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## **A Will to Know the Future?**

### **Politics and Prognosis**

In order to address such an immense topic as “politics and forecasting” I had proposed, in my abstract<sup>1</sup>, to engage with political power with a view toward its dependency. This topic is a little misleading in that on its basis one might assume that one could have a new approach to political theory in terms of forecasting or prediction. I tried to slow myself down by sharpening or narrowing the question: How can those that “have” political power, whatever “having” means here, know the future? How do a will to knowledge and a political will intersect or disconnect where politics employs predictions?

I sketched out two hypotheses that contradict each other in a certain way. But, perhaps this contradiction will sharpen our attentiveness to the contradictory condition of political power, that is to say, to the tension between the *political* in political power and the *power* in political power. Regarding what is *political* in political power, I had, like Aristotle, identified this as an orientation towards praxis; it is a certain activity of excessive presence that avails itself of the freedom of being able to decide, and therefore requires *sophrosyne*, i.e. a standard and discretion of its own. And regarding the *power* of political power, I had, in order to simplify matters, restricted myself to two extreme formulations: that of Hannah Arendt and the view argued for by Hobbes, Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, which understands power as sovereign *potestas*, as a not yet realized violence, and as an undeviating implicit pressure of rule placed on the life of those ruled.

The first hypothesis is linked with the popular critical objection that what we today call politics is no longer political. This is most obvious especially where politicians look to the predictions of experts in order to make decisions, or where they look to the recommendations of “political advisors” who concern themselves with these predictions. This is also evident, in hindsight, when one looks at the long history of the compromising

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <http://www.prognosen-ueber-bewegungen.de/en/news/conference-prognoses-on-movement-s>

of politics through prophesy and at the regularity with which rulers looked to the help of oracles, soothsayers and prophets before the development of systematic scientific knowledge, in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, which gave rise to modern political forecasting and prediction. One might say that what has recurred throughout history is the replacement of political dependence by a-political dependence – an exchange of political dependence that belongs to political power insofar as it is concerned with the transient world, and is itself temporal and finite, with another dependence that obviously appears less threatening or restrictive to those in power. This other kind of dependence is different, at the epistemological level, because it involves transferring the power of decision or determination of political reason to a metaphysical or scientific *logos*. This dependence is also different at the level of persons or institutional instances because those with political power grant influence to people or institutions that themselves carry no political accountability and are not appropriately legitimized. To put it succinctly, this would be the first hypothesis: wherever prophesy, prediction or forecasting appears in politics we find, at least as a tendency, a de-politicization of political power.

The heterogeneity of political activity and metaphysical or scientific knowledge with regard to prediction is also something that can be read another way. One could understand it – and this would be the second hypothesis – as an *outsourcing of fallibility* and, at the same time, as a *distancing of knowledge* that *competes* for the presence of political power by deferring the instances of this knowledge to the future. Because ever since antiquity, ever since political theory has been articulated, there has been a competition in western politics between political praxis as an essentially rhetorical “art of movement” of activity that understands the ability to decide as the place where human freedom – whatever sense and status this freedom contains at the time – is demonstrated and performed, and a science of truth that seeks to establish itself as the foundation of a rationality of accuracy and that perceives the necessity of decision as the location of a problem that the individual political actor cannot solve on the basis of his own judgment but requires a superior, metapolitical form of knowledge in order to handle it correctly. Political praxis has a difficult and tricky relationship with knowledge: on the one hand, its insistence upon the freedom of decision can’t simply base itself upon ignorance and, on the

other hand, it must defend this freedom against the determinism offered by scientific knowledge that propounds to be a more accurate form of knowledge.

In view of this dilemma the figures of the oracle, the soothsayer and the forecaster can be regarded as instances of a *distancing of knowledge from action* that involves both the symbolic and the performative. That is to say that when they receive advice about the future, political decision makers engage with a kind of knowledge that, as “wisdom,” “illumination,” or “scientific knowledge,” is different from the practical knowledge involved in politics and is even heterogeneous to politics. However, with these advisors they also dispense with the figure of the theoretician or philosopher-king who, since Plato, was entitled to be the true ruler. It is perhaps the very precariousness of using something that is recognized as the truth for the purpose of predicting the future that has again and again made it possible to put an extraneous knowledge, that would restrict the freedom of decisions, at a distance. Viewed in this way, forecasting would be important for politics, not only as something that guarantees an increased security for power, but would be equally as important as a source of error and as evidence for the fallibility of an individual and institutional subject of knowledge that competes for power.

I would like to let the tension between these two hypotheses stand for a moment and, in what follows, investigate, so to speak, a transformation or shift within this field of tension, which is important for my considerations of the current political or a-political status of forecasting: namely, a certain shift from the magical practitioners of clairvoyance and soothsaying, the oracles, seers and prophets, to what we today call political forecasting or prognosis. I am not concerned with reliably fixing a date at which this shift occurred, but one could certainly say that it does have to do with the emergence, establishment and development of the regulative power of the, so called, political economy. Thus, it also has to do with a formation of knowledge, the first evidence of which Michel Foucault had traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century, but whose success mainly stands in connection with a series of crises and re-figurations of sovereignty since around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and whose relevance for a foundational transformation of the essence of

power (this also seems important to me) really became intelligible only towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Out of considerations of time, and because it has already been done at this conference, I am not going to go into the numerous subtle phases, transitions, breaks and re-inscriptions that lead from magical prediction to forecasting, and by certain paths back to magic, but will instead, roughly and schematically, mark some differences.

First –, at the root, magical prediction concerns something that is absolutely *wished* for or something that is, without a question, to be *avoided*, even where it is cloaked in some specific interest or another. The time of magical prediction is one of fate, of a future, whose relative bindingness is derived from an absolutely condensed moment, in which fate is *fulfilled* – positively or negatively, as the highest empowerment of the sovereign political will over the confusing and transitory world, or as fatal evidence of the powerlessness at the center of power. In contrast, the technical superiority of prognosis consists in the fact that the will to knowledge that drives it neither aims at reaching something at all costs nor at avoiding it at all costs. The kind of reason associated with prognosis demarcates itself through a principle equanimity; indeed, one would have to say that it is indifferent to the extremes of victory and defeat in the battle with the powers of fate. Subversion, revolt, anything that would be considered a political catastrophe by a sovereign who relies on an oracle or a prophet, also belongs to the reality which this kind of reason surveys, just like the economic catastrophes of shortages, and the medical catastrophes of epidemics etc. What is undesirable first shows itself, to those that regulate influence through appropriate measures, as such an aspect of reality, as something that will probably happen. To predict or forecast does not mean that one assumes that something must not happen, but that it *will* happen, sooner or later, with more or less distinct consequences, for better or worse.

This is exactly why the same thing does not occur to prognostic forecasting as always did with magical prediction in its fascination with wanting to attain or avoid something: namely, that the *factual consequences* of certain steps, which one understands in hindsight with respect to this goal of attainment or avoidance, completely surprises those who carry out these steps and this destabilizes the power structure. This comes at the price of a lasting shift of power within the constitution of political power. Political economy

imports a category into political thinking that radically externalizes the gap intrinsic to sovereignty (namely the gap between potential and action in which the sovereign maintains itself and which Agamben correctly described as its source of regeneration). The new category is that of *effectiveness*. The experiences one had in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century with national politics – what, at the time, was called the “police” – showed that a well planned and authoritatively executed political decision could be completely ineffective. And, not so rarely, this even led to consequences opposite from those which the ruler and officials hoped for. For example: the hoarding of corn was banned and the price was fixed by decree, but this likely led to scarcity and escalating prices in the marketplace and to a black-market. Under the reproach of such phenomena, the new dynamical theory of economic processes confronted political decisions with powerlessness, a powerlessness that did not come from lack of authority, but from ineffectiveness. Such problems indicate a constitutive difference between the aim of a *decree* as the expression of the will of a sovereign and the actual consequences that this decree has as an *intervention*. The unity of difference between decree and intervention defines the basic performative magnitude of political economy: namely, the measure.

Secondly – and directly associated with this: political economy defines power according to *influence*. If the sovereign was previously the heroic subject of volition, then in order to defend his own power against time, in order to become sovereign over passing time and to arrest transformation itself by placing a certain spell or ban on the future, then this new kind of national politician must be interested in exerting influence as effectively as possible, which allows things to occur in a particular, probable way. He must do this because he knows that the consolidation of his influence depends on the effectiveness of the measures that he introduces.

The dependency of this *governmental* politician, to borrow a concept from Foucault – the dependency of this administrative performer on the personal and institutional instances of political forecasting is far more existential than that of the sovereign on his clairvoyant advisors. This is because what is at issue is not that the political ruler cedes a part of his infinite power to another, in order to better assert himself in the finite world, but that power is restricted or intersected by its finitude. In order to grasp the future

consequences of his actions, the one in power requires someone who tells him where these consequences are likely to be found. Here, time is no longer the medium in which what is persistent is endangered by alteration; instead, it is a medium of influences, a systemless system of differences that separates actions from effects. From the traditional perspective on action it only reveals its lack of system. It is first from the perspective of influences, via the transformation of the separating difference between the act and its effects into a positive magnitude, that the systematic of the systemless comes to light. This is exactly what forecasting guarantees, or persuasively claims to guarantee: it turns the difference between current actions and future effects into a positive magnitude that can be attributed to the current activity as a value.

Thirdly – and I will try to analyze this difference in more detail –: a new source of threat that is no longer a suitable object for magical prediction emerges. It is something, however, that can be successfully made into an object of forecasting: namely, the population. The vulnerability, to which the sovereign reacts by surrounding himself with clairvoyant advisors, or by seeking the advice of prophets and oracles, can be traced back to a threat that comes from those *who are his equals*. Even in Machiavelli this problem stands at the foreground: he considers the prince to be the sovereign ruler over his kingdom, whether this title comes through birth or by conquest. But, in both cases, the prince is an aristocrat among aristocrats and the members of other aristocratic families vie for power and it is, above all, their efforts at harming the prince that pose a threat. According to the Machiavellian perspective, the rebellion of the people really only becomes possible where the prince's scheming, aristocratic competitors use the dissatisfaction of segments of the population, combining forces, giving them an identity, and making them a part of the scheme. If the sovereign needs to look into the future, then it is in order to identify and eliminate these schemes before it is too late.

Insofar as it concerns the relationship between equals, the threat that time has for political power has a kind of phantasmal technicity: there is a *rhetoric of threat*, that is to say, a number of rhetorical figures that cover what the rivals are capable of undertaking in order to come into conflict with the ruler. It seems to me that the rhetorical, gestural and

linguistic praxis of magical prediction comes into close contact with this rhetoric of threat where seeing the future acquires relevance for sovereign rule. It seems evident that a techne of magical prediction cannot be sustained without a strong rhetorical structuring of its method as well as the linguistic field or area of signification within which it can formulate its predictions of the future. As enigmatic, nuanced, incomplete and elaborate the process of interpretation can be, the translatability of this kind of prediction into information relevant for the sovereign rests on the fact that the activity of political power is also rhetorically structured and that the languages and forms of activity of magic and politics are accessible for one another because of this essentially rhetorical structure.

The situation becomes complicated at the moment when the scenario of threat transgresses the narrow boundaries that had been limited to a small number of competitors, and a new actor steps on stage. His performance does not follow the well determined and familiar figures, it is not disciplined by the technical stringency of a rhetoric of action, but is, in a way much more radical than that of the schemes and intrigues, unanticipateable by this rhetoric; that is to say, it is constitutively unanticipateable because the cause of its impenetrability lies in its *inequality*. This actor is the populace. Not the people, but the populace – this distinction is essential to how political forecasting operates: the populace concerns a group that is much more similar to the Hobbesian “multitude” than to the “people” who are more or less controlled by sovereign power and whose disordered segments are merely an excess to be accounted for supplementally. The populace is, so to speak, the essentially disordered transformed into something positive.

The behavior of the populace remains inaccessible to the metaphysical techniques of prediction that search for hints of timeless reality in terrestrial movements. It would be pointless to ask an oracle or a seer about the future of a populace or demand information about whether it will do something or not, whether it will rebel against its prince or be loyal and support him. Nothing is to be gained by such questions because the populace is far too disunited to be identified with some distinct figure or agent. The situation within the populace is a perpetual flux of opposing manners of thought, speech and action, which is true of its future as well as its past: there will be some individuals, groups or currents within the populace that are dissatisfied with a certain reign or administration, and among

them there will be those that conspire to rebel, while others lead a happy and content life, peacefully going about their daily work. In contrast with the case of the aristocratic rivals of the prince, regarding these dangerous tendencies that are distributed throughout the impenetrable multitude of the populace, it can't be a matter of predicting their course at a specific point in time and taking up specific, aimed measures against them in order to encounter the populace at some future point at the level of *its* action. Instead, one would have to let things happen as they may and resort to diverting certain forces within the populace with the help of other forces in the populace in such a way that they work against the threatening tendencies, weakening, channeling and transforming them into something more harmless, holding them, at any rate, below a certain critical point.

This requires political forecasting because prophetic pronouncements or oracular proverbs are not helpful here. One need not know if someone is hatching dark plans against the prince, but the scale which the phenomena of dissatisfaction has reached, what kind of distribution it has among the populace, at what rate it is developing and what the prospects are for its further development. What Foucault called the security dispositive emerges here. Political power is transformed from a center of vulnerability, from an aggressive-defensive sovereign rule that denies or enlists fate in its resistance to adversaries, to the source of a positive process of *consolidation*. The measures that the agents of this newly configured political power put into place aim at raising security, insofar as this is possible, instead of defending against vulnerability through the anticipatory elimination, at the level of action, of its phantasmic double. Knowledge of the future, which is supposed to ensure security, is the *same* knowledge that ensures economic expansion, favorable population growth, increased prosperity and improved health. In the process of consolidation the image of political stability becomes tied to the idea of growth; as a central tenet of political economy has it: there is no stability except through growth. And, if it is a matter of knowing the future, then it is not in order to prevent danger, but in order to find measures that, despite everything and through everything, generate growth, because the dynamic of growth itself will limit the influence of all threatening tendencies.

Through this it becomes evident how the revaluation of the future — the shift from the concept of the future as the sphere of influence of that date on which the scheme or intrigue will close itself off to the present ruler, to the concept of the future as the dimension of a dynamic division of chances and risks — gives rise to the *principle of inequality* in the relationship of political reason to itself. This is what I would like to attempt to explain in the final section of my presentation.

The equality of humans as temporal beings, which every authoritarian form of rule that believes in fate still recognizes at some point, is suspended according to the way in which effective political measures relate to their object: as a movement that is supposed to give rise to certain consequences through the medium of a constitutive inequality. Even at the point where those in possession of the power to rule eventually present themselves as one movement among others within the populace (thus where they begin to operate as part of “formal democracy”), the multitude of people that comprises the populace, through its inequality, remains determined by its deficiency in the face of an acting subject. Even where nobody any longer, in the full sense of this word, *acts*, what one does instead is still expressed by the cleverly calculated, efficient narrowness of the reduction: the object and medium of political prognosis will be the “subject” to which one attributes the rise and fall of performances, but never an active subject or agent. In short, there is no rhetoric of the populace. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century one sees a mechanics, a mathematics, a chemistry, and a neuropsychology of the masses and finally in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a biology and ecology of the masses, but none of these efforts at systematicization ever leads to a rhetoric of action, nor does it seem to attempt to do this.

This categorically valid principle of inequality that political forecasting or prediction puts into play in the behavior of the populace also concerns the decisions that are made on the basis of these predictions. If the decision no longer comes from a primary pretension, but emerges in the course of a speculation on effects or consequences, then this transforms the future from a dark corner, where fatal necessity lurks, threatening the autocracy of despotic will, into the oppressive constriction of a present that is called contingency. Contingency means that everyone must decide — whether they have the power to act or not. The decision of someone powerful obeys the *same* necessity to decide as that

of the powerless. Those who make political decisions are obliged then, within the structure of governmental administration *itself*, to elevate themselves above or withdraw from the very thing that is to be the medium and object of their decisions.

Political economy draws its decisive advantages by acknowledging and yet remaining indifferent to the passing of time and to singular events. For politicians who want to make use of economic knowledge in order to make decisions, that can make the claim to a certain authority, this means that they must commit to reproducing this indifference in the form of decision itself. If they do not, at the same time, want to gamble away the advantages of the knowledge of time afforded by economics, then the decision itself must retreat from the present in a certain way. To be more exact, the decision must remove itself from *that* dimension of the present in which the subject and object of decision are *present in the same way*: it must remove itself from the present of coexistence in which man *expects* what is coming, places fear or hope in it, and refuses it or assures itself on this basis. Governmental decision requires the active renunciation of the community of expectation and anticipation. An essential moment of the performance of rule or administration is the imploring removal of itself from the circle of those who share expectations for the future and who are collectively affected by what the future brings.

This is what remains for those in power to reorganize a quasi-sovereignty for themselves. In a governmentally ruled state, power can be distinguished from powerlessness only by bringing this difference to a performative completion, by making a certain performative self-relation and implemented decision into the regalia of the powerful. What is important is that the decision itself produces a definitive excess, which distinguishes the superior reaction, made under the pressure of the future, from an inferior reaction, which is merely exposed to and lost in time. Marketing language has coined the term “pro-active reaction” for this performative difference. It seems to me that this often ridiculed buzz word gets right to the center of things: in a governmental situation, one can’t do otherwise than react. Consequently, power relations depend decisively upon who can present their reaction as action, or, if possible, as something even more active than an act. Political prognoses promise to assist in transforming reaction into action. They provide the decision makers with the immanent acceleration that allows them to be, literally and

without irony, *quicker than passing time*, because they can no longer tolerate sharing the present with those that will be affected by their decisions. What is more, they can no longer tolerate it precisely because nothing separates them from those who are affected by their decisions.

The decision of the sovereign is defined by an exteriority of the decision with respect to the object that the decision concerns and at the same time by the figure of a reversal. The sovereign ruler's position is exterior to the people and, generally speaking, he is also not subject to the laws that apply to his subjects. But, on the other hand, the sovereign formulates his decisions, in a sense, in a tense dialogue with an other, whose place and position remains open, but which *can be occupied* at a given moment. It can be occupied by another ruler, that a group of aristocrats who have become influential can put in his place, or from an outsider who has seized control. The decisions of a sovereign over those who are separated from him and subject to his power are, in the same moment, reconfigured from the perspective of time, in which he encounters himself as an equal.

The governmental decision occurs under somewhat inverse conditions: the exteriority of the subject of decision is suspended. The politician who makes decisions loses the distance between the multitude of people whose lives are affected by his decisions. It is true that at times he still retains some formal exclusive rights, such as judicial immunity during his time in office; but these become merely functional and no longer allude to a primary difference that lay at the basis of the political order itself. In order to think in a political-economical manner, the politician, while he need not necessarily understand himself as part of the dynamical configuration that is the populace, must understand *his decision* as part of this configuration. Whatever results from his decision will be one movement among others: however strong, this movement will develop into an effective measure first by becoming synchronized with other movements, strengthening and becoming strengthened by them and, by virtue of this strengthening, inhibiting or diverting other movements etc. The performance of rule or administration is a production of movements or currents within a systemless system of movements.

With respect to decisions, the so-called major political players find themselves in a situation that is principally no different from that of a manager whose further employment

in a company depends upon whether his personal and strategic decisions bring about consequences that can be regarded as “his successes.” Everything that he does refers retroactively, by way of a detour through the multiple, tangled, confused and never completely controllable circulations, back to the requirements of his occupation and his status as someone who possesses certain competencies. But, this detour *does not* mean a deferral that imparts or creates a quantity of time, nor does it mean that he is granted a certain amount of time during which everyone waits collectively to see if what he does “bears fruit.” Rather, the consequences are always already present; they have already begun at the moment the decision is made and have already begun to evaluate the position, status and competence of the decision maker.

The subject and the object of the decision collaborate and come together in the functional relationship between the ruler and the ruled. If a political decision attempts at all to claim a kind of quasi-sovereignty under these conditions, then this could only be successful if the deciding subject, from a certain perspective, negates his equality with the objects of his decision. The perspective from which this could happen is precisely that of the subject’s relationship to the future: as a politician – and as a manager, or “leader” in any position – one must make decisions *as if* one will not be affected by their consequences. As someone who deals with consequences in the moment of the decision, one has to claim the ability to abstract one’s own position from the present in which one fears or hopes for these consequences for oneself. The measure (that which has effects) always demands, from those who enact or undertake it, a virtual step away from *the* present, in whose future the consequences of a decision will appear, to another present: the labored present of a resoluteness in which the decision itself, the naked performance of decision draws toward itself and absorbs all that remains of the memories of a sovereign in the value differences of a post-stratified society.

One could say that, in this resoluteness, sovereignty once again *makes its way on stage*. But this act is no longer the self-staging of an authority that is attached to the present that it, at the same time defiant and cunning, takes on with the future, by means of an ambiguous deference to what lies beyond its limits. Rather, the performance of rule or administration clings to the present of decision, which it emphatically argues for,

incessantly emphasizing its urgency and, through this, making it a “sustainable” present, because it must, at all costs, avoid the future, in which what is introduced in the present equally overtakes all. Resoluteness claims an empty identity of the freedom of decision with the necessity to decide *now in a particular way* because it sets up a future that will bring *unequally distributed consequences*. It is the difference of this inequality that the governmental decision occupies as a political office.

To make decisions in this way, as if one will not be affected by their consequences, means, as Foucault had explained, suspending the immensity of a collective event, explaining away the collective event, understood as the form of the future, as a chimera and replacing it with an unequal distribution of consequences. Without distance, without at least something like a *différance* between the subjects and objects of decision, the power of deciding rests on a mere self-empowerment of the moment of decision, which exempts itself from its consequences by transforming them into a present that is protected from the collectively expectable future by indifference. Political prognosis serves politics inasmuch as it serves the demand for such a present: a present in which the political decision does not see itself compelled to confront its own consequences directly. In order to sell out expectation, forecasting allows a second instance to be established at the periphery of political jurisdiction. This second instance deals with the anticipation of consequences so that when politicians attribute the basis of their decision to a prediction of the future made by scientists, they are given a certain artificial distance within the distanceless immanence of decision and consequences. And thus they practice autonomous, sovereign decision making under conditions that have long since made such decisions impossible. An obvious question would be: is this the timely, diminished continuation of politics or the panicked delay of its demise?

-Translated by Steven Tester