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Hans Blumenberg's History of Possibilities

By guest contributor Hannes Bajohr

In 1974, the philosopher Hans Blumenberg – known for such massive tomes as *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, and *Work on Myth* – received the prestigious Kuno Fischer Prize for his life's work. Musing on the relation between history and philosophy in his acceptance speech, Blumenberg uttered a curious sentence: "I have always felt the charge of 'historicism' to be an honor." (170) From the mouth of a philosopher, even a historian of philosophy, this statement must seem astonishing. After all, in its polemical meaning, "historicism" refers to a value-free accumulation of facts lacking any distinction between the important and unimportant. Wanting to clarify the genesis of phenomena without being able to determine their validity, as the "charge of 'historicism'" could be summed up, ends in a meaningless relativism. And as a philosophical attitude, historicism is a paradox, for it dissolves philosophy into

history. Yet, the fact that it should be "an honor" to practice it, can be justified *philosophically* for Blumenberg. As a correction of mistaken conceptions of history, historicism is put to use for a whole program of historical theory: Blumenberg once called it the "destruction of history" (224).

Blumenberg makes clear what kind of history is to be destroyed at various points in his work, but in *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, the issue takes center stage. Here, he levels a polemic against what he calls "temporal 'nostrocentrism'" – an "us-centeredness" in time (170). By this he means the tendency to look at history from today alone and to bestow on its winding path a necessity that willfully ignores all the junctions it could have taken. In this way, the past becomes a series of transitional stages on the way to the present. It, in turn, is either its own destination or simply a stopover towards a future set as a telos. What is left by the wayside is both the sense of the complexity of history as well as the intrinsic value of what has been passed through. The cipher "historicism" thus serves Blumenberg above all for the correction of overly straightforward and overly presentist theories of history. He offers a three-fold counter-strategy: First, he calls for the history of the past to be written as a *history of possibilities*. Second, he argues for a *non-linear course of history* that permits leaps and non-simultaneities. Finally, he relates both to a *historical ethos* – surprising for a philosopher who is not known for normative statements.

In *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, Blumenberg's criticism of non-historical thought is directed against the assumption that Copernicus's discovery would have been possible at any time. This view, however, already argues from the consciousness of the Copernican world for which the line between the present and the past simply needs to be drawn through different points in order to arrive at the same result. Not only Copernicus's thesis itself, but also the disposition for its reception, Blumenberg reminds us, were "built into and embedded in a system of premises" (137). The fact that the earth revolves around the sun had already been postulated by Aristarchus of Samos in the fourth century B.C.E., but his insight did not achieve

any lasting effect because such a cosmology was simply not compatible with the ancient world view (15–16). Thus, Blumenberg argues, it is not so much the forerunners of the Copernican system that should be examined, but more fundamentally "the conditions of the possibility of the fact that there is any such thing as a history of Copernicus's effects" (133). Instead of the reconstruction of Copernicus, Blumenberg's analysis aims at the "opening up of the possibility of a Copernicus" (121). *A*, not *the* Copernicus – since now it is solely about the circumstances that allow for such a figure to have a lasting impact.

Blumenberg's history of possibilities presupposes the interweaving of the philosophical, theological and scientific elements of a world view. The object of investigation is not simply the Copernican theory, but also its *world*: Instead of looking at "historically insular phenomena" one should "make progress on the question of their rhizome" (132). Five years before Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari created an emblem of postmodern thought with this term, Blumenberg makes use of the image of the root network to stand for that "system of premises" of a historical epoch that can always only be treated as a whole. It is Blumenberg's methodological aim to measure, in this rhizome, the conceivable "scope" of possibilities, the "breadth of variation within which certain theoretical actions are possible and others are excluded" (131–32). Such a history of possibilities would be a rejection of merely causal-progressivist historical models that think in terms of prehistory, phenomenon, and history of effects. Against the tendency to regard each historical moment as a stop on the way to the next, Blumenberg urges us to map the potential of each time onto itself.

If reconstructing historical possibilities is one strategy for the "destruction of history," another lies in rejecting a strictly linear flow of time. Elsewhere, Blumenberg writes: "History does not run, primarily, in diachronic sequences of what is not yet, what is, and what is not anymore; rather, it proceeds in synchronous parataxes and hypotaxes." (345) Blumenberg gives an example of such a non-simultaneity by describing the Copernican revolution, in one

essential element, as a paradoxical loop – as a result of which it itself is a precondition. He refers to the principle of inertia first formulated by Isaac Newton, according to which bodies retain their linear and uniform motion if no force is exerted on them. While the Copernican system is generally regarded as a prerequisite for the discovery of inertia, Blumenberg insists that Copernicus could not have formulated his theory without an idea equivalent to it.

Blumenberg reconstructs this strange loop in detail: Copernicus used the scholastic concept of *impetus* to describe the continuous rotation of the earth without the constant supply of energy. Originally, this concept was used to explain the effect of the sacraments in the absence of a direct influence of God. Metaphorically, then, *impetus* already implied the preservation of energy. Copernicus coopted this notion of a "communicated causality" (145) and applied it to the physics of celestial objects. According to Blumenberg, this is a "reoccupation of medieval systematic positions" (153) such as he had already described it in his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*for the notion of progress (65–69). On the one hand, this resulted in the "loosening of the systematic structure" (143) of scholasticism, as its elements could now be redeployed in ways in which they were not initially intended, paving the way for the construction of the Copernican world; on the other hand, Copernicus succeeded in "the opening up of freedom for theory" (131), which allowed not only his own theory but also its Newtonian formalization. By this point, Blumenberg has destroyed the strict distinction between prehistory and the history of effects for good, giving way to a temporality that permits jumps and latencies.

Being an historicist, for Blumenberg, means thinking in complex potentialities and temporal dilations. This has little to do with the mere accumulation of facts of which 19th-century historicism is usually accused. He also warns against the narrative construction of a single history, aware of the danger "that *history* [*Geschichte*] is pushed aside by *a story* [*Geschichte*]"(171). To this end, he relies on the construction of spaces of possibility and on a sense for historical non-

simultaneity. This is first of all a historiographical-methodological consideration: It requires us to sharpen our focus on those background transformations that change our understanding of historical phenomena, and to recognize and take seriously the contingency of their effects, since other paths were always possible. Blumenberg sees this as the main problem of the history of science in his time: the tendency to produce narratives of "in part interesting, in part at least charming (even if by now scarcely comprehensible) errors" (272) – but of errors nonetheless.

But Blumenberg's history of possibilities goes beyond a mere critique of linear, progressivist history. It also contains an ethical appeal, which is a true rarity in his work. Turning away from nostrocentrism and making the present something other than the obvious outcome of history restitutes the dignity to each time-space position it was denied by an "arrogance on the part of the contemporaries." (200; trans. mod.) Against this arrogance, Blumenberg's historicism emphasizes "that all historical moments after each present one are equivalent with regard to man's radical potentialities" (202). Blumenberg's theory of history is based on a theory of freedom; history is the space in which this freedom can be realized, and it is important to retain an awareness of the breadth of this space. In his speech, Blumenberg calls the consequence of this historicism, with some pathos, the "the elementary obligation of forsaking nothing that is human." It is an ethos that demands "according respect to those who have fallen into obscurity" (170).

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