

# *The Vanishing Reality of the State: On Hans Blumenberg's Political Theory*

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Jürgen Habermas's two-volume *This, Too, a History of Philosophy* (2019) offers a grand vista over the history of "post-metaphysical thought." The central distinction between its two main lineages is the weight each accords historical thought: only the intersubjectively focused heirs of Immanuel Kant, not the subject-centered descendants of David Hume, theorize a historically situated reason. Reflecting on one's own historical standpoint while acknowledging that such reflection is itself the result of a historical learning process gives *theories of modernity* a central position.<sup>1</sup> However, most such approaches in the twentieth century reject the modernity they theorize. Habermas names only *one* philosopher who comes close to his own affirmative stance: Hans Blumenberg, with his 1966 *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite the agreement on the defense of modernity, Habermas dismisses his work: because Blumenberg conceives of modernity as a solution to eternal anthropological problems, he in the end "seeks refuge in a rhetoric of the *Work on Myth*."<sup>3</sup> The reference to Blumenberg's 1979 book implies that what appears as a pro-

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1. Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte*, 35–38, 40–74. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.
2. Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte*, 64; Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*.
3. Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte*, 65–66, 41.

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gressive position in *Legitimacy* later revealed itself to have been conservative all along, dealing with eternal anthropological constants, not with historical change.

Habermas's verdict is symptomatic of a certain puzzlement in the face of Blumenberg's oeuvre that results from the difficulty of placing him politically. When Habermas suggests that historically reflexive theories mostly come in the shape of or at least imply a political theory,<sup>4</sup> it is not immediately clear where Blumenberg would have formulated his. Blumenberg's interpreters are indeed divided about the status of politics in his work: he is either seen simply not to have a political theory,<sup>5</sup> to be only a reactive commentator of the secularization theories he attacks (mostly Karl Löwith's and Carl Schmitt's),<sup>6</sup> or to possess a more substantial, yet hidden, political theory that can be extracted from his theory of myth.<sup>7</sup> In this latter case, the main works to be considered are his 1979 *Work on Myth* (which did not deal with politics) as well as two recent posthumous publications, *Rigorism of Truth* and *Präfiguration* (which did).<sup>8</sup>

In Habermas's estimation, the third position eventually won out against the second, and he is not alone in this view of Blumenberg's political thought. Yet it is incomplete—not only because it is difficult to plausibly relate the Blumenberg of *Legitimacy* to the Blumenberg of *Work on Myth*, and that means to connect his more liberal *theory of history* with his more conservative *philosophical anthropology*, but also because Blumenberg *did* write about political theory, and not in a merely reactive mode, nor only in texts hidden among his papers. In 1968, two years after *Legitimacy* and eleven years before *Work on Myth*, he published the essay “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State” in the liberal *Schweizer Monatshefte*—in its May issue, as he later pointed out gleefully.<sup>9</sup> Astonishingly, this long and dense text has virtually been ignored by those in search of Blumenberg's thoughts about political

4. Habermas, *Auch eine Geschichte*, 73.

5. Wetz, *Hans Blumenberg zur Einführung*. This is a recurring stance in the more popular writing on Blumenberg. For instance, Uwe Justus Wenzel calls Blumenberg “nonpolitical” (“Meister des Problemkrisis”).

6. Bragagnolo, “Secularization”; Ifergan, “Cutting to the Chase.”

7. Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences*; Nicholls, “Hans Blumenberg on Political Myth”; Heidenreich, “Political Aspects”; Kirke, *Hans Blumenberg*.

8. Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*; Blumenberg, *Rigorism of Truth*; Blumenberg, *Präfiguration*.

9. Blumenberg, “Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie”; Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State.” The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* journalist Martin Meyer recounts how he received a copy of this text from Blumenberg in the 1980s, with the date of the issue—May 1968—circled in red (“Der Kandidat,” 54).

theory.<sup>10</sup> It draws out the *political* implications of his theory of modernity, and it does so without any hint at anthropology, which for Habermas always risks a conservative proclamation of traits eternal to human nature.<sup>11</sup> Rather, “Theory of the State” builds on a theory of history.

In this article I aim to rectify this oversight by giving “Theory of the State” the attention it has missed. In it, Blumenberg develops a rhetorical approach to politics that is connected to his theory of history, which he called “historical phenomenology.”<sup>12</sup> Only later would he articulate this rhetorical theory with reference to his philosophical anthropology, which he called “phenomenological anthropology.”<sup>13</sup> In what follows, I contextualize the essay in Blumenberg’s oeuvre and show how it propounds an innovative approach to politics as anti- or nonperformative speech acts, analyzes the slow dissolution of the state, and advocates for supranational structures to replace it; in line with his ideas in *Legitimacy*, Blumenberg describes the situation of politics in the technical age. I conclude by addressing the differences between the historical and the anthropological approaches; the turn from the former to the latter marks the main change in Blumenberg’s work.

### ***The State and Its Discontents: A Historical Phenomenology of Politics***

Blumenberg’s biography hardly allowed him to be apolitical. His experience of totalitarianism, his classification as a “Half Jew” by the Nazis, and his internment in a labor camp shortly before the liberation left a lasting mark on his life and shaped his political outlook.<sup>14</sup> He became a strong skeptic of state power, and even if he accepted that the new Germany had a stable parliamentary democracy, the distanced stance toward the country that had once declared him an enemy remained remarkably consistent throughout his life: in 1948 he wrote to a friend that “in my most formative years, they tried to drill into me the idea that by nature I could not be a German—and lo and behold: today, now that I am allowed to be a German, I indeed cannot be one.”<sup>15</sup> Four months before his death in 1996, in a letter to a former student, Blumenberg still rejected

10. Felix Heidenreich and Angus Nicholls mention the text only as a corollary to Blumenberg’s anthropology (“Nachwort der Herausgeber”), as does Oliver Müller (“Beyond the Political”); only Jean-Claude Monod has given it some attention in its own right and as a part of a historical phenomenology rather than a phenomenological anthropology (“Préface”).

11. For a similar point, see Gordon, “Secularization,” 164.

12. Blumenberg et al., “Diskussion,” 226.

13. Blumenberg, *Beschreibung des Menschen*, 167.

14. See Zill, *Der absolute Leser*, 37–134.

15. Blumenberg to Eric Orton, December 20, 1948, DLA Marbach.

the idea that Germany was a *Heimat* to him: “This country has remained uncanny to me, although I have left it only rarely. . . . What had made Hitler possible in this country has not melted into thin air.”<sup>16</sup>

Such skepticism of the state as a locus of political identity finds its counterpoint in what one could call Blumenberg’s political anti-absolutism. It comes to the fore most succinctly in his confrontation with Schmitt in *Legitimacy*. The story of this intellectual standoff has been told many times, and here I give only a brief recapitulation.<sup>17</sup> Schmitt’s notion that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts”—part of his “sociology of concepts” that assumes an isomorphism of a time’s “metaphysical image” and its political terminology<sup>18</sup>—led him to suggest that sovereignty and the state of exception defining it correspond to the ideas of divine omnipotence and the miracle. Since “the rationalism of the Enlightenment rejected the exception in every form,”<sup>19</sup> the modern age no longer has an adequate conception of politics understood as sovereignty-as-decision. Implied herein is the need for a political theology that would replace any political theory.

Both the interpretation and the demand are objectionable to Blumenberg: rather than adopt theological concepts by turning them into political ones, the modern age commences as an epoch of “human self-assertion” against a theology of an all-powerful nominalist God and brings forth the rationality of “self-preservation” embodied in scientific and technological progress. It was precisely the unbearable omnipotence of the “decisionist” God against which modernity was founded and which disqualified this structure as a model for politics. No substantial but a “linguistic secularization” had taken place, which had transferred the divine attributes to the state retrospectively and with legitimizing intent—a tactic Blumenberg also suspected with Schmitt. “Political theology” is for Blumenberg a matter of metaphors in its justificatory function.<sup>20</sup>

To Blumenberg, Schmitt imputed illegitimacy to liberal modernity and advertised what was unacceptable in a less-concealed rhetorical form: absolutist political structures. Indeed, for Schmitt to posit that “the political is the total”<sup>21</sup> means to advocate for a total state, a state whose self-organization as

16. Blumenberg, ““Und das ist mir von der Liebe zur Kirche geblieben,”” 178–79.

17. Schmitz, “Legitimacy of the Modern Age?”; Bragagnolo, “Secularization”; Hammill, “Blumenberg and Schmitt”; Ifergan, “Cutting to the Chase.”

18. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36, 45–46.

19. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 37.

20. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 58. I quote the German first edition here, since the English translation is based on the substantially revised second edition.

21. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 51.

well as its ability to mobilize are not dependent on any other ground than sovereignty-as-decision. In broader terms, Schmitt's political vision is aimed against what he sees as an "age of neutralizations,"<sup>22</sup> in which the state had been undermined by liberalism's worship of trade, technology, and parliamentarianism. Schmitt deems deficient the pure self-authorization of modernity through the scientific curiosity that Blumenberg praised: "This seems to be simply grounded in a justification issuing from the novelty."<sup>23</sup> A world of pure scientific immanence, a constant "process-progress," is for Schmitt a horrifying vision.<sup>24</sup>

Blumenberg, however, has a much more positive view of scientific progress and the notion of an autonomous self-authorization of modernity. Against Schmitt's absolutism of the total state and his anti-Enlightenment stance, Blumenberg suggests that the real task is "to destroy [*destruieren*] the absolute qualification of political situations as anachronisms."<sup>25</sup> In this "radicalization of Enlightenment,"<sup>26</sup> as Robert Wallace has called it, Blumenberg declares the "'worldliness' of the modern age" not only a positive achievement but also an achievement that must be shielded against absolutist theoreticians of retheologization—it is "not a secure historical characteristic, but its continuing critical *officium* [duty]."<sup>27</sup> Modernity, in other words, must be defended, without recourse to theological references, but solely from the norm of human self-assertion.

In formulating his objections against Schmitt, Blumenberg revealed little of his own, positive political theory. And although he defended his notion of a legitimacy that is independent of continued historical substances, he did not present alternatives to Schmitt's other basic categories such as the political, sovereignty, neutralization, or decisionism. In the 1968 essay "The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State," however, Blumenberg went on to offer counterpositions on all these points. Defending a version of liberalism that places Blumenberg within a "constellation de pensée post-souverainiste,"<sup>28</sup> he embraces the very neutralization Schmitt abhors. Three basic theses stand out: politics in the strong sense is losing its status of master *episteme* in the present; it takes on a rhetorical function that performs by *not* performing anything; and

22. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 80.

23. Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 118.

24. Schmitt, *Political Theology II*, 120.

25. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 61.

26. Wallace, "Translator's Introduction," xxv.

27. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 61.

28. Monod, "Préface," 32.

the state is dying off, to be replaced by supranational structures. Despite its hermeneutical difficulties, this fascinating text is the most detailed exposition of Blumenberg's thoughts on the historicity of the state, the conditions of its demise, and the role of rhetoric as a technique of politics.<sup>29</sup>

Already in the title, Blumenberg draws attention to *reality* as a criterion of politics. Schmitt is frequently called a "political realist," and more than the split between politics and morality that comes with this appellation, Schmitt's realism relies on the normative force of reality itself: the decisive reality is what is produced by the decision over the state of exception. Blumenberg challenges the historical stability of this reality: "If the assessment of realities is one of the elementary preconditions of political action, then the *concept of reality* that such assessment *implies* matters, especially if it should not be the trivial *constant* as which it might appear at first glance—if, in other words, the concept of reality itself possesses a historical dimension."<sup>30</sup>

The "concept of reality" is the operative term in what Blumenberg came to call "historical phenomenology." He first introduced the concept of reality in the early 1960s as a historicized version of Edmund Husserl's notion of the "life-world."<sup>31</sup> For transcendental phenomenology, the life-world is the correlate to the "natural attitude," the horizon-like, pretheoretical understanding of reality that forms the unexamined background of all reflection.<sup>32</sup> Historical phenomenology is the study of *historical* life-worlds; the concept of reality is what structures the understanding of reality in a given epoch. Introducing both in "The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel" (1964), he distinguishes four concepts of reality. In antiquity it is "reality as instantaneous evidence," in which what is real is immediately felt and is in no further need of proof, as with the sun of the good and true in Plato's cave allegory. In the Middle Ages reality is conceived of as "guaranteed reality," in which God becomes

29. Blumenberg prepared three versions of this essay: a first draft; a job talk for a professorship in social and political philosophy he gave in November 1967 at the University of Zurich; and a final version that appeared in the May 1968 issue of *Schweizer Monatshefte* (Blumenberg, "The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State"). For the first and second drafts, see "WST" and "WST II," folder "Wirklichkeitsbegriff und Staatstheorie," DLA Marbach. As Blumenberg's biographer, Rüdiger Zill, relates, the essay was an outlier. When in 1967 Blumenberg was invited to give the job talk in Zurich, he suggested three topics, of which the theory of the state was his least favorite. Yet it was chosen, and with much misgiving he wrote the talk he had not yet prepared (Zill, *Der absolute Leser*, chap. 2). It appears to have been deemed too complicated by the audience. See Meyer, "Der Kandidat," 54.

30. Blumenberg, "WST II," 1.

31. Blumenberg, "The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel." See also Blumenberg, *Realität und Realismus*.

32. Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences*, §51.

the final ground for everything that is. Modernity has two concepts of reality that are dialectally related: the first has a structure of “the actualization of a context in itself,” a consistency realized over time—in the absence of immediate self-evidence or a transcendent guarantor, reality is real until disproved. This structure brings forth the final concept of reality, reality as the “experience of resistance.” Here it is the rupture of this context that appears to be the actual mark of the real.<sup>33</sup> Concepts of reality, while never directly stated, implicitly structure what in a given epoch is conceived of as real, and come to the fore in vastly different areas, such as art and literature, technology, science,<sup>34</sup> and, indeed, in politics. Therefore any conception of the state, too, is bound to the epoch’s reigning concept of reality: “For the construction of the state there is no model that would be equally binding and self-evident in every phase of the historical process. . . . It is not a static, but a dynamic reality.”<sup>35</sup>

For this reason, any call to “realism” must be suspect, as “every realism can itself be instrumentalized. The label ‘reality,’ attached to what is to be designated as authoritative, authenticates the positive proposition as that which is meant to be thought of as possible.”<sup>36</sup> Blumenberg, the metaphorologist, had already charged Schmitt with dissimulation, passing off theology as politics. Blumenberg, the historical phenomenologist, enacts a similar critique of ideology by questioning the political realist’s concept of reality. For before one can “realistically” decide on the state of exception, one has already decided on what should count as reality.<sup>37</sup> Thus Blumenberg begins “Theory of the State” with the observation that the state always stands in “reference to reality in a twofold sense: first, to that reality the state claims for itself and manifests in political actions, and second, to that reality it grants to *that* which it itself is *not*.”<sup>38</sup>

By dissecting the contingency of the state and its underlying rationality, Blumenberg counteracts Schmitt’s claim that the state is a supratemporal entity, a natural form, or an eternal necessity. His rebuke of the state, then, is a most direct rebuke of Schmitt’s doctrine of political sovereignty. Yet even beyond

33. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel,” 501–6. See also Blumenberg, “Preliminary Remarks.” Emphasis deleted.

34. Blumenberg, “‘Imitation of Nature’”; Blumenberg, “Phenomenological Aspects”; Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, pt. 3.

35. Blumenberg, “WST,” 19–20.

36. Blumenberg, “Preliminary Remarks,” 118.

37. As Blumenberg puts it in an unpublished manuscript: “The decisive question is who decides what is realism and who may call himself a realist. (Analogous to Carl Schmitt: Sovereign is he who decides the state of exception)” (“Aufzeichnungen und Notizen zum Wiener Kreis und zum Realismus,” DLA Marbach).

38. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 83.

Schmitt, Blumenberg also attacks an entire tradition of German political theory. Against this ahistorical notion, Blumenberg begins his text by juxtaposing the notion of the state in the ancient and the modern concepts of reality. In the ancient model—in which reality is understood as nature, identical with a cosmos whose truth is “instantaneously evident” and to which no alternative exists—the state is a direct part of nature. This is why Plato can argue for an isomorphism between the polis and the soul (in the *Republic*), and between the polis and the cosmos (in the *Timaeus*). In political Platonism, truth, morality, and politics form a unit, and so the state, too, is sanctioned as both true and good insofar as it is “founded on the self-evidence of [its] relation to reality.”<sup>39</sup> This notion of political Platonism—as well as its resultant rejection of pluralism—remains influential for much of Western history, Blumenberg holds.

In the Middle Ages, the naturalness of the state is refashioned into a natural law that is ultimately sustained by God, as in the political thought of Thomas Aquinas. While reality now relies on a transcendent guarantor, little changes in the quasi-natural, divinely legitimized status of the state. Only the modern concept of reality that appears in the Renaissance ruptures this notion. No longer describing a well-ordered, necessary cosmos, it is determined by radical contingency. It requires human self-preservation, not as an anthropological achievement, but as the constant “realization of a context,” which Blumenberg defends as a notion of nonteleological progress as continuation from the given. This epochal threshold was the focus of *Legitimacy*, where the response to theological absolutism had been human self-assertion. Something similar, Blumenberg argues, happens in political philosophy with the almost simultaneous writing of Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Prince* (1513, published 1532) and Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516). In both texts, the state is no longer natural or divinely sanctioned but appears as an artificial construction that needs to be actively sustained. Both authors express a reality that, rather than the phenomenal reflection of an ideal noumenal order, has merely become “a hyletic stock that must be arranged by humans for humans.”<sup>40</sup> Machiavelli and More are the first political instances of this new concept of reality.<sup>41</sup>

For Blumenberg, More’s *Utopia* is the origin of the revolutionary strand of modern political theory. Instead of offering a Platonic ideal state based on true knowledge, *Utopia* is first and foremost “aimed critically against the fac-

39. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 89.

40. Blumenberg, “WST,” 6.

41. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 93–94.



ticity of what is.”<sup>42</sup> If nothing new could come into the world before, because the world was complete, now the new is a distinct possibility, and can be made by humans.<sup>43</sup> “If the alternative to the self-evidence of the cosmos is chaos, the alternative to contingency is the possibility of the other, and that also means, of revolution.”<sup>44</sup> With this affirmation of human freedom, however, epistemic skepticism enters the political realm. While “the ideal *Politeia* is a norm spelled out,” utopia states only what could, not what must, be.<sup>45</sup> And where More attacks the naturalness of politics by highlighting contingency, Machiavelli does so by turning politics into a *techne*: questions of legitimacy remain as left-over elements of the old system but are now open to being manipulated; the art of politics furnishes “the appearance of unbroken continuity and unquestioned naturalness” after the fact.<sup>46</sup> This in turn results in a new concept of power as something human in origin, no longer entwined with the Platonic triad of nature, truth, and morality as reflections of the ordered cosmos. Both More and Machiavelli therefore rehabilitate the phenomenal against the noumenal in modernity’s world of contingency.

The strange duality of the modern concept of reality also plays a role in politics. The work of sustaining a context must break down at some point, and this experience of resistance can itself become a sign of reality. “Reality is not what looks like nature” but must constantly be made; at the same time, it is also “what cuts deeper into life than anything ever could that seems natural to it.”<sup>47</sup> This reality puts the state, too, into a new situation. It can no longer claim an inherent legitimacy because it mirrors the order of the cosmos, but must perpetually legitimize itself. And it has to “cut deeper into life” just to be felt as real and to prove its necessity. Both qualities follow from what Blumenberg calls the rationality of the modern concept of reality: self-preservation. “Consistency, immanent harmony with itself [*immanente Einstimmigkeit*], is the mark of the modern concept of reality. Self-preservation (instead of a transcendent *conservatio*) is the principle of this consistency and thus the principle of the idea of the state that corresponds to it.”<sup>48</sup>

Self-preservation is, one can argue, the structural equivalent to the “self-assertion” *Legitimacy* had seen in the struggle against the nominalist god.<sup>49</sup> If

42. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 90.

43. Blumenberg discusses the possibility of the new in the modern concept of reality in “The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel,” as well as in “Imitation of Nature.”

44. Blumenberg, “WST,” 16.

45. Blumenberg, “WST II,” 5.

46. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 93.

47. Blumenberg, “WST II,” 4.

48. Blumenberg, “WST,” 16.

49. See Matysik, “Hans Blumenberg’s Multiple Modernities.”

self-assertion is an “existential program” in the face of a loss of meaning,<sup>50</sup> then self-preservation is its underlying rationality, the modern (nonaffective, ateleological) constant realization of a context, which is translated into the “rational norm of a process.”<sup>51</sup> This is, Blumenberg stresses, not a question of anthropology but only addresses the “logical self-preservation” of the pure continuation of the structure of consistency itself.<sup>52</sup> One of this rationality’s expressions is the dynamic of an immanent progress in science and technology: no final truth is to be had, only an incremental progress to be made. This rationality also plays out in the theory of the state, and for Blumenberg, it is best exemplified in Thomas Hobbes: the state of nature must be left behind not because of its being “solitary, poor, brutish, nasty, and short”—that is, not because it is *affectively* disagreeable—but because it makes future actions *logically* impossible. After all, it is the mere affective drive that creates the state of nature, in which everyone has a right to everything, for it fosters the brutishness of everyone claiming their right. The rational self-preservation, on the other hand, abstracts from affect and makes everyone relinquish their natural rights in order to create a new system that will reinstate positive rights within a state.<sup>53</sup>

In Hobbes, Blumenberg thus sees the rationality of self-preservation transferred onto the state. Since it cannot claim naturalness any longer, it must constantly make the case for its own necessity. And because reality is a “contrastive concept,” this justification will have to perpetually point out what the rationality of self-preservation is meant to thwart—this is the reality of “*that* which it itself is *not*” mentioned above.<sup>54</sup> And it is here that Schmitt’s total state enters again:

By way of comparative and *competing presence* it can be understood what it means to say the state claims reality and grants it to that which exists “beside, above, and beyond the state, and often enough even against it.” . . . It is in war that the state sees an upswing of its own reality as the most extreme and exclusive bindingness, of the self-evidence of its necessity and its right, which tends toward absolutism; this occurs not only in war but also on the brink of war, also in the simulation that anticipates war as a “cold” one. *Only the crisis essentializes the state’s existence*; the state of emergency [*Notstand*] is the textbook case of its vindication.<sup>55</sup>

50. Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 138.

51. Blumenberg, “Self-Preservation and Inertia,” 219.

52. Blumenberg, “WST 17.”

53. Blumenberg, “Self-Preservation and Inertia,” 217–19.

54. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 83.

55. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 84. Emphasis mine. Blumenberg quotes Thomas Mann’s *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man*.

Thus, just as Hobbes's absolutist state receives its legitimacy—and thus its reality—from the promise to end the unsustainable state of nature, the modern state must continuously point to the state of emergency. The state of emergency is therefore indeed the locus of power and legitimacy for the state, but not in the sense of Schmitt's decisive sovereignty. The result is that Blumenberg presents not a strong but an utterly *weak* state: the modern state is always on the brink of losing its reality and must try to assert it by constantly keeping in consciousness that *against* which it exists—crises, states of emergency, war. Because of this, the state “tends towards absolutism,” and this tendency can falsely appear as a sign of strength. Schmitt certainly argues in this sense when he formulates his vision of political theology. Yet in fact, Blumenberg shows, this strength is a sign of dependency and would be a mark of power only under a concept of reality that holds the state to be naturally given or divinely guaranteed. Yet in modernity, human self-assertion has discarded these possibilities. It is for this reason that Schmitt's historical method is flawed: the “sociology of concepts” and its epoch-defining “metaphysical image” claim historicity but are still based on an idea of reality as providing eternal norms or legitimacies.<sup>56</sup> Schmitt tries to transfer assumptions from the past into a fundamentally different present for which they no longer hold. The “sociology of concepts” is anachronistic, wishful thinking. Thus it is not *mastery* of the state of emergency that legitimizes sovereignty—rather, sovereignty *depends* on a perpetual state of emergency for its very survival.

***The Immanent Neutralization of the State: Technology and Technization***

The paradox of strength necessitated by weakness—a direct consequence of the modern concept of reality as resistance—is in line with *Legitimacy's* view of the turn from transcendence to immanence in modernity. To be sure, Blumenberg does not formulate a law of history. Rather, he thinks through the consequences of an observation: “My concern is with an analysis of tendencies.”<sup>57</sup> One such tendency is the decline of the strong state. In industrialized societies, Blumenberg sees politics—the formerly dominant discourse of their organization—in the process of being either relativized or replaced by some other system. Here Blumenberg is in agreement with other thinkers of functionally differentiated modern societies in the tradition of Max Weber, such as Niklas Luhmann or, indeed, Habermas. As a result of modernity's inherent rationality and its functional complexity, Blumenberg affirms what Schmitt

56. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46.

57. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 104.

had seen as the great evil of the state's liberal "neutralization," that is, the role played by the economic sphere, the parliamentary system, and technology in limiting the state.<sup>58</sup> In this respect, Schmitt and Blumenberg agree on facts but not on their evaluation: Blumenberg welcomes neutralization as an immanent development of the modern state. Speculatively following this logic to its end, Blumenberg argues that the current age could petrify the state to the point of its obsolescence. He demonstrates this thought by example of the two things Schmitt abhors, economy and discourse; both, for Blumenberg, are instances of "technization."

It is helpful to remember the political circumstances of 1967, when Blumenberg wrote "Theory of the State," internationally and domestically. After the shock of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, which pushed the world to the brink of nuclear conflict, the Cold War had entered a phase of *détente*, with power balanced between the two great blocs and their nuclear arsenals. In Germany the governing grand coalition of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, formed in 1966, discussed the *Notstandsgesetze*, aimed at changing the constitution to extend the state's emergency powers; a year later the emergency laws would play a decisive role in the student protests. In a rare nod to current events, Blumenberg notes that the plans for the *Notstandsgesetze* only seem to confirm that "the state of emergency [*Notstand*] is the textbook case" of political normalcy in which the "manipulated crisis [is] a tool for [the] inner stabilization" of power.<sup>59</sup> The nuclear threat is another example of the state as a "subject of crises," which retains its reality only if it remains the visible answer to this threat. However, for Blumenberg, this rationality has changed in the present. The idea of *Notstandsgesetze* as well as the grand coalition itself only play the role of a "pragmatic myth" meant to suggest political decisiveness and agency,<sup>60</sup> both of which are no longer given in actuality. Likewise, the fact of mutually assured destruction makes war unthinkable. Both developments signal that politics is losing its status as master episteme. If, in the transition to modernity, nature had been replaced by politics as the reality that "cuts deeper into life,"<sup>61</sup> now "politics in turn seems liable to be surpassed by the relevance of other structures."<sup>62</sup>

One difficulty of "Theory of the State" is that Blumenberg never quite spells out what exactly these other structures are. At first glance, he seems to

58. Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*, 28.

59. Blumenberg, "The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State," 84.

60. Blumenberg, "The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State," 96. See also Nicholls, "Hans Blumenberg on Political Myth."

61. Blumenberg, "WST II," 4.

62. Blumenberg, "The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State," 100.

suggest that it is the dynamics of a globally integrated economy. Not only do “elections, crises, formations of governments increasingly occur under the influence of economic factors and situations,” but the “interests of economic existence” serve as criteria for almost all political demands. Economic policy “has increasingly become the substance of politics, or, what is essentially the same, the desubstantialization of its historically sanctioned form.”<sup>63</sup> The only function of domestic politics, then, is the control of economic growth, so that neither the *Notstand* nor a grand coalition can reconstitute actual power to the state. Indeed, the term *politics* itself may simply be a leftover element, one that, reoccupation-like, now refers to economic regulation.<sup>64</sup>

For the anti-absolutist Blumenberg, it is a blessing that there is “almost nothing left of the absolutism of the reality of the state.”<sup>65</sup> Yet it is not altogether certain whether it is really economics as such that supplants politics, as Schmitt had feared. In affirming that the state has been reduced only to sustaining the bare necessities of a hegemonic economy, Blumenberg appears to approach Robert Nozick’s idea of the night-watchman state; in seeing the economy as truly self-regulatory, he exhibits an affinity to the spontaneous order of free-market theorists like Friedrich von Hayek. In this reading, Blumenberg would be a radical economic libertarian, yet one for whom there is little possibility for political agency. Not committing to any interpretation of Blumenberg’s economic persuasion, Angus Nicholls thus interprets him as a proponent of “a disillusioned and melancholy politics.”<sup>66</sup> And while Jean-Claude Monod notes that “the whole question of the political capacity of populaces in times of the rule of economies and markets has reached a degree that Blumenberg’s text foresaw,”<sup>67</sup> Monod chides him for an all-too-fatalistic approval of this fact. Indeed, one must ask whether Blumenberg reserves any systematic room for agency or political freedom at all—if his plea for postsovereignty is accompanied by an acceptance of postpolitics.

But the role of the economy and the space of freedom are more complicated in this text. Against interpretations that see Blumenberg as a libertarian, I would argue that he privileges not a self-regulating economy but self-regulation as an expression of modern rationality as such. That he does not favor a libertarian economics becomes clear when he writes that Walter Eucken’s ordoliberal model of deregulation—partly responsible for the Ger-

63. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 102.

64. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 103–4.

65. Blumenberg, “WST II,” 14.

66. Nicholls, “‘How to Do Nothing with Words,’” 74.

67. Monod, “Préface,” 33.

man *Wirtschaftswunder* of the 1950s—has failed, now that “the automatism of self-controlling systems has evinced alarming fluctuations.”<sup>68</sup> In a draft of “Theory of the State,” he even praises Karl Schiller, the new social democratic minister of economic affairs, who countered the previous chancellor Ludwig Erhard’s ordoliberalism with a Keynesian approach that included increased regulation.<sup>69</sup> In his assessment, Blumenberg has the dialogue and accord between state and economic players in mind, Schiller’s “concerted activity” (*konzertierte Aktion*).<sup>70</sup> Rather than any actual control of politics over the economy, Blumenberg highlights the *rhetorical* nature of such politics. It is his main example of the thesis that “to a high degree, economic politics is the politics of words.”<sup>71</sup> In fact, all that is left of the old economic politics is the power of rhetoric; “its instrument is essentially the word in public discourse: the trustworthy piece of information, the call to nonintervention by others, guiding principles, planning projections, and encouragements to consume.”<sup>72</sup>

Here we approach the center of the essay—the connection between rhetoric and technology, understood as not just technical objects but the core of modern consciousness. Rhetoric, for Blumenberg, is closely related to the notion of technology. To understand this, it is important to keep in mind that for him, two connected but distinct phenomena become increasingly decisive in modernity: the “principle of technicity,” on the one hand, and the concept of “technization,” on the other.<sup>73</sup> The first simply designates the logic of technological progress, which follows the concept of reality as a purely immanent, ateleological continuity—what Schmitt had derisively called the “process-progress”—instead of operating according to any transcendent criterion or telos.<sup>74</sup> Blumenberg argued at different times that the unfolding of this immanent principle of technicity overcomes the problems that technology itself had created, instead of “dogmatically” rejecting technology altogether.<sup>75</sup> By this he means the notion that the current problems of technology are to be solved not by future technological progress but by stepping out of the continuum of history—by a reversal into the past, or a parallel, that is, utopian, present. He

68. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 102.

69. “Rhetoric does not need to take on the naïveté of ‘soul massages’; rather, it can be implemented as a more subliminally than morally suggestive jargon of musical metaphors, such as the current economy minister of the Federal Republic commands so masterfully” (Blumenberg, “WST,” 10).

70. See Hochstätter, *Karl Schiller*, chap. 3.

71. “Blumenberg,” “WST,” 10.

72. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 103.

73. Blumenberg, “Phenomenological Aspects,” 362, 359.

74. Schmitt, *Political Theory II*, 120.

75. Blumenberg, “Dogmatische und rationale Analyse,” 259.

cites Walter Benjamin, for whom “the realization of the idea of technology is a betrayal of utopia,”<sup>76</sup> precisely because a utopian history must break with the continuity of technological progress. Instead, Blumenberg speculates on the consequences of the principle of technicity on the existence of the state to determine whether “what was supposed to be realized as *human* endeavor would come as *technological* consequence.”<sup>77</sup>

If the “principle of technicity” plays out in the realm of technical progress, the second concept, “technization,” explains how modern consciousness responds to this progress. Blumenberg borrows the term from Edmund Husserl, just as he had already appropriated the life-world.<sup>78</sup> Like Blumenberg and Weber, Husserl understood modernity as a process of increasing rationalization. Yet where the Marxist critique that took up Weber’s analysis saw a problem in the “iron cage” of rationality on the level of social relations,<sup>79</sup> Husserl was more concerned with the rift between scientific and everyday modes of knowledge. This rift was responsible for, as the title of his book has it, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*.<sup>80</sup> The scientific method replaced eidetic knowledge with “‘symbolic’ concepts,”<sup>81</sup> so that not every step of, for instance, a mathematical operation had constantly to be present to consciousness. And just as Blumenberg welcomes the rationalization of the principle of technicity, so does he embrace technization as the separation of knowing-how from knowing-that. Politics, Blumenberg argues, inevitably morphs into a *techne*. Against the old Platonism, in which truth was the precondition for action, Blumenberg offers a rejuvenated Sophism that deals with such techniques. And the most politically eminent form of technization for Blumenberg is rhetoric.

Both the principle of technicity and rhetorical technization explain the demise of the state and the rise of a new type of politics. In describing the political consequences that grow out of the principle of technicity, Blumenberg returns to the state as a “subject of crises.” Just as Hobbes’s absolutist state had not quelled all conflict but projected it “onto the relationship between the

76. Blumenberg, “WST,” 13. See also Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 109n32. That Blumenberg refers to Benjamin should not be taken to indicate that he knew Benjamin’s writings well. This thought—taken from the last segment of *One Way Street*—Blumenberg found in a book by Peter Szondi, as the manuscript shows.

77. Blumenberg, “WST II,” 17–18.

78. See Mende, “Histories of Technicization.”

79. Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 123.

80. Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences*. Often the term *Technisierung* is translated as “technicization.” I follow the translation in *Crisis of European Sciences*, which gives “technization.”

81. Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences*, 48. For a metaphorological investigation of technization, see also Blumenberg, *Paradigms*, 75.

now-forming nation states,”<sup>82</sup> it was not only the specter of a *Notstand* but also the external threat of war that rendered the state “evident.” This balance of internal and external threat that still dominated Hobbes’s era is now exacerbated in the new world order of the Cold War, with its dual centers of power and unprecedented technologies of destruction. If Hiroshima had shown the extent of nuclear devastation, the Cuban missile crisis vividly demonstrated the urgent danger of self-annihilation: “Given, however, a technological state in which real wars endanger the state itself and as such, and in which they can destroy its identity even as a subject of crises, the hypothetical war—the ‘phantom war’—becomes a medium that promises to push states to crystalline solidity.”<sup>83</sup>

The state’s looming “crystalline solidity” approached by the principle of technicity is, however, not the total state of Schmitt: the self-preservation of the individual in the state is acceptable in this situation only as long as the state offers more protection than harm. Once the progress of arms technologies endangers its own existence, this logic collapses. The result is the *impossibility* of a total state, as the solidity of the state cancels out the very quality that defines it, the ability to decide. Under the doctrine of mutually assured destruction, the political loses its meaning, since any decision could trigger a complete annihilation of both parties. This is why, for Blumenberg, “the all-encompassing antithesis of the East/West dualism has only been a short-lived interlude,” since it may be “that the experiment of absolute authorities has been *played through to its conclusion*.”<sup>84</sup> The fading away of “the political” (in Schmitt’s sense) as the main category of actual politics thus applies not only to domestic politics emaciated by economics but also to international politics. Blumenberg sees Schmittian agonism and decisionism replaced with an “immanent regulation” as the rationality of the technical age.<sup>85</sup> The result might not be an eternal, but at least a “cold” peace. “It does not mean that war as means can no longer be thought, but that this thought can no longer be thought to the end.”<sup>86</sup> The sta-

82. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 59.

83. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 84.

84. Blumenberg, *Legitimacy*, 91. Emphasis mine.

85. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 95.

86. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 84, 96. In his analysis of the “cold” peace, Blumenberg picks up on a newspaper article by the physicist and “peace researcher” Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, who had argued that the arms race required a new morality, for “the technical world does not stabilize itself. Its stabilization is a political task” (“Friede und Wahrheit”). This is exactly what Blumenberg questions. On the international stage, the nuclear deterrence policy seems to him, despite its horrendous risk, to constitute a certain stabilization, which may create “a bad peace but not the worst” (“The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 96). The best peace, Weizsäcker’s



bilization of the cold peace through the principle of technicity leads Blumenberg to welcome *rhetorical* technization.

Let us suppose we were able to approximate this threshold value of immanent regulation, in which case the axiom would gain validity whereby political action best fulfills its purpose by only *simulating* the classical quality of “decisiveness” [*Entscheidungsfreudigkeit*]. . . . This is an irritatingly exaggerated formulation, but it seems useful to me as an antidote against overestimating the traditional scope of political “reality.”<sup>87</sup>

Here Blumenberg fully embraces Husserl’s notion of technization as the use of “‘symbolic’ concepts”: “The decisions that have become possible today no human can make anymore. This justifies their replacement by symbolic quodlibeta. At least as a model it is thinkable that the state will one day be nothing more than the institutionalized, rule-bound exchange of words and information, of hypotheses about action that never will be necessary.”<sup>88</sup> The state, here, is no longer based on true insight, as it was in the Platonic model. It only requires the simulation of decisions, since the decision as the central category of the political can no longer “match our political experience” in a world of mutually assured destruction,<sup>89</sup> and in a world dominated by economics. Examples of that are Karl Schiller’s “musical metaphors” as well as the ways in which the two world powers rhetorically preempt the strikes they cannot execute if they want to survive.<sup>90</sup> One does better to accept “how preferable, particularly with regard to global structures, is the substitution of words for facts and actions, proclamations for decisions.”<sup>91</sup>

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peace born of moral insight, appears not only less likely to him but dangerous. It reintroduces the Platonic dependence of politics on morality and truth. Moreover, this speculative new morality relinquishes what can be anticipated from the logic of modern rationality. Weizsäcker assumes that current problems of technology can be solved only by stepping out of the continuum of history—by a reversal into the past or a leap into a parallel, that is, utopian, present. Blumenberg’s criticism is partly a question of theory design: modern rationality can at least be anticipated in its outcome, “played through,” while stepping out of its course jeopardizes what is already achieved. The point of “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State” is that politics becomes a technique like any other, and morality must be separated from it. What is significant about Blumenberg’s rejection of morality in politics is that while Schmitt saw the opponent in the political debate as a moral category (*Political Theology*, 28), Blumenberg wants to develop it from the inherent logic of modernity.

87. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 95.

88. Blumenberg, “WST II,” 17.

89. Blumenberg, “WST,” 7.

90. Blumenberg, “WST,” 10.

91. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 94.

***A Politics for the Technical Age: Nonperformative Rhetoric, the Public Sphere, and Postsovereignty***

Speech instead of deeds: this is a reversal of the old political “realism” that argued that actions spoke louder than “mere words.” For Blumenberg, such realism is a residue of an antirhetorical Platonism that exists even in the otherwise purely modern Machiavelli. “Platonism is a philosophy against the rule of the word, the postulate of visual perception against listening, of self-evidence against persuasion, of *res* [things] against *verba* [words].”<sup>92</sup> It was against the Sophists that Plato pitted the *politeia*, which was meant once and for all to put an end to politics as a matter of debate and make it into a matter of truth. Yet under the exigencies of the technical world, Blumenberg argues, “the *res-verba* antithesis would have become the *verba pro rebus* thesis—and this in turn would be something like the return of Sophism from its Platonic exile.”<sup>93</sup> Instead of a politics based on Platonic evidence in all its varieties—“insight and conviction, fidelity and steadfastness”—politics should be understood as a series of capacities, “as a technique [*Technik*] just like any other technique” that requires only knowing-how, not any deeper knowing-that.<sup>94</sup> Against politics as decision, he offers politics as rhetoric.

I see a strong and a weak interpretation of Blumenberg’s theory of political rhetoric. I will start with the strong interpretation. It conceives of rhetoric as the complete *suspension* of decisions, and it must count as one of the most fundamental counterpositions to Schmitt’s political theory imaginable. It argues that politics in modernity is defined by a replacement of action through words without ever completely crossing this boundary. As such, it is ultimately untenable as a political theory but heuristically useful in its exaggeration. On the basis of this exaggeration—an “analysis of tendencies”—Blumenberg isolates a concept of the *public* as the locus of politics.

In the strong interpretation of the *techne* of rhetoric, it has a strange performative structure that undercuts the usual theories of political speech. It does not only contradict the Schmittian decisionism that rejects speech as apolitical, or a Marxist view, which lessens its importance compared with class dynamics, but also goes against the reverse tradition that understands speech itself to be the supreme political action. In the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt most fervently argued that speech is action (and a host of theorists have followed her, not least Habermas).<sup>95</sup> What connects Schmitt and Arendt, and separates them

92. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 94.

93. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 100.

94. Blumenberg, “WST,” 12.

95. Arendt, *Human Condition*.

from Blumenberg, is that they both see action at the core of the political—be it the discursive speech or the decision (which in most cases is also a speech act). Yet in a strong interpretation of Blumenberg, words are not actions at all: Blumenberg’s political thought would be based on a theory of language that is performative by *not* being performative. In a central passage of “Theory of the State,” Blumenberg notes: “*How to Do Things with Words* is the title of an important book by J. L. Austin—maybe another one still needs to be written: *How to Do Nothing with Words*.”<sup>96</sup>

Blumenberg refers to Austin’s theory of speech acts, which looked not only at the semantic dimension of propositions but also at their pragmatic impact—at the effects utterances have in the world once they are uttered. Austin differentiated three elements of speech acts: the locutionary act is the propositional content of a sentence, its meaning; the illocutionary act deals with the “force of the utterance,” the communicative significance within a natural language; and the perlocutionary act is the resulting consequences in the world.<sup>97</sup> Political speech also consists in performative acts; their illocutionary force may be that of a declaration or an order, and their perlocutionary effect a change in political reality. What Blumenberg seems to have in mind when he alludes to Austin, however, is radically different. He inserts a hiatus into the structure of the speech act itself, so that it becomes a performative utterance whose illocutionary force is not simply a passive or negative perlocution—as in Austin’s example of the utterance “You can’t do that!”<sup>98</sup>—but the indefinite delay of any perlocution *at all*. Put differently, in a strong interpretation of Blumenberg, *the perlocution of a political speech act is its own suspension*.

Parallel to Austin’s performative, Werner Hamacher has coined the concept of the “afformative.” At least in some regards, it seems to come close to what Blumenberg has in mind. According to Hamacher, affirmatives “are not a subcategory of performatives.” They do not posit but “depose.”<sup>99</sup> Hamacher develops his idea following Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence.” The Benjaminian difference between lawmaking and law-preserving violence is transposed

96. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 106.

97. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 22.

98. Austin uses the example to explain his distinctions: If person A says to person B, “You can’t do that!,” the locution is the semantic meaning that B is unable to perform a certain action C (Austin suggests that this can be reformulated as “he said that . . .”); the illocution is the act of protesting against C (“he argued that . . .”), and the perlocution may be to stop B from doing C (“he convinced me that . . .”) (*How to Do Things with Words*, 102). In this case, the performative utterance indeed may stop an action, but it is still an action itself. This is not the case in Blumenberg’s strong conception of rhetoric.

99. Hamacher, “Afformative, Strike,” 1139.

onto speech act theory: just as every act that upholds the law has in it the potential to overthrow the law, Hamacher believes that every performative is, at its basis, affirmative, able to turn against its perlocutionary power. His proximity to Benjamin—and Benjamin's to Schmitt—would sit uneasily with Blumenberg, and I do not want to suggest a direct theoretical lineage or a shared political project here; after all, Benjamin's "religious decisionism"<sup>100</sup> and his anti-parliamentarianism are exactly the type of positions Blumenberg wants to "depose" in his use of the rhetorical affirmative. On the contrary, his hope is exactly that for which Schmitt—and Benjamin—had scolded "the bourgeoisie as a 'discussing class,'" namely, "to evade the decision. A class that shifts all political activity onto the plane of conversation in the press and in parliament is no match for social conflict."<sup>101</sup> Taking the affirmative merely as an apt descriptor of Blumenberg's ideal of political speech, one may say that for him, parliamentary democracy can be considered the perpetual deferral of the decision that could potentially be the end of the world. It thus would be, ironically, something like Schmitt's *katechon*, the "restrainer" of the Antichrist, and Nicholls indeed sees the goal of this politics in nothing less than "saving the world."<sup>102</sup> In this strong interpretation of rhetoric, affirmative speech acts are the most rational implementation of the imperative of self-preservation in the atomic age.<sup>103</sup>

Of course, if this were to describe the *whole* of political rhetoric, it would be the end not only of decisionism but also of any kind, even nonabsolutist, political activity. It would, indeed, be a formulation of Arnold Gehlen's "post-histoire," which Nicholls assumes that Blumenberg reproduces.<sup>104</sup> In such a world, political speech would only have the effect of preventing irrational agents from disturbing a self-regulating technical equilibrium; it would be a postpolitics. This strong position is a willful exaggeration in line with Blumenberg's methodical approach of an "analysis of tendencies," and while it offers valuable insights, as a political theory it must remain utterly unconvincing. Political decisions are not only made on the level of nuclear war avoidance, and politics as a matter of public debate, negotiation, and deliberation is not even touched on in this model.

100. Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason*, 90.

101. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 59.

102. Schmitt, "Nomos" of the Earth, 59; Nicholls, "How to Do Nothing with Words," 74.

103. *Speech acts* need not be taken to mean singular, identifiable propositions here. With Jean-François Lyotard, one could also say that a specific "phrase regimen" or the "linking together" of different such regimens can have an affirmative effect (*Differend*, xii). I thank Rieke Trimev for suggesting this to me.

104. Nicholls, "How to Do Nothing with Words," 66.

However, Blumenberg's thought also offers a weaker, and more convincing, model of rhetorical technization, and one that includes democratic deliberation and a productive role of the public sphere. It reduces the affirmative element to only one in the political process. Rhetoric, here, may delay action or diffuse its effects to gain time for further deliberation, which yields performative results. Such rhetoric retrieves its performativity in the hiatus of the affirmative. It provides "a solid technique of at least placing speeches ahead of actions, and information ahead of intervention."<sup>105</sup> Whoever speaks, one could say, does not fight. Thus "the often vilified 'endless discussion' can very well replace and transpose the momentary discharge of a conflict."<sup>106</sup> If the stronger notion of rhetoric is due to the logic of rhetorical technization, the weaker notion is the result of its interaction with the principle of technicity. Together, they allow a reformulation of the notion of political activity that follows a more dialogical model. It relies on the "secure conditions under which pluralistic and non-violent communication can take place,"<sup>107</sup> as Nicholls writes. This kind of political rhetoric is compatible with parliamentary democracy, not only as *katechon* against the potentially annihilating decision but as a safe system for effective deliberation. Here also lies Blumenberg's notion of political freedom within limits: rhetoric acts less as a replacement for action than its regulation through a specific type of public *consensus*—but one quite different from Habermas's understanding of the concept.

Blumenberg describes the full interaction between the principle of technicity as immanent regulation and the affirmative tendencies of rhetorical technization in what he calls the "paradox of the powerless power." If technological progress creates a stability between powers internationally, it has domestic effects as well. Any state is now "confronted with the complexity of the problems of a world that is only possible by virtue of technology." This engenders "being forcibly turned toward rationality."<sup>108</sup> In the technical age, power is no longer the exertion of mere physical force by way of sovereign decisions. Rather, the functioning of the technology that undergirds power largely depends on the cooperation of a highly specialized and functionally differentiated society; indeed, it makes sense to include these interrelations between complex social systems under the heading of "technology." "Whatever one may wish to call the powers and qualities that might at this moment

105. Blumenberg, "The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State," 106.

106. Blumenberg, "The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State," 104.

107. Nicholls, "How to Do Nothing with Words," 74.

108. Blumenberg, "The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State," 98.

be the objective of an expansive political will to subdue, they can no longer be separated from the free consent to this will.” The fragility of this machinery is the “humane surprise” that hastens the end of Schmittian sovereignty. The “substance of what can be neither won nor ruled by power”—the consent of a public closely integrated into the technical world—“has become crucial, in modern reality, to the continued existence of that very reality.”<sup>109</sup> Most surprisingly, it is the creation of political reality itself, once at the hand of the state creating perpetuating crises, that is now a function of this public. In his essay on the novel, Blumenberg thus had written, “Reality as a self-constituting context is a boundary concept of the ideal totality of all selves—it is a confirmative value for the experience and interpretation of the world that take place in inter-subjectivity.”<sup>110</sup>

Blumenberg repeats this point expressly in a posthumous publication, stating “that the modern concept of reality cannot be interpreted correctly without reference to an interpretive community [*Verständigungsgemeinschaft*] of subjects.”<sup>111</sup> This amounts to the notion of the public both as the *regulator* of the political will and the *perpetuator* of political reality—reminiscent of Kant’s “transcendental principle of publicity,”<sup>112</sup> according to which only those political decisions are permissible that require public consent—and that its role is most developed in a state so technologically advanced that it is nearly impossible to act against it. Both its functions render “any notion of violence, even of the most conventional kind, risky in the extreme.”<sup>113</sup> Instead, they require slow and deliberative processes. In this, Blumenberg comes close to Arendt’s notion of the public as a guarantor of reality,<sup>114</sup> or Habermas’s discourse theory of politics. However, in Blumenberg, consensus is not the result of a discussion under the assumption of an ideal speech situation. Rather, the consensus marks the *beginning* of any deliberation as a result of the immanent regulation of the technical world—it is the consent *to* deliberate rather than the consent *by* deliberation. Instead of being situated within dialogue, technical rationality makes dialogue possible in the first place by ruling out any alternative to it.

“Theory of the State” is very much in line with Blumenberg’s thinking since *Legitimacy*. He sees as the result of modern rationality’s immanent

109. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 99.

110. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Possibility of the Novel,” 504. Emphasis deleted.

111. Blumenberg, *Realität und Realismus*, 29.

112. Kant, “Toward Perpetual Peace,” 104–9.

113. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 96.

114. See Bajohr, *Dimensionen der Öffentlichkeit*, chap. 3.

dynamic an eventual increase in individual freedom and a decrease in volatility. Although his model can at times look almost cybernetic in its reliance on self-regulation, Blumenberg is far from suggesting a postpolitical or post-historical future. Instead, he tries to reformulate the situation of politics in the technical age. This means both the rejection of Platonism as a still-subcutaneously virulent concept of reality and the recognition of the conditions under which political action is possible in industrialized and technicized societies. The reintroduction of premodern notions of reality, as in Schmitt, are deemed dangerous because they risk exploding a trajectory that promises at least some stability and predictability. Likewise, Blumenberg rejects utopian notions of history because they sidestep the rationality of self-preservation.<sup>115</sup> Utopia, as already in More, highlights the contingency of reality, and for Blumenberg this is useful only in its critical function.<sup>116</sup> But modernity must constantly reshape contingency into consistency, and one way of doing this is, as Machiavelli had found out, through the use of political language. Rhetoric may not only replace or suspend action; it is also the most fundamental way of world making in the absence of the norms of nature. No utopia, Blumenberg argues, can provide guidance toward such consistency because it assumes a radical discontinuity in history.<sup>117</sup>

Here, then, lies the task of politics for Blumenberg: to rationally deliberate within the limits of what is implied in the modern concept of reality. For despite all his talk of “immanent regulation,” Blumenberg does not suggest any historical determinism. The “immanent regulation” is the consistency of the modern concept of reality projected into the future, and marks the logic one *should* follow—or at least not act against—not a prediction of events to come. Blumenberg is well aware that a relapse into past concepts of reality is always possible, and that, in the long run, ruptures are bound to occur in history, because the integrity of such immanent logic is always at risk of being punctured. This is why his attack on Schmitt on the basis of the latter’s false historical epistemology—his “sociology of concepts”—is so significant: it fulfills the “continuing critical *officium*” of modernity.<sup>118</sup> It must indeed be continued, constantly made, since the modern notion of progress is neither teleological nor automatic. It is the logic of a process that can only be differentially detected, by comparing past and present states, but without any final goal.<sup>119</sup>

115. Blumenberg, “Dogmatische und rationale Analyse,” 272–73.

116. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 110.

117. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 110–11.

118. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, 61.

119. Blumenberg, “Dogmatische und rationale Analyse,” 261–64.

This is why Blumenberg was more of a liberal in the mold of Max Weber, as Charles Turner has suggested, and not simply a Whig historian, as Richard Rorty believed, for whom progress is a given.<sup>120</sup>

Instead of stepping outside the dynamic of modernity, Blumenberg argues, a politics cognizant of this dynamic should follow the immanent logic of the technical world. While one can see Luhmannian undertones in this, another way to look at it would be to call Blumenberg, in a strange way, something of an accelerationist.<sup>121</sup> His suggestion is that technization as well as the principle of technicity accelerate the reduction of state sovereignty to such a degree that at some point a supranational system guided by international law will result. To be clear, Blumenberg remains vague on this notion. He neither refers to any contemporary theorist of postnational politics, be it Alexandre Kojève, whose Schmittian roots and Hegelian outlook he would have found suspicious, or Ernst Jünger and his idea of the *Weltstaat*, whose biologicistic undertones he would have abhorred.<sup>122</sup> Characteristically, Blumenberg side-steps the debates of his time. Instead, he retraces a thought by the French eighteenth-century political theorist (and inventor of the word *ideology*) Antoine Destutt de Tracy, who had suggested that after Hobbes the state of nature between individuals had only been transposed onto the situation between states. “What the states lacked to reach a condition of a ‘society which is organized and perfected,’” Blumenberg summarizes Destutt de Tracy, “was the founding of a common court of law and a superordinate coercive power.” This thought, however, only becomes convincing once the “threat to everyone by everyone” that Hobbes had assumed for the relationships between individuals also goes for the relationship between states. And this, of course, describes the political situation after the atom bomb.<sup>123</sup>

In 1967, the year of Blumenberg’s first draft of the essay, the Brussels Treaty went into effect, consolidating the development of the European Union as a supranational organization. We do not know how Blumenberg thought about it, but it is not unlikely that he deemed it agreeable. Such a supranational entity shows, quite in line with Blumenberg’s thinking, “that sovereignty and

120. Turner, “Liberalism”; Rorty, “Against Belatedness.”

121. Williams and Srnicek, “#ACCELERATE MANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics.” Williams and Srnicek define *accelerationism* as the notion of speeding up and exacerbating productive relations within capitalism; they see it as an alternative to the messianic utopianism that puts such a premium on temporal rupture.

122. Kletzer, “Alexandre Kojève’s Hegelianism”; Jünger, *Der Weltstaat*. On Blumenberg’s political distance to Jünger, see Blumenberg, “Ernst Jünger—ein Fazit.”

123. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 113.



sovereign states . . . have been but the passing phenomena of a few centuries, that their passing is by no means regrettable, and that current developments in Europe exhibit the possibility of going beyond all that,”<sup>124</sup> as Neil MacCormick put it. Postsovereignty is the logical result of modern rationality: of self-preservation and the immanent principle of technicity, on the one hand, and of publicness and intersubjectivity, on the other. And postsovereignty is achieved through language in the form of political rhetoric: “The iteration of the state contract through the state contract among states appears in this instance not as an externally introduced utopia, but as the internal consequence of a reality that has been established not only with the contractual act, but with language as the first instrument of social reciprocity.”<sup>125</sup>

***Conclusion: From History to Anthropology***

Blumenberg has since been proved right on some of these points, such as the strengthening of supranational bonds both in international relations and in institutions like the European Union (despite its recent setbacks), and wrong on others, like the self-healing properties of technological progress. Although Blumenberg does not mistake “immanent regulation” for teleology, he puts much faith in the willingness of political agents to act according to the inherent rationality of modernity. The challenges of slowing, if not reversing, climate change—a direct product of technical progress—demonstrate that the reasonable is not necessarily the politically feasible.<sup>126</sup> What is more, the fundamental, and essentially game-theoretical, assumption of his argument—the stability of nuclear deterrence—is anything but certain in a multipolar world. Nuclear deterrence today is not a “foolproof and reliable global security mechanism,” if it ever was one; it may eliminate nuclear war, but not the “limited war,” itself the product of new technologies, that often proliferates into endless ones.<sup>127</sup>

What is more, while Blumenberg briefly touches on the demagogical potential of rhetoric,<sup>128</sup> his trust in the self-regulating power of a public discourse limited by the necessities of the technical world is unsuited for the present. In the end, he presupposes a base consensus too easily, so that his desire to put Schmittian decision at a distance requires him to subscribe to what Judith

124. MacCormick, “Beyond the Sovereign State,” 1.

125. Blumenberg, “WST,” 19.

126. For the argument that Blumenberg can nevertheless be brought to bear on the topic of the Anthropocene, see Vida Pavesich’s contribution to this special issue.

127. Brown and Arnold, “Quirks of Nuclear Deterrence,” 293, 298.

128. Blumenberg, “The Concept of Reality and the Theory of the State,” 106.

Shklar has called the “ideology of agreement,” which underestimates the challenges of reaching consent in a pluralistic society.<sup>129</sup> In this, his distrust of state power and his private fear of a political climate that “made Hitler possible” were not matched by his theoretical writings, even though his hope for postsovereignty was a strong endorsement of postnationalism.

In the end, “Theory of the State” offers insightful notes toward a political theory of rhetoric without spelling out such a theory once and for all. While this may be consistent with the analysis that politics is losing its central status in contemporary modernity, the plausibility of this very analysis is questionable. However, keeping in mind Blumenberg’s method of following tendencies rather than merely describing actualities, it is possible to read “Theory of the State” less as a farewell to politics than as a study of the structural transformation of *modes* of the political. It sketches the move away from Schmittian power politics to a more rhetorical and rhetorically mediated politics. This concentration on modes rather than substances, nevertheless, is in line with a liberal outlook more interested in safeguarding political structures and processes than in dictating positive concepts acting as criteria for the contents of these structures. In this, Blumenberg was closer to skeptical liberals like Shklar and Rorty than to the engaged republicanism of Arendt.

In a curious way, Blumenberg’s work runs parallel to the Left’s post-1968 melancholia, as his optimism about the rationality of immanent regulation and the power of language, which he formulated in “Theory of the State” (1968), was soon succeeded by a more pessimistic view, exemplified in the 1971 text “Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric.” The reasons for this shift are still debated, but Blumenberg’s biographer Rüdiger Zill points out that the student unrest of 1968—and especially the change in student-teacher relations that Blumenberg came to feel in the 1970s—shook him deeply.<sup>130</sup> While the Left never played a role in his thinking before, he was increasingly hostile to anything that showed signs of a Marxist zeitgeist. This included the theory of history, which was now unmistakably a domain of the Frankfurt School. Odo Marquard has suggested that the philosophy of history and anthropology are mutually exclusive alternatives,<sup>131</sup> and there are good reasons to believe that Blumenberg’s turn toward anthropology was led by this view.

The anthropological dimension constitutes a genuinely new development in Blumenberg’s work. “Anthropological Approach” at first glance appears as

129. Shklar, *Legalism*, 88–110.

130. Zill, *Der absolute Leser*, 302–3.

131. Marquard, *Schwierigkeiten*.

a mere complement to “Theory of the State,” adopting its praise of rhetoric as a replacement of action. But the basic assumptions have shifted from a historical onto an anthropological fundament.<sup>132</sup> If the earlier text had focused on the rationality that rests within the historical concepts of reality, to which rhetoric is only the proper *response*, in “Anthropological Approach,” rhetoric—an “anthropological ‘radical’”<sup>133</sup>—becomes a new rationality. Blumenberg sees the situation of human beings as characterized by both a “lack of self-evidence” and the “compulsion to act.”<sup>134</sup> Human beings are always under pressure to respond to the situation they find themselves in but are never in possession of enough information to know whether their actions are adequate. Rhetoric here becomes a type of technization that deals with the possibly permanent state of incomplete rationality and thus “a form of rationality itself—a rational way of coming to terms with the provisionality of reason.”<sup>135</sup> It is obvious that this expands the concept of rhetoric far beyond its applicability as a political notion. Instead, Blumenberg argues for rhetoric as a genuinely *human* type of rationality. It still may be affirmative, replacing *res* with *verba*, but its necessity is now not merely a matter of historically changeable concepts of reality. Rather, it is deeply situated in the human condition, the dearth of human life-time.<sup>136</sup>

Blumenberg’s anthropological turn raises the concerns that Habermas, in *This, Too, a History of Philosophy*, hints at. The historicity of Blumenberg’s notes toward a political theory, which builds on a historically situated reason, now seems to stand in conflict with the lasting features of the human condition. By only focusing on the later, anthropological Blumenberg, however, Habermas ignores his earlier positions. As this interpretation of “Theory of the State” has shown, Blumenberg’s historical phenomenology provides a rich and insightful take on political theory—even if it does not quite become one itself—especially in developing a powerful, *nonanthropological* notion of rhetoric. The alternative to a limited view of his thought is to periodize and to pluralize him.<sup>137</sup> There is more than one Blumenberg at work, and the liberal Blumenberg of *Legitimacy* and “Theory of the State” can still be an ally to Habermas’s theory of modernity without involving the anthropology of the

132. For a detailed analysis of this shift, see Bajohr, “Shifting Grounds”; and Bajohr, “Gebrochene Kontinuität.”

133. Blumenberg, “Anthropological Approach,” 187.

134. Blumenberg, “Anthropological Approach,” 191, 186.

135. Blumenberg, “Anthropological Approach,” 203.

136. Blumenberg expands on this idea in *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit*.

137. I make the case for such an approach in Bajohr, “Shifting Grounds.”

more conservative later Blumenberg. After all, both Habermas and Blumenberg are connected in a defense of modernity that was so rare among philosophers of the twentieth century; while diverging on many points, they are united in their “critical *officium*.”

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