



A Time of Divination and A Time of Risk: Social Preconditions for Prophecy and Prediction

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I. The Rationality of Divination

With increasing frequency, our society turns to practices of a divinatory kind. By that, I do not mean trends that repeatedly resurface, such as horoscopes or comparable practices that are not taken all that seriously even by those who follow them, but instead mean elements of the divinatory tradition in heavily technology-dependent fields that are, when viewed from without, taken to be rational.

One example I want to mention here is the financial markets¹ – places where our rationality alone is incapable of providing reliable guidance, as past crises have shown. In search-

¹ See Esposito 2010.

ing for a new model better able to capture circularities, reflexive mechanisms, and nonrandom regularities,² theories involving alternative forms of rationality are being explicitly formulated in this domain. But it is not only the financial markets that have a close connection with the matter at hand; the media, too, invoke oracles, mantras, and prophecies day after day.

Even more surprising is the example of the Internet – a technology in its seemingly most advanced form. Since the spread of Web 2.0 and cloud computing, and in the search for new forms of the semantic Web, suggestions have come from various quarters that it is necessary to transcend the linear logic of the Western tradition and become more active in finding connections, analogies, and more complex correlations in which effect precedes cause, in which one must deal – even if vaguely and incompletely – with a higher intelligence and a perfect memory.³

In this context, it should be emphasized that the reason to make reference to divinatory structures is not to repudiate rationality as such,⁴ but rather to explore an alternative form of rationality. It has been known for quite some time that divination and its allied practices – though incompatible with the “modern” rationality that has shaped our society for several centuries now – cannot simply be discarded as irrational. Several decades ago, Vernant and his associates tried to investigate the relationship between divinatory practices in conjunc-

2 See successful books such as Taleb 2007 and Soros 1987.

3 See, for example, Anderson 2008 or Kelly 2010; also Esposito 2012.

4 The analysis of irrationality takes different paths: for example, behavioral economics, which explicitly seeks to understand the “logic” of the irrationality in the behavior of the market participants.

tion with certain social organizations – and here it is interesting to observe this occurred only in a limited context.⁵

Today, this question is more urgent than ever. What logic lies behind the enormous complexity of divinatory techniques and practices, in the different forms they have taken and at the most diverse times, in various societies from ancient Mesopotamia to China, from antique Greece to the various African civilizations? What conclusions can our present-day “risk society” draw from them as it faces an unclear future and a threatening, largely uncontrollable world, yet must nonetheless make responsible and non-arbitrary decisions in this situation?

Before the divinatory tradition as such can be addressed, it must be made clear that divinatory elements, which can be found in all societies, can take on quite different forms. They include inspired divination from the mouths of prophets and oracles, for example, and deductive divination based on the interpretation of signs. Divination can range from the study of signs already present in the world to the deliberate producing of omens. The formalization of texts, for example, also must be taken into account. In addition, the history of reception must be kept in mind: Divinatory practices were deemed legitimate, as a matter of course, or divination has been rejected as superstition.

The plausibility of divination is based on a number of overlapping assumptions, and on a concept of the world and of man that presupposes a certain logic – a logic in which the belief in omens, and the behavior adapted to that belief, does not mean a renunciation of rationality, but on the contrary im-

5 See Vernant et al. 1974.

plies a controlled, and far from arbitrary, access to a rationality of a higher order.

In all its forms, divination tries to support human beings in their decision-making, by offering guidance that allows us to act in a non-haphazard manner, in a structured but nonetheless uncontrollable world. Quite unlike the more disillusioned recourse to horoscopes, it affords us the opportunity to adapt our strategies and actions to a higher logic, one that in its essence is inaccessible to us. By so doing, humans recognize their own limitations and accept support from a higher level. That this logic cannot be understood by us is not a weakness of this procedure but instead a strength: in this way, the logic demonstrates it is part of an order that transcends limited human cognitive abilities.

If there is a weak point, then it has nothing to do with the order of the cosmos. It has to do with the unavoidable, yet somehow reassuring weakness of human beings who do not know everything, are uncertain and in doubt, and find themselves in a contingent, seemingly threatening world. This human boundedness is understood as the obverse of a reassuring, superior, boundlessness: a superhuman intelligence knows the order of all things and the necessities that govern it, is constant and internally consistent – precisely because it does not appear knowable.⁶ At the level of this higher wisdom, all objects and events reflect the same logic and mutually correspond to each other. For one who can read them, all phenomena, in their own way, reflect the same underlying order, and thus continuously and redundantly refer to one another in a manner that points to the unity of the structure of the world.

6 See Vernant 1974: 20ff.; Vandermeersch 1974: 27ff.

All asymmetries, such as the multiplicity of phenomena or the relationship between cause and effect, are attributable to the short-sightedness of those who cannot comprehend these relationships of symmetry – relationships that govern the harmony of the cosmos and manifest themselves in marvelous parallels or correspondence between the macroscopic level (such as the rhythm of the seasons, the configuration of the stars and of landscapes) and the microscopic level (such as the phases of our individual lives or face and body shape).

Everything in the world is of infinite significance, and perhaps just for that reason is incomprehensible to we humans who have only finite interpretive abilities at our command. Mankind is permitted only partial access to the world, as otherwise what differentiates man from the gods would be abolished; wisdom conceals itself by manifesting itself through hints and obscure, always ambiguous signs – such as oracles that are enigmatic and mysterious, and proven true regardless of what happens. Should reality falsify them, then it is due to a flawed interpretation, not a false omen. Mystery is a symbol of this order. There are mysteries in the world not because something is being concealed, as in the case of secrets, but because there are things that by nature are not revealed or accessible to we humans. And in fact when they are unveiled, they evoke only a feeling of irrelevance rather than added insight. The mystery is significant only for those who know how to understand it – and humans are unable to do so. It marks a boundary between limited knowledge and higher knowledge that is unaffected by prohibitions. The mystery is, so to speak, the link—grounded in our world—to a higher, supernatural world. And anyone who understands the mystery is paradoxically

aware that it cannot be understood.

The difference between the limited human perspective and the higher perspective of God becomes especially clear with reference to time – time is where divinatory logic also parts ways most sharply with rationality of the modern kind. From our standpoint, the notion of knowing the future in advance is not plausible, because the future is not yet here but is being shaped by our actions and decisions. Nobody can know today what will take place tomorrow, because the future does not yet exist and is not discernible by us – not even God can see it. On the other hand, the notion of predicting the future, linked with the idea of destiny and of a fate that governs the course of events, is completely plausible if one thinks of a future that pre-exists before its materialization,⁷ which for us seems a further absurdity.

In divinatory logic, divine omniscience also includes the contemplation of eternity and the ability to see, simultaneously, what is, what was, and what is still to come.

The basic difference of the course of time is not our difference between a past that no longer exists and a future that does not yet exist. Rather, it is the difference between a linear and supple human time which constantly transforms the future into the past, and a rigid divine eternity in which past and future are extant and set, yet can be considered at the same time. Time, then, in its coming-into-being, is nothing but a human illusion⁸ that results from a limited perspective, in which destiny gradually reveals itself gradually through events perceived as

⁷ See Bloch 1984: 11ff.

⁸ According to Plato's (*Timaios*, 37ff.) well-known formulation, time is a moving image of eternity.

random and surprising. From the divine perspective, there are neither surprises nor coincidences nor developments but only an admirable necessity that has already determined “future things” and “past things” and that can be observed provided one has the right means to do so.

II. Technique and Writing

Divination offers controlled and limited glimpses into the level of this higher necessity of things, glimpses into the future when we are faced with the need to make a decision, or glimpses into the past when, for example, an ordeal is being used to search for the person guilty of a certain crime, but also glimpses into the present when something unknown is to be found out. From the perspective of eternity, in which past, present, and future simultaneously coexist, this makes no difference. But access to this infinitely orderly and significant world, of course, must not be haphazard or casual: controlled and ritualized techniques are required.

At this point it becomes clear that divination is neither irrational nor uncontrolled. It takes the form of extremely technical knowledge⁹ that reflects a certain image of the cosmos. If it is true that the entire world is governed by a single, perfect, and irrefutable logic, then this logic can be found in every thing and every configuration. Then one should be able to observe limited segments of the world – for example, tortoise shells, the entrails of sacrificial animals, the stalks of a plant, or other items – and see their forms as reflections of the cosmic order

⁹ Brisson 1974: 248; Csikszentmihali 2000: 55, 63.

in a smaller format accessible to humans. To that end, however, one has to know how to do this, and the corresponding techniques are limited to a small target group in which this knowledge is cultivated and passed on.

To some extent, the signs to be interpreted already may be found in the world. These include the structure of landscapes or of the human face, studied as part of geomancy or physiognomy, time as the object of chronomancy, which differentiates between auspicious and inauspicious moments, astral figures or the flight patterns of birds. They also can be generated for the specific purpose of divination, and this thus acquires an empirical, almost experimental dimension. By casting yarrow stalks or heating the shells or bones of animals (tortoise shells or shoulder-blades), meaningful symbols – in this case, cracks or configurations – are produced and subsequently interpreted. Chance, which exists only at the limited level of the human perspective, is used to experimentally reveal the necessity that governs the world, and thus to surmount arbitrariness. Divination functions as a “random mechanism intrinsically capable of learning,”¹⁰ which enables us to observe the surface of the world in search of a deeper order. It is thus a method that acknowledges no contingency for itself, because the assumption is that every aspect of the universe is governed by a higher necessity. However, it does not rule out chance as such but uses it as a means to “allow the world to speak” in a language that can be interpreted by humans, with all their uncertainties.

In some cases, particularly in ancient Mesopotamia and in China, these methods led to developing a divinatory

¹⁰ Luhmann 1997: 237.

arithmetic, and later a divinatory algebra, which guided the manipulation and combination of signs in an increasingly complex manner.¹¹ Numbers were not regarded as separate from things. Instead, they led to recognizing the inner properties of things by scrutinizing the numbers.¹² This development, however, did not occur everywhere. The distinction noted above between inspired divination, in which the deity speaks directly through the mouth of a priest or his representative, and deductive divination, in which signs must be deciphered¹³ also sets civilizations such as ancient Israel or Greece, where the former type was practiced, apart from other civilizations where the focus was on the latter type and reference was made to written texts. Writing seems to be the decisive factor here: in divinatory logic, the entire universe is a written page of enormous dimensions which waits to be deciphered.

This is a real logic of writing, which not coincidentally finds its highest expression in Chinese civilization, “a civilization of the written sign par excellence,”¹⁴ or even in ancient Mesopotamia, where writing was not ranked second to the spoken word but more the reverse. The name was not the external attribute of a thing but instead expressed its innermost nature, which linked it with the great script of the universe.¹⁵

Against this background, one can assert that Western civ-

11 Vandermeersch 1974.

12 See Needham 1965: 288; Granet 1934:149.

13 The source is Bouché-Leclercq, 1879-1882; see Bottéro 1974 and 1987c.

14 Smith 2010: 13.

15 Bottéro 1987b: 126.

ilization is not a civilization of written signs, although script is a fundamental instrument that is indispensable in developing the form of abstraction that distinguishes it.¹⁶ Writing, however, has led it at the same time in a direction opposite to that of the great divinatory civilizations. Though Western civilization is based on an alphabetic script it could not abandon, it is not a civilization of written signs, because it writes words (Wörter) as isolated, distinct units – clusters of letters – rather than writing words (Worte) as connected, meaningful statements or trains of thought. Isolated words are something different and autonomous: when writing, one deals not with the things themselves, but with mere signs, separate from the things, that could be different, with all the benefits and all the costs this abstraction entails.

The manipulation of characters in itself does not make it possible to know what is happening or will happen. To find that out, one needs an empirical basis through exploring the world, which prepares for but does not replace the work on the signs. In the West, the spread of alphabetic script in fact went hand-in-hand with the gradual marginalizing of divination, until finally, in the context of the development of scientific reasoning, the modern stigmatizing of divination as superstition and ignorance was the result.

In civilizations with non-alphabetic writing systems, this development took a different course. In writing in such scripts, one is not removed from the concreteness of things but instead understands them in another form, one that made it possible to investigate and combine them, and study their corre-

16 Havelock's studies in this regard (1963, 1976) are still indispensable – and then there is a very extensive body of literature.

lations. In the Chinese tradition, for example, the written signs correspond both to a segment of sound and a unit of meaning at the same time. Chinese script is a “writing of the sign”¹⁷ in the fullest sense – both phonetic and semantic aspects are taken into account. The written names of all things are consonant with studies of the cracks on bones or tortoise shells, or with the infinite number of other shapes that can be read on the surface of objects.¹⁸ When these lines are written down, it becomes easier to study them – and that led to the development of complex classifications which were collected in the divinatory texts. People did not turn away from the world to immutable forms, however, but remained in harmony with objects and embedded in their processes and their changes, and learned to read and understand them.¹⁹ In the case of non-alphabetic civilizations, therefore, one is dealing not with mere names, but with nonrandom signs.

In accordance with the rationality of divination, access to the immutable forms is situated in our world. The possibility of access, however, in no way implies that a higher, initially closed level will also be attained. One extrapolates it from clues in the contingency of the earthly world and its mutations, and that makes these clues themselves more reliable. Immanence is a destiny, but at the same time also a resource. Consequently, divination is completely rational: it is the prerequisite for our living or acting in a way that is not haphazard.

17 Alleton 1970: 18.

18 See Palumbo-Liu 1993; Needham 1965: 32ff.

19 “In China, the act of writing is closely bound up with the meaning of nature; it is far from any breach with the state of nature. For many Chinese, there is no beautiful landscape without an inscription on stone, a poem, a character”: Alleton 1970: 99.

III. Societal Order and Individual Autonomy

Seen in this way, the difference between Western society and divinatory civilizations lies not in rationality, because both approaches can demonstrate their own rationality, one in which arbitrariness is effectively ruled out and empiricism is used as a recourse. The difference, therefore, does not consist of a rational and a non-rational attitude, but in differing forms of rationality. But what constitutes this difference?

From the sociological perspective, the central point lies in locating the observer. In the logic of divination, the observer is located in the observed world and is subject to the same logic and the same principles – as is also demonstrated by the self-referential circles that are typical of prophecies (for example, in the case of Oedipus). Should the observer try to escape his fate, he contributes to its realization by doing so. Instead, he should attempt to align himself with the principles of necessity that govern events, because variety and contingency are merely the reflection of his earthly boundedness.

On the other hand, the observer in modern society – and this is known in the philosophical tradition and is celebrated in the semantics of subjectivity and individuality²⁰ – is located outside of the world, has an autonomous and singular perspective, and must learn to coordinate himself with the autonomy that other observers equally possess.²¹ He is in a position

²⁰ See Luhmann 1989.

²¹ It would be an oversimplification, of course, to attribute this development, which depends on a great many factors, directly to communication technologies and specifically to writing. But it must be noted that only with the spread of letterpress printing in the sixteenth century (that is, at the beginning of the modern era) did written communication finally become

to observe other observers, or even his own observer's perspective – here one speaks of second-order observation²² – though in the process he is not observing the world but only the observation of the world, while events develop according to laws not dependent on the knowledge and categories used by observers. In observing the world, one does not learn what its subjects are thinking, and by observing the subjects, one does not learn what the world is like, nor does one exert any influence on it. Subjectivity is separated from the objectivity of the events and itself constitutes an infinite horizon for exploration.²³ That is one of the reasons why we cannot know the future – because it depends on what the observers will do. Their decisions cannot be read in the signs of the world; they belong to a completely different level. The inability to recognize the future correlates with the autonomy of the subjects. Neither Dame Fortune nor fate can provide information about it, so instead one tends to fall back on formalized methods of calculating probabilities that take contingency and uncertainty into account.

From the sociological standpoint, this step is linked to the increasing complexity of modern society, which has moved from a hierarchical organization associated with a clear top to bottom order that reflects the order of the cosmos, to a functional organization with a great many different orders or systems unconnected with one another. They correspond to different functional areas, which now follow their own criteria

independent of forms of orality and able to fully develop its potential for abstraction—with all the associated consequences: see the classic work, Eisenstein 1979.

²² See von Foerster 1981.

²³ A typical formulation from the field of phenomenology.

and priorities. The economic order is not the order of law or that of science, politics, religion, or of the mass media.²⁴

Western society includes all these orders or systems and is becoming increasingly complex – and, above all, feels compelled to implement a contingent meta-order that recognizes, at every point, the options of other criteria and the priorities of the various functional systems. The necessary order of the cosmos, and the openness and diversity of modern society, cannot be reconciled with one another.

In this fragmented and multifaceted world, each individual must find a reference point in himself. One does so by acknowledging the autonomy of individual perspective, providing an orientation in the world but also granting the same autonomy to other subjects. As a result, people necessarily move in a contingent and disorderly world, which they observe from the outside. In studying the order of things, one learns nothing about the thoughts of its subjects, and in studying meaning, one learns nothing about the organization of the world. Therefore, the manipulation of signs can provide no guidance to the world, but can at most show how subjects observe it – each in their own way and from their own particular perspective.

Thus, the prerequisites for divination lose all plausibility. It is therefore unsurprising that it is increasingly stigmatized as superstition and irrationality. Scientific reasoning takes other paths and has developed a separate form of rationality that is causal and experimental, and is knowledge of a hypothetical and incremental kind. The observer is located outside of the observed world, as the requirements of impersonality and replicability in scientific rationality indicate: a valid experiment

²⁴ See Luhmann 1997: 707ff.

must lead every subject to arrive at the same result. The subject does not influence the procedure, because if subjective elements are found, the procedure loses its validity. And because the subject for his part does not seek to be represented as an object, he rejects all external determination and predictability for himself.

IV. The Influence of the Observer in the World

If the difference between civilizations in the divinatory tradition and modern Western society is so great, how can one explain our society's recent fascination with divination and divinatory procedures – especially in realms of science and technology that are seemingly closer to an instrumental and objective notion of rationality? How does one explain the fascination with Eastern philosophy and the mindset of the Orient, which reflect a different logic but seemingly offer more profound wisdom? The fact is that in many areas, modern society appears to be learning the limits of clearly separating objects and subjects, a distinction on which its successful technology is based. Technology seems to be turning against itself, as is evident from discussions about risk, which increase the distrust of technology. It is not technological failure people fear but rather its success: what are the harmful consequences of a functioning technology?

Even the linear connection between cause and effect is shifting with increasing frequency into circular configurations in which the desired effect is depicted as a cause difficult to control. Aside from self-fulfilling prophecies, there are more

and more instances of self-defeating prophecies in which the objective scientific prediction sets in a process in motion that leads to providing the prediction false – even, and especially, if it was correct.

The current financial crisis is a particularly dramatic case of such a mechanism.²⁵ In the past few decades, formalized models for risk management have spread. These models promise to control the contingency of the future by providing a strategy for every possible course of events. They are supposed to thus offer traders the opportunity to operate in a “risk-neutral world.” In the meantime, we have learned that this alleged neutrality acts as an additional, powerful, uncontrollable risk factor that has led to the collapse of the models and a loss of confidence in their efficacy.

But what does that have to do with divination? The mechanisms described in the markets seem to mirror typical figures of rationality in divination, such as the inclusion of the observer in the observed world, where his actions have consequences and the act of observing in itself has an influence on these events. The models being used to forecast future developments in the markets have not taken into account the extent to which current predictions would affect the future – they have not taken into account the existence of models that sought to control the future, especially not the circular figures based on the potency of divinatory predictions.

Also, forms of linking present and future that complement the facile and euphoric notion of an open future are turning up again – with the image of the future as modern society expects it to be: a new age, free of every link to tradition and

²⁵ See Esposito 2010: 245ff

capable of reinventing itself in every present. As was already realized in the eighteenth century, all we can learn from the past is that nothing can be learned from the past.²⁶ The circular processes of the self-falsifying prophecies, on the other hand, indicate a treacherous linking of the present to the past – the less aware one is of the consequences, the more dangerous the consequences. It is true that the future is open and will remain so, and can be neither controlled nor predicted by the models. But it is also true that the possibilities available in the future (also) depend on what we do or fail to do today to prepare for them. If nothing is done, our future will be less rich in possibilities, as the paralysis of the financial markets in the wake of the crisis demonstrates. Their functioning is impaired by a lack of confidence, which finds expression in a lack of liquidity, and a lack of willingness to lend on the part of the banks. Every action in the present gives structure to the future and increases its variety – although it by no means makes it possible to predict or determine the future. What the future, with its present ties and relationships, will bring remains unclear – and its openness remains intact. However people may prepare for and structure the future, ultimately it is never present.

From the divinatory perspective, this is nothing new. Ancient Chinese thought was based not on a logic of modelling such as ours, a logic that calls for comparing the world with an external model, but on a logic of process,²⁷ which looks for indirect effectiveness. Tugging at plants does not make them grow faster, but one still should not fail to prepare the soil in order to promote their growth (Mencius II, A, 2) – one should

²⁶ See Koselleck 1979: 38-66.

²⁷ See Jullien 1996: 52ff. See also Needham 1965: 281ff.

let them sprout. The future is structured by the present – even and precisely when it disappoints expectations, and when it forces us to learn and to revise our own criteria.

Then the observer can anticipate, and prepare himself to face the surprises that arise from his behavior. How he can do that, or what techniques can be employed in the process, can perhaps be learned from divinatory rationality. As the present-day practice of “surfing” the Internet teaches us, it can be more effective to remain on the surface than to explore the depths – if the practice is guided by a logic that is inaccessible to human cognitive capabilities, in this case the enormous computational ability of the machine. It would be important to do so in a nonrandom way and with the help of a technique – just as divination has done from time immemorial, and perhaps can teach us (again) to do.

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