Büchner, Science and the Metaphysics of Contingency

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Abstract

In this essay I argue that Büchner's main legacy was – in addition to his enormous literary and cultural significance – a philosophical-scientific investigation into the nature of existence as an entirely contingent reality. The *metaphysics of contingency* describe a conceptual approach I take to analyse the disjuncture between what Büchner suspected was the entirely contingent nature of life on the one hand and the metaphysical patterns of explanation that humanity had developed in order to obviate the nihilistic implications of that insight on the other. I argue that his works are all attempts to grapple with this fundamental dichotomy of human existence. Touching on the work of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Ernst Bloch and Durs Grünbein, I argue that Büchner proceeded from the idea that man is indeed an animal but also saw that this did not mean that he should be treated like one.

For much of the nineteenth century and in parts of the twentieth, Büchner's works were ignored – or worse. This has only partly to do with his untimely death and the unfinished nature of his works. More importantly, these are uncomfortable texts, considered even by his friends to be violent, sexually provocative and immoral, politically dangerous and socially explosive as well as existentially dark. They are uncomfortable in this way because they come, as Durs Grünbein points out, at a vital breaking point in human history and philosophy when the death of art was being proclaimed as a precursor to the death of God.¹ Moreover, Büchner was writing in the years after the defeat of Napoleon and the partial re-establishment of the old feudal order. To paraphrase Gramsci, for restorationist Germany, the old new order of evolutionary France had passed away, yet a new old order of reactionary Germany was only impermanently fixed. In the historical interregnum between post-revolutionary

France and pre-1848 Germany, when the centralizing and nationalizing tendencies were still in their infancy in Germany – existing as it did as a series of separate states – it is not really possible to identify a German revolutionary movement, and German drama had become self-consciously classical. Büchner was pitched into this interregnum, and his few short years as a writer and a dramatist, though bright retrospectively, saw his work largely ignored.

Nowadays, however, as well as being considered the forerunner of practically every significant political and philosophical movement in the nineteenth century, he is also considered to be the bringer of new trends in artistic developments within modernity. He was the first realist, we are told, as well as the first surrealist and absurdist. He was the first expressionist, the first socialist dramatist, the first to put the working class at the centre of his plots instead of at the edge of the stage carrying the spears and the coffins. He discovered psychoanalysis before Freud; he realized that God was well and truly dead but also alive and well in our imaginings long before Nietzsche; that history was moved forward by injustice, class struggle and revolution before Marx; that a nameless something was missing long before Brecht; that that thing – spirit, soul, consciousness, desire, hope or meaning – was the most elusive and yet the most central thing about us; he knew that the search for a meaning to evolution was a delusion, but a beautiful one which produced its own meaning, and that the search for the human within the human being is the thing which constitutes humanity. He knew before Adorno and Horkheimer that the dialectic of human development was also a negative one in which there was also a non-identity as well as an identity of historical development, and he also knew before Foucault that power resides in the way we think about power and not only in the way it is exercised.

Büchner is therefore perhaps one of the first exponents of what I call the ‘Metaphysics of Contingency’. By this I mean an acceptance that we are an evolved species with no special place within evolution other than that of being able to think about evolution and our place within it. We then, however, construct a series of explanations for our contingent existence, many of which, even if ostensibly materialist, have a metaphysical element to them. In Act 3, Scene 3 of Leonce und Lena, we see this dichotomous relationship summed up in the two-word call and response: ‘Leonce: O Zufall! – Lena: O Vorsehung!’ Here Büchner shows us precisely how the relationship between contingency and metaphysics functions in human interactions. Where one sees pure

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3 MA, p. 188. ‘Oh, Fortune’, ‘Oh Providence’ (TMW, p. 128).