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The oxymoron of normality

Now that "normalization" has come to seem a fact in post-communist eastern Europe, it might be asked why the word "normal" was so close to people's hearts. How does its meaning in the context of transition compare to western usages of the word? A *Begriffsgeschichte* of the concept of "normality" reveals meanings that are multiple, historically changeable, contradictory, even oxymoronic.



"Normal" is one of those words that seem not to need a definition; its meaning appears self-evident. Besides, because of the enormous flexibility of its usages, the conditions for a definition — conceptual strictness and clear semantic articulation — are hardly achievable: everyday routine is "normal", though what, precisely, is "everyday routine"? Everyday routine in Rome differs considerably

from that in an African village, which in turn differs from everyday routine in Valparaiso. "This is normal for Lebanon," said a Beirut taxi driver interviewed on CNN morning news on 21 September 2007. He was referring to the assassination of a member of parliament.

At the beginning of the transition period in eastern Europe, "normality" was a kind of democratic daydream: the programme of overcoming the communist legacy and becoming a "normal states" found broad political consensus. In Bulgaria in 1991, the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF, the democratic opposition to the former communist government of Andrej Lukanov) won elections under the slogan "back to normality". Everywhere in post-Cold War Europe, philosophers and journalists were aware of the crucial social energy of the word: "'Revolution to normality' is the crucial metaphor of 1989".¹ Conservatives even spoke about the "counter-revolution of normality".

Seventeen years later, when "normalization" has come to seem a fact, questions need to be asked. Why was the word "normal" so close to the hearts of eastern Europeans? How does its meaning in the context of eastern European transition compare to other historical usages of the word? Were there any hidden contradictions in this "normalization" programme? A conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*)² of the words "normal" and "normality" is one possible tool for answering such questions.

It is remarkable, that, despite the various waves of linguistic patriotism and purist filtering of foreign words, the Latin words "norm" and "normal" are present in all three major European language groups: Germanic, Roman, and Slavic. "Normal" is used even in Hungarian and Finnish, which belong to Finno-Ugric, a rare, non-European language family. It seems that among the European languages, only modern Greek uses another word for normal

(*kannoniko*). According to dictionaries, these words penetrated European languages at around the same time — roughly speaking, between 1810 (the first rare usages) and 1850 (common usage).³

The morphological productivity of the root morpheme "norm" is remarkable: one can find derivatives such as "normality", "normative", "normal", "normalize", "normalizer" in all three major European language groups. Clearly, this productivity is a symptom of the proliferation of meanings, semantic nuances, and metaphors: "norm", "normal", and their derivatives seem to be "transferable" to many different regions of life and society. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the "norm" morpheme has permeated many fields and their jargons. According to the OED,⁴ "normal" has specialized meanings in grammar, pedagogy, geometry, physics, chemistry, metallurgy, meteorology, geology, statistics, and even botany, where one speaks of "normal forests" (in which all ages of all classes of trees occupy equal areas); it also operates, of course, in pathology and psychiatry.

Yet the semantic stability of the term's meaning is no less remarkable. Along with its specialized meanings, old lexicons display four major meanings of "normal" in everyday speech:⁵

- obeying the norm, following a rule, regular;
- habitual, frequent, usual, ordinary, moderate;
- standard, not deviating from;
- sane, healthy.

Contemporary lexicons repeat this semantic structure almost unchanged. The electronic thesaurus of the 2003 "Word Office" package, for example, lists the following synonyms for "normal": usual; standard; regular; ordinary; typical; customary; common; average; natural; routine; conventional; antonym: abnormal. On this list, normative, descriptive, statistical–procedural, and "biological" semantic nuances coexist peacefully, not bothered by possible contradictions. The word "normal" displays, in fact, an eclectic semantic knot, yet this eclecticism is hidden behind its "self–evidence — behind its "normality".

Despite this stability, one can notice a slow semantic shift in the meaning of "normal". In contemporary lexicons, the normative meaning of "normal" ("obeying a norm", "following a rule") makes way for dominant descriptive meanings such as "usual", "ordinary", "typical", "customary", "common", and "average". Moreover, in meanings such as "standard" and "regular", normative nuances are weak: these definitions imply technical procedures for measuring and ordering rather than moral or religious norms. It is as if the "norm" in the "normal" is gradually disappearing.⁶

Did the words "normal" and "normality" alter the "conceptual limits" (Koselleck⁷) of European populations between 1810 and 1850? I believe it is highly probable that the word "normal" and its derivatives contributed to a *longue durée* process — the ascendance of the new moral order.⁸ "God–given"⁹ virtues, laws, and decrees were gradually replaced by a dominant sociological imagination operating with overall trends and "statistical" norms. This meant replacing the Christian moral notion of a pious life with conformity to "typical",¹⁰ "normal", mass behaviour; divine normative guidelines were replaced with worldly, descriptive ones.

What is remarkable is that these lexical changes occurred simultaneously with processes of industrial revolution, technologization, bureaucratization, and power transformations in modern European societies. The philosophical and

historical oeuvre of Michel Foucault pays special attention to this far-reaching shift of power from the sovereignty of the monarch to an anonymous network of technological and institutional micro-powers designed to intervene in the most intimate spaces of individuals. The population policy of individual subjectification was essentially a process of disciplining and "normalization". The latter term designates in Foucault's texts routine institutional practices of classification and spatialization, along with systematic sanctions, repetitive exercises, control over deviations, and taming of "normal" bodies. All these practices presuppose a rationally regulated, taxonomic field of differentiation, in which "normal subjects" and healthy populations were located (or rather, produced or "disciplined"). The field had its natural limits: "deviations" from "normality", and beyond them, the "abnormal".¹¹ In a nutshell, the conceptual revolution that took place between the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century consisted in the silent replacement of concepts such as "sin and virtue" with concepts such as "normality and deviation".

Yet, the words "normal" and "normality" (as well as their antonyms — "abnormal" and "deviation") did not reveal the real micro-power mechanisms of this process. Rather, they made it invisible. "Stronger" modern nuances such as "discipline", "repression", "power", and "administrative classification" were screened out of the semantic field of the words "normal" and "normality", which presented imposed norms, as well as repressive and productive normalization technologies, as something they were not: routine, widespread, automatic, usual, average. In other words, "normal" and "normality" projected onto new processes old (even ancient) images of conformity: since the moment of its penetration in modern European languages, one of the major meanings of "normal" has always been the archaic "as all people usually do".

Another semantic feature of "normal" — the nuance "natural" — also contributed to this invisibility. In the mechanistic and positivist worldview of the nineteenth century, nature was no longer the divine creation but a self-sufficient, all-encompassing entity, with regularities and "laws" of its own. By the nineteenth century, a long tradition of "nature" and "natural" already existed — let us mention in passing "human nature", "the natural condition of man", "natural law" and other philosophical slogans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus, the biological metaphor "natural" designated a kind of anonymous, indisputable status quo, invested with spontaneous energies and a self-sufficient (immanent, though not transcendent) order of life. The "taming" of modern bodies, the construction of subjects and populations, was hidden behind images of the usual, the normal, and the natural: the process became unproblematic and self-evident. The new verbal fashion of "normal" and "normality" hid the technological and coercive aspects of the very process (normalization) it described.

Given these lexicographical, pragmatic, semantic, and contextual details, one can argue that between 1810 and 1850, a kind of conceptual colonization took place in Europe. The words "normal" and "normality" (along with their countless morphological derivatives) conquered the specialist fields of science and technology as well as everyday life: the aggressive, "self-evident" word family penetrated language barriers, fighting purisms, professional jargons, and common habits, and changing the horizon of expectations and the conceptual limits of mass behaviour. It introduced a major principle of modernity: the conceptual binary "normal/deviation". "Normal" becomes a designation for the internalized, routine, self-evident modern order, a designation that conceals its disciplinary and technological character. This order was mixed and identified

with "nature" (the best example is automatic, "natural" behaviour in front of traffic lights). With the very same conceptual gesture, "normality" condemns "others" (deviants, the abnormal, those beyond the limits of normality) to silence, making them the objectified subjects of legitimate bio-politics and normalization procedures.

This self-evident ideology of normality was so powerful that almost a century elapsed before it could be questioned in the works of Georges Canguilhem¹² and Michel Foucault.¹³ Another challenge came — though from a different perspective — with Hanna Arendt's famous idea of the "banality of evil" as source of the greatest crimes of the twentieth century,¹⁴ a powerful philosophical attack against the "normality" of the average, disciplined person.

With this preliminary analysis completed, we can return to the contemporary usages of "normal" and the eastern European "revolution to normality". I will begin by listing some of the eastern European usages of "normal" and "normality" in the last 30 to 40 years.

During the 1960s and 1970s, a political process was put in motion by the Soviet Union and the US known as "cold normalization". This label designated the political will to avoid the extremes of the Cold War (having had their share during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962) and to "normalize" relations between the two blocs. Interestingly, this meaning of "normal" and "normalization" was almost completely forgotten after 1989, when new usages of the words came into being, multiplying their meanings in apparently centripetal directions.

At the beginning of the transition there were some specific German usages of the word normal. The programme of *Normalisierung* undertaken by German politicians (including the general admiral Dieter Wellershoff and the minister of defence Volker Rühle¹⁵) was in fact post-Cold War political and military strategy — it meant the refusal of the German *Sonderweg* and Germany's accession into the family of "normal nations" (i.e. major powers), including German participation in the peace-keeping operations of Nato. This triggered much debate in Germany and internationally about the deployment of the German military abroad and Germany's place in the new Europe; some commentators suspected a silent attempt to normalize the German past¹⁶ — for example, in the context of a debate about the *Alltagsgeschichte* [everyday history] of the Nazi period.¹⁷

There were other meanings of "normal" that went far beyond the specificity of the German case. One interpretation of the "back to normality" slogan that spread throughout all post-socialist countries was restoration of continuity with the "sovereign" national statehood of the interwar period. The post-socialist Czech Republic, for example, claimed to be the legitimate inheritor of the Masaryk state and Czech bourgeois traditions.¹⁸ In many national public debates, the socialist period was presented as a distortion of historical temporality and a painful break in continuity: its restoration was dreamt of in the Baltic republic, Poland, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania. This restorative impulse also legitimized the restitution of parties, newspapers, organizations and, most importantly, property in all eastern European countries.

The notion of normalization—as-continuity often accompanied the political programme of normalization as "return to Europe", of a restoration of spatial

continuity, of "Europe as a whole". The "Visegrád three" (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic) pretended that they had always been an integral part of Central Europe ("the very core of the West"¹⁹), while in political speeches, public discourse, and everyday conversation in the Baltic Republics it was often argued that "normality" was located in the West and that these states shared solid northern European traditions.²⁰ For several years, the name of the European continent entered into a strange synonymy with the words "normal" and "normality" — as one German journalist wrote in 1990, a German "return to Europe proved simultaneously to be a return to European normality".²¹

In the transitional chaos and the general crisis of orientation experienced by many eastern Europeans, the words "normal" and "normality" assumed another meaning, too. Talk was of the "normal" (in other words, "desirable") functioning of institutions such as the rule of law, social order, social sectors such as the judiciary, the police force, the economy, banking, industry, agriculture, sport, and so on. In short, of a "normal state" that fulfilled its official duties towards its citizens. That implied that the contemporary situation was perceived as painfully "abnormal". As an anonymous author wrote in the Bulgarian newspaper *Demokratia* in 1990,

The Communist Part ruled our country for four decades. Everything said by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin was tried out on the Bulgarians. What have been the results? Mass poverty, a devastated natural environment, polluted cities, destroyed agriculture, old, poorly functioning industry, moral degradation, isolation from Europe [...] ethnic conflict, a low birth rate. [...] Enough experiments! We want to live like normal people, not as human guinea pigs. It is time for the Communist party [...] to step down and to free the stage for new social forces capable of leading Bulgaria out of its disastrous moral and social crisis.²²

The most interesting and irrational interpretation of "normality" was its investment in the foundational values of liberal democracy: in the early years of transition, "return to normality" meant "return to the initial social contract" and the naïve, altruistic celebration of fundamental modern ideas such as freedom, solidarity, truth, and justice. In July 1990, protesting democrats in Sofia staged a "sit-down protest", establishing a tent camp, which they called "the city of truth", near to the presidential residence. One journalist reported it thus:

In a matter of a few days, the sitting people, united by a pure form of democracy, elaborated a social structure. A micro-variant of settlement has been established called "the city of truth" — and it was city with a mayor, an administration, a social and cultural life, and its own newspaper. Everywhere, one can see the natural and normal urge of man to live in a democratic society. The protesting people are creating such a society in pure and miniature form.²³

In this idealistic discourse, the protest, driven by the impulse to "live in truth", creates a kind of social *tabula rasa* (analogous to the "natural condition of man" in Enlightenment philosophy); what spontaneously arises in this "pure" condition is a miniature liberal democracy complete with institutions. What is remarkable about this "story of origin" (almost mythical in its narrative structure) is the way it uses the label "normal". It claims as "normal" primary

sociability itself — the communal self-organization of human beings, created spontaneously by the "normal drive of man to live in a democracy". In other words, in its implicit logic, the argument mingles "democracy", the "original condition", and "normality"; in such a context, the slogan "back to normality" means no less than "back to the original and natural (democratic) condition of man". The problem here is that, in its intellectual content, "normality" starts sounding like forgotten quote from Rousseau and moves dangerously close to intellectual banality — at least for some interpreters.²⁴

At this point it is worth comparing briefly eastern European with western European or Northern American usages of the words "normal" and "normality". British sociologist Elizabeth Shove has argued that the social construction of normality is "a path-dependent process of scientific development, technical embedding and conceptual naturalization";²⁵ a construction of "a different sort of indoor environment — a process in which scientific and commercial interests literally construct normality — building conditions and conventions at one and the same time".²⁶ According to Shove, the major features of the constructed normality of consumption are cleanliness, comfort, convenience, and relaxation (her preferred example is of an air-conditioned house that forms its occupants' habits). However, these conventions of normality are not self-sufficient but shot through with social and moral significance. Moreover, they maintain social and cultural boundaries: in this "normal", comfortable context, people have their rationales and ways of reasoning, even their legitimizing discourses. In short, in this "indoor" environment they make sense of their own actions and of the actions of others, they "calibrate responses to the daily problem of managing shared structural anxieties".²⁷ According to Shove, the "evolving of services [...] is a process central to the reproduction of "normality".²⁸

This example of a western European/North American definition of normality reveals a major difference to eastern European usages. On the one hand, all eastern European usages listed above, are — unlike the British case — public not private. The metaphor "normal" was used in the discourses of the Velvet Revolutions to describe and elucidate social and political processes, not "indoor environments". On the other hand, there is the familiar accusation that the eastern European Velvet Revolutions were driven by consumerist motives — by the individual utopias consisting of the same "normal" luxury described by Shove.

There is certainly some truth in this accusation. It would be incorrect to say that throughout the last seventeen years of eastern European transition, "normal" has had exclusively public usages. It has also been used in private contexts with various consumerist meanings. In Bulgaria, the common expressions "to live normally" or "to live like a normal person" were interchangeable with the strange expression "to live like a white man" — the synonymy loaded consumerist "normality" with racist and colonial nuances.

Yet although the consumerist utopia was indeed one motive for many "transitioners", it fails to explain the split between public and private usages in eastern Europe, the contradiction and the peculiar interplay between the egoistic and the altruistic senses of longing for normality. I believe that the missing point mediating these extremes can be found in the phenomenon known as "imaginary consumption". In "Re-constructing the normal: Identity and the consumption of western goods in Estonia",²⁹ Sigrid Rausing argues that in the early years of the Estonian transition, the consumption of expensive

western goods was far beyond what the average Estonian could afford; the attraction of these goods was connected to the intrinsic "normality" projected onto them, which had no relationship to their affordability. Consumption had an additional symbolic value for Estonian villagers: it meant an escape from former Soviet/Russian identity and a return to "normal" Estonian identity. Rausing claims that "the consumption of western products [...] constituted a form of appropriation of 'western-ness', whereby the whole village was moving from east to West, from what they believed to be a state of the 'not-normal' to the 'normal'. The intrinsic 'western-ness' of the Estonians, as opposed to the 'easterness' of the Russians, represented Estonia's past in the form of the brief period of independence from Russia between the two World Wars, as well as a perceived cultural, ethnic, and geographical proximity which represented the 'normal'. The consumption, therefore, of 'normal', i.e. western, household products symbolized the collective return of the village, and the country, to 'normality', articulating a key feature of the present Estonian identity."³⁰

Commenting on Rausing's article, Ruth Mandel and Caroline Humphrey write: "[...] consumption is [...] not [...] simply a matter of the satisfaction of individual desire, but is implicated in issues of collective identity and national aspiration."³¹ Yet Rausing notes that not all consumption styles can serve as a sign of national identification, but only those that can be successfully associated with solid, ordered, and ordinary "Nordic" traditions.³² In other words, it is not only consumption that determines identity, but vice versa: the collective self-image makes certain consumption styles more appropriate than others.

Of course, one should not forget what Elizabeth Shove pointed out: that western notions of "normality", far from designating only routine habits, are "shot through with social and moral significance and maintain social and cultural boundaries"; another way to put it would be that they set in motion social imagination and the performance of identities. In the eastern European case described by Rausing, the relation between routine and imagination is quite different: the desirability of and imaginary identification with western, Estonian identity comes to the fore, while real, routine habits of "normal" consumption and air-conditioned existence are almost entirely absent. The balance between "normal reality" and "imagined normality" is reversed. The consumption of expensive goods is by no means the simple and rational satisfaction of egoistic needs: it is the irrational satisfaction of (egoistic) dreams. Daydreaming always has to do with the image of the ideal self: it produces symbols and symbolic gestures that place the ideal self in ideal circumstances and an ideal world. The paradox is that in the Estonian case — though I believe that this is valid for eastern Europe in general and has little to do with the local juxtaposition between Estonian and Russian identity — this ideal world was called "normal" and transferred to the West. Consumption is equivalent to the imaginary journey to the West; in consuming, one demonstrates that one is normal, i.e. one of the "normal", western people. This is another way of saying that consumption enters the logic of identity performance and the struggle for recognition.³³

What is most interesting here is that this type of imaginary consumption is not so different to the celebration of foundational values mentioned above in relation to the "city of truth". Both presuppose "the Gaze of the Big Other" (as Jacques Lacan would have it) and a performative act of the self in search for recognition. Both consumption and the public shouting of slogans like "Democracy!", "Down with Communist Party!", and "Back to Europe!" were,

in fact, performances — a kind of "staging" of eastern European collective identity, with the expectation that "Europe" would recognize that. I am not referring here to the real and practical political negotiations concerning accession to the European Union, but to the phantasmic dimension, an aspect present in almost every act in the early years of transition — be it public or private. Indeed, the phantasmic aspect of these acts blurred the very difference between public and private. Staging always presupposes a stage,³⁴ albeit imaginary. That means that even seemingly private acts such as "consuming like normal people" are in fact public: they are performed on invisible agora in anticipation of the public ritual of recognition. The name of this ritual is "normality".

What is also interesting here is the nature of the implicit norm in this ubiquitous staging procedure. Rausing notes about the Estonian villagers that, "My informants [...] were not moving from the local to the global, or from modernity to post-modernity [...]. As a nation, the Estonians thought that they knew exactly what they would have been like if the situation had been 'normal', and thus what they wanted to become."³⁵ She adds that, "the 'norm' [...] was not used in the meaning of what the norm was, but rather in the meaning of what it should have been: what 'normality' would have looked like had Estonia's development itself been 'normal', i.e., uninterrupted by the Soviet takeover."³⁶

In Rausing's example, "normality" is label for a project, for a "what it should be" identity: the descriptive mode of self-understanding is mingled with the prescriptive one. Earlier, I argued that in the western European history of the terms, the normative moment slowly faded away to make way for routine, procedural, regular, and "indoor" nuances. In contrast, in the early transitional years in eastern Europe, it was exactly the "normative" nuances that were heavily stressed. Unlike the pale, disappearing norm in western usages, the eastern European accent on the normative dimension was self-conscious and categorical, sometimes even imperative. This was a symptom of serious dissimilarity between "eastern" and "western" usages — apparently, eastern European usages of the word "normal" constituted a response to specific "structural anxieties" shared in this part of the continent.

What was upsetting was not the missing norm but a reality perceived as abnormal.³⁷ Post-socialist Estonians (and Bulgarians, Serbians, Hungarians, etc.) were deeply concerned that they themselves were "deviations", post-communist mutants.³⁸ The rhetoric of moral disgust (widespread in eastern Europe at that time) demonstrated that the moral norm coincided paradoxically with infantile fears ("we are not normal, we are not white"), desires ("we wish were different, white, European") and, most importantly, repulsion ("we are Negroes, we are mutants, we are absurd"³⁹). In the Bulgarian press, one still finds desperate appeals of the kind: "I am eager to see examples of normality, but — alas! — they are not available [...] Is there any chance at all that we will ever become normal?"⁴⁰ So we can see that "normal" and "normality" proved not only to be morally normative, but were also invested with a great and contradictory emotional burden: longing, fear, and repulsion. Moreover, it was impossible to "normalize" their usages, to use them as automatic, neutral, and routine labels of routine and comfortable situations. The word "normal" still "inspires" or "hurts" in eastern Europe (or both at the same time).

The contradictions do not stop here. In the slogan "revolution back to normality", "normality" occupied the place left empty by the "bright future" of

communism -revolutions have always occurred in the name of such a future, for the sake of a perfect, "bright new world", freedom, brotherhood, and mass happiness. "Normality" has replaced the legitimizing utopia; it is a backwards looking, anti-utopian retro-utopia in the age of the loss of transcendence.⁴¹ "Normality" rejected social engineering, cruel historical collisions, and bloody experiments conducted by a demiurgic state, yet expressed the same infantile desire for happiness — in the "moderate" form of comfort, cleanliness, relaxation, and recognition.

In recent years, with the accession of eastern European countries to EU, a new transformation occurred in the utopia of normality. The post-socialist longing for normality encountered not the Europe it had imagined, but the real euro-bureaucratic procedures of accession: the harmonization of national judicial systems with European law, administrative normativization and standardization of almost every single sphere of social reality. Like many other countries, Bulgaria went through a hard process of negotiation before its accession, abolishing 31 articles related to the economy, energy supply, agriculture, industry, ecology, fiscal politics, finances, quality of goods, telecommunications, social policy, health, education, fishing policy, and so on.

The major EU directives clearly stated that the technical standards, quality certificates, and metrological definitions of all commodities were to be governed by legislation set up at the European level. The uneasy, sometimes painful implementation process was scrupulously controlled by new types of government actor — commissions, euro-commissioners, inspectors, European experts, external observers, auditors, and so on. Sanctions for not fulfilling the accepted duties were severe.

At a practical level, the imposition of all-encompassing standardization and regulation policies was little different from the population policies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries described by Foucault. In the nineteenth century, population control was practiced not only in Europe proper, but was also imposed by colonial administrations on Indian, Chinese, and African populations.

The enlarged European Union created a space for similar institutional practices of classification, codification, calculation, mapping, control, and neutralization of deviant products and practices. Unlike the governments of the eighteenth century, which openly pursued "happiness" for the masses, the EUs aims, along with the mobility of people, capitals, commodities, and services, is to achieve normal and healthy populations, an unpolluted environment, and improvement of the quality of life.

However, bureaucratic "normalization" of the new Europe ran into conflict with traditional everyday cultures in post-socialist cultures. These had old working habits and another temporal rhythm; they were defined by economists and anthropologists as low trust environments with clientele and network mentalities; they had another attitude to food, health, and communication, another image of the quality of life, different "structural anxieties", and so on. Imposed procedural normalization did not coincide with the dream of "return to Europe and normality" and, therefore, was accepted as "normal" by very few eastern Europeans. The European passion for procedure and standardization even met symbolic resistance.⁴² Confronted with the real bureaucratic Europe, the "longing for European normality" became a disappointed utopia and produced the opposite reaction: a new longing for difference, "authenticity",

and communality. This is one explanation for the recent wave of nationalist and isolationist movements in eastern Europe. These movements also regard themselves as returning to "normal", only now, "normal" and "natural" are interpreted as "native soil and roots".

Reinhart Koselleck has warned that "Through alternation of the semasiological and onomasiological questions, *Begriffsgeschichte* aims ultimately at *Sachgeschichte*"⁴³ The history of concepts cannot replace the history of things, actors, and material processes — social history, in other words. However, the history of concepts can help to supplement the "normal" perspective of social history with viewpoints concerning the historical patterns of meaning and the expectations of those who act and interact. As demonstrated here, the meanings of crucial concepts such as "normal" and "normality" were multiple, historically changeable, contradictory, even oxymoronic. In order to better understand historical changes, one needs to be patient, to chase these details, twists, and contradictions. They mark the categories and limits of self-understanding which, in turn, makes meaningful historical actions possible while simultaneously setting semantic constraints on them. Some concepts mould the behaviour of historical agents. This makes their history at least as interesting as the history of material conditions.

¹ K. Hartung, "Der Intellektuelle als Held", *Die Zeit*, 9.11.1990.

² According to Reinhart Koselleck (See, "Begriffsgeschichte and Social History" in *Future Past. On Semantics of Historical Time*, translated by Keith Tribe, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1985, 73–92.), *Begriffsgeschichte* investigates "... the autonomous power of words without the use of which human actions and passions could hardly be experienced and certainly not made intelligible for others", 73. Koselleck writes further that: "from this a methodological minimal claim follows, namely that social and political conflict of the past must be interpreted and opened up via the medium of their conceptual limits and in term of mutually understood, past linguistic usage of the participating agents. (79). Therefore, *Begriffsgeschichte* is a "specialized method of source criticism, taking note as it does of utilization of terminology relevant to the social and political elements and directing itself in particular to the analysis of central expressions having social and political content" (79). He goes on: "A concept is not only indicative of the relations it covers but is also a factor within them. Each concept establishes a particular horizon for potential experience and conceivable theory, and in this way sets limits." (84) According to the *Begriffsgeschichte*—research program the relevant questions to be asked are: Is the concept in common use? Is its meaning disputed? What is the social range of its usage? In what contexts does the term appear? Who uses the concept, for what purposes and to address whom? How long has it been in social use? What is the valence of the term within the structure of social and political vocabulary? What terms does it overlap with and does it converge with other terms over time? It is clear from these questions that the exposition of the concept's meaning was anticipated from the beginning to involve its placement within a hierarchy of meaning, the cumulative effect of the lexicon being to elucidate a complex network of semantic change in which particular concepts might play varying role over the time. (73–92)

³ There is no registration of "norm" and "normal" in the famous *Dictionary of the English Language*, by Samuel Johnson (1755, printed by W. Strahan). According to Random House Webster's *College Dictionary* (Random House, New York, 2nd ed. 1997), the first reiterated usages of these words in English is between 1815–1825; when the Latin "norma" — "rule, pattern" — was anglicized. The Oxford English Dictionary (Second Edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, Vol. X, 1989) is more precise: it registers the years of penetration of different meanings of "norm", "normal", and their derivatives in the English language. This dictionary mentions early usages of "normal" (as early as 1650), but in its traditional Latin meaning of "rectangular, perpendicular". The adverb "normally" has its rare usages, too (meaning "regular") since the late sixteenth century. Yet the meaning "conforming to, not deviating from or different from the common type" or "standard, regular, usual" as well as the synonymy between "normal" and "typical" were registered not earlier than 1828; the dictionary dates the mass usages since 1840. The common usages of the substantive "normality" started at that time, too: "under normal or ordinary conditions" is dated about

1850. "Normalize" penetrates English a little later — about 1865 — and one can find "normalization" as early as 1880. The situation in German was not very different. The Duden dictionary (*Deutsches Universal Wörterbuch*, Dudenverlag, Mannheim, Leipzig, Wien Zürich, 1989) claims that the word *Norm* was present already in *mittelhoch Deutsch* (1050–1350) but at that time it was used in the traditional Latin meaning *Winkelmass* (angular measure) and *Regel* (rule); the dictionary of the brothers Grimm (*Deutsches Wörterbuch*, VII, von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm, Hirtzel, 1854, bearbeitet von dr. Mathias von Lexer, Leipzig, Verlag, von s. , 1889), registers the word "normal" but does not mention the meanings "usual, ordinary, typical" — it accentuates the older meaning *Als norm dienend, ihr gemäss; regelmässig* [serving as a rule, according to a rule, regular]. In the German language, the root "norm" is extremely productive, especially concerning composite words such as *Normalgewicht* (normal weight) *Normalgröße* (normal size), *Normalhöhe* (normal height), *Normalform* (normal form), etc. In French the situation is similar. The *Tresor de la langue Francaise, Dictionnaire de la langue du 19 et du 20 ciele* (tome 12, Paris, Gallimard, 1986), registers the meanings *habituel, frequent, Etat normal* (habitual, often, normal condition) as early as 1846. The other important French Dictionary *Le Robert* (*Dictionnaire de la langue Francaise*, t 6, Le Robert, Paris, 1987) mentions earlier usages in the traditional geometrical meaning in 1753, and the meaning *la verb normale* (normal verb) in 1753. It also registers the pedagogical meaning appearing in 1793; *ecole Normale* (school for teaching of teachers). Yet, the meanings "usual", "typical", and "average" come later — *Le Robert* registers them in some texts of Balzac and in the positive science of Auguste Komte between 1833 and 1850. The substantive "Normalization" appears in French as early as 1873. The Russian dictionary of Vladimir Dall (*Tolkovyi slovar ruskogo yazyka, Tom vtotoi, Izdanie tipografca I knigoprodavca M.O.Volfa*, Moskva, St.Peterburg 1881) mentions "normal" in part of its modern meanings — usual, regular, non-extreme, following the rule. The Russian etymological and historical dictionaries register some early usages of "normal" (1784) but in the meaning of "normal school for teachers". According to P.Y. Chernyih, *Istoriko-Etymologicheskyy slovar sovremennogo ruskogo yazyka Moskva* (Ruskii yazyk, 1994), the word "normal" appears in the Russian language as early as 1804 (borrowed from German). In the Bulgarian dictionary of Hristo G. Danov (1868) the word "normalen" (normal) appears in the meaning of "following, obeying the rule, regular, usual, sane"; yet in the other important dictionary of the Bulgarian language (Naiden Gerov 1895–1904) the words "norm" and "normal" do not appear at all — obviously they still sound like "foreign words" to the diligent patriotic lexicographer.

- 4 *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, Vol. X, 1989.
- 5 See footnotes 3 and 4.
- 6 Maybe one of the reasons is the appearance of the specialized words "normative" and "normativity", which clearly differ from "normal" and "normality". Yet, unlike "normal" and "normality", these words are rarely used in everyday contexts; they are rather legal or philosophical (ethical) termini.
- 7 Koselleck op. cit. 79.
- 8 For the concept "new moral order" — a social order in which the people live for their cooperation and mutual services and not for their devotion to the divine — see Charles Taylor, Charles., Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2004.
- 9 In contrast to this modern ideology of normality, one can hardly find a concept fully corresponding to the meaning of "normality" in ancient languages or in pre-modern cultures. In ancient Greek, for example, they used two words with similar meaning: *metron* (measure) and *physis* (nature). They were positive evaluation: *kata metron dran* used to mean "he/she acts adequately, according to the measure, fitting to the situation". *Metrios legein* used to mean that one speaks appropriately, no more than needed. And *kata physin dran* used to mean "to act according to nature" (both human nature and the nature of things themselves). These examples show clearly that in ancient culture, the usages of words similar to "normal" always presupposed a metaphysical, cosmic, or divine norm. The opposite of *metron* and *physis* were not mere "deviations" (as in case of normality and "abnormality") but distortions of divine "measurements" — challenged to the Gods and the numeric essence of the cosmos, leading to the Gods' fury and to cosmic and human catastrophes (*hubris*). (I am grateful for this remark to the Bulgarian scholar in classic philology Dr Nikolay Gotchev.)
- 10 Frank Kermode describes a similar shift in the meaning of the word "typical" during the same historical period - see Frank Kermode, *The Classic*, London: Faber & Faber 1975.
- 11 For the meaning of "normalization" in Foucault, see *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France*, 1974–1975; edited by Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, New York: Picador 2003. (I cite the Bulgarian translation by Evgenia Grekova, Sofia: LIK, 55–68); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*; translated from the French by Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage Books 1995. See the chapter "The Normalizing Function". (I cite the Bulgarian translation by Petko Staynov and Antoaneta Koleva, Sofia: Sofia

- University Press 186–193).
- 12 See Georges Canguilhem, *Le normal et le pathologique*, 1943. German translation: *Das Normale und das Pathologische*, München: Hanser, 1974. Canguilhem criticized both normative normality (following a norm) and statistical normality (where the "normal" is the statistically average): he preferred a "vitalistic" interpretation, where normality used to mean flexible capacity of a living organism for adapting to changing circumstances. See also Jim Marshall, "Georges Canguilhem" <http://www.ffst.hr/ENCYCLOPAEDIA/georgescanguilhemp.htm>
- 13 See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, London and New York: Tavistock/Routledge 1967, 1989, 3–38.
- 14 Hanna Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York 1963, German: *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen*, Piper, München 1964; 14. Auflage 1986.
- 15 Volker Rühle, "Gestaltung euro-atlantischer Politik", in: *Europäische Sicherheit*, nr. 8/1993, 386–388.
- 16 Stefan Berger, *The Search for Normality: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Germany since 1800*, Providence: Berghahn Books 1997.
- 17 Thomas Childers and Jane Caplan (eds.), *Re-evaluating the Third Reich*, New York: Holmes & Meier 1993.
- 18 R.D. Kernohan, "Searching for Normality in Central Europe" in *Contemporary Review*, Vol. 285 Issue: 1665, October 2004, 221.
- 19 Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe", *The New York Review of Books*, 26 April 1984.
- 20 Sigrid Rausing, "Re-constructing the Normal: Identity and the Consumption of Western Goods in Estonia", in Ruth Mandel and Caroline Humphrey (eds.), *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism*, New York: Berg 2002.
- 21 K–R. Korte, *Die Wiederkehr Europas*, Beilage der *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2/3 10.1990.
- 22 Anonymous, *Demokratia*, 4 April 1990.
- 23 Petko Iliev, "In the City of Truth", *Demokratia*, 12 July 1990.
- 24 The early intellectual programme of the velvet revolutions could be called retro-utopian and performative: it celebrated old, foundational ideas of modernity. Its performance — the ritual public "staging" of democratic values — was mistakenly interpreted as philosophical banality by some orthodox western interpreters. Jürgen Habermas wrote about them as early as 1990: "Indem die nachholende Revolution die Rückkehr zum demokratischen Rechtsstaat und den Anschluss an kapitalistisch entwickelten Westen ermöglichen soll, orientiert sie sich nach Modellen, die nach orthodoxer Lesart durch die Revolution von 1917 schon überholt waren. Das mag ein eigentümlichen Zug dieser Revolution erklären: das fast vollständigen Mangel an innovativen, zukunftsweisenden Ideen." See J. Habermas, "Nachholende Revolution und linker Revolutionsbedarf. Was heisst Sozialismus heute?" in: *Die Moderne — ein unvollendetes Projekt*, Leipzig 1990, 215.
- 25 Elizabeth Shove, *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organization of Normality*, Oxford: Berg 2003, 23.
- 26 Ibid. 23.
- 27 Ibid. 190.
- 28 Ibid. 191.
- 29 Rausing op. cit. 127–142.
- 30 Ibid. 129.
- 31 Ibid. 8.
- 32 Rausing writes: "The 'normal', then, was not luxury as opposed to the present poverty — that was associated with the 'New Estonians', i.e. the newly rich, who in their own way also lacked 'normality'. Instead, the 'normal' was associated with the solid ordinary comforts of northern Europe, which in the context of the former collective farm, were actually anything but ordinary." Ibid. 132.
- 33 See Honneth, Axel, *Die Kampf um Anerkennung. Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1992.
- 34 Charles Taylor writes about this imaginary stage as follows: " This identity is vulnerable to nonrecognition, at first on the part of the members of the dominant societies, but later there has developed a world public scene, on which peoples see themselves as standing, on which they see themselves as rated, and which rating matters to them. This world scene is dominated by a vocabulary of relative advance, even to the point of having to discover periodic neologisms in order to euphemize the distinctions. Hence what used to be called the 'backward' societies began to be called "underdeveloped" after the War, and then even

this came to be seen as indelicate, and so we have the present partition: developed/developing. The backdrop of modern nationalism, that there is something to be caught up with, each society in its own way, is inscribed in this common language, which in turn animates the world public sphere." In: Charles Taylor, "Nationalism and Modernity", in: R. McKim and J. McMahan (eds.), *The Morality of Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, 1997, 46. On the topic of staging and imaginary communication, see also Alexander Kiossev, "Behind the Stage", in Tatjana Aleksic, (ed.) *Mythistory and Narratives of the Nation in the Balkans*, Cambridge Scholars Publishers 2007.

³⁵ Rausing, op. cit. 139.

³⁶ Ibid. 140.

³⁷ This has been noted by other researchers: "All the government wanted to achieve, according to Defence Minister Rühe, was the vague aim of being able to react just like the FRG's 'democratic European neighbours'. What was significant was not to achieve a positive goal but to avoid abnormality". In: Zehfuss, Maja. *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, 214.

³⁸ The present author wrote in 1991 a short article entitled "The Exotics of the Mutants", which later was taken as the title for a collection of Bulgarian essays translated in Hungarian: *A Mutans Egzotikuma*, Budapest, 2000 Orpheus 1993. The Bulgarian title seemed easily understandable for Hungarians: obviously, their experience and self-estimation was not very different from the Bulgarian one.

³⁹ An extreme example of this "rhetoric of self-repulsion": "Take the masks off! No matter that there are not faces under them! [...] We are drowning in the mud of lethargy, we are sinking in ideological cloaks [...] Take the mask off! Let us create our own faces [...]. What you will see are not faces, not live, but polyps [...]. A long time is needed for chaotic hammers to form our semi-faces, semi-words [...]" The combination of quotes comes from the article "Poetry today" by the poet Edvin Sugarev (who later became a leading oppositional politician in Bulgaria) in the first Bulgarian Samizdat journal *Most* [Bridge], no. 1, June 1989.

⁴⁰ The quote is from the article, "How we didn't manage to become normal", an electronic publication by the Bulgarian ex-minister of finance Alexander Bozkov on the website "Epochal Times", http://www.epochtimes-bg.com/2007-01/2007-07-29_09.htm

⁴¹ Havel, Vaclav, "The Need for Transcendence in the Post-Modern World", *Journal for Quality & Participation*; Sep 95, Vol. 18 Issue 5, 26.

⁴² This was the case with Bulgarian and Romanian protest about the regulation of traditional home brewed alcohol (*rakia*, *cuika*) and the defence of the traditional Christmas killing of pigs and consumption of pork. In Romania, a famous anthropologist even organized a workshop called "Porkshop", ridiculing European policy. On an official level, the Bulgarian resistance to the word "euro" for the new European currency was similar. Under pressure from Bulgarian public opinion and the Bulgarian government, the European Commission (who wanted to standardize the pronunciation and the orthography of the new currency) were forced to accept that the name "euro" broke the phonetic law of the Bulgarian language (in Bulgarian the pronunciation is "evro").

⁴³ Kosseleck, op. cit. 87.

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