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Penka Angelova, Manfred Müller (Hg.)

ELIAS CANETTI – MASSE, MACHT, POLITIK

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„Nichts fürchtet der Mensch mehr als
die Berührung durch Unbekanntes.“
Elias Canetti, *Masse, Macht, Politik*

PENKA ANGELOVA, MANFRED MÜLLER

Anlässlich des 110. Geburtstags von Elias Canetti fanden 2015 in Wien und Ruse zwei Symposien zur Aktualität von Elias Canettis Werk statt, organisiert von der Internationalen Elias Canetti Gesellschaft (IECG) in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Österreichischen Bundesministerium für Europa, Integration und Äußeres (BMEIA), Sektion V, den Österreich-Bibliotheken in Ruse und Veliko Tarnovo und der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Literatur, Wien.

Dabei wurden zwei für Elias Canetti emblematische Orte anvisiert: Ruse (Rustschuk), seine Geburtsstadt, wo alles „schon einmal geschehen war“, und Wien, seine „zweite Heimat“. Somit ist Elias Canetti nicht der einzige Nobelpreisträger, der mehrere Heimaten hat, er ist aber der einzige Nobelpreisträger, der schon zu Lebzeiten dafür gesorgt hat, sich zu ihnen zu bekennen und als europäischer Bürger par excellence zu gelten, ohne eine nationale/staatliche Zugehörigkeit anzugeben. Auch sein Werk zeugt von dieser Zugehörigkeit zur Menschheit und zur Menschlichkeit über das Eurozentrische hinaus.

In diesem markanten Jahr 2015, als die „Berührungsfurcht“ einen ihrer ersten Höhepunkte erreichte, haben wir im Rahmen der Symposien den Blick verstärkt auf das Phänomen „Masse“ und ihre Wechselwirkung mit der Macht und den Medien gerichtet. Zudem wird die Aktualität von Canettis Theorie für Wissenschaft und Politik hervorgehoben, wobei die „binäre Trennung zwischen Theorie und Politik, der eine Auffassung von Erkenntnis als totalisierende Allgemeinheit und des Alltagslebens als bloße Erfahrung, Subjektivität oder falsches Bewusstsein zugrunde liegt“, aufgehoben wurde. Erkenntnis und Alltagsleben bedingen einander gegenseitig und es hat sich als eine große Herausforderung erwiesen, Canettis Theorie auf den an- und aufregenden Alltag anzuwenden. Dabei weist Adam Paulsen auf Canettis „beobachtende Teilnahme“ hin und sein holistisches Eintreten für eine ganzheitliche Ästhetik, die sich vor allem

¹ Homi K. Bhabha: Die Verortung der Kultur. Stauffenburg Verlag 2011, S. 46.

Principle of Possibility. From Prohibition on Transformations to the Prohibition Crowds

LEONARD MAZZONE (MALLAND)

1. The “work of a life” against the death

More than twenty years had passed from Canetti's decision to devote his life to the study of crowds, when in 1948 he started ordering all the material collected for *Crowds and Power*; other 12 years had to pass, before the book was eventually printed. Besides being a classic of the history of political, sociological and philosophical thought, *Masse und Macht* can be considered – as suggested by its author – as “the work of a life” [*Lebenswerk*], in a twofold sense: it is the highest synthesis of a life devoted to writing and, at the same time, a work which reflects the anxieties and the hopes of a life, which was entirely committed to a struggle against power or, which is the same, against the mortification of life.

Such an alliance between life and writing runs through all the different literary genres frequented by Canetti during and after the long, slow and uninterrupted composition of his masterpiece. Despite Canetti's stylistic versatility, his works reproduce his obsession for certain contents: *Die Blendung*, the dramas, the *Aufzeichnungen* and – above all – the three volumes of the autobiography share the same issues of *Masse und Macht*. At the core of the antagonism between crowds and power, transformation and “prohibitions on transformation” there is always the Canetti's rebellion against death and not only for the death of his relatives: as he later wrote in *The Torch of My Ear*, “I care about the life of every human being and not just that of my neighbor”.

Such an unusual hate has been transmitted to the young Canetti by the early death of his father, concomitant with the outbreak of the war between Montenegro and Turkey in 1912. Since that moment, the most incomprehensible experience of any life, death, became the sworn enemy of his entire life and works. Canetti's childhood was shaped by his declaration of war against death and this reaction reproduced on a small scale the “dynamics of every war”,

which Canetti would have clarified later in a namesake paragraph of *Crowds and Power*: in a sense, we could say that the father's death was "the first death which infects everyone with the feeling of being threatened. It is impossible to overrate the part played by the first dead man in the kindling of wars".

2. The bloodhound of his time

If *Crowds and Power* was written "under the dictation of the twentieth century", the three volumes of the story of Canetti's life contain a lot of references to the crowds and power formations of the past century.

The main protagonists of *Die gerettete Zunge*, *Die Fackel im Ohr* and *Das Augenspiel* – who are Canetti's mother, Karl Kraus and Veza, the doctor Sonne and Anna Mahler – are at the core of the growth of the young Elias, who improves the three senses which will transform him in a "bloodhound of his time". After his father's death, the young Canetti learned from his mother the secret language spoken by his parents in their intimate moments; then he improved his hearing capacity, after his encounters with one of his literary models and with his future wife. Thanks to the "acoustic quotations" of Karl Kraus and to the attentive patience and the uninhibited intelligence of Veza, Canetti became the "ear witness of the twentieth century", more than a mere "participating observer"; in his first (and last) novel *Die Blendung* and in the dramas *Die Hochzeit*, *Die Komödie der Eitelkeit* and *Die Befristeten* he tried to capture through the new "mother tongue" of German the acoustic masks of his age. Finally, after having been blinded by the fire started by Peter Kien to his library, Elias' eyes were opened again by the bright encounter with Doctor Sonne. Since that moment, Canetti became a "hunter of images": instead of providing a certain definition of the phenomena of crowds and power, he employed these images in order to grab the twentieth century "by the throat" in *Crowds and Power*.

3. The forced isolation of *Crowds and Power*

Unlike the negative dialectic of Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, Canetti tried to "overcome the concept" through the images disseminated in his masterpiece, rather than by adopting further conceptual mediations. This is also one of the main reasons of the forced isolation to which *Crowds and Power* was condemned by its critics. Besides this accusation related to the literary style of the book, the readers of this work usually reproach Canetti for the mix of disciplines and for the radical heterogeneity of its contents. All these objections can be related to

one of the main – and most surprising – aspects of the book: the absence of any method, as Theodor Adorno said and Canetti himself admitted during a radio conversation in 1962.

Nevertheless, it would be better to talk of a *plurality of methods* drawn from different disciplines, rather than of the absence of any method at all. Thanks to this plurality, Canetti was able to organize in a *multidisciplinary frame* the new pieces of knowledge acquired during more than thirty-five years of work, occasionally interrupted only by the composition of the *Aufzeichnungen*, the satirical book *Die Affenoper*, the travel notes *Voices of Marrakech* and *Life-Terms*. Finally, the long time devoted to the writing of his work gave Canetti the possibility to refine his own ideas about crowds, initially shaped by his *personal participation in some crowd formations* dating back to 1922 in Frankfurt and to 1927 in Wien and, later, developed after the totalitarian mobilization of crowds themselves.

Unlike the previous inquiries about crowds and power, Canetti removed any ideological blinker from his eyes in order to see directly the emancipative potential of the "open crowds" of his time and its degeneration, due to their active domestication by Nazism. In summary, the methodological pluralism, the multidisciplinary approach, the literary style and the heterogeneity of contents which show up in the pages of *Crowds and Power* are expressly chosen by Canetti in order to comprehend the new character of the complicity between crowds and power occurred with the Nazism.

Yet, even if estimators of *Crowds and Power* appreciate all these aspects which make this book unique, every time they select only some parts of the text and renounce to read it entirely they unintentionally risk underestimating its greatness.

4. The uniqueness of *Crowds and Power*

The sequence of the chapters of *Crowds and Power* is anything but casual: no one can really appreciate the complexity of the book without taking their order into serious consideration. Foremost, the priority of the chapter devoted to the crowds prevents to interpret this social phenomenon only in a regressive way. After having been regarded as a criminal phenomenon by the collective psychologists of the 19th century, crowds came to be considered a triumph of craziness by Gustave Le Bon. In the 20th century, at last, Sigmund Freud put an end to the previous tradition of studies in collective psychology, which interpreted the crowds as a result of a "collective soul".

The father of modern psychoanalysis translated the categories used in collective psychology into those of the rising individual psychology: since *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*, crowds were interpreted as a collective expression of the individual unconscious. By conceiving the reciprocal identification of the

¹ Canetti, 1960: 138.

members of a crowd as a result of their infatuation for the leader, the latter was regarded by Freud as a necessary premise for the rise and the persistence of this social formation. It is not by chance that Freud used "crowds" to refer to long-term masses, such as the Church or the army, rather than to short-term crowds like those investigated by Le Bon.

After having taken part in some crowds of his time, Canetti drew up a pluralistic phenomenology of crowds in order to recognize the possibility of their emancipative character. This is another of the most scandalous aspects of the first part of *Crowds and Power*: here the author describes the "hypocritical variants" of crowds – such as the *double crowd of war* and the *baiting crowds* –, together with the "critical" ones (*flight, reversal* and *prohibition* crowds) and the *feast crowds*, which can belong to both of these kinds.

5. *Dominus homini lupus est*: human hunting

The domestication process of crowds by power can be illustrated starting from the most ancient crowd known by men: *flight crowds* flee away from the threat of death as it happens in the animal world. If flight crowds represent the most ancient example of any human crowd, every form of power consists in predatory relations.

In order to explain the complex relationship between crowds and power, after all, there's no better starting point than the opening pages of *Crowds and Power*: here Canetti begins with the "fear of being touched by the unknown". If men can free from this fear only in the crowd, this fear itself is a symptom of the predatory nature of power. Touching is the central moment of the animal hunting: before it takes place, the predator spies the prey; after the contact with the prey, the predator can incorporate it. Power relations reproduce these different stages of animal hunting.

In this regard, Canetti's political anthropology is more radical than Thomas Hobbes' one, as witnessed by the preference accorded to the "offensive notion" of survival rather than to the defensive concept of "self-preservation". Canetti does not locate predatory relations among humans in a hypothetical state of nature; he's not interested in legitimating any institutional form of power like statehood. Although Canetti regards Hobbes as one of the foremost experts on power, he wants to fight against this perversion of the human capacity of transformation. This different attitude towards the relations of power is due to the different kinds of political violence observed by these two authors. Facing the English civil wars, Hobbes thought that Statehood is justified by the purpose of avoiding the violent death made possible by the absence of an absolute power. On the contrary, Canetti was facing the totalitarian perversion of the monopoly of violence held by Nation State in 20th century. This is the main reason why, in

the case of *Crowds and Power*, the Plauto's maxim which inspires the political realism of Hobbes undergoes a radical twist: not man, but "master is a wolf for another man" (*Dominus homini lupus est*).

6. Anatomy of power

With this deep change, Canetti wants to *denaturalize any relation of power* among humans. In other words, he tries to politicize one of the most common and unavoidable experiences of human life: the experience of survival. In Canetti's words, "the moment of survival is the moment of power. [...] In survival, each man is the enemy of every other, and all grief is insignificant measured against this element triumph"².

In that moment, the survivor is similar to an animal predator and the dead man assumes the appearances of a prey. Despite this astonishing similarity, human huntings usually take place without the murder of the prey. The first stage of any human hunting is very different from the animal one: humans who want to survive are not always strong enough to obtain their preys directly, so that they recur to one of the main features of power: the dissimulation of harmful intentions and the simulation of benevolent purposes. In hunting relations among humans, lions are often dressed up as lambs: the self-victimization is one of the main strategies used by rulers in order to captivate the trust of the preys. Unlike animal predators like lions, human predators have to partially transform themselves in order to catch their preys: the simulation of power is a sort of midway stage between the animal capacity of external imitation and the properly human power of internal transformation. In order to come close to their preys, human hunters have to wear *masks* which allow them to maintain their harmful intentions, rather than to transform themselves as human beings learned to do during their history.

Besides this crucial difference, humans learned to seize and incorporate their preys without killing them. Canetti does not only try to hunt power by showing all its predatory gestures; he tries also to vivisect its body through an autopsy: the crucial discontinuity between animal and human gestures of seizing and incorporating has been made possible by the patient capacity of human *hands letting go*, refined when men were still like monkeys and lived in the trees³.

² *Ivi*, p. 227.

³ The human power of transformation has its roots in this acquired capacity of hands: freed by the necessity of grasping the prey, human hands could learn to represent objects and, through this, to produce them together with words. The destructiveness power of hands and teeth has been transferred by men to their instruments of power and to social space.

7. Elements of power

After having analyzed the so called “entrails of power”, Canetti can focus his attention on its main “elements”, that are force, speed, question and answer, secrecy, judgment and condemnation, and mercy.

As already hinted to in the paragraph devoted to the patience of the hand, human relations of power are different from violence acting in the predatory relations between animals belonging to different species. Unlike substantial conceptions of power *à la* Hobbes, Canetti defends a relational view of power: a relation of power starts when there is no need to recur continuously to violence. Differently from relational conceptions of power *à la* Arendt, however, Canetti does not regard these concepts as opposite to each other, but as “potential synonyms”: when human preys disobey, powerful subjects cannot do without the appeal to violence. Power is neither reducible to the violence of the predator nor to the freedom of the prey, though it presupposes both. Although *force* or violence is one of the main elements of power, the latter is not reducible to the former.

Power has a bigger extension in space and time than force, and that leads to another element of power, which is *speed*. According to Canetti, the speed of power is twofold: first of all, it refers to chasing and grasping human preys. Other than by the improvement of human weapons, this speed can be obtained also by means of linguistic devices such as *questions*, which can immobilize the preys in a defined identity. On the other hand, power has to guard its secret desire of surviving by not answering. The ruler can question everything without answering anything: this is the core of power’s irresponsibility.

Since rulers have to dissimulate their *secrecy*, they try to prevent the risk of being unmasked. In its second acceptance, the speed of power consists in the paranoid unmasking of an opponent. This also means that the ruler can judge and condemn everyone without being judged and condemned by anyone in his/her turn.

Besides this unpleasent asymmetry, one of the most important element of power is *mercy*: differently from the animal which uses its force, the powerful man increases its power by suspending the death sentence on the prey. Anyway, mercy does not coincide with *forgiveness*: by subordinating the prey, the ruler survives; by surviving to the prey, the ruler cannot forgive anyone. Besides this consequence which concerns the predator, mercy’s effects on the prey are as much relevant: in order to be pardoned, the prey has to kneel; by kneeling, the prey increases the greatness of the power which concedes the mercy.

8. The process of survival and the postures of power: the subordinated life

As demonstrated by the posture assumed by the prey who asks for pardon, elements of power allow to deepen further the meaning of survival. Besides being referred to a physical experience, this category is also related to symbolic expressions of power, which are embodied in the social space in many “silent configurations of power”. Surviving does not only mean to *be still alive while another person is dead*, but it also means to *subordinate someone’s life*. This crucial variation about the meaning of survival results in human postures different from that of the “moment of survival”, within which the survivor is standing while the dead is lying.

Unlike the posture of kneeling, which expresses a form of active powerlessness, the setting position exemplifies the so-called “process of survival”, which moves the main focus of power from the power of killing to the power of subordinating another’s life through commands.

9. The domestication of flight command

In order to explain the main difference between animal and human hunting, Canetti analyzes the domestication of flight-command among animals belonging to different species. According to Canetti, in animal hunting the flight of the preys represents a biological prototype of human command: human relations of power consist in the inversion of the flight direction of human preys, which depends on the domestication of the flight command. Instead of threatening the weaker with death, human commands dissimulate this threat and simulates its exact contrary: they embody a promise of life. In human relations of power, “a creature which is subject to another habitually receives its food only from that other”⁴.

This is the main reason why obedience can exist only among humans and not among animals. In the case of human relations of power the death sentence is suspended when the distance between the person who prescribes and the one who obeys to certain commands is canceled. Besides presupposing the freedom of the prey, which is – first of all – freedom of movement, power transforms the death sentence into a promise of food: if only the open crowd can reverse the individual fear of being touched by the unknown, the domestication of flight command reverses the threat of death. Due to this command’s corruption, the prey fears to be abandoned by its predator and this fear looks like a far memory of the death sentence between animals belonging to different species.

⁴ *IVI*, p. 307.

10. From flight crowds to the domesticated crowds

The domestication of flight-command finally allows to explain the domestication of crowds. Any command the prey carries out leaves a *sting* behind in him. The prey can free him/herself from his/her stings in two ways. The first one consists in waiting for a reversal of his power position through a promotion coming from his superior: as soon as a subject is promoted, he can give to others the commands his superior once gave to him. Instead of changing the social hierarchy,⁵ the "secret discipline" of command leaves it exactly the same. Through these forms of "authorized transformations", which are also an advanced form of "prohibitions on transformation", the uppermost extreme of asymmetrical relations of power can reproduce itself by conceding limited social changes (like social mobility in the modern societies).

Besides the so-called "secret discipline of commands", there is also the possibility of a collective liberation from the stings of command. In this case the prey can join the other preys in a *reversal crowd*, which reverses predatory relations. When this crowd comes into existence, classes and castes finally cease to be mere concepts and become social realities: "the lower class, which is in revolt, forms a single, cohesive crowd; the higher one, which is threatened and outnumbered and surrounded, forms a series of frightened packs, bent on flight".⁶

On the other side, power has to face a dilemma. The ruler must pardon its human preys in order to survive them: without them, he could not survive anyone. By pardoning human preys, nevertheless, he risks being overturned by them, once they are joined in a hunting crowd against him. By conceding mercy to human preys who obey him, power feels the so called "anxiety of command": "The man who gives the command, who shoots the arrow, feels a slight recoil from it. [...] The satisfaction which follows a successful command is deceptive and covers a great deal else. There is always some sensation of a recoil behind it, for a command marks not only its victim, but also its giver. An accumulation of such recoils engenders a special kind of anxiety, which I call the anxiety of command".⁶

For the ruler the only way of freeing himself/herself from this anxiety is to give commands to many people rather than to individuals, because only isolated commands lead to the formation of the stings. With the only exception of the army, which can exist as long as all commands have equal validity for any single soldier,

In a crowd a command spreads horizontally. It may originally strike a single individual from above. But since others like himself stand near him, he immediately passes it on to them. In his fear he moves closer to them and in a second

they are all affected by it. First a few of them start to move, then more, and finally all. The instantaneous spread of the same command turns them into a crowd and soon they are all in flight together. Since the command is immediately diffused, no sting is formed. There is no time for this: what would otherwise have become permanent is instantaneously dissolved. A command to a crowd leaves no sting behind. A threat which initiates a crowd flight is dissolved in that same flight.⁷

These few lines contain the pivot theme of *Crowds and Power*: by transforming its subjects in *baiting* and *double crowds* of war, power can avoid the risk of being overturned by the preys joined in a reversal crowd. In these two crowd formations individuals can free themselves from accumulated stings by killing single or collective victims. The herd begins again to flee, but instead of distancing itself from the predator it goes towards the death of another prey, single (as in the case of baiting crowds) or collective (as in the case of the double crowd of war).

11. Crowds and powers along history

Besides analyzing the motives of complicity between crowds and power, Canetti's work also provides suggestions that are useful for a historical reconstruction of their changing relationships. If we wanted summarize all the main passages of the book, we should say that power can avoid the risk of being overturned through three main strategies.

First of all, the so called secret discipline of commands allows individuals to free themselves from command-stings without joining in a crowd, but – rather – by obeying to superiors and by subordinating inferiors in social hierarchies within which they are involved. A second way of domesticating the destructive-ness impulse of an open crowd consists in its closure and on repetition of crowd rituals. Last but not least, a third way consists in turning the subjects into a (baiting or war) crowd, in order to divert the threat of death on others.

If we take these distinctions and Canetti's words into serious consideration, we can obtain from *Crowds and Power* a theoretical frame of the historical relations between crowds and power. If "the desire to turn men into animals was the principal motive for the development of slavery"⁸, "from the very beginning there must have been two distinct types of slave: the single slave, linked to his master as a dog is, and numbers of slaves together, like cattle in a field, who were, indeed, the earliest of man's slaves"⁹. This means that *Crowds and Power* provides a historical survey of different forms of power in human history by focusing on the different kinds of domesticated crowds of individuals, from the

5 *Ivi*, p. 328.

6 *Ivi*, p. 308.

7 *Ivi*, p. 310.

8 *Ivi*, p. 384.

9 *Ivi*, p. 385.

slow crowds of monotheistic religions and, above all, of the so-called religions of lament (Catholics and Shites) to today crowded individuals of the religion of increase. After the pastoral power of religions, at the beginning of the modern age disciplinary power could not restrict the crowds in closed spaces anymore: the population had increased so much, that power was constrained to favor and instrumentalize their explosions.

In this regard, *Crowds and Power* does not only contradict those critics who have reproached its author for not having taken historical data into account: the whole book fulfills the task of grabbing the 20th century "by the throat".

12. The relevance for the present time of an outdated book

If we limited ourselves to recognize to *Crowds and Power* its relevance only in relation with the past century, we would misapprehend another crucial aspect of the book: it gives us the instruments to understand current phenomena of crowds and power, besides providing the devices for criticizing their complexity.

We can find proofs of this in the everyday life of our societies: it's enough to take into account the actual externalization and professionalization of wars to appreciate the Canetti's definition of power as survival, provided we refer this notion to the population of the North of the world; the same can be said about the current versions of baiting crowds, which undermines the stability of democracies by tirelessly chasing imaginary preys (in Italy this role is assigned to rom population and to strangers without stay permit). Moreover, today we can observe a renewed version of flight crowds in those thousands of migrants who are trying to escape from the threat of death or to reach a better life.

Besides having provided analytical devices that are useful to understand these phenomena, *Crowds and Power* contains also some notions which can help us to recognize and give a name to today's attempts at resistance against the manifold experiences of survival. Another of the least deepened part of *Crowds and Power* is the so-called *prohibition crowd*, which can be opposed to prohibitions on transformation used by power formation in order to prevent reversal crowds. This particular crowd is created by a refusal from a large number of people to continue to do what, till then, they have done singly. Like commands, this prohibition is absolute; differently from commands, nevertheless, this prohibition is self-imposed.

I would suggest to rename these "negative" crowds as "critical" ones, because they directly face the hypocritical heart of power and its games of dissimulation and simulation. Unlike all the other kinds of crowd described by Canetti, the prohibition crowds embody a social transformation which can directly oppose to the hypocritical prohibitions on transformation which characterize current forms of power.

13. Besides desperation, before hope: the principle of possibility

Compared with the "Principle of Hope" advanced by Ernst Bloch and with the "Principle of desperation" contained in the two volumes of *The Obsolescence of Man* written by Günther Anders, in *Crowds and Power* Canetti seems to propose a third principle. As witnessed by these two principles, necessity has been the obsession of the philosophical thought along its history. Again, Canetti overturns this concern: all his works – first of all, *Crowds and Power* – deal with an unexplored issue. I would suggest to call it the "principle of possibility", which is directly opposed to any version – positive or negative – of historical necessity.

Unlike the principle of responsibility advanced by Hans Jonas, the possibility principle cannot be applied only to the present, starting from the possible effects of our actions in the future. It must be applied also to the past, as Walter Benjamin proposed. In this sense, the will of emancipation invokes a three-dimensional principle, which has to be applied to the unexplored possibilities either of the past and of the present. I think that this has been the core meaning of the mission that Canetti assigned himself as a writer.

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