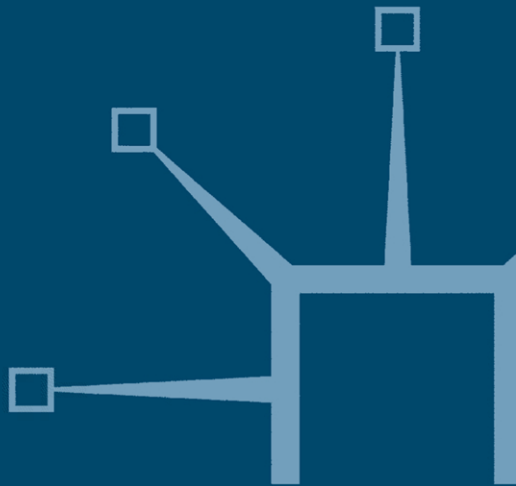


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# Modernism and Charisma

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Agnes Horvath



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# Modernism and Charisma

Agnes Horvath

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*To the youngest, Stefano*

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# Editorial Preface to Modernism and Charisma

As the title 'Modernism and ...' implies, this series has been conceived in an open-ended, closure-defying spirit, more akin to the soul of jazz than to the rigour of a classical score. Each volume provides an experimental space allowing both seasoned professionals and aspiring academics to investigate familiar areas of modern social, scientific or political history from the defamiliarising vantage point afforded by a term not routinely associated with it: 'modernism'. Yet this is no contrived makeover of a clichéd concept for the purposes of scholastic bravado. Nor is it a gratuitous theoretical exercise in expanding the remit of an 'ism' already notorious for its polyvalence – not to say its sheer nebulosity – in a transgressional fling of postmodern *jouissance*.

Instead this series is based on the *empirically* oriented hope that a deliberate enlargement of the semantic field of 'modernism' to embrace a whole range of phenomena apparently unrelated to the radical innovation in the arts it normally connotes will do more than contribute to scholarly understanding of those topics. Cumulatively the volumes that appear are meant to provide momentum to a perceptible paradigm shift slowly becoming evident in the way modern history is approached. It is one which, while indebted to 'the cultural turn', is if anything 'post-post-modern', for it attempts to use transdisciplinary perspectives and the conscious clustering of concepts often viewed as unconnected – or even antagonistic to each other – to consolidate and deepen the reality principle on which historiography is based, not flee it, to move closer to the experience of history of its actors, not away from it. Only those with a stunted, myopic (and actually *unhistorical*) view of what constitutes historical 'fact' and 'causation' will be predisposed to dismiss the 'Modernism and ...' project as mere 'culturalism', a term which due to unexamined prejudices and sometimes sheer ignorance has, particularly in the vocabulary of more than one eminent 'archival' historian, acquired a reductionist, pejorative meaning.

Yet even open-minded readers may find the title of this book disconcerting. Like all the volumes in the series, it may seem to conjoin



two phenomena that do not 'belong', in this case an aesthetic category with a political concept. However, any 'shock of the new' induced by the widened usage of modernism to embrace non-aesthetic phenomena that makes this juxtaposition possible should be mitigated by realising that, in fact, it is neither new nor shocking. The conceptual ground for a work such as *Modernism and Charisma* has been prepared for by such seminal texts as Marshall Berman's *All that is Solid Melts into Thin Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982), Modris Eksteins' *Rites of Spring* (1989), Peter Osborne's *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (1995), Emilio Gentile's *The Struggle for Modernity* (2003) and Mark Antliff's *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (2007). In each case modernism is revealed as the long-lost sibling (twin or maybe even father) of historical phenomena from the social and political sphere rarely mentioned in the same breath.

Yet the real pioneers of such a 'maximalist' interpretation of modernism were none other than some of the major aesthetic modernists themselves. For them the art and thought that subsequently earned them this title was a creative force – passion even – of revelatory power which, in a crisis-ridden West where *anomie* was reaching pandemic proportions, was capable of regenerating not just 'cultural production', but 'socio-political production', and for some even society *tout court*. Figures such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Richard Wagner, Wassily Kandinsky, Walter Gropius, Pablo Picasso and Virginia Woolf never accepted that the art and thought of 'high culture' were to be treated as self-contained spheres of activity peripheral to – and cut off from – the main streams of contemporary social and political events. Instead they assumed them to be laboratories of visionary thought vital to the spiritual salvation of a world being systematically drained of higher meaning and ultimate purpose by the dominant, 'nomocidal' forces of modernity. If we accept Max Weber's thesis of the gradual *Entzauberung*, or 'disenchantment' of the world through rationalism, such creative individuals can be seen as setting themselves the task – each in his or her own idiosyncratic way – of *re-enchanting* and re-sacralising the world. Such modernists consciously sought to restore a sense of higher purpose, transcendence and *Zauber* (magic) to a spiritually starved modern humanity condemned by 'progress' to live in a permanent state of existential exile, of *liminoid transition*, now that the

forces of the divine seemed to have withdrawn in what Martin Heidegger's muse, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin, called 'The Flight of the Gods'. If the hero of modern popular nationalism is the Unknown Warrior, perhaps the patron saint of modernism itself is *Deus Absconditus*.

Approached from this oblique angle modernism is thus a revolutionary force, but is so in a sense only distantly related to the one made familiar by standard accounts of the (political or social) revolutions on which modern historians cut their teeth. It is a 'hidden' revolution of the sort referred to by the 'arch-'aesthetic modernist Vincent van Gogh musing to his brother Theo in his letter of 24 September 1888 about the sorry plight of the world. In one passage he waxes ecstatic about the impression made on him by the work of another spiritual seeker disturbed by the impact of 'modern progress', Leo Tolstoy:

It seems that in the book, *My Religion*, Tolstoy implies that whatever happens in a violent revolution, there will also be an inner and hidden revolution in the people, out of which a new religion will be born, or rather, something completely new which will be nameless, but which will have the same effect of consoling, of making life possible, as the Christian religion used to.<sup>1</sup>

The book must be a very interesting one – it seems to me. In the end, we shall have had enough of cynicism, scepticism and humbug, and will want to live – more musically. How will this come about and what will we discover? It would be nice to be able to prophesy, but it is even better to be forewarned, instead of seeing absolutely nothing in the future other than the disasters that are bound to strike the modern world and civilisation like so many thunderbolts, through revolution, or war, or the bankruptcy of worm-eaten states.

In the series 'Modernism and ...' the key term has been experimentally expanded and 'heuristically modified' to embrace any movement for change which set out to give a name and a public identity to the 'nameless' and 'hidden' revolutionary principle that van Gogh saw as necessary to counteract the rise of nihilism. He was attracted to Tolstoy's vision because it seemed to offer a remedy to the impotence of Christianity and the insidious spread

of literally a soul-destroying cynicism, which if unchecked would ultimately lead to the collapse of civilisation. Modernism thus applies in this series to all concerted attempts in any sphere of activity to enable life to be lived more 'musically', to resurrect the sense of transcendent communal and individual purpose being palpably eroded by the chaotic unfolding of events in the modern world even if the end result would be 'just' to make society physically and mentally healthy.

What would have probably appalled van Gogh is that some visionaries no less concerned than him by the growing crisis of the West sought a manna of spiritual nourishment emanating not from heaven, nor even from an earthly beauty still retaining an aura of celestial otherworldliness, but from strictly secular visions of an alternative modernity so radical in its conception that attempts to enact them inevitably led to disasters of their own following the law of unintended consequences. Such solutions were to be realised not by a withdrawal from history into the realm of art (the sphere of 'epiphanic' modernism), but by applying a utopian artistic, mythopoeic, religious or technocratic consciousness to the task of harnessing the dynamic forces of modernity itself in such spheres as politics, nationalism, the natural sciences and social engineering in order to establish a new order and a 'new man'. It is initiatives conceived in this 'programmatic' mode of modernism that the series sets out to explore. Its results are intended to benefit not just a small coterie of like-minded academics, but mainstream teaching and research in modern history, thereby becoming part of the 'common sense' of the discipline even of self-proclaimed 'empiricists'.

Some of the deep-seated psychological, cultural and 'anthropological' mechanisms underlying the futural revolts against modernity here termed 'modernism' are explored at length in my *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (2007). The premise of this book could be taken to be Phillip Johnson's assertion that 'Modernism is typically defined as the condition that begins when people realize God is truly dead, and we are therefore on our own'. It presents the well-springs of modernism in the primordial human need for a new metaphysical centre in a radically decentred reality, for a new source of transcendental meaning in a godless universe, in the impulse to erect a 'sacred canopy' of culture which not only aesthetically

veils the infinity of time and space surrounding human existence to make existence feasible, but provides a totalising world view within which to locate individual life narratives, thus imparting it with the illusion of cosmic significance. By eroding or destroying that canopy, modernity creates a protracted spiritual crisis which provokes the proliferation of countervailing impulses to restore a 'higher meaning' to historical time that are collectively termed by the book (ideal-typically) as 'modernism'.

Johnson's statement seems to make a perceptive point by associating modernism not just with art, but with a general 'human condition' consequent on what Nietzsche, the first great modernist philosopher, called 'the Death of God'. Yet in the context of this series his statement requires significant qualification. Modernism is *not* a general historical condition (any more than 'postmodernism' is), but a generalised revolt against even the *intuition* made possible by a secularising modernisation that we are spiritual orphans in a godless and ultimately meaningless universe. Its hallmark is the bid to find a new home, a new community and a new source of transcendence.

Nor is modernism itself necessarily secular. On the contrary, both the wave of occultism, theosophy, and the Catholic revival of the 1890s, and the emergence of radicalised, Manichaean forms of Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and even Buddhism in the 1990s demonstrate that modernist impulses need not take the form of secular utopianism, but may readily assume religious (some would say 'post-secular') forms. In any case, within the cultural force field of modernism even the most secular entities are sacralised to acquire an aura of numinous significance. Ironically, Johnson himself offers a fascinating case study in this fundamental aspect: the modernist rebellion against the empty skies of a disenchanting, anomic world. A retired Berkeley law professor, some of the books he published such as *The Wedge of Truth* made him one of the major protagonists of 'Intelligent Design', a Christian(ised) version of creationism that offers a prophylactic against the allegedly nihilistic implications of Darwinist science.

Naturally, no attempt has been made to impose 'reflexive metanarrative' developed in *Modernism and Fascism* on the various authors of this series. Each has been encouraged to tailor the term 'modernism' to fit their own epistemological cloth, as long as they broadly agree in seeing it as the expression of a reaction

against modernity not restricted to art and aesthetics, and driven by the aspiration to create a spiritually or physically 'healthier' modernity through a new cultural, political and ultimately biological order. Needless to say, the blueprint for the ideal society varies significantly according to each diagnosis of what makes actually existing modernity untenable, 'decadent' or doomed to self-destruction.

The ultimate aim of the series is to help bring about a paradigm shift in the way 'modernism' is generally used, and hence stimulate fertile new areas of research and teaching with an approach which enables methodological empathy and causal analysis to be applied even to events and processes ignored by or resistant to the explanatory powers of conventional historiography. I am delighted that Agnes Horvath, a political anthropologist with a deep interest in social and ideological reactions to the liminality which lies at the experience of modernity, has contributed a volume to this series which presents charisma and totalitarian leadership in a startlingly unfamiliar context.

Roger Griffin  
Oxford  
August 2012

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# Introduction

A proper understanding of the dynamics of modernity, in particular the paradoxical links between modernism, fascism and communism, requires new concepts, not taken from the usual self-understanding of modernity. This book argues that this can be done through the notions developed in anthropology, based on a systematic and comparative analysis of the most varied cultures. Not every anthropological study, however, is equally useful for that purpose, as it is necessary to overcome those theoretical approaches that themselves were part of the very same self-understanding of modernity and its ideologies. The most important such ideas, developed by long-ignored figures, mostly at the margin of the discipline, owing to their dissent from the ideas of Durkheim, Boas, Marx or Freud, and their disciples, include liminality (Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner), schismogenesis (Gregory Bateson), the trickster (Paul Radin), imitation (Gabriel Tarde, René Girard) or sacrifice (Marcel Mauss).<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, these concepts can be paired with ideas from classical philosophical anthropology, especially those of Plato. Liminal is close to the *apeiron*, the famous 'first word' of Greek philosophy, introduced by Anaximander; the trickster to the sophist; Bateson's entire work had a Platonic inspiration; whereas the best proof for the tight connection is shown by the term 'imitation', central for the anthropology of René Girard, the anthropological sociology of Gabriel Tarde and for the entire philosophy of Plato. The aim of this book is to understand the masquerading capacity of the irrational in the totalitarian experience through the rise of the liminal authorities of modernity, focusing on the case of communism,<sup>2</sup> but with a crucial comparative eye

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on fascism as well,<sup>3</sup> using a combination of the clues about the irrational mentioned above.

However, to make proper use of these notions, it is necessary not only to combine them, but also to clarify their meaning, as developed by their inventors. This is most substantial in the single most important theoretical tool for this book, the term 'liminality'. The work of Victor Turner has vital significance in turning attention to this concept, introduced by Arnold van Gennep, a main intellectual opponent of Durkheim, who was subsequently diverted out of anthropological and sociological thinking. However, Turner's approach to liminality has two major shortcomings. First, partly because of criticism, Turner was keen to limit the meaning of the concept to the concrete settings of small-scale tribal societies, preferring his own neologism 'liminoid', to analyse certain features of the modern world, like theatre (Turner 1982). However, this book will argue that the term can be applied to concrete historical events, and *should* be applied, as offering a vital means for historical and sociological understanding.<sup>4</sup> Second, again staying too close to his own experiences, Turner attributed a rather univocally positive connotation to liminal situations, as ways of renewal. However, it will be argued that liminal situations can be, and in fact in the modern era are, rather quite different: periods of uncertainty, anguish, even existential fear; a facing of the abyss or the void.<sup>5</sup>

Being pushed to the limit, or on the threshold, is an extremely difficult moment in the life of individuals, or any community. If this happens, it is never certain that there is a way back to life as before; even to any kind of rational existence. A proper way out of such an irrational situation depends on many factors, and it can easily happen that a limited situation can be exploited by some: for example trickster-like figures, as pioneered by Radin, and used by several anthropologists, mythologists or literary scholars. Such figures, as ample anthropological and mythological evidence indicates, might emerge from temporary situations of distress, using and abusing the anxieties and uncertainties of people whose world has suddenly collapsed, capitalising on weakness. Radin's ideas about the trickster illuminate the Weberian perspective of charismatic leader from a new light.

This book is about how this weakness can be transfigured into political capital, owing to the dissolution of certainties that



transforms societies simply because the new situations are beyond the reach of cognitive power, and hence effectively fracture cognition. Modern politics, it is generally assumed, is concerned with strength, based on rationality and interests, or on the will of the people as expressed and codified by the law. This is also where the essence of democracy is usually situated, connected to power relations. Tocqueville<sup>6</sup> or Max Weber<sup>7</sup> were searching for emotions and sentiments that were mobilised to influence political systems powerfully. It was to capture this type of mobilisation that Weber developed the concept charisma,<sup>8</sup> taken over from theology, but also using material from anthropology, mythology and ancient history, defining it as a type of authority. The problem, however, is that the term attempts to incorporate emotions and other non-rational elements influencing and motivating political behaviour into an otherwise rationalistic classificatory scheme. How to construct types out of emotions, whose extraordinary moves and possibilities can never be exactly calculated, whose ability for fascination and capacity to mesmerise are never ending and whose strength is so separable from the reality created? Emotions, like so many devices of our mind, are beyond individual abilities and have nothing to do with powerful social possibilities; they belong to the liminal, which engineers their reproduction. This book suggests that the term 'charisma', just as other emotional mobilisations characteristic of modern politics, should be linked with liminal conditions: situations in which the previously taken-for-granted order of things is dissolved, everybody is paralysed with the opposite of power with weakness concerning what to do and is faced with anxiety about what is going to happen.

Liminality, where events happen that are never ending and actions take place that cannot be exactly calculated, is a forbidden territory of knowledge. Classical philosophy was built up on the opposite ethos: on the principle of concreteness; that objects and beings powerfully inhabit reality, whether animate or inanimate, and whatever fills the space between these entities is irrelevant, being empty. In the language of classical philosophy, it belongs to non-being, a forbidden territory of knowledge. Since the Presocratics – but it must have been formulated even before – beings have been considered as given in their unity, with each thing having a character that is always the same. This took no account of any breakage or fraction (Deleuze 2004a: 238):<sup>9</sup> staying

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close to the real world is primary evidence of every living being, refusing a radical difference between the appearance and the essence, even maintaining an unbroken continuity between the human and divine worlds. However, both these primary and primordial standards are questioned by liminality, where unity becomes weak, relations hazy, order suspended, thus finding themselves in a relative go-between, with the decomposed entities standing in incommensurable relations to each other. The true radicalism of incommensurability, pioneered by liminality, lies in the reversal of the self-evidence of reality. In Being, there is a balanced and harmonious relationship between every part. This is the meaning of rational, derived from Latin *ratio*, which does not mean reasoning, rather proportionality, still present in English with the same meaning; or present in the idea of 'rational' numbers, which means that a number can be written as a ratio of two natural numbers. In liminality, as in non-being, the self-evident reality becomes the void; objects only take up an uncertain position within this empty space, which dissolves meaning, but they are still experienced, however devoid of units. But why is this apprehensibility such a particularly suitable though forbidden vehicle for knowledge?

#### **The forbidden knowledge**

The Tocquevillean analysis of emotions and sentiments diverts the problem towards already known or accepted statements. This is quite understandable, as analysis is at a loss in coming to terms with counter-solutions, thinking rather in terms of causalities, like tracing the origins of the French Revolution to the rise of the absolutist state. In this perspective, emotions arise because there was a cause for them. However, this book argues that a genuine proliferation of the incommensurable liminal took place with the rise of modern politics, marked by its revolutions and wars, culminating in the World Wars and totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century that have no causal origins or realistic aims. What is more, exactly a detachment from reality, the liminal void nursed their appearance as alienation, penchant of a kind of resentment. This was first recognised towards the end of the nineteenth century by Friedrich Nietzsche and Gustave Le Bon, contemporaries who also shared the fate of not being taken seriously during their lifetime

but having an enormous following and effect soon after. Nietzsche had a great impact on Weber's analysis of charismatic leadership, whereas Le Bon pioneered the study of crowd psychology, influencing Tarde and Durkheim, similar to Simmel and Pareto. Le Bon was interested in the problem of how certain figures can rise to a leadership position under the type of unstable condition that is characteristic of crowds and masses. Le Bon reflected on the feeling of distress that he found around himself; but a series of interpreters and political leaders would soon emerge who explicitly made use of his ideas in unsettled times, not covered by the scientific view of contemporary political philosophy dominated by neo-Kantian categories, to gain power in liminal situations. They are the 'liminal authorities' of the twentieth century, whose appearance justifies and requires an analysis based on the broadest possible historical and anthropological material. This book attempts to draw the picture, and present the exploits, of liminal figures, a disturbance or an irritation in the order of things that use the forbidden knowledge of liminality, much ignored over the past centuries owing to the legacy of the Enlightenment.

Incommensurable liminality so far has hardly been perceived, let alone studied, by social and political scientists, even though it has played a fundamental, decisive role since pre-history, and some of its manifestations, under various labels, have gained a certain degree of notoriety in most cultures and civilisations. There are several reasons why liminality, in spite of the crucial importance I claim it has played in all times and places, have so far not been recognised. First, liminality is incommensurable with unity, order, causes and facts, and so is practically invisible.<sup>10</sup> Liminality hides and disguises itself, stalking either underground or outside the boundaries, at the margins or limits of society;<sup>11</sup> thus, it falls out of perception, and is even often confused with its opposite. This is not even a simple matter of choice, as every community tries to do its best to get rid of liminality, pushing perceptions of weakness to the margins and keeping it there, once its presence has been revealed. Thus, liminality repeatedly disappears, and – under the false assumption that this means the end – vigilance and knowledge about such conditions also vanish, so it can strike again, provoking decomposition.

Apart from its invisible, underground or outcast character, the full identification of liminality and the recognition of the

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unity underlying its various individual manifestations have also been hindered so far because of the profoundly contradictory and ambivalent nature of liminal persons themselves and their personification into leaders. Political leaders must manage a combination of opposites: an intellectual and a moral dualism. Intellectually they need a practical sense for success and an understanding about differences, where each social act is judged by its own terms, while morally they also must manifest idealism, having knowledge about ideas that make life a value in any community, thus being capable of living a life animated by decency and self-sufficiency. However, these two major character-signs of leadership are completely undermined by the liminal, which is further magnified if it begets a political figure who is ambitiously imitative, miming or hijacking and conceiving. By taking conscious use of such sensitive conditions, liminal leaders might destroy the very conditions of possibility of reality, inciting sensations, using them as vehicles for further liquidating normality. Liminal authorities make use of the classical topos of leadership, while marrying it to their own tenets of disturbance. An example of such figures includes on one side the communist nomenclature with their intellectual cheerleaders, the various avant-garde, covering their brooding mediocrity with super ideology, whereas on the other there is the fascist leaders' nightmarish suspense of order advocated by queer political craftsmanship. Although politics in the classical and even early modern sense can only be carried by figures who exist in the meaningful sense of the word, demanding worthy thoughts and defending postulates that guarantee the existence of a unique normality, in the topsy-turvy world of liminality the distinguishing principles, where counterparts meet in harmony, disappear into the incommensurable.

Liminal figures are those who – owing to their exterior position to normal social conditions – gain an in-depth understanding of the out-of-ordinary, liminal stages of reality. They therefore manage to come up with unusual and seemingly congenial solutions when liminal conditions occur within society, while the central issue in charisma is not the reception of a gift, but rather being a gifted, intact personality. Those figures of the liminal who are themselves divided could easily become omnipresent and indestructible, their dual nature accommodating well to the contradictory space of the incommensurable, while the charismatic

is not a crisis person, their appearance being restricted to certain positions and spaces in history. Liminal figures, however, appear at every possible location in space and time, known not only in anthropology and in mythology, but also in literature, in philosophy, in religion, in theatre, in every borderline situation, whether called in-between, go-between, transitoriness, haziness, emptiness, or the void, while they are the trickster or the stalker, the smith of fairy tales or the leprechaun, the dwarf or the spider-god (Horvath 2008). The ancients were familiar with this figure just as the moderns. Plato famously described them in the form of the wandering philosophers, the *Sophists*, under *poiesis* or – as Heidegger expressed it – the *bringing-forth*. The chief traits are the appearance of a break, an ability to launch emptiness in the likeness of the real, just as in an alchemical opus the unit is broken into parts and is reunited again into a new existence. The book will present the exploits of this peculiar disturbance or irritation in the order of things, when it grows into a leading position, for which the name liminal authority is suggested; figures who are particularly able to mimic normal forms and rules of behaviour, even though – or rather exactly because – they themselves lost their integrity. In contrast, a charismatic person is at one with themselves, having coherence and a never-changing attitude towards things in harmonious co-existence.

The idea of catching the dynamism of liminal authorities is derived from the perception that politics in the modern world is not simply based on the rational pursuit of objective interests. Rather – just as in any other human societies – it is deeply penetrated by emotional and sensational concerns, in particular force derived from weakness, visible in the growth of political revolutions, totalitarian systems and media power (the role of political marketing and propaganda), phenomena that are themselves much connected with each other and much improvised with increasingly newer patterns of emotional domination. The study of these incommensurable aspects of modern democratic politics requires the incorporation of broader, anthropologically based terms and perspectives, moving beyond the narrow foundations of modern politics, which can be traced back to Hobbes and Kant (Lefort 2007; Wydra 2007: 16–17).

An excessive focus on causal mechanism led to the systematic ignoring of the detaching aspects of incommensurable moments,