

Surprise, chance, contingency

On the indeterminate in society and science

45th Congress of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Empirische Kulturwissenschaft (DGEKW) |
German Society for Cultural Analysis / European Ethnology

Kiel | October 1–4, 2025

Call for Papers

Cultural phenomena and social events cannot be perceived down to the last details. They are always characterized by a certain vagueness and feature open moments (Roedig/Zederbauer 2022). Factors that determine our thoughts and actions are often not predictable, intended or explainable. The resulting lack of recognizability of patterns of action can cause uncertainty and undermine planning and expectations. At the same time, however, it opens up performative leeway that allows for random variations and possibilities of alternative realization. Finally, situations and processes of the indeterminate and indeterminable can also be consciously sought out, for example to provoke creativity, adventure or a fascination with the new. By making surprise, chance and contingency visible, their effectiveness is emphasized and the potential for subversive use can be unleashed (cf. Butler 2002).

In everyday culture as well as in science, individual and collective and even institutional efforts are made to control (and thus tend to negate [Zollinger 1997: 43]) the element of chance, to cope with it or to counter it (rituals, religion and faith, myth, therapy, promises) or to make it predictable (calculation methods in forecasting, e.g. economic research, insurance). Those who grab it by the neck (*kairos*), who have momentum on their side, are admired. However, there is also a deliberate focus on chance. Practices with an affinity for chance can be discerned, among them play, speculation, strolling/letting yourself drift, stumbling and laughing, traveling, but also the search for “time-outs” (sabbatical, adventure, departure, risk). Chance can be valorized and certified as ‘randomness’ (encryption software/password generation, controlled randomness), it can be plausibilized retrospectively (Fleck 1980) and theoretically substantiated (chaos theory).

Possibilities for connection can be made to various subject areas and research directions in empirical cultural studies, such as narrative and biographical research which investigates surprise as a narrative element, and its attributions of meaning. Chance appears as a transmitter for something completely new, as a carrier for what can almost not be told (Kasabova/Langreiter 2007: 198), as a stylistic device that can drive narratives forward and as a pattern of explanation and justification. Since the unanticipated and unmediated can only ever be recognized and grasped *ex post*, its (material) traces and effects – and thus material cultural research – play a central role in the examination of chance. With concepts such as the treachery of the object (among others, Ferus/Rübel 2009) and the obstinacy of things (Hahn 2015), it contributes to the range of theories in this field and also features expertise that is relevant to practice in its reflections on the creation of museum collections (Weschenfelder 1992). In media and popular culture research, representations of the possible are examined and consulted for their potential for plausibility. Research on technology in everyday life recognizes it as a tool for processing contingencies (Beck 1997), research on digital cultures focuses on the productivity of chance, e.g. in working with AI (Veprék 2024), and science and technology studies emphasize the playful moments in scientific action, for instance in dealing with big data (Dippel 2017). Last but not least, empirical cultural studies contributes its expertise in the study of science and especially in the methodological reflection to the interdisciplinary study of chance. Ethnography ultimately – and perhaps first and foremost – presents itself as a way of stumbling into situations and constellations which is about systematically heightening the possibility of chance findings (Lindner 2012: 8), of creating opportunities for unexpected findings at the entry point of research (Künzler 2017) and to organize sur-

prises (Breidenstein et al. 2013: 121). The anthropology of futures emphasizes the creative aspect here, the design moment in dealing with chance in ethnography (Pink et al. 2023). Historical research, on the other hand, is based on transmitted materials, the continuity of which is part of a process of tracing that is also based on coincidences (Krämer 2007). The historical approach, like contemporary ethnography, often has to rely on lucky chances. The principle of serendipity and its epistemic potential has also been conceptualized in empirical cultural studies (cf. Greverus 2002, Lindner 2012).

In the history of ideas, a multitude of attempts has been made to grasp chance, the contingent, the indeterminate and, in doing so, to integrate similar terms and concepts but also to differentiate them from one another (e.g. Vogt 2011). Chance thus appears as fortuna (luck, fortune), as arbitrariness, nemesis (doom), as risk that is linked to failure, and danger, as accident, as aleatory and contingency as well as speculation. It touches on essential questions - not least in its constitutive suddenness (Bickenbach/Stolzke 2014: 48) - but can also occur as something arbitrary in everyday situations (Marquard 1986; cf. Goffman 1977). In systems theory, chance facilitates the autopoiesis of social systems (Luhmann 1997), and in game theory, it also plays a key role in the description of social processes (Caillois 2017). Chance, as Wolfmayr and Frischling put it (2013: 3) leaves possibilities for interpretation where causal explanations no longer apply, it has the flavor of the experiential, is considered by many to be a place of longing for spontaneity and a liberation from a calculating and controlling corset.

Even if thinking about chance significantly predates modernity, this epoch is still centrally linked to the contingent (Bauman 1991), the question of security and risk is declared a structural feature (Beck 1986) and the accident is declared an integral part of (technical-industrial) progress (Scharfe 1996, Virilio 2009). The postmodern theoretical discussion of chance (among others, Derrida 2001) is no less intense, albeit with a different focus: an accent on the playful. In existing research, for instance in the historical sciences (Böhme 2018), chance is presented as a complement to rules, in a similar way as risk is to certainty, failure to success. Alternatively, attempts are made to locate it as an unhistorical category (Koselleck 1979) entirely in the contemporary, the present tense.

Chance has developed its own characters, such as the *Deus ex machina* in literature and theatre or the 'black swan' in economics. In criminology, chance becomes the accomplice of the investigators (Holzhauer 2016) and it has also long been ennobled as indispensable in art and literature. Here, it proves to be a creative, innovative impulse that is sought out, shaped and elevated to a principle (improvisation) and is capable of producing new orders of the unpredictable (Pflaumbaum et al. 2015: 8). In doing so, an examination of the aesthetics of chance can be directed towards chance as something represented as well as towards the level of the logic of action or the artistic process of production (ibid., Boden 2014). The accentuation of the accidental - linked to the aleatory - is once again driven forward in the digital field: Relationships between program, code, interfaces, users and human-data as well as human-machine relations, understood as social-material structures, prove to be contingent (Chun 2008, Suchman 2007).

The congress organizers welcome proposals for contributions that deal with the following and similar questions in the fields outlined above, as well as in others:

- Which practices and ideas of the accidental can be found in everyday culture and in science? How is chance dealt with and what do transformations into routines and rituals look like?
- What can cultural studies approaches to phenomena such as surprise, chance and contingency look like? Which approaches can be used to capture indeterminacies, and how do these in turn affect methods and theories?
- Which questions of power and social (in)equality are linked to chance (politics of chance), which expectations (opportunities and crises) are directed at chance?
- Which effects (also: humor and irony) does the unexpected produce?
- What do operationalizations look like, and which interests are associated with them (chance economies)?
- Which emotions (hopes, fears, indifference) are attached to images and narratives of chance, and which aesthetics does it produce?
- How is the accidental linked to fragility, disturbance, upheaval and (dis)rupture, but also to stability or stabilization, control and transformation? Are there moments of transition (Pflaumbaum et al. 2015: 12) and how are these perceived, shaped and discursivized?
- In which semantic constellations do surprise, chance and continuity operate; how do they

relate to other principles such as (ir)rationality, (un)certainty, (in)determinism; how and by whom are they negotiated, and are there shifts that can be observed (here also: scaling and reach)?

- What are the challenges and potentials of surprise, chance and contingency in scientific practice – especially in empirical cultural studies? How do methods and methodologies relate to chance; how is it identified and reflected in research designs, how is it (rendered) epistemically effective?

Contributions can address these fields both theoretically as well as empirically. The can, for instance, focus on spaces of the indeterminate (e.g. transitory spaces, creative spaces), question contingencies that relate to a specific period (historical events, opportunities, triggers) or examine chance-related practices (moderating, popularizing, intensifying, tabooing, ignoring) as well as cultural techniques of chance (probabilistics, the aleatory, experiments).

The organizing team has compiled a [selected bibliography on the congress theme](#).

Organizational information

The 2025 DGEKW congress offers interested parties various formats for participation:

Plenary contributions: Individual contributions lasting approximately 30 minutes in plenary sessions, followed by a discussion. The selection is made by the congress organization from the submissions. In addition, individual experts will be directly approached.

Sections: Parallel two-hour sessions usually consisting of three thematically related individual presentations (each lasting approximately 20 minutes and followed by a discussion). The presentations are grouped by the congress organizers.

Panels: Parallel two-hour sessions with an overarching theme. The panels with a maximum of five (!) thematically related individual presentations (including introduction, comments, etc.) are proposed by a panel leader. The joint abstract includes the titles and short abstracts of all individual panel contributions as well as the names and short CVs of the panel participants.

Innovative and experimental formats: In addition to these classic presentation formats, we also allow spaces for individual formats that enable new or unusual didactic methods or interactive work.

The Kiel Congress also aims to continue the tradition of practical research and subject policy **workshops** established at previous congresses. Topics may include questions of research ethics, methodology, digitization practice, etc.

The student panel will also play an important role, offering various opportunities to discuss current student research and projects. A separate call for papers will be issued by the student representatives on the main committee of the DGEKW.

Guidelines for submissions

Please note the following guidelines when submitting your abstracts:

- In addition to a brief summary of the content, the abstracts must contain information on the research question and the empirical basis resp. provide information about the context from which the contribution originates and, if applicable, include details on existing publications, the status of the applicant's own research resp. initial results.
- Entries must, of course, be new and previously unpublished research presentations. The willingness to publish the contribution for the first time in the congress proceedings following the event is an absolute prerequisite (deadline for submissions in spring 2026)!
- Contributions can be presented and published in German or English.
- Please provide up-to-date contact details; in the case of panel proposals, include details for both the responsible organizers and all participants! Please inform us of any subsequent changes.

- Abstracts for individual presentations must not exceed 2,500 characters, those for panels 5,000 characters (including spaces). Submissions that exceed these limits cannot be considered for selection!
- Abstracts and personal details can only be submitted using the [online form](#) provided. Only fully completed forms can be accepted.
- The deadline for entries is **January 15, 2025, 0:00 am GMT+1**.

In order to facilitate the selection process and make it transparent, all submitters are urged to follow these guidelines. The board and main committee will select the entries and determine the program at their joint meeting with representatives of the local organizer in February 2025. Notifications of acceptance or rejection will be sent out in March 2025.