

Das interpretative Universum

Dimitri Ginev zum 60. Geburtstag gewidmet

Herausgegeben von

Paula Angelova

Jassen Andreev

Emil Lensky

Die Herausgeber:

Paula Angelova ist wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin an der Universität Sofia. Sie hat Texte in *Divinatio*, *Problems of Sociology*, *Philosophical Alternatives* veröffentlicht. Mitgliedern in „Association pour la promotion de la phénoménologie“.

Dr. Jassen Andreev ist unabhängiger Gelehrter. Er war Assistent-Professor für Phänomenologie, Hermeneutik und Geschichte der Kultur- und Geisteswissenschaften an der Universität zu Sofia, wo er von 2003 bis 2011 lehrte. Er ist Verfasser von zahlreichen Aufsätzen in *Studia Culturologica*, *Studia Phaenomenologica*, *Phänomenologie*, *Divinatio* und *Problems of Sociology*, sowie Kapitel von Sammelbänden. Er war Mitbegründer der internationalen Zeitschrift „*Studia Culturologica*“. Zusammen mit Professor Ginev hat er zwei internationale Forschungsprojekte zur Identitätskrise der Kulturwissenschaften organisiert.

Dr. Emil Lensky ist freier Autor und Publizist, der sich seit mehr als 10 Jahren mit der Entwicklung der Doktrin vom kognitiven Existenzialismus engagiert. Veröffentlichungen in *Philosophische Rundschau*, *Estudio Filosóficos* und Sammelbänden.

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The Garden of Thought.

The political and anthropological role of the Humanities

§ 1. Locating the Humanities

Transcendental philosophy does not seem to be in good health nowadays. The question of realism purports to be the only issue worth being discussed. Indeed, so many scholars have been supporting this trendy vague during the last decade that the classical question of the meaning of subjectivity for the philosophical argumentation has become rather out of place. Allegedly – and, I would add, wrongly – the transcendental stance is reproached to be anti-realist, as if the simple articulation of the relation between the givenness of the world and the structure of the subject that is supposed to encounter this givenness would imply a sort of negation of the external world. It can be shown that anti-realism – however one may understand it – does in no way affect the transcendental stance. My present purpose is not, however, to show in details why and in which sense transcendently oriented philosophies can help better place the question of realism within a broader metaphysical frame. I just want to evoke the fact that one of the most useful contributions the transcendental stance makes consists in posing the relation between ontology and epistemology in a rather balanced way. This is important especially if one intends to argue that the first step – or one of the first ones at least – one has to take if aiming to articulate a critical discourse upon a discipline, or a set of disciplines, consists in questioning the place that the subject of the discourse occupies. Each disciplinary approach to the world is not, in fact, simply an inventory of what exists within a given domain of reality – in other words, it is not a discourse that pertains only the ontological level. Each discipline *is* a rhetoric apparatus that frames, according to specific rules and codes, the domain that it is supposed to describe and within which its explicative value is supposed to be effective.¹ The work of framing unfolds domain specific operative concepts as well as metaphors, which both connote not only how a given discipline constructs its own object, but also how the subject of science conceives of its own role as the rhetoric opera-

¹ On this, see Nelson, Megill and McCloskey (1987); Boutier, Passeron and Revel (2006).

tor that has to warrant for the consistency of the disciplinary discourse. Thus, the transcendental foundation of the encyclopaedia is called to investigate how the construction of a disciplinary domain is, at the same time, a way to establish, or, better, to locate the subject's position within the disciplinary discourse itself.

Husserl's phenomenology shows accurately to what extent this issue must be considered as inescapable if one moves from a transcendental perspective. In particular, Husserl's way of considering the constitutive subject and the constituted object as a unit provides the fundament for the necessity to investigate how, at each moment of the process of constitution, the epistemic and the ontological moment are intertwined with each other.²

If, however, one is dismayed – no matter for which reason – by philosophical arguments that rely on the transcendental stance, it is worth remembering that also other philosophical strains within contemporary philosophy have envisaged the necessity of taking into consideration how the construction of a disciplinary domain and the self-positioning of a specific form of subjectivity are two faces of the same coin. Nietzsche's perspectivism, for example, hinted at the same set of problems, even if in a way that might seem to lack the rigour that we are used to ascribe to philosophical arguments.³ More recently, Deleuze, by using a couple of metaphors that evokes the oscillation between rootedness and nomadism, made a vivid description of how the subject of science is entrenched in the discursive domain the consistency of which it is called to sustain.⁴

Even if Deleuze's philosophy is not committed to the transcendental tradition at all, it contributes to understanding in which sense the account of how we construct a shared and, thus, objective reality requires an account of how the subjective stance finds its own expression within the texture of the representational dimension. The latter involves not only philosophy, but also visual arts, literature and, of course, science. Even if they do it in rather different manners, philosophy, the diverse kinds of art and science cut into the chaotic flow of experience and allow for the emergence of concepts, functions, figures and affects. Philosophy, art and science are all forms of thought, each one differently involved in the immanence of experience, and each one aimed, at the same time, at recasting the way subjectivity stands out from the immanence of experience. Deleuze and Guattari avoid carefully, however, to bring forth a form, although renewed, of representationalism. While the discourse of science has to entail a methodological moment that allows to address the question of reference, that is the question of the relation between mathematical func-

² On this subject, see Mensch (2001); Dodd (2004); Leghissa (2014).

³ Babich (1994) has shown, however, to what extent this impression is misleading.

⁴ In what follows I will refer in particular to Deleuze and Guattari (1994).

tions and reality, both philosophy and art are not forms of thought that have the scope to 'reflect' – in the sense of 'mirror' – the level of experience. The multi-layered and mediated structure of the latter can be better addressed by using the notion of 'plane of immanence', which can be seen as one of the most peculiar marks of Deleuze's and Guattari's late philosophy. This notion should provide the proper conceptual tool that is requested to reflect on how reality (in the ontological sense of the term) is both what restrains itself from any possible conceptual grip and what enables the emergence of any possible self-articulation of experience in a discursive form. In other words, Deleuze and Guattari neither put experience as a synonym for an immediate immersion into reality, nor conceive of a notion of subjectivity that coincides with the empirical subject that psychology or the tradition of historicism have made us acquainted with. Within this context, they make an important point by showing how the conceptual personae and the *Boden* (in the Husserlian sense of the term) in which each act of thought is rooted are related to each other. The conceptual persona "is not the the philosopher's representative but, rather: the philosopher is only the envelope of his principal conceptual persona" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 64), which means that what sustains the rhetorical construction of the philosophical discourse cannot be confused – as already said above – neither with the idiosyncratic psychology of a single author nor with the given historical context within which the production of philosophical texts arises. Now, precisely the notion of conceptual persona helps us understand how the philosophical practice is related to the earth: each act of thought is the expression of an ongoing movement from a given territory to the virtual dimension of thought, where the plane of immanence articulates itself as the realm of pure virtuality. This movement – or, better, this oscillation – is the movement of thinking. The latter, thus, coincide with an act of detaching oneself not only from uninvestigated presuppositions and doxastic assumptions, but also from the empirical, historical and psychological sphere within which any process of subjectivation takes place.

If, since Plato, we are used to ascribe an atopic character to those who practice philosophy (*Symp.* 219e-222b; *Thaet.* 149a), this occurs because the conceptual persona that inhabits the realm of thought is permanently involved in a dehumanizing activity. It is true that *homo sapiens* can live everywhere and, thus, turn the whole earth into its own ecological niche, but it is also true that it always seeks a territory and is always ready to exchange its liberty for a secure shelter. Hominids are surely able to deterritorialize themselves, but each deterritorialization generates a subsequent reterritorialization. The earth, in this sense, is that which encompasses the movement both of territorialization and deterritorialization. The philosopher, on the contrary, lives on his permanent extraneousness

– even with regard to humanity. The realm where the conceptual personae spend their life is the plane of immanence, where the earth is absorbed, that is annihilated as a set of territories and re-created as “a future new earth” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 88). The ‘new earth’ at which philosophy hints is a place where it is possible to experience unprecedented forms of sociability. The community of friends that characterized the philosophical praxis in ancient Greece has pre-empted, in a certain way, the utopic feature that philosophy possesses – and has to possess – according to Deleuze and Guattari.⁵ But their idea of philosophy does not exhibit the traits of a mere revivification of the classical *philia*. At stake here is rather a strong utopic quest for a political and social upheaval.

For our purpose, it is worth noticing that this upheaval is not unrelated with philosophy meant as a de-territorializing praxis. For Deleuze and Guattari thinking means to interact with those conceptual personae that inhabit the plane of immanence, whereas this interaction is not to be seen as a form of pathological identification, but rather as the possibility to be affected by their transforming force (Nietzsche’s Zarathustra is a good example of this). In other words, if one is willing to assume the risk involved by this way of practicing philosophy, then one must be ready to expose oneself to a sort of self dispossession. Only the latter, in fact, generates that attitude that is necessary in order both to create new concepts and to figure out new forms of associated life.

In sum, only by submitting itself to a continuous deterritorialization philosophy becomes a practice of invention: creating concepts, which is philosophy’s main – and only – scope, is the result of an exercise that transforms the subject of science. Of course, this transformation affects primarily the discursive sphere within which philosophy is enacted, but it does not leave untouched the institutional apparatuses and networks that support – in different ways and often according to goals whose nature is far from being related to theory – the production of theory itself. For this reason, philosophy is able to qualify itself as a critical praxis, namely as a practice of transformation: as far as the encounter with the plane of immanence and the conceptual personae that inhabit it suspends the normal course of experience, philosophical thinking opens the way toward the creation of narratives that allow the not-yet-existing community of those who crave to live in a ‘new earth’ to capture the promise of a different future.

⁵ In Derrida (1997) one can find a similar reference to the ancient Greek community of friends not as the historic cradle of philosophy, but rather as a transcendental figure that enables us to imagine the anthropological template of those attitudes that are required to produce a critical discourse. It would be interesting to compare Derrida’s position with the one expressed in Deleuze and Guattari (1994), but here nothing more is possible than the suggestion just made.

I suggest that Deleuze's and Guattari's emphasis on the creative role played by philosophy in the realm of thought should extend so far as to include the whole of the Humanities. Philosophy and the Humanities, to many respects, border one another; if their methodological vicinity is taken seriously, then it seems to be reasonable to consider both philosophy and the Humanities as forms of a theoretical praxis that arise only as a consequence of a critical attitude. The latter consists in being able to afford the experience of deterritorialization – in other words, in the capability to take distance from the immediateness of experience, while knowing, at the same time, that the subject that is responsible for this theoretical operation cannot be completely detached from the flow of experience itself. This double movement is the condition of possibility for the emergence of intellectual responsibility, which is to be meant as responsibility toward both the disciplinary field within which one operates, and the broader institutional context that enables the existence of the various disciplinary fields that, taken as a whole, assemble the encyclopaedia.

So, in order to answer the question where philosophy and the Humanities are located, it is necessary not only to query their methodological asset, or the extent to which they contribute to increase knowledge, but also the feature of the subject that sustains their epistemic consistency. This means, concretely, to investigate the conditions of possibility for the emergence of what Blumenberg (1983) defined as 'theoretical curiosity'. As Deleuze's and Guattari's account of the unplaceable character of philosophy has shown, the theoretical curiosity is not related to some idiosyncratic elements that may be ascribed to individuals who are able to turn their maladjustment into an intellectual resource, but is rather related to specific institutional architectures that may – or may not – allow for the production and diffusion of a critical discourse.

§ 2. *The enhancement of democracy and the Humanities*

Foucault, Deleuze's close friend, pushed even further the idea that there is – and must be – a necessary relation between the work carried out within a critical theory whose function is to furnish a critique of the present social, cultural and political asset of our society and a specific form of detachment from the latter. In his last series of lectures held at the Collège de France (Foucault 2011) the Cynic philosopher stands out as the supreme embodiment of the intellectual, whose function is to say the truth in front of those who exert whatsoever power function within society. The force of *parrhesia* (the ancient Greek name for this cheeky attitude) is, according to Foucault, surely not enough to produce a revolutionary

upheaval, but it is enough, at least, to induce a change of the mindset among those well-informed citizens that constitute the core of democracy.

It is not per chance that Foucault seeks in ancient Greece the model of what represents ideal typically the opposite of the highbrow intellectual, scion of a well-off bourgeois family (Foucault himself belonged to that kind of intellectual). His own model is supposed to offer, instead, the image of a thinker whose main concern is the political health of the *polis* even at the cost of his own physical integrity. It is since Humboldt's articulation of the notion of *Bildung* at the beginning of the Nineteenth century that an idealised image of the Greek citizen – meant as a free individual whose main trait is the capability to take a critical distance from the state of affairs of the *polis* in order to improve the public debate on it – has been underpinning the Western discourse on that which lays the foundation for a well-working modern society in which free men and women share a common space where it is possible to decide together about the common future.⁶ Since the inception of modernity becoming a free individual – able, furthermore, to act with their own peers – means to emerge from a self incurred minority, as Kant posits it in his writing on the meaning of the Enlightenment. This process of self emancipation has never been considered to be an unreflected repetition of an ideal of liberty that found on the Greek soil its first instantiation. Nevertheless, by mirroring itself in the construction of the ancient world offered by classical philology the modern discourse on liberty could develop toward a direction that remained unchanged until the present day.

Here we have a peculiar and, I would add, paradigmatic example of how a discipline that belong to the Humanities played an important role as to the establishment of a critical attitude. Classical philology has been always committed to account not only for the cultural development – in the broadest sense of the term – of ancient civilizations, but also for the significance that those civilizations – especially the Greek one – could still have for the education (*Bildung*) of contemporary men (and, eventually, women). It is true that sometimes the image of the ancient world produced by the philologist met the conservative interests of a bourgeoisie that were no more willing to fight in the name of progress and emancipation.⁷ But, in general, classical philology contributed to convey the idea that plunging in the Greek world could be a necessary, even if not sufficient, precondition for the emergence of the form of subjectivity that is to

⁶ On the relationship between the ideal of *Bildung* that W. von Humboldt put at the core of its political and educational project and the reference to a specific image of ancient Greece, see Leghissa (2007).

⁷ Nietzsche, an 'heretic' among the philologists, expressed a sharply critical point of view on this issue in his unfinished *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtung* titled *Wir Philologen* (see Nietzsche 1967).

characterize modernity. Since the age of the Enlightenment the work of the philosopher, subsequently, has consisted in enlarging and refining this idea.

Above I mentioned Foucault's late work as a good example of this interaction between philosophy and the results of the mediation between our present and the ancient past operated by philology. Martha Nussbaum's philosophy of emotions provides another example (Nussbaum 2001). Herself a scholar devoted to the study of the history of ancient philosophy, Nussbaum developed a political theory that has at its core the idea that emotions design the landscape of our social life, in the sense that they constitute motivated reactions to our perception of values. Far from being something that needs controlling and dominating, as a tradition mainly rooted in Plato's philosophy stated, emotions help us shape and improve those kinds of feelings that are required in order to conduct a good life in concert with our peers. It is thanks to the mediating role played by emotion that human beings are able both to recognise what counts from a moral point of view and to become acquainted with what produces pain and joy, loss and gain, not only within their own life but also within others' life.

The point that is worth highlighting here is Nussbaum's insistence on the fact that emotions and feelings can – and must – be educated. Our emotional life does not grow in a social and cultural vacuum, but it is exposed to the influence exerted by norms and shared models of conduct. Sometimes this exposure does not elicit a morally satisfying response. Hence arises the importance of improving those educational devices that connect individuals with narratives that depict situations and forms of interaction among living beings in which individuals can mirror their own ways of conduct and learn, from this, that an ethically grounded way of conduct can exist even within situations characterized by suffering and pain, or by the impossibility to acquire a clear intellectual perception of the values that sustain our behaviour. It is in this context that Nussbaum places the educational prominence of the classics: within the narratives they display one can find portrayed situations that possess both a universal value and a range that encompasses most of what human being usually make experience of when confronted with ethical dilemmas or moral mazes. Furthermore, according to her sense for the intercultural dimension of the philosophical discourse Nussbaum, when referring to the classics, does not take into consideration only the works that count as 'classic' within the Western tradition: each cultural tradition (and, it must be added, even those where the practice of cultural transmission takes place without the support of writing) has its own set of references and exam-

ples that embody values and tenets that are deeply rooted in the symbolic apparatus of the community in a paradigmatic way.⁸

Nussbaum is not inviting her audience, however, to confer to the Humanities a performativity that would lead to a revolutionary upheaval. In her philosophical work one cannot find that sort of enthusiasm⁹ that one may attribute to the deterritorializing movement described by Deleuze and Guattari, or to Foucault's attempt to let the Cynic philosopher come back from the Hellenistic period in order to adumbrate an image of the radical intellectual that can result viable at least on the terrain of utopia. Her work is deeply and consciously rooted in the Liberal tradition; therefore, from the role that the Humanities can play in our contemporary world she expects above all an improvement of the public debate on those values that a democracy has to articulate and negotiate uninterruptedly in order to frame the unavoidable conflict among different interests. Since decades both the discourse on government and the practice of government itself have been underpinned by a model of rationality that has its main source in the economic discourse of neoliberalism.¹⁰ In this sense, Nussbaum's defence of the political and educational role of the Humanities can be seen as an effort to counter the neoliberal discourse, which impedes any form of distinction between the economic and the political rationality, with a narrative that is supposed to allow for the emergence of values whose source is not the economic model of rationality (Nussbaum 2010). These values have been always conveyed – and still are – by the Humanities, whose main function is to create a peculiar and unique 'emotional landscape'. The latter is supposed to allow individual to develop their critical attitude toward the social context within which they are embedded.

The reference to the affective part of the critical attitude I am evoking here is due to the peculiar epistemic status of the Humanities. Contrary to the explanatory power of natural sciences like physics, the Humanities cannot provide causal explanations; they can, however, put forth grounded descriptions of chains of events occurred within the historical and cultural realm. Contingency is the main distinctive mark of the events investigated by the Humanities (Hacking 1999). In fact, if it makes sense

⁸ This point has been developed also in Said (2004).

⁹ I use of the term 'enthusiasm' on purpose in the present context: 'enthusiasm' is, in fact, the translation of the German '*Schwärmerei*', a Romantic attitude sharply criticized by Kant.

¹⁰ In his Lectures held at the Collège de France in 1978 Foucault (2008) captured very vividly the transformation in the art of government that the neoliberal way of conceiving the relation between the economic and the political realm has introduced all-over the Western world since the aftermath of WWII. For further literature on this, see Becchio and Leghissa (2017).

to say that the chain of events X has taken the course Y, then it is plausible to imagine that they could have taken also the course Z, which is different from Y – and this by referring to real possibilities, that is by taking into consideration the whole of the circumstances that characterize the investigated chain of events and not just by appealing to the observer's wishful thinking. Now, precisely the perception of this contingency allows for the emergence of the desire to imagine a different world – the 'new earth' mentioned above by referring to Deleuze and Guattari (1994). As Nussbaum's philosophical attempt to reframe Rawlsian liberalism has abundantly shown, it is not really possible to give a thorough foundation to those rational arguments that are called to underpin a theory of justice. Thus, it becomes important to point at those affective and emotional aspects of those arguments that we use to express the human need of living in a world where the amount of inequality and injustice is at least bearable.

This need is embedded in the concrete research work carried out within the Humanities. As far as philosophy and the Humanities do not restrain themselves to deal with metaphysical issues, or to provide sound descriptions of past courses of events, as it happens in the case of history, their discourse can be seen as the attempt to render in rational terms the desire to articulate the human quest for justice. Precisely in this sense the Humanities make themselves an instrument for the enhancement and spread of a democratic mindset. Those who partake in the scientific undertaking of the Humanities partake at the same time in the political community as citizens that are willing to contribute to the betterment of the latter.

In a nutshell, it seems impossible to detach the scientific project that sustains the Humanities as a part of the encyclopaedia from the tradition of the Enlightenment, within which the enterprise of knowledge goes hand in hand with the desire to free one's peers from the self incurred minority they are supposed to suffer from.

§ 3. *Reasons for doom mongering – and still keeping on doing the best*

Nevertheless, there are several reasons for questioning the optimism that pervades the tradition of the Enlightenment that, to some extent, is embedded in the scientific project of the Humanities. This is not due principally to the general failure that seems to affect the Enlightenment meant as the paradigm of a global effort to establish universally values like democracy, tolerance, open-mindedness, mutual understanding among human beings, struggle to compose conflicts without recurring to war and so on. This is rather due to how knowledge is both produced and made

available within those social formations that are peculiar to the cultural landscape issued from the Enlightenment.

If one pays attention to how sociology of knowledge has analysed the development of scientific production, one can well perceive how difficult it is to allege that the pure desire to give room for the 'new earth' Deleuze and Guattari and other revolutionary thinkers of the last century dream of is the only motivation that drive the scientific undertaking of the Humanities.

The amount of biases that influence how scientific research is produced is enormous. This does not simply mean that the academic work is rooted in institutions that on their turn hinge upon a complex and variegated institutional network, a fact that alone shows rather clearly how limited is the range of the *Einsamkeit und Freiheit*¹¹ the scientist is able to enjoy in order to produce those forms of knowledge (meant here as the translation of *Wissenschaft*) whose diffusion is supposed to foster the enlightenment of collective consciousness. Biases of all sort come both from the scientific community itself to which each researcher belongs and from the individual attitude that sustains the scientific work. Desire of standing out in front of the colleagues, or envy for their success are feelings that do not miss to affect the scientific community. More generally, if looked at with the neutral gaze of the sociologist the scientific enterprise ends up resembling the structure of an organisation, like all others governed by power relations and affected by conflicts of interest, whereas race and gender components are always present as well.¹²

It would a mistake, however, to take the matter of fact that the scientific enterprise is heavily biased as a justification of a relativist stance, which would undermine the claim for objectivity that characterizes the scientific discourse. Bourdieu (2004), for example, takes seriously the necessity to look at the scientific enterprise from a sociological perspective. Moreover, his notion of 'field' helps refine the intelligibility that can be gained from this perspective, in the sense that this notion is precisely what allows to point out the relations of force among the scientific agents. "Rather than being deployed in the context of a universe without gravity or inertia, researchers' strategies are oriented by the objective constraints and possibilities implied in their respective position and by the representation (itself kinked to their position) they are able to form of their position and those of their rivals, on the basis of their information

¹¹ According to the father of the modern academic system, W. Humboldt, *Einsamkeit und Freiheit*, loneliness and freedom, are the two basic presuppositions for the accomplishment of the academic work. See von Humboldt (1968).

¹² On this, see, among others, Harding and Hintikka (1983); Latour (1987); Longino (1990); Pickering (1992); Barnes, Bloor and Henry (1996); Galison and Stump (1996); Harding (1998); Knorr-Cetrina (1999); Daston and Galison (2007).

and their cognitive structures” (Bourdieu 2004, p. 35). But, at the same time, Bourdieu envisages to highlight the commitment to the search for the truth that motivates the scientific community. It is surely true that the latter puts together individuals whose motivations cannot be detached from passions and interests, but it cannot be denied that researchers, within both the Humanities and the natural sciences, are also driven by the willingness to build models of the world whose truthfulness, self consistency, applicability and relevance can be proven thanks to objective criteria.

Bourdieu, in other words, seems to have well understood – and continued in his own terms – one of the main bequest of phenomenology, namely the necessary intertwinement between the empirical and the transcendental spheres.¹³ Each discipline, taken as the discursive dimension within which it makes sense to articulate the question of truth, constitutes an autonomous field, closed upon itself. But precisely this closure constitutes, on its turn, “the historical principle of the genesis of reason and the exercise of its normativity” (Ivi, p. 54). More radically: “a discipline is defined by possession of a collective capital of specialized methods and concepts, master of which is tacit or implicit price to entry to the field. It produces a ‘historical transcendental’, the disciplinary habitus, a system of schemes of perception and appreciation (where the incorporated discipline acts as a censorship). It is characterized by a set of socio-transcendental conditions, constitutive of a style” (Ivi, p. 65). It may sound as a paradox to state that each scientific discipline is a historical site “where trans-historical truths are produced” (Ivi, p. 69). But the field Bourdieu is talking about in order to locate the position of the scientific discourse is not a mere collection, or assemblage, of individuals, it is rather a peculiar subject that undergoes specific laws. The field itself is, thus, the real subject of science. In terms that clearly resemble the Husserlian notion of intersubjectivity (even if Husserl is not present among Bourdieu’s references), the French sociologist maintains that “knowledge is based not on the subjective self-evidence of an isolated individual but on collective experience, regulated by norms of communication and argumentation” (Ivi, p. 72). In sum, Bourdieu’s position does not partake neither in a naïve realism, nor in a radical constructivism, like the one sustained by some sociologists of knowledge. The acknowledgement that science is a construction does not amount to affirm that scientific discoveries depend on the historical process that lead to their construction. In fact, both the historical and the transcendental dimension cross the intersubjective work carried out within the scientific community (see *ivi*, p.

¹³ Here I refer to the late Husserlian reflexions on how the coincidence of the transcendental Ego with the empirical one does not erase the necessity to bring about a transcendental foundation.

78). In this way it is possible to 'save the phenomena' described and explained by science, in the sense that the account of the world the latter provides can serve for establishing not only ontologies, but also reasonable manners of conduct – whereas 'reasonable' means that they can be deployed in front of the Kantian court of reason.

Nevertheless, one could be tempted to say that any form of optimism with regard to the power of knowledge must be reduced solely to the fields within which natural scientists carry out their work. Descriptions offered by the Humanities cannot lay any claim as to their own explanatory capability. They can provide no more than satisfactory interpretations of different forms of human interaction, each of which is rooted in historical contexts that can be compared to each other recurring to arguments based on analogy. Reflecting on human history and culture can at most contribute to create an archive of arguments that prove to be useful when at stake are issues related to what constitutes the socially constructed identity of groups and individuals. In other words, the amount of knowledge the Humanities make available constructs that meta-layer a given social formation needs in order to reflect upon itself, upon its limits, its past and its future destination.

But what I have just outlined above points at the worth of the Humanities, not at their imperfection. What makes the Humanities irreplaceable even in cognitive terms is precisely the role they play as the reservoir of arguments that a social formation draws from itself, namely from the discursive practices that constitute its boundary, or, better, its historical location. Luhmann (1998) provides a persuasive analysis of this point. If considered from the perspective of the functional differentiation, which lays at the core of the Luhmannian conception of modernity (Luhmann 1980), the emergence of the scientific project of the Humanities coincides with the establishment of a technology that allows for second-order observation within the social system. This technology is based on the production and diffusion of the results of the scientific enterprise within a closed community of experts who observe each other's work and evaluate it according to shared criteria. Despite the fact that this community is closed, the results of the work produced within it affect society as a whole, even if not directly. Luhmann makes a remarkable point here because he confers a pivotal role upon the scientific production carried out within the Humanities and, at the same time, helps us to understand the triviality of the social structure that underpins this production.

First, the discourse of the Humanities has been and still is essential in order to establish the difference between what contributes to define modernity and what is posited as external, or alien, with respect to modernity itself. The conceptual apparatus deployed by the Humanities enables the observation of both what happened before the emergence of modernity

and what characterizes forms of life alien to modernity. The concept of culture, for example, has not been created just to satisfy the theoretical curiosity toward non Western civilizations, defined, in some cases, as 'primitive' in order to mark the presumed superiority of the European one, but has also had the function to make visible the boundary between modernity itself and its exteriority (Luhmann 1995). Thus, more important than the singular scientific results that each discipline is able to produce is the fact that the discourse of the Humanities enacts both the difference between modernity, taken as a system, and its exteriority, taken as the environment.¹⁴ Starting from a systemic perspective, thus, we see how the Humanities contribute to build the system's own complexity, in the sense that they exclude operatively the system from its environment, and at the same time they make the system sensitive to irritations from the environment as long as they provide descriptions of it.

Second, it is thanks to what the Humanities perform as an essential element of the encyclopaedia that it becomes possible to reflect on what we are used to define as modern rationality. The latter means no more and no less than reflecting the unity of difference between system and environment within the system (Luhmann 1998, p. 36). Rationality as such cannot be observed, what can be observed are, instead, the different forms of communication that pervade the various elements that build up the functionally differentiated system. It is through the repeated and widespread communication of statements about the effects of interaction among social agents that irritations can be produced within each system (be it the economic system, the legal one, the family, and so on). Communication, in other words, produces difference, in the sense that it elicits the production of more information and invites to extend the networks within which the interaction among agents takes place. This production of differences connects the internal states of the system to each other and thus contributes both to increase the complexity of the system and to manage it. The Humanities, as already stated above, are a closed system among others. As members of the scientific community, researchers, when they write a paper or participate to a colloquium, let themselves be observed by their peers. Furthermore, the results of the work carried out within the Humanities amount to first-order observations: each discipline is responsible for the description of specific sets of events (past or present) that involve agents within specific domains of interaction, each of which is governed by its own codes and rules. It is, however, a second-order observation what the Humanities taken as a whole perform: by reframing those narratives that contribute to establish the meaning of

¹⁴ This does not mean that the self-reference of knowledge is absent within civilizations different from the Western one: Luhmann (1998, p. 37).

shared values, or of both individual and collective identity, the Humanities force a uninterrupted re-negotiation of what constitutes the rationality to which actors refer. If it is true that a text “realizes a world description that changes what it describes through its description” (Luhmann 1998, p. 38), it is reasonable to hold that the whole textual production encompassed within the Humanities is the discursive arena within which modern rationality fulfils its most peculiar promise, namely the promise of driving human action only by recurring to discursive tools that can be continuously recast, modified, negotiated.

If we look at the Humanities from the perspective disclosed by Luhmann’s system theory, we are surely not invited, however, to be optimist as far as the transforming role of the Humanities is concerned. The set of second-order observations they provide can provoke reactions from other systems only in a limited way. The operative closure of each discipline – which can be understood in terms of the closure of the field analysed by Bourdieu – leaves only a small room for the idea that the scientific results gained by the Humanities can accomplish the project of social transformation through education and spread of knowledge. Everyone is able to see the failure of the so called ‘society of knowledge’, which is the secularized version of the Enlightenment. At best, starting from a liberally oriented project like Nussbaum’s, one can hope that the transformative power of the Humanities reaches the members of a well educated élite. We cannot even rule out the possibility that the Humanities are doomed to become a joyful toy in the hands of a small group of tired intellectuals. But, if each researcher who work within philosophy and the Humanities keeps on doing his or her work seriously, in the name of that commitment to truth that probably motivated the initial choice to become a scholar, there is still some room for hope.

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