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Marginal Thinking Knowledge and Communication in the Postmodern Era

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Abstract: The paradigm of late modernity and postmodernity, characterized by the sheer living manifestation of the limit, assumes the conscience of the indissoluble, by annulling any hypothesis, interrogation or problematization. The fracturing of the self coincides with the fracturing of knowledge, as an effective dialectic movement, or, in other words, as a state of continuity of the thinking, specific to the human being. The knowledge-seeking relation to the world through exclusion, that is featured by late modernity and postmodernism is manifested, in an extreme(marginal) form, by the de-presentisation of the immanent and the transcendent and by imposing the simulation as a global process of creation of representations through communication.

Keywords: *knowledge; communication; truth; meaning; discourse; limit; mediation; reality; simulacra; plurality; experience; daily.*

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Introduction

Difficulties in understanding contemporary world are mostly determined by the prejudice that every knowledge refers to something that is, in a way, exhausted and out of circulation. This idea is resting on the internal separation of experience from knowledge, meaning that we can only in part understand an experience what we are going through, just as while trying to understand, we in fact cease to live in reality. The apparent irrevocable tension between the way in which a human being lives awarely and the ways in which hat same human being thinks of oneself, characterizes modern culture and modernity in general. Yet, it is even the acute perception of the disjunction between experience and conscience that marks the necessity of inevitable dependence of experience on the conscience and viceversa. This means that, in trying to understand the present, „we are obliged to use structures of thinking that originate in the analysed periods and concepts. (....) Yet, there is no way of eschewing or avoiding the consequences of needing to reflect upon the relations between experience and knowledge, between present and past, using terms and structures that derive of these." (Connor, 1999, p. 15)

This ironic and sober attempt at self-understanding, this dependence assumed by the in-itself of the time's culture becomes a defining mark of postmodern sensitivity – a kind of thinking turned towards itself, that is projecting its future by means of self-projection. The prefix "post" applied before "modern" appears paradoxical, as long as we can not extract ourselves from the present moment in order to speak about the present, other than by re-presenting it, and we can only settle the future under the sign of anteriority. (Mihali, 2006, p. 19). Mention must be made about the fact that postmodernism's lever of force does not proclaim a rupture with modernist themes, but rather confesses being caught in their trap; therefore, modernism can not be left behind by means of projecting a different newness; the only solution left is the radicalisation of modernist tendencies, their consumption from inside. A question arises naturally: in what way does postmodernism represent something different from modernism, since in some of its philosophical versions, it denies the criteria of newness and of surpassing? „Born out of rebellion against the abuse in historical sense produced against the process of becoming, as a reaction against anything natural theology and teleology, and ultimately, against the idea of a rational world and of a human project of mastering over it, postmodernism is trying to infiltrate itself in the empty space resulted after the disappearance of the

principle of founding, and to encourage the play of thus decentralised elements, freed by the constraints and dependences on a centre, itself subjected now to centrifugal erosion." (Mihali, 2006, p. 19).

The Trademark of Marginal Thinking

Nietzsche's and Heidegger's nihilism, through which man explicitly admits the lack of foundation as being constitutive of his condition, presents itself as a positive moment within a philosophical construction that undertakes to meditate upon our origins and our present, upon the daily condition of the act of being, in dissonance with a thinking and theology that is searching for its own legitimisation in the past or in a golden future. The placement of the ideal, the principle, the concept or the universal in a secondary plane, along with the prominence of the text, example, fragment or common place represent a trademark of marginal thinking and the manifestations of limits, of a void of knowledge, of an un-appropriable truth. „This is the *meaning* of all major themes of contemporary thinking, whether it is about *being, language, the other, singularity, ecriture, mimesis, multiplicities, event, body* or many more others." (Nancy, 2005, p. 121). Communication itself is placed inside this logic of limit, since it "belongs to all and to nobody, without belonging to itself any more." (Nancy, 2005, p. 122).

Foucault inserts science into a broader praxis – which is knowledge – and this in turns, into discursive formations. Knowledge is not a progressive discovery of the nature of things, but a subtle fabric made by the various threads of our beliefs and practices. He elaborates a methodology of difference, by which he is trying to capture the discontinuity and specificity of discourses; discontinuity has a paradoxical value: it is at the same time instrument and object of research, delineating the field whose effect it embodies. „Discontinuity was that stigma of temporal dissipation whose blotting out of the course of history had been the historians mission. Now it has become one of the fundamental elements of historical analysis." What historians are trying to discover today are „the limits of a process, the inflexion point of a curvature, the inversion of a regular movement, the edges of oscillation, the limit of a function, the moment of disturbance of a circular causality." (Foucault, 1999, p. 13). To Foucault, discourse is a space of exteriority that, beyond the logical, psychological or contextual analysis, is the expression of obvious evidence and of an "inbreak" in history, an "incision that it itself embodies". (Foucault, 1999, pp. 32-36). „With Foucault, surface becomes firstly a surface of inscription; here is contained

the entire theme of the affirmation, at the same time nonvisible and unhidden. Archaeology defines the make-up of a surface of inscription. If it does not make up a surface of inscription, the unhidden remain nonvisible. Surface is not opposed to profundity (repeated reference to surface), but to interpretation." (Deleuze, 2005, p. 80)

With Nietzsche (1994) just as with Foucault, we find „a criticism of truth"; truth being understood as „a will for truth". In other words, truth does not rely on a method in order to be discovered, but on some "processes" leading to wanting it. „We always have those truths that we deserve, according to the ways in which we gain knowledge (particularly linguistic ones), the processes of power, the processes of subjectivisation and individuation that we dispose of." (Deleuze, 2005, p. 105). Aligning our thinking to the meaning of things that exist and to their possible prerequisite has only characterised the first three ages of Western philosophy: the antiquity, the Christian thinking and the modern Age of Reason. Along with the failure of reason, we learn that the true world is intangible, and being intangible, is also unknown. If after the demise of Reason, the true world becomes a superfluous idea that loses any usefulness and thus asks for its own expiation, then beyond nihilism we learn that the true world has been lost for a long time. With Nietzsche (1994), the spirit heralded by philosophers is in essence nothing but life; pure knowledge is a simple illusion, therefore man should not bow in front of the products of his spirit, but manifest pleasure for insecurity. He will reject the contemplative interpretation of knowledge, downgrading knowledge to the degree of a mere instrument in the battle of wills. Philosophy must not embody an oversensitive, monumental world, harbouring values to the detriment of a world given prey to phenomena, error and transience. In the stead of this principle of ontological and moral dualism, Nietzsche was proposing an assumption of nihilism perfected by a will for affirmative power, the only one able to recognize the priority of appearance, of sensitivity and, through these, of reality's irreducible complexity. Nietzsche sees in rationalism a cultural choice with predominantly negative effects such as the demise of originality and uniformisation of life. The ways in which individuals get to represent the world to themselves are perspectives on the world and not expressions of the very world, since they are inevitably relative and conditioned by individual peculiarities. Each of the aspects that reality is displaying in front of our eyes, according to how and where it is regarded from, is a form, a shape or a morfé that is clothing reality. As we observe these, we witness its transformation, transfiguration or metamorphosis. „The impossibility to ultimately dominate the universe of reality from a sole point

of view has the existence of varied fundamental conceptions make sense, whose pluralism then appears ineluctable." (Gasset, 2004, p. 173)

By placing rhetoric before logic, Derrida casts doubt upon the idea that we can have total control over our world, based on the stability of systems and meanings. He postulates text and difference as realities that encapsulate any production of meaning, hence our impossibility to invest our projections in the world with certainty. Through the internal reference points of grammatology, Derrida proposes a new relation with written texts. Grammatology radically places the problem of reference to reality between parentheses, along with the foundational function of the *écriture* and the interpretation of texts. All is revolving around the logos, the spoken word, even the written text. Logocentrism is thus the privileged metaphysics, the prime act, associated to the presence of the subject, of which then the *écriture* (the writing) is derived. Referent is the written tradition solely, which makes interpreters out of us. (Derrida, 1967, p. 149)

To Rorty as well, the way in which meaning takes shape is grounded on conversation and dialogue, as well as practices of social legitimisation, that is, non-epistemological instruments. We must again and again negotiate the relations between archaic and contemporary forces, between those that root and those that dislocate any attachment – whether spatial, temporal or mental, by the spill-out of media communication, and this continuous effort goes in the direction of progressive exhaustion of any proper. Rorty appreciates that any rational evaluation can only be achieved in a context, based on previous acceptance of a conceptual framework. „The suggestion that truth, just like the world, is situated outside us, is a legacy of a time when the world was seen as creation of a Being that had his own language. If we give up trying to give meaning to the idea of such non-human language, we will be spared the temptation to confuse the commonplace assertion that the world could give us reasons to consider a statement as true, with the affirmation that the very world is divided out of its own initiative, into pieces shaped just like assertions, called facts." (Rorty, 1998, p. 36)

Contemporary knowledge, according to Lyotard, is not any more legitimised either through the validity of the scientific discourse, or through the great stories, or through consensus, but through performativity, which becomes the equivalent of power. Informatisation can become an instrument of control and regulation, extended as far as knowledge itself and exclusively led by the principle of performativity. "The administration of a test probe, that in principle is nothing than part of an argumentation, itself meant to obtain the agreement of the beneficiaries of the scientific message, thus shifts under the control of a different language play, where the stake is

not truth, but performativity, meaning the best input/output ratio. The State and/or the company abandon the narrative of idealistic or humanistic legitimisation in order to justify a new stake: in the discourse of those who are granting funds nowadays, the only credible stake is power. Scientists, technicians and machines are not being bought to help know the truth, but to enhance the power." (Lyotard, 2003, p. 72). Knowledge gets to be analysed according to all material relations within which it exists. Logos is being urbanised by means of technical taming and computership, determining a strong exteriorisation of the knowledge system in relation with the knower. Knowledge elements can only be translated into bits of information, and their acquisition is no more contributing to the formation of spirit and the person, since they cease being their own purpose, they are losing their "usefulness value" (Lyotard, 2003, p. 15), being produced in order to be valued in a new production. „No structure of knowledge can take shape in the absence of a system of communications, testimonies, accumulations and transfers that in themselves constitute a form of power, and that are tied in their existence and function to other forms of power. The other way around, no power can manifest itself in the absence of extraction, appropriation, dissemination and conservation of knowledge. At this level we do not have science on one side and the state on the other, but only the fundamental forms of knowledge/power." (Sheridan, 1980, p. 131)

Communication and the New Gnoseological Order

Along with Georges Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy (2005) brings into attention the double failure of community and communication; the loss of community intimacy leads to a degradation of communicational intimacy. Communication preserves its significance, to the extent in which it indicates subjectivity or intersubjectivity, and to the extent in which it pertains to transmission of message and meaning. Beyond this, the word communication is not sustainable. „Isolated beings and communication have but one single reality. There exist no isolated beings, that may not communicate, and there is no communication independent from the points of isolation." (Nancy, 2005, p. 42). The daily praxis demonstrates an illusion of communication, that is, of the clash between two subjectivities; we are rather talking about a clash that is being postponed by mediation, or the "show", as Guy Debord names it. „The show is not a set of images, but a social relation between persons, mediated by image." (Debord, 2002, p. 40). The media discourses are doubling or even tripling the direct and experimental discourse between man and the immediate reality, finally

getting to overlap with it or even substitute it. The replacement of direct (referential) knowledge with technologically mediated knowledge is also being highlighted by Cassirer. „Physical reality seems to withdraw, just as man's symbolic activity is advancing. Instead of dealing with the very things, man is constantly conversing in a certain way with himself. He has enveloped himself so much in linguistic forms and artistic images (...) that he is unable to see or know anything otherwise than through an interposed artificial environment." (Cassirer, 1994, p. 43). Any possible *mise en relation* is subordinated to image. McLuhan identifies this substitution with the myth of Narcissus, who becomes a prisoner of his own image reflected in water, losing his identity and becoming a closed system, incapable of capturing any ripple that is coming from the direction of concrete reality. Just like Narcissus, man, says McLuhan" has come to be all of a sudden fascinated by any exterior extension of himself (...) while the reflected image becomes an amputation of one's own conscience, which lies under too much pressure from reality." (McLuhan, 1964, p. 51-52) We could side with A. Sandu in wondering whether the exposure to virtual media could possibly create a "digitalization of conscience" or if the technological development could determine a development of the human condition beyond what it is now, towards a "trans-human" or "post-human" state. (Sandu, 2018, 2019) Technicalisation and simulation indicate to a certain extent the finitude of meaning. Simulation as a global process, sets in scene representations emptied by the presupposition of a perfect present, a meaning that closes and fulfils the project, and the field of technology is not merely a prolongation of nature or of man, but is replacing them, thus showing that there is neither immanence, nor transcendence. Technique incessantly "de-multiplies, disassembles, disorients the finite closure of a meaning." (Mihali, 2006, p. 134)

The diverse exteriorisations of our senses, achieved through media are transforming our mental processes, causing „a new culture shift." (McLuhan, 1997, p. 134). By this, McLuhan is demonstrating that a medium does not affect society firstly by the content that it carries and transmits, but by the characteristics of the very medium – this idea being mirrored in the slogan *The medium is the message*. He identifies a new status of man in the electronic era, much different from that one in the age of orality or printing. Tribal, illiterate man, lives here and now in a personalised world, while the contemporary man exists in an indifferent and impersonal one, since while sound unites, the image separates. „In other words, the de-tribalisation, individualisation and visual representation are one and the same. The magic disappears once the interior events become visible manifestations."

(McLuhan, 1997, p. 144). In the Gutenberg era, sight is predominant, yet the universe of the eye is cold and neutral, writing constraints the thought into the reins of logic and successive ordering, into identification of causes and relations. Today, when electricity creates conditions of interdependence on a global scale, we are again rapidly closing in on a tribal world of simultaneous events and general conscience. The electric technology has consequences over the most common perceptions and habits, quickly reconstituting in us the primitive man's mental processes. What is yet missing from this new tribalisation is spiritual solidarity. The unity among people is a unity of an amorphous mass, guided by the new symbols. Not the internal solidarity among individuals is creating unity, but certain external determinations. „The electromagnetic discoveries have re-created a simultaneous plane in all aspects of human life, so that now the human family draws its existence from the global village. We are living in a unique shrinking space, resounding with tribal drums." (McLuhan, 1997, p. 127) More than being a mere extension of human power, the „electronic magic" produces „a transformation of the mindset – and, of course, of the content of culture" (Postman, 2016, p. 30). Postman raises the very problem of the way in which knowledge is produced and disseminated through communication means, so that we can speak of new ways of perception, of integration of experience of or organisation of ideas, eventually determining new definitions of truth, coming at least partially from the very nature of communication channels. „Just as a culture shifts from orality to writing and then to printing and television, its ideas regarding truth are also shifting along with it. Each philosophy is a philosophy of a stage in life, said Nietzsche. To this we can add that each epistemology is an epistemology of a developmental stage of the media." (Postman, 2016, p. 46)

Defining the message through its medium of communication annuls its understanding as *in-formation* (putting reality in form) or, as Postman states, as a "concrete, specific affirmation about the world" since media channels are our metaphors creating the content of our culture. "A message holds a concrete, specific statement about the world, yet the kinds of media in our days, including the symbols by which they allow conversation to take place, are not uttering such statements. They are rather metaphors working by means of discrete, yet powerful inferences, towards sustaining their own definitions of reality. Whether we see the world through the lens of speech, the print word or the filming camera, our media metaphors are classifying the world for us, they divide it, frame, magnify, reduce, colour it, while pleading in favour of a particular vision." (Postman, 2016, pp. 26-27). The symbolic power that makes up the mediatic space tends to establish a

gnoseological order in which the truth is produced and reproduced by means of "fragmented conversations". By "conversation" Postman defines all techniques and technologies that allow people in a certain culture to exchange messages. In this sense, the entire culture is a conversation or, more precisely, a corporation of conversations held in a variety of symbolic ways. (Postman, 2016, pp. 22-23).

Conclusions

The circuits by which we are talking to ourselves, to others and to the world, in more vague or more concrete forms, are indicative of a fragilisation of human existence, and its main sign allows itself to be revealed in what I have described above in terms of mediation; then, the impoverishment of experience, the subject being stripped of his experiential faculties, the artificial production of experiences, as well as the artificial production of events are all affecting above all the human capacity of mediation, that capacity that is protecting individuals from being overwhelmed and swallowed up by others and by things.

Limit-close experience is the answer that man can find when he decides to put himself radically in question. The need of this radical interrogation of oneself has determined the movement by which thinking is closing up in a system, „entrusting itself to an absolute concept (God, Being, Eternity, Unity)". Yet this movement is not working today any more, when man considers he has achieved the claim of being everything, master over all categories of knowledge. But what does knowledge put in practice by man engaged in an „immobile becoming" look like today? Before all, the unknown does not represent any more what is not known yet, but what can not be known, because there is nothing left to be known; in other words, we were not dealing with a negativity that could determine a move towards a purpose, but a „negativity without use". (Blanchot, 1969, p. 307). Knowledge remains void of challenges. The excess, the surplus, the supplement or the difference – concepts having nourished philosophers like Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault or Nancy, do not represent experiences of progress, oriented towards more, but possible experiences meant to block the possibility of closing up inside a system, a subject, a truth.

The orientation of thinking towards relativity and nondetermination in the modern decades of the past century, and towards fractality, dispersion and fragmentarism in the postmodern stints of the end of century leads to the annulment of any problematisation generated by a necessary knowledge and consideration of negativity. By replacing the opposition with difference,

negative does neither appear as logical limitation, nor as real opposition, since it can not determine hypotheses, interrogations or debates. The state of crisis, having become a brand mark of modern and postmodern destiny, seems to coincide with an ontological, gnoseological and communicational fracture of the self, marked by he more or less conscious loosening from an ancient form of civilisation, without having, through this, found a new form that may render it satisfied.

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