

Philosophical affinities of postmodern sociology

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Abstract

Both the nature of philosophical and sociological discourses are undergoing a profound change, attuned to the gradual substitution of the postmodern sensibility for the cultural climate dominant during the modern age. In particular, philosophy sustained by *legislative reason* recedes, replaced by a philosophical style informed by *interpretative reason*; a movement in many respects reminiscent of the *Pyrrhonian Crisis* of the 16th–17th centuries. The passage from the orthodox consensus of modern sociology to a postmodern sociological strategy parallels this transformation. The present change, however, affects the very relationship between philosophy and sociology. From the search for the foundations of cognitive certainty, the outspoken domain of philosophy guided by the legislative reason, epistemological concerns move to the communicative problems of communally founded cognitive systems – the acknowledged realm of sociological investigation.

The debate on the relationship between sociology and philosophy is as sociologically understandable as it is philosophically inconclusive.

Looked upon sociologically, the debate is easily explained as an expression of natural concern with boundary-drawing: two intellectual traditions, two wide-open discursive formations that draw upon each other, feed each other, intertwine and live through joint history, but which need to guard their precarious institutional autonomy within the academic world of departmental divisions and specializations. The passion and ferocity of the battle reflect the elusiveness of its objective; the two discursive formations staunchly resist administrative attempts at separation and stay alive only in so far as the artificially erected dams are far too low and porous to resist overflowing. One can usefully think of the two discourses as of

two eddies inside one river. The same fluid matter passes through them incessantly; the eddies exist solely as conductors. For each of the two, to keep its identity means drawing in ever new matter and letting out what has been.

Looked upon philosophically, the debate reveals its futility. It makes philosophical sense only in so far as it assumes, counterfactually, that the institutional separation has indeed led to (or, more fallaciously yet, that it 'expressed') the substantive segregation of the subject-matter; and in so far as it assumes that the institutional boundaries that guard the integrity of – respectively – philosophy and sociology against external intrusion, circumscribe internally unified entities. In other words, in the generalized form in which it normally appears, the debate makes sense only after a tacit acceptance that philosophy and sociology are two separate and integrated, self-contained totalities that can enter into contractual agreements, negotiate compromise or declare wars on each other. This is, however, manifestly not the case. Philosophy and sociology as modes of intellectual activity are not separated in a way even remotely reminiscent of the tight departmental segregation of academic philosophers and sociologists guarded by appointments committees and professional guilds. As intellectual activities, neither philosophy nor sociology are integrated to an extent that would enable them to confront each other as homogeneous subjects, each marked by a distinctive profile and defined purpose.

It is on that last point that this paper will dwell. The choice is not a matter of accident; the postmodern era, here understood as the era of re-evaluation of modernity (and, by the same token, of a retrospective condensation of the modern mode of existence into a 'project of modernity', whose imputed intentions and ascribed consequences are thereby exposed to examination), has focused attention on internal splits which cut, in strikingly similar ways, through the bodies of philosophy and sociology. Though the split is often represented as one between modern and postmodern mentalities (attitudes, perspectives, frames of thought), treating the two philosophical or sociological modes as remaining in a relation of historical succession means to court an unproductive and in the end superfluous contention: it would be pointed out immediately that 'post-modern' practices can be easily traced far back, right to the heart of the modern era, while the advent of postmodernity need not mean at all that the characteristically 'modern' way forms of philosophical and sociological practice are about to be replaced and leave the stage forever. The alleged

historical succession is but an illusion fed by the construction of the 'other' of the self-consciously postmodern philosophy and sociology as a matter of 'the past' to be transcended and left behind (this is a bid for hegemony, accomplished through the well-tried expedient of temporalizing a spatial relationship, substituting temporal hierarchy for spatial coexistence, much as in the case of 'primitivization' of alien cultures).

I suggest that the two distinct and alternative modes of philosophical and sociological practice recently classified as 'modern' and 'postmodern' are best described as legislative and interpretive.¹ What we witness today is, first, the rising relative weight of the interpretive mode among philosophical and sociological practices, and second, the rising militancy of its foremost practitioners aimed at discarding the alternative as either outdated or misguided from the start.

Politics of legislative reason

The philosopher, Kant² insisted in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'is not merely an artist – who occupies himself with conceptions, but a law-giver – legislating for human reason'. The task of reason for which the philosopher acts as the supreme spokesman is 'to establish a tribunal, which may secure it in its well-grounded claims, while it pronounces against all baseless assumptions and pretensions, not in an arbitrary manner, but according to its own eternal and unchangeable laws'. The idea of the philosopher's 'legislative power resides in the mind of every man, and it alone teaches us what kind of systematic unity philosophy demands in view of the ultimate aims of reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*)'.

Philosophy cannot but be a legislative power; it is the task of good philosophy, of the right type of metaphysic, to serve the men who require 'that knowledge which concerns all men should transcend the common understanding'. 'Reason cannot permit our knowledge to remain in an unconnected and rhapsodistic state, but requires that the sum of our cognitions should constitute a system'. The kind of knowledge that may indeed transcend the common understanding, composed of mere opinions and beliefs (*opinion*: judgement insufficient both subjectively and objectively; *belief*: the most perfidious sort of judgement, one 'recognized as being objectively insufficient', yet subjectively accepted as convincing), could and should only 'be revealed to you by philosophers'. In performing this

task, metaphysics would be 'the completion of the *culture* of human reason'; it will raise that reason from the raw and disorderly state in which it is naturally given, to the level of orderly system. Metaphysics is called upon to cultivate harmonious perfection of thought.

[T]he supreme office of censor which it occupies, assures to it the highest authority and importance. This office it administers for the purpose of securing order, harmony, and well-being to science, and of directing its noble and fruitful labours to the highest possible aim – the happiness of all mankind.

Adjudicating on the matters of human happiness is the philosopher's prerogative, and his duty. Here Kant merely re-states the centuries-long tradition of the sages, originating at least with Plato. In the Seventh Book of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates advised Glaucon that once he had visited the realm of 'true philosophy', and thus ascended 'into real being' ('turning of a soul round from a day which is like night to a true day'), he must return to those who did not follow him on his expedition (sages who never return from their escapade to the world of eternal truths are as wrong as the ordinary men and women who never embarked on the journey; in addition, they are guilty of the crime of lost opportunity and unfulfilled duty). Then he 'will see a thousand times better than those who live there' – and this advantage will give him the right and the obligation to pass judgements and enforce obedience to truth. One needs to proclaim as the philosopher's duty 'the care and guardianship of other people'.

Then it is the task of us founders . . . to compel the best natures to attain the learning which we said was the greatest, both to see the good, and to ascend that ascent; and when they have ascended and properly seen, we must never allow them what is allowed now.

'It is more likely that the truth would have been discovered by few than by many' – declared Descartes in the third rule of the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. Knowing the truth, knowing it with such certainty as can withstand the cross-currents of vulgar experience and stay immune to the temptations of narrow and partial interests, is exactly the quality that sets the few apart from the many – and places them above the crowd. To legislate and to enforce the laws of

reason is the burden of those few, the knowers of truth, the philosophers. They are called to perform the task without which the happiness of the many will never be attained. The task would sometimes require a benign and clement teacher; at some other time it would demand the firm hand of a stern and unyielding guardian. Whatever the acts the philosopher may be forced to perform, one element will remain – cannot but remain – constant: the philosopher's unchallenged prerogative to decide between true and false, good and evil, right and wrong; and thus his licence to judge and authority to enforce obedience to the judgement. Kant had little doubt as to the nature of the task; to explain it, he drew his metaphors profusely from the vocabulary of power. Metaphysics was 'the queen', whose 'government' could 'under the administration' of dogmatists turn into despotism, but still remain indispensable to hold in check 'nomadic tribes, who hate permanent habitation and settled modes of living' and hence attack 'from time to time those who had organized themselves into civil communities'. The specific service metaphysics is called upon to render is criticism of reason;

[t]o deny the positive advantage of the service which this criticism renders us, would be as absurd as to maintain that the system of police is productive of no positive benefit, since its main business is to prevent the violence which citizen has to apprehend from citizen, that so each may pursue his vocation in peace and security.

One may easily be tempted to play down these or similar tropes drawn from the rhetoric of power as a predictable part of all *protreptics* – the habitual laudatory preambula to philosophical treatises meant to ingratiate the subject with the prospective readers, and particularly with the powerful and resourceful among them. Yet the case for legislative reason was addressed to a special kind of reader, and thus the language in which the bid for attention and favours was couched was one familiar to such a reader and resonant with his concerns. This reader was first and foremost the government of the day, the despot approached with an offer of enlightenment – of a means to do more effectively the very thing he declared himself to be after. Like the earthly rulers, critical philosophy braced itself to 'strike a blow' 'at the root'. The enemies such philosophy was particularly concerned to transfix and overpower were those of the 'dogmatic schools' of Materialism, Fatalism, Atheism, Free-thinking, Fanaticism and Superstition

‘which are universally injurious’. It had to be shown then that these adversaries threaten mundane and intellectual orders alike; that their annihilation is attuned to the interest of the powers that be in the same measure as it conforms to those of critical philosophy; that therefore the task of Royal legislators overlaps with the aim of legislative reason.

If governments think proper to interfere with the affairs of the learned, it would be more consistent with a wise regard for the interest of science, as well as for those of society, to favour a criticism of this kind, by which alone the labours of reason can be established on a firm basis, than to support the ridiculous despotism of the schools, which raise a loud cry of danger to the public over the destruction of cobwebs, of which the public has never taken any notice, and the loss of which, therefore, it can never feel.

Yet there was more to Kant’s choice of metaphors than consideration of expediency in the bid for Royal sponsorship. There was a genuine affinity between the legislating ambitions of critical philosophy and the designing intentions of the rising modern state; as there was a genuine symmetry between the tangle of traditional parochialisms which the modern state had to uproot to establish its own supreme and uncontested sovereignty, and the cacophony of ‘dogmatic schools’ that had to be silenced so that the voice of universal and eternal (and hence one and uncontested: ‘nothing will be left to future generations except the task of illustrating and applying it *didactically*’) reason could be heard and its ‘*apodeictic certitude*’ could be appreciated. Modern rulers and modern philosophers were first and foremost legislators; they found chaos, and set out to tame it and replace it with order. The orders they wished to introduce were by definition artificial, and as such had to rest on designs appealing to the laws that claimed the sole endorsement of reason and by the same token delegitimized all opposition to themselves. Designing ambitions of modern rulers and modern philosophers were meant for each other and, for better or worse, doomed to stay together, whether in love or in war. As all marriages between similar rather than complementary spouses, this one was destined to combine the delights of passionate mutual desire alongside the torments of no-holds-barred rivalry.

Securing supremacy for a designed, artificial order is a two-pronged task. It demands unity and integrity of the realm; and

security of its borders. Both sides of the tasks converge on one effort: that of separating the 'inside' from the 'outside'. Nothing left inside may be irrelevant to the total design or preserve autonomy *vis-à-vis* the exceptionless rulings of the order ('valid for every rational being'). 'For pure speculative reason is an organic structure in which there is nothing isolated or independent, but every single part is essential to all the rest; and hence, the slightest imperfection, whether defect or positive error, could not fail to betray itself in use' – just as in the case of political reason of the State. In the intellectual and the political realms alike, the order must be both exclusive and comprehensive. Hence the two-pronged task foils into one: that of making the boundary of the 'organic structure' sharp and clearly marked, which means 'excluding the middle', suppressing or exterminating everything ambiguous, everything that sits astride the barricade and thus compromises the vital distinction between inside and outside. Building and keeping order means making friends and fighting enemies. First and foremost, however, it means purging ambivalence.

In the political realm, purging ambivalence means segregating or deporting strangers, sanctioning some local powers and de-legalizing the unsanctioned ones, filling the 'gaps in the law'. In the intellectual realm, purging ambivalence means above all delegitimizing all grounds of knowledge philosophically uncontrolled or uncontrollable. More than anything else, it means decrying and invalidating 'common sense' – be it 'mere beliefs', 'prejudices', 'superstitions', or sheer manifestations of 'ignorance'. It was Kant's crowning argument in his devastating case against existing dogmatical metaphysics that 'this so-called queen could not refer her descent to any higher source than that of common experience'. The duty of the philosophy Kant set out to establish was, on the contrary, 'to destroy the illusions which had their origin in misconceptions, whatever darling hopes and valued expectations may be ruined by its explanations'. In such a philosophy, '*opinion* is perfectly inadmissible'. The judgements admitted into the philosophical tribunal of reason are necessary and carry 'strict and absolute universality', that is they brook no competition and leave outside nothing that may claim any recognized authority. For Spinoza, the only knowledge deserving of this name is one that is certain, absolute and *sub speciae aeternitatis*. Spinoza divided ideas into strictly separate categories (leaving no room for 'the middle case') of such as constitute knowledge and such as are false; the latter were flatly denied all value and reduced to pure negativity – to the

absence of knowledge ('False or fictitious ideas have nothing positive . . . through which they may be called false or fictitious; but only from the want of knowledge they are so called'). In Kant's view, the speculative philosopher is 'the sole depositor of a science which benefits the public without its knowledge' (the public awareness of being benefited is irrelevant to the validity of the benefits; it is the warranty of the philosopher that counts). Kant repeats: '[i]n the judgements of pure reason, opinion has no place . . . For the subjective grounds of a judgement, such as produce beliefs, cannot be admitted in speculative inquiries'. Descartes would readily concur: 'A man who makes it his aim to raise his knowledge above the common should be ashamed to derive the occasion for doubting from the forms of speech invented by the vulgar' (*Second Meditation*); intuition and deduction, both systematically deployed by philosophers, 'are the most certain routes to knowledge, and the mind should admit no others. All the rest should be rejected as suspect of errors and dangerous. . . . We reject all such merely probable knowledge and make it a rule to trust only what is completely known and incapable of being doubted' (*Rules for the Direction of Mind*).

These are, in outline, the main characteristics of what Richard Rorty was to dub foundational philosophy – having first charged Kant, Descartes and Locke with joint responsibility for imposing the model on the following two hundred years of philosophical history.³ As I have implied above, such foundational philosophy had its correlate in what may be called the foundational politics of the rising modern State; there was a striking symmetry of declared ambitions and practised strategies, as well as similar obsession with the question of sovereignty of legislative power expressed as the principle of universality of legal or philosophical principles.

In a curious way, both sides of the symmetrical relationship came to be incorporated in the self-image and strategy of modern sociology (that is in the kind of social study that was prevalent and academically dominant throughout the modern period); the philosophical and state-political versions of the modern project found their equivalents in the two aspects of sociological practice. First, sociology set itself up as the critique of common sense; second, it undertook to design foolproof frames for social life that could effectively put paid to deviation, unauthorized forms of conduct and everything else that from the systemic perspective had been construed as a manifestation of social dis-order. In the first capacity, it offered itself to the public as the adjudicator and umpire

in the struggle between rival conceptions of human condition, as the supplier of truth about the 'real springs' of the human conduct and fate, and thus as a guide to genuine freedom and rational living, identified with goal-implementation and effectivity of action. In a second capacity, it offered its services to the power-holders of every level as the designer of conditions that would secure predictable, patterned human behaviour – and thus deploy precepts of rationality in the service of power-promoted social order through defusing and neutralizing the consequences of individual freedom.

Both functions of modern social science converged, again, on the supreme objective of fighting ambivalence: the scandal of mind which cannot be recognized as reason, of consciousness that cannot be granted the vaunted human ability of truth-knowing, of knowledge that should not be permitted to aver that it grasps, exhausts and masters its object in the way real knowledge was promised to do. In other words, they converged on the task of demoting, disapproving and delegitimizing 'merely experiential' – spontaneous, home-made, autonomous manifestations of human consciousness and self-consciousness. They led inexorably to the denial of human capacity for generating adequate self-knowledge (or, rather, they defined all self-knowledge, for the fact of being self-knowledge, as inadequate). Much as the Church must have defined its flock as a gathering of sinners, the modern social sciences had to define their wards as collections of ignoramuses.

'The social structure and the state continually evolve out of the life-processes of definite individuals, but individuals not as they may appear in their own or other people's imagination but rather as they really are . . .'⁴ – wrote Marx and Engels in the famous sentence that through the intellectual practice that followed paved the way to the two-tier world, inhabited by the ignorant and the duped at the base level of the mundane, and by the sharp-eyed social scientists at the lofty summit of objective truth; as it paved the way in political practice to the denigration of popular opinions and wishes as so many symptoms of 'false consciousness' and the dismissal of all views originating outside the established hierarchy of power as 'a mere trade-union mentality'. As Alvin Gouldner would write later, Marx's focus on 'true consciousness' as the gap that ought to be filled to bridge the way to good society 'tends to transform the proletariat into political raw material, to be assembled and re-processed by the Party organization, which justifies its leadership precisely in the name of its possession of theory and consciousness'⁵

Durkheim demanded that

the sociologist put himself in the same state of mind as physicists, chemists, or physiologists, when they enquire into a hitherto unexplored region of the scientific domain. When he penetrates the social world, he must be aware that he is penetrating the unknown. He must feel himself in the presence of facts whose laws are as unsuspected as were those of life before the development of biology.

This is a bold statement in view of the fact that the 'human units' of the social world, unlike the cells or the minerals investigated by biologists and physicists, have a well-formed opinion of themselves and their actions; and yet, Durkheim is adamant, this fact is no objection to his postulate: things we encounter in our daily life give us only

confused, fleeting, subjective impressions . . . but no scientific notions or explanatory concepts . . . [W]e can only with difficulty obtain a very confused and a very distorted perception of the true nature of our action and the causes which determined it . . . We believe ourselves disinterested when we act egoistically; we think we are motivated by hate when we are yielding to love, that we obey reason when we are the slaves of irrational prejudices, etc.⁶

What Durkheim's argument discloses is truly illuminating: it shows that in order to sustain the scientificity of sociological practice, the authority of lay judgement (indeed, the lay access to truth, the capacity of ordinary members of society to form adequate knowledge of themselves and their circumstances) must be denied. Durkheim's rules of sociological method establish, first and foremost, the superiority of the professional over the lay interpretation of reality and the professional's right to correct, declare out of court or downright abrogate non-professional judgement. They belong to the rhetoric of power – to the politics of legislative reason.

So do the methodological principles of Max Weber, however distant the German *Kulturwissenschaften* tradition seemed to be from French positivism, and however indifferent the two 'founding fathers' of modern sociology were to each other's work. Like Durkheim, Weber argues the case for the truth of the sociologist through denigrating the cognitive value of lay knowledge:

In the great majority of cases actual action goes on in a state of inarticulate half-consciousness or actual unconsciousness of its subjective meaning. The actor is more likely to 'be aware' of it in a vague sense than he is to 'know' what he is doing or be explicitly self-conscious about it . . . The ideal type of meaningful action where the meaning is fully conscious and explicit is a marginal case.⁷

In a remarkable inversion of the asymmetry of initiative, the assumed inherent haziness and non-reliability of actor's awareness is invoked to argue the imperative of sociologists' intervention. In the very first section of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Weber declares that '[t]he present work departs from Simmel's method . . . in drawing a sharp distinction between subjectively intended and objectively valid "meanings"; two different things which Simmel not only fails to distinguish but often deliberately treats as belonging together'. The difference between the two kinds of meaning, as later reasoning amply documents, is one between untrustworthy accounts of motives, heavily influenced by non-rational and irrational (unconscious) factors, and the logically coherent explanations constructed by the rational analyst. In the course of arriving at such an explanation, the question of what the actor actually thought and felt when acting is the least of the analyst's worries – the 'theoretically conceived pure type of subjective meaning' is attributed to the hypothetical 'actor or actors in a given type of action'. It is enough that the explanation 'makes sense' once the actor 'can be said' to have been aware of a given motive, 'even though it has not actually been concretely part of the conscious "intention" of the actor; possibly not at all, at least not fully'. The actor's unawareness of the motives imputed to him by the sociologist does not detract from the truth-value of the explanation. Emphatically, it need not be considered as that truth's indispensable condition.

For the purposes of a typological scientific analysis it is convenient to treat all irrational, affectually determined elements of behaviour as factors of deviation from a conceptually pure type of rational action The construction of a purely rational course of action . . . serves the sociologist as a type ('ideal type') which has the merit of clear understandability and lack of ambiguity⁸

– the features which the self-consciousness of the actor cannot boast by definition. Rationality of the actor remains mostly wanting, always suspect. The actor needs the rational scientist to make sense of her action, the sense of which – when left to her own flawed rationality – she would hardly account for.

The arguments differ, yet the cause persists: the lay knowledge of society's members cannot be trusted as representation of truth. To put it bluntly, people on the whole do not know what they are doing and why they are doing it. Knowledge of the lay member and that of the scientist differ in their quality; their difference is narrated by the scientist's side of the opposition as one between truth and falsity, but whatever the name, the essence of the difference is hierarchy and subordination.

The 'orthodox consensus' (the term proposed by Dick Atkinson and adopted by Anthony Giddens)^{8a} of modern sociology was founded on the shared assumption of false consciousness (wrongly supposed to be the distinctive property of post-Lukácsian Marxists – only because they theorized overtly what the rest of sociological practice assumed, or rather construed, tacitly). Most of the refined practices of sociologists, like factor analysis and statistical tabulations, derived their *raison d'être* from a common agreement that the objects of investigation are incapable of explaining their conduct causally; they do whatever they do for wrong reasons, or at any rate because of the factors of which they are but vaguely (if at all) aware. In its totality, the research-and-diagnostic strategy of modern sociology served to perpetuate the state of intellectual disendowment in which common sense and lay knowledge in general had been cast.

This side of legislative reason displayed by modern sociology chimed in well with the other side: the promise of rational organization of the human condition. As it has already been assumed (and continually corroborated by sociological practice) that adequate knowledge of determinants (causes or reasons) is not a necessary condition of any conduct being effectively determined, this promise could be dissociated from the enlightenment function sociology had claimed to perform. Design and implementation of rational order could involve, but did not require in principle the dissemination of truth or, for that matter, any sort of indoctrination. It could be conducted solely through the manipulation of the outer environment known to induce the desirable kind of actions (discipline – or, in Weber's formulation, 'the probability that the command will be obeyed') in disregarding

or defying the accompanying thoughts of the actors. The denial of authority to lay knowledge implied the legalization of coercive order. It wedded the project of rationality to the exercise of force. It also represented this marriage as something people need without knowing that they need it (particularly because they do not know it), thereby effectively protecting the practice from moral reprobation.

The strategy of interpretive reason

Interpretative reason is to legislative reason what *sophrosyne* is to *hubris*. Though it wants to capture and possess 'the other' (as all reason must want), it does not assume that the act of appropriation ennobles the object of possession, makes it better than it was in its un-possessioned state. It assumes instead either that the object has been transformed in the course of appropriation so that its appropriated form does not invalidate the original one and does not make it obsolete, or that the act of appropriation is a productive act, in which a new object comes into being which supplements rather than displaces the object that triggered off the effort of appropriation. Interpretive reason is engaged in dialogue where legislative reason strives for the right to soliloquy. Interpretive reason is interested in continuation of the dialogue that legislative reason wants to foreclose or terminate. Interpretive reason is unsure when to stop, treating each act of appropriation as an invitation to further exchange. Legislative reason, on the contrary, values all accretions only in so far as they promise to advance toward the end. To simplify somewhat, one may say that while legislative reason services the structure of domination, interpretive reason gears itself to the process of reciprocal communication. All in all, one is tempted to say that while interpretive reason is guided by *libido*, legislative reason is the work of *thanatos*.

The strategy of interpretive reason has been elaborated in various forms by Freud, Heidegger, later Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Ricoeur and Derrida; it finds today its arguably most radical, uncompromising expression in the work of Richard Rorty. Its growing audibility is more than contingently coincidental with the crisis and slow decomposition of the modern project and the falling from grace of the central modern values⁹ – the process that in its turn tends to render services of legislative reason in both its

philosophical and sociological garbs increasingly redundant while generating growing demand for culture mediation and brokerage.

Whenever the historical pedigree of interpretive reason is explored, the tradition of hermeneutic inquiry is the favourite choice. More often than not hermeneutics is identified with interpretive reason as such: or, rather, whatever may be the distinctive trait of interpretive reason is imputed to hermeneutics as, undoubtedly, its major tool. This identification, however, is fraught with the twin dangers of diluting the specificity of interpretive strategy (not a necessary condition of the practice of hermeneutics), and of promoting an illusion that the divorce between hermeneutics and legislative reason is principal and absolute. However central is the role played by hermeneutical practice in interpretive strategy, hermeneutics does not exhaust the idea of interpretive reason; most certainly and more importantly still, not all hermeneutics abides by that reason's rules.

To make the point clear: under the influence of Wilhelm Dilthey (and, more recently, Hans Gadamer), the work of Schleiermacher is most often referred to as the starting point of contemporary hermeneutics. Yet Schleiermacher hermeneutics was originated, informed and moved by the erstwhile concerns of legislative reason; for Schleiermacher's by far the main worry was not the lack of understanding, and the passage from the absence of understanding to its presence, but the danger of misunderstanding: the suspicion (indeed, an unchallenged assumption) that without systematically codified methods of interpretation a false understanding may, and in all probability will result. The founding axiom of Schleiermacher's project was the unreliability and thus inferiority of understanding unaided by expert guidance. Hence Schleiermacher's major purpose was to establish grounds for the true representation of meaning; obversely, for delegitimation or refutation of all competitive interpretations. Most conspicuously, the notorious ambition of legislative reason found its expression in Schleiermacher's well-nigh obsessive concern with demonstrating the superiority of the methodical interpreter over the producer of the object of interpretation. Schleiermacher strived to prove that the understanding of the interpreter is better than that of the author of the text; that the author is not a trustworthy judge of the meaning of his own creation. And this despite the fact that the proclaimed purpose of hermeneutic investigation was the recreation of the act of creation, retrieval of something that had been

known already but forgotten or beclouded with the passage of time, or poorly visible because of the distance in space.

Efforts to deploy hermeneutics as a weapon of legislative reason never in fact stopped. They were salient among the concerns of Dilthey, and in the very conception of the hermeneutic circle that depicted the process of understanding as a gradual, yet relentless distancing of the interpreter from the idea once residing in the creator's mind, and emphatically asserted the correlation between that distance and the quality of comprehension (indeed, the closeness of interpretation to the sought truth). For Dilthey, the chance of true interpretation grows instead of diminishing with the passage of time and the growth of geographical distance, that is with the deepening of cultural difference (an idea avidly adopted later by Claude Lèvi-Strauss in one of the most influential among recent attempts to establish the practice of interpretation as the servant of legislative reason). Dilthey tried to ground that intellectual superiority of the interpreter as, so to speak, a law of history: through its inherent trend towards universalizing the human condition and fusing cultural perspectives, history in each successive stage widens the cognitive horizons of the interpreters. Readers located in a historically superior culture are superior interpreters thanks to the superiority of their culture; a characteristically modern variety of confidence, one that blended the right to intellectual adjudication with the axiom that modern civilization represented a peak in the temporal and spatial hierarchy of social forms. The same intention shows through another decision of Dilthey – to focus the labour of interpretation on art and philosophy, as allegedly the 'high points' of any civilization, in which the spirit of a given culture comes into full blossom and hence can be best found and most completely grasped. Hermeneutics turns, therefore, into a family affair of sorts: an on-going conversation between intellectuals as cultural creators, with each successive generation wiser ('by the logic of historical universalization') than the preceding one (the assumption that serves no purpose better than the reaffirmation of the inherently progressive nature of intellectual history).

Toward the end of his life Dilthey came close, however, to the critique and rejection of legislative ambitions. His belief in the superiority of the historically privileged interpreter became more a hope (a methodological postulate rather) than a certainty. What is worse, it could no longer become certainty through the interpreter's own efforts: only the end of history (that is, the unlikely and at any

rate distant moment of universality so complete that it excludes the possibility of further extension) could have furnished an interpretation comprehensive and evident enough to be acknowledged as the final truth and stay uncontested. In late Dilthey one finds the seeds of that doubt that later overwhelmed the hermeneutical philosophers and prompted them to shift their practices from the realm of legislative to that of interpretive reason.

Seeds planted by Dilthey came into full fruition in Hans Gadamer's work (ironically called *Truth and Method*) and thus attracted the wrath of the spokesmen of legislative reason led by Betti. Gadamer spelled out the inevitable conclusion that 'the discovery of true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process'. This was bad enough as the ambitions of legislative reason go, but still a minor offence when compared with Gadamer's really unforgivable sin: his denial of special privilege claimed by professional hermeneutics (or, rather, by the part of knowledge class that claimed hermeneutics as its exclusive property and unshared field of expertise):

It follows from this intermediate position in which hermeneutics operates that its work is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place. But those conditions are not of the nature of a 'procedure' or a method, which the interpreter must of himself bring to bear on the text, but rather they must be given. The prejudices and fore-meanings in the mind of the interpreter are not at his free disposal . . .

Understanding is not, in fact, superior understanding . . . It is enough to say that we understand in a different way, if we understand at all.¹⁰

From the point of view of legislative reason such statements must sound like heresy and abomination. They are not thoughts one can forgive and live in peace with. The *raison d'être* of the legislative project was the possibility of a method – that is, of a procedure that guarantees the validity of the result by the sheer fact that it has been scrupulously followed; and the principle that the findings at the end of the methodical procedure carry a superior validity which no non-methodical effort can claim. These are the canons that Gadamer explicitly or implicitly denied, suggesting instead that the lay and professional understanding cannot but be ascribed identical noological status, as each has been made possible by (and stays

enclosed in) its own specific variety of *Vorurteil*; and that, while remaining (possibly forever) different from each other, neither can claim superiority.

Only at this point does hermeneutics emancipate itself from the supremacy (factual or intentional) of legislative reason and become instead a practice of interpretive reason. Whatever Gadamer said about the ultimate convergence between the activity of interpretation and the truth looks far from satisfactory when measured by the aims of legislative reason and is thus justly dismissed as no more than lip-service paid to philosophical nostalgia: the notorious suggestion of 'fusion of horizons' points clearly beyond the confines of the kind of practice philosophers may hope ever to administer and control. Given the uninvited and unavoidable precedence of prejudice over all perception and understanding, fusion of horizons cannot be an outcome of thought processes alone. The prospect is more in the nature of consolation rather than practical advice that can with due effort be re-forged into a method – and action.

The spokesmen for interpretive reason grew bolder by the year. Roland Barthes made Nietzsche's aphorism about the truth being 'only the solidification of old metaphors' into the principle of his own, highly influential, theory of interpretation:

*Text means Tissue; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual inverweaving; lost in this tissue – this texture – the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an *hyphology* (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web)'.¹¹*

From there, there was but a small step to Jacques Derrida's intertextuality (an endless conversation between the texts with no prospect of ever arriving at, or being halted at an agreed point) and his defiant maxim 'there is nothing outside the text' (that is: anything we can possibly know is a text; the only thing a text can refer us to in our effort to grasp its meaning is another text; nothing we can possibly know of may claim a status better, more solid, or in any other way different from that of the text).

Derrida's philosophy is one of a contingent world and contingent knowledge; and one in which the dividing line between the world

and the knowledge is no longer clear or hoped to be clear or wished to be clear. With that dividing line, off go all other sacred boundaries of the 'Platonic discourse': those between subject and object, inside and outside, meaning and nonsense, knowledge and opinion, certainty and contingency, truth and error. The impossibility of drawing and protecting such boundaries, we are told, lies in the very impulse and effort to mark them; all systems of marks (language most prominent among them) contain an inner tendency to multiply the chance-like and the contingent while striving to contain and eliminate it: they produce ambivalence on the way pointing to the well marked and transparent universe of meanings. One of the most important boundaries that cannot be drawn clearly and that generate ambiguity in the very process of being compulsively drawn is that between the text and its interpretation. The central message of Derrida is that interpretation is but an extension of the text, that it 'grows into' the text from which it wants to set itself apart, and thus the text expands while being interpreted; this precludes the possibility of the text ever being exhausted in interpretation. Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction asserts the inescapability of multiple meaning and the endlessness of the interpretive process¹² – not because of the impotence of the cognizing mind, but as the result of the awesome potency of cognitive capacity to regenerate the very text it aims to tame, arrest and ossify; to expand the world it strives to confine and enclose. The work of interpretation spawns metonymical supplements while determined to gestate metaphorical substitution.

While Derrida's hermeneutics challenged the whole idea that logical consistency and a specifically scientific method can lead to conclusive and apodeictic truth inaccessible in any other way (an idea constitutive of legislative reason), its arguably most seminal precept is 'the methodological necessity of including itself in the issue and the problem, accepting responsibility for its own reflexivity of error'. This hermeneutics, which the authors of these words¹³ treat as identical with postmodernist discourse,

wants to field its rebound – to abandon a tradition of self-certainty, to stand aside from the conditions of sense defined in this tradition, without lapsing into mere unintelligibility. The outsider's accusation of massive contradiction ('What you say refutes what you say') is an ancient topos of philosophical argument . . . But in postmodernism the rebound of statement

upon itself is not suffered passively or received in embarrassment, as somehow silencing, but actively embraced. Discourse has been reconstituted about precisely this instability.

The activity of interpretation is thereby 'absorbed into the activity of the text',¹⁴ and spawns ever new tasks for itself while it is busy in resolving them. This self-distending quality of all hermeneutical labour rebounds as undecidability and inconclusiveness of all interpretation, each supplementing instead of replacing the interpreted text and opening up new demands for yet more complex interpretation. One could say that the hermeneutic circle of legislative reason is broken up and stretched into a spiral with (to paraphrase Pascal) its centre everywhere, its circumference nowhere; a spiral that points towards infinity.

What follows is that for interpretive reason its own work is the main cause of the impossibility of its task (the *focus imaginaire*, to borrow Rorty's expression, that guides its pursuits) ever being fulfilled. First, if legislative reason is energized by the overwhelming desire 'to complete the job', interpretive reason labours while aware of the infinity and perpetuity of the task. Not the truth, but its search is now unbound by space and time. It is in view of that infinity that the power hierarchies crumble (all power, as an effort to subsume and foreclose, is tied to temporality), differences in status between coexisting and rival interpretations are dwarfed and become insignificant, and the very idea of a 'privileged knowledge' (that is, a 'true' interpretation entitled to declare its alternatives invalid) loses sense. Second, plurality of interpretations (coexistence of rival knowledges) ceases thereby to be seen as a regrettable yet temporary and in principle rectifiable inconvenience (as it was for the legislative reason), becoming instead the constitutive feature of being as such. In other words, interpretive reason takes off from the moment of reconciliation with the intrinsically pluralist nature of the world and its inevitable consequence: the ambivalence and contingency of human existence. This armistice with the contingency of the world and all knowledge, interpretive reason would not admit to be sign of weakness and surrender; above all, this reason will stubbornly refuse to consider seriously the charge of relativism (or, rather, to consider relativism as a serious charge). Rorty's response is typical of the normal reaction:

[O]nly the image of a discipline – philosophy – which will pick out a given set of scientific or moral views as more 'rational' than the

alternatives by appeal to something which forms a permanent neutral matrix for all inquiry and all history, makes it possible to think that such relativism must automatically rule out coherence theories of intellectual and practical justification. One reason why professional philosophers recoil from the claim that knowledge may not have foundations, or rights and duties an ontological ground, is that the kind of behaviourism which dispenses with foundations is in a fair way toward dispensing with philosophy.¹⁵

– with philosophy of legislative reason, to be precise. Interpretive reason refuses to legislate, and this refusal makes it criminal from the vantage point of legislative strategy. This crime cannot be repented nor forgiven. The two philosophies cannot be reconciled.

Neither can the two sociologies whose mutual relationship replicates the chasm dividing legislative from interpretive reason. In defiance of the modern strategy, postmodern (interpretive) sociology refuses to adjudicate on matters of lay knowledge and in particular refrains from the task of ‘correcting’ common sense. It is also unwilling to position itself outside the (inevitably particular and ‘local’) discourse and thus to seek grounds other than those such a discourse may provide. It accepts as a fate its own ‘insidedness’ and tries to re-forge its fate into destiny – into a position one may choose in full awareness, in order to explore and utilize the chances it contains. It sets out thereafter to clarify the conditions under which knowledge (all knowledge, including itself) is formed and socially sustained, all along remaining conscious of its own work as an activity that adds to, rather than replacing and displacing the interpretations woven into reality it wishes to interpret. It aims not so much at the fusion of horizons, as at the widening of horizons through exposition of their inherent plurality and their mutually supplementary, rather than mutually exclusive, character.

The legislative reason as historical memory

In his recent book of essays Martin Jay offered his own version of the widespread post-Heideggerian intellectual concerns. He suggested as the formula for social-scientific (and, more generally, philosophical) strategy that one should ‘combine hermeneutics of suspicion with recollected meaning’ – the first part standing for the acceptance of plurality of truths in the hopelessly plural postmodern world, the

second for the perpetuation of the traditional – modern, legislative – role by the intellectuals turned perforce into interpreters. He insists on the need to maintain the hierarchy of cultural values and artistic taste, and offers an updated version of the old Schleiermachiian principle of interpretative authority of the critic and cultural historian over that of the artist or, more generally, the lay member of a cultural community.¹⁶ What Jay, and many others for whom he acts as the spokesman, have not done, is to lay bare the sociological essence of such concerns that shows through the acute preoccupation with the distinction between horizons to be fused and the people expected or claiming to fuse them, between ‘suspect interpretations’ and ‘suspicious interpreters’, between distorted communication violating its ‘regulative principles’ and the guardians and umpires of principles.

With modernity gradually coming to terms with its own predicament (the only habitat it can live in while remaining itself), the ultimate solitude and irreducible sovereignty of the thinking subject has become apparent, thus throwing the ‘collective security’ arrangements of intellectual work in disarray. With the new awareness that ‘the discourse is intended to *constitute* the ground whereon to decide *what should count* as a fact in the matters under consideration and to determine *what mode of comprehension* is best suited to the understanding of the facts thus constituted’,¹⁷ or that ‘[e]very social scientist (as an individual repository of the sphere of social science) must deal with his or her own hermeneutic spiral . . . The only thing that determines the point at which a social scientist should cease the quest for understanding is his or her good judgement . . .’¹⁸ – the questions repeatedly raised by Jay have been asked with growing anxiety. By all standards inherited from the long rule of legislative reason, good judgement, strong will and a lot of daring needed to determine what would be judged as ‘the facts of the matter’ seemed to offer hopelessly inadequate grounds for sustaining the social standing of social thought.

Thus postmodernity, the age of contingency *für sich*, of self-conscious contingency, is for the thinking person also the age of community: of the lust for community, search of community, invention of community, imagining community. The nightmare of our contemporary – writes Manning Nash¹⁹ – ‘is to be deracinated, to be without papers, stateless, alone, alienated, and adrift in a world of organized others’; to be, in other words, denied identity by those who, being others (that is, different from ourselves), always seem at a distance enviably ‘well settled’, ‘integrated’, ‘organized’

and sure of the identity of their own. Nash is concerned with only one, ethnicity-type, response to this fear – but this response can stand as a pattern for all the others:

The identity dimension of ethnicity (whatever its deep psychological roots) rests on the fact that fellow members of ethnic groups are thought to be ‘human’ and trustworthy in ways that outsiders are not. The ethnic group provides a refuge against a hostile, uncaring world.

Community – ethnic or otherwise – is thought of as the uncanny (and in the end incongruous and unviable) mixture of difference and company: as uniqueness that is not paid for with loneliness, as contingency with roots, as freedom with certainty; its image, its allurements are as incongruous as that world of universal ambivalence from which – one hopes – it would provide a shelter.

The real reason for the specifically intellectual variety of the universal (though by and large unrequited) love for community is seldom spelled out. More often than not it is given away unintentionally, as in a recent phrase of Chantal Mouffe:²⁰

it is always possible to distinguish between just and unjust, the legitimate and the illegitimate, but this can only be done from within a given tradition. . . . In fact, there is no point of view external to all tradition from which one can offer a universal judgement.

This sentence was intended as a polemic against the false pretences of impersonal, supra-human objectivism that guided modern strategies aimed at the suppression of contingency; as another salvo in the unrewarding but on the whole pleasurable skirmishes against ‘positivistic science’,²¹ against the pious hope that one can be ‘in the right’ for all times, places, and for everybody. In fact, Mouffe’s message is that – even with absolute truth defunct and universality dead and buried – some people at least can still have what their past (legislatively predisposed) benefactors, now decried as deceitful, promised to give: the joy of being ‘in the right’ – though now perhaps not at all times, not in all places at the same time, and only for certain people.

‘Tradition’ (it could be in other texts ‘community’ or a ‘form of life’) is the answer to Richard Bernstein’s anxiety expressed in his rejoinder to Rorty’s treatment of contingency – one that many

found too radical to elicit popular enthusiasm, and certainly calling for too much heroism to seriously anticipate a massive following. Having conceded to Rorty the lack of universal foundations for any belief or value locally upheld, Bernstein²² could not deny himself asking

How are we to decide who are the rational discussants and in what sense are they 'rational'? . . . Sorting out rational discussants from those who are judged to be irrational is precisely the type of issue that needs to be 'hammered out' . . . [T]here are plenty of questions concerning justification, objectivity, the scope of disciplines, the proper way of distinguishing rational from irrational discussants, and *praxis* that are answerable and demand our attention.²³

All right – so Bernstein seemed to be saying – one cannot establish authoritative rules stretching beyond the confines of a given community of meaning or tradition; but surely this need not mean that the game of rules is over? Surely the referees and their decisions, which the players are not allowed to appeal against, are still in place and needed, though with a somewhat smaller 'area of catchment', narrower area of jurisdiction? The 'distinguishing between just and unjust' that is 'always possible' is precisely the purpose for which Mouffe postulates 'tradition'. The need of the 'objective demand for our attention', of the grounding of the right to set us, the rational subjects, apart from those who we are allowed to dismiss as irrational, is Bernstein's motive to do the same. The anguish of the contingent person seeking affirmation of her personal truth is aided and abetted by the anxiety of an intellectual seeking reaffirmation of her legislative rights and leadership role.

Michel Maffesoli has recently suggested a highly suggestive concept of neo-tribalism²⁴ to describe the world like ours: a world that contains, as its conspicuous feature, the obsessive search for community. Ours, Maffesoli suggests – is a tribal world, one that admits of but tribal truths and tribal decisions about right and wrong or beauty and ugliness. Yet this is also a neo-tribal world, a world different in most vital aspects from the original tribal antiquity.

Tribes, as we know them from ethnographic reports and ancient accounts, were tightly structured bodies with controlled membership. Gerontocratic, hereditary, military or democratic agencies, invariably armed with effective powers of inclusion and exclusion, monitored the traffic (limited as it was) over the boundary of the group.

Remaining inside or outside the tribe was seldom a matter of individual choice; indeed, this kind of fate was singularly unfit to be re-forged into destiny. The neo-tribes – the tribes of contemporary world, are on the contrary formed – as concepts rather than integrated social bodies – by the multitude of individual acts of self-identification. Such agencies as might from time to time emerge to hold the faithful together have limited executive power and little control over cooptation or banishment. More often than not, ‘tribes’ are oblivious of their following, and the following itself is cryptic and fickle. It dissipates as fast as it appears. ‘Membership’ is relatively easily revokable, and it is divorced from long-term obligations; this is a kind of ‘membership’ that does not require an admission procedure or authoritative rulings, and that can be dissolved without permission or warning. Neo-tribes ‘exist’ solely by individual decisions to sport the symbolic tags of tribal allegiance. They vanish once the decisions are revoked or the zeal and determination of ‘members’ fades out. They persevere only thanks to their continuing seductive capacity. They cannot outlive their power of attraction.

Neo-tribes are, in other words, the vehicles (and imaginary sediments) of individual self-definition. They are generated by self-construction efforts. The inevitable inconclusiveness and frustration of such efforts leads to their dismantling and replacement. Their existence is transient and always in flux. They inflame imagination most and attract most ardent loyalty when they still reside in the realm of hope. They are much too loose as formations to survive the movement from hope to practice. They seem to illustrate Jean-François Lyotard’s description of being as ‘escaping determination and arriving both too soon and too late’.²⁵ They seem also to fit very closely the Kantian concept of aesthetic community.

For Kant, the aesthetic community is and is bound to remain an idea; a promise, an expectation, a hope of unanimity that is not to be. Hope of unanimity brings aesthetic community into being; unfulfilment of that hope keeps it struggling for life, and thus alive. The aesthetic community owes its existence, so to speak, to a false promise. But individual choice cannot be committed without such promise.

Kant uses the word ‘promise’ in order to point out the non-existent status of such a republic of taste (of the United Tastes?). The unanimity concerning what is beautiful has no chance of being actualized. But every actual judgment of taste carries with

it the promise of universalization as a constitutive feature of its singularity:

The community required as a support for the validity of such judgment must always be in the process of doing and undoing itself. The kind of consensus implied by such a process, if there is any consensus at all, is in no way argumentative but is rather allusive and elusive, endowed with a spiral way of being alive, combining both life and death, always remaining in statu nascendi or moriendi, always keeping open the issue of whether or not it actually exists. This kind of consensus is definitely nothing but a cloud of community.²⁶

Those among us who – prompted by the memories of legislative era – wish a situation in which ‘it is always possible to distinguish legitimate and illegitimate’ to hold, are bound to be disappointed. The best they can obtain to support such a possibility under present postmodern conditions are but such aesthetic communities – clouds of communities. Such communities will never be anything like Tönnies’s cosy and unreflective (cosy because unreflective) homes of unanimity. Tönnies-style communities fall apart the moment they know of themselves as communities. They vanish (if they have not evaporated before) once we say ‘how nice it is to be in a community’. From that moment on, community is not a site of secure settlement; it is all hard work and uphill struggle, a constantly receding horizon of the never ending road; anything but natural and cosy. We console ourselves and summon our wilting determination by invoking the magic formula of ‘tradition’ – trying hard to forget that tradition lives only by being recapitulated, by being construed as heritage; that it appears, if at all, only at the end, never at the beginning, of agreement; that its retrospective unity is but a function of the density of today’s communal cloud.

Given our knowledge of contingency – now spilling over from the idea of the beautiful to that of the being itself, to its truth and its reason – we cannot abandon our search for consensus: we know after all that agreement is not pre-determined and is not guaranteed in advance, that it has nothing but our argument to stand on. Ours is the courage of despair. We cannot but re-double our efforts while going from defeat to defeat. The Kantian antinomy of the judgement of taste showed that disputation was as much unavoidable as in the end inconclusive and irrelevant. This is a demonstration that both Habermas and his detractors lose from sight:

Habermas, in as far as he presents the model of undistorted communication as a realistic prospect of truth-consensus; and his critics, when they try to disavow adequacy of such model, accusing it of not offering a firm enough ground for agreement, and so tacitly imply that some other, presumably firmer grounds, ought to be sought and can be found.

Under these circumstances, the foremost paradox of the frantic search for communal grounds of consensus is that it results in more dissipation and fragmentation, more heterogeneity. The drive to synthesis is the major cause of endless bifurcations. Each attempt at convergence and synthesis leads to new splits and divisions. What purported to be the formula for agreement to end all disagreement – proves to be, the moment it has been formulated, an occasion for more disagreement and new need of negotiation. All efforts to solidify loose life-world structures produce more fragility and fissiparousness. The search for community turns into a major obstacle to its formation. The only consensus likely to stand a chance of success is the acceptance of heterogeneity of dissensions.

For the intellectual, such a prospect is hard to live with. It means a realm of authority as frail and friable as the current capacity to impress one's 'regulative principles' upon some others who (as long as they abide by those principles, but hardly a minute longer) form 'the community' for which a joint 'tradition' can then be retrospectively put together, and commonality of language construed through inclusive/exclusive practices. No wonder intellectuals dream of something more solid. Being intellectuals, they must believe that the sought-after solidity may be only a function of theoretical practice; that their juridical authority over communities may be only made permanent and secure through enforcing their version of intellectual law and order. Hence attempts like Jay's will be made over again. They will hardly ever stop, as each attempt to draw up steady borders of another communal consensus (in as far as it remains unsupported by institutionalized coercion) would itself become one more ingredient of that pluralism it purported to abolish or at least qualify. Once communally grounded (and reconciled to such grounding) rather than seeking supra-communal, species-wide or even *apodeictic* guarantees, the standard of truth poorly serves the ambition of expanding authority. Whatever remains of the strategies of legislative reason turns to be counterproductive: it defies its purpose.

Pyrrhonian crisis, mark two

Just before the spectacular rise of 'foundational philosophy', in the sixteenth century, European metaphysics went through a brief, yet dramatic period of Pyrrhonian crisis.²⁷ The unclouded rule of the Aristotelian paradigm seemed to come to an end when the arguments of the sworn enemies of Aristotelian 'dogmatism' among the ancient philosophers were unearthed, rehashed and turned against contemporary seekers of truth, now re-defined as latter-day dogmatists.

The critics reached for the legacy of the long line of sceptics – from Pyrrhon to Sextus Empiricus – who in the Hellenic and Roman worlds played successfully the role of 'bad conscience' (for some) or the 'sober voice' (for others) of philosophy until banished by the ascending Christian truth of the Revelation. Sceptics doubted that truth was possible; they doubted that if truth were possible, we would know it; they doubted that if we knew the truth, we would be able to convince ourselves and the others that we did. One by one, the sceptics took apart all criteria advanced by the Aristotelians for telling the true from the false beliefs; no criterion stood up to their scrutiny, and – by induction – the sceptics concluded that no such criterion can be ever found, and thus the beliefs we hold will never ascend to the level of truth, and doubt will never stop haunting our knowledge.

In particular, ancient sceptics declared suspect the two pillars of dogmatic certainty: the 'evidence of the senses' – the reliability of human sensual impressions, and the 'evidence of clarity' – the human critical faculty to distinguish [the] 'obviously true' from false convictions. However clear and obvious our representations, we would not know whether they are true, as the senses on which we rely keep supplying fickle and contradictory information. And there was no way of setting apart true from false ideas, as both appeared to us with similar strength, 'obviousness' and degree of clarity. The sceptic case had been summed up and codified in the course of the second century by Ainesydemus in the form of ten arguments (*tropoi*), focusing on the frailty of the knowing subject's cognitive faculties. Thus the second trope pointed to the differences of the impressions received by individual subjects; the fourth argument referred to the change of impressions depending on the state of the subject – age, health, or mood, while several following *tropoi* considered the changing shape of the objects depending on the external circumstances of perception, like the position occupied by

the object or its distance from the observer. Finally, the last argument raised the issue of the subject's inability to set apart the evidence of senses from the representations induced by customs, laws, legendary beliefs or, indeed, dogmatic theories themselves.²⁸ As no knowing subject could insist on the truthfulness of his impressions and ideas, no one could claim the kind of certainty that would ground the universal validity of his knowledge. No opinion could be accepted with full, unqualified confidence; there was no way to measure in advance the error of any view, as no standards allowed one to select from the multitude of impressions and ideas the ones that could be assigned the attribute of truth.

The arguments of the Sceptics, relegated first to the margins of Greek philosophy, rapidly gained in strength, influence and audience with the growing cultural pluralism of the Hellenistic world and expanding *oikoumene* opened up by the spread of Roman rule. With the prospect of the 'fusion of horizons' or any other form of 'melting pot' rather distant if not altogether unrealistic, what inspired the efforts of sceptic philosophers more than any purely philosophical question was a thoroughly practical issue: is it possible to live reasonably (indeed, successfully) under conditions of lasting and irreparable uncertainty, and if so, how. Sceptics were not prophets of despair, as their critics tried to insinuate; neither did they advise resignation and retreat from active life (in which they differed from Cynics and, to an extent, from Stoics). What they did suggest was that philosophical equanimity (a state of mind they compared to *galene* – the smooth surface of a bottomless sea), the abandonment of vain efforts to separate the grains of truth from the chaff of illusions, was needed better to concentrate on the practical business of life; an art that could be practiced effectively without the certainty countersigned and vouched for by dogmatic philosophers. According to Pyrrhon, withdrawal from worldly affairs would be an act of rebellion, conduct utterly at odds with the sceptical doctrine that advised reconciliation and humility. Resignation from universally valid truth did not mean rejection of the evidence offered by representation; it only suggested the need for caution and careful application of reason to the planning and the execution of action. Having rejected all dogmatic criteria of truth, another Sceptic, Carneades, insisted on the practical criteria of proper (effective) behaviour. For the latter, he suggested, one did not need the truth. One could rely on trustworthy representations; better still, on representations unquestioned and unchallenged by others and thus enjoying the tacit support of general agreement; best of all, on

representations checked and tested as thoroughly as it could be done in given circumstances.

The power-assisted truth of Christian Revelation for a time silenced sceptical voices; they became audible again once the ecclesiastical version of the power/knowledge package fell apart at the threshold of the modern era. Thus the Pyrrhonian crisis took off, playing havoc for a time with the philosophical establishment suddenly deprived of the protective cover of the universal Church. Soon, however, the power/knowledge syndrome was reassembled again, this time thanks to the increasingly ambitious and potent secular state. With a new universal order becoming once more a plausible prospect, philosophical certainty was reassembled again through the work of Spinoza, Descartes, or Kant. This time, however, it was Reason and not Revelation that served as the guarantee of the confidence called truth: legislative reason was now taking over the world-creating potency once accredited only to God. The universal order of the future, after all, was to be made; it could only be a human work and could count only on earthly powers.

The diminished credibility of the project of modernization as the royal road to new pan-species universality, coupled with the falling dependency of the now well established modern state on ideological (legitimational) grounding of administrative discipline and social integration, once more weakened the conviction and resolve of legislative reason and the verisimilitude of its promise. Difference has been revealed for what it was throughout the modern adventure: the existential condition rather than a temporary irritant. And so was the existential foundation of disagreement and undecideability. The sceptical doubts, never fully extinguished, surfaced again. Pyrrhonian crisis mark two began. It constitutes the philosophical folklore of postmodernity.

As each of two crises responded to the collapse of a specifically grounded certainty, the Mark Two differs somewhat from its three-centuries old predecessor. Instead of dwelling on the weakness of the cognitive subject and its inability to make a good choice among the cacophony of contradictory pretences (suddenly exposed once the protective cover of religious authority had been withdrawn), it focuses on the strength of community; on its ability to make choices good. Instead of calling the individual, bereaved by the withdrawal of supra-human guarantees of truth, to distrust promises of faultless wisdom and fall back on the faculties of own good sense, it exhorts the individual liberated from coercive practices of truth-definers to huddle in the warm embrace of community.

Community, present only marginally if at all in the deliberations of the Pyrrhonians of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries (mostly negatively, as the habitat of the sinister idols of tribe or the marketplace), figures most prominently in the very centre of the scepticism of the present-day interpretative reason. Conversation and agreement-seeking – the defining traits of the community – serves as the arch-metaphor of this reason as against the command-issuing, order-guarding powers favoured by its legislative opponent.

Re-negotiating the philosophy/sociology relation

The current crisis of legislative reason and the ascent of its interpretive alternative has a profound impact on the relationship between philosophy and sociology. For sociologists, it means much more than switching allegiances and affiliations from one type of philosophical doctrine and strategy to another. It means nothing less than the revision of the very relationship between sociology and philosophy established and rarely questioned throughout the modern era.

The declaration of intent associated with philosophy impelled and agitated by the legislative reason was, overtly or implicitly, an anti-sociological manifesto. The pronounced (even if unintended) relativizing edge of sociological reason was an anathema to the legislating project aiming at the universal grounds of truth. The localized sources of beliefs that sociology was adept in documenting (and willy-nilly playing with the danger of legitimizing) were precisely the obstacles to truth the legislative philosophy was determined to disempower. The last great act of legislative reason, Husserl's phenomenology, listed socially and culturally induced representations (the very subject-matter of sociological inquiry) as the first among the impurities destined to fall under the chop of transcendental reduction and to be 'bracketed away' from the field of philosophical relevance. Philosophy inspired by legislative reason left sociology the choice between the role of a handmaiden, keeping clean the analytical cutlery in the home of good knowledge owned by philosophers, or facing the prospect of dishonourable discharge without references.

With interpretive reason's discovery of communal bases of knowledge and the selection of communication-servicing as the major task of philosophers, the traditional figuration has been

drastically changed. Deprecated and more often than not suppressed inclinations inherent in sociological practice have been rehabilitated while their detractors have been discredited. Moreover, inquiry into the bases of knowledge in general, good knowledge included, turned to be first and foremost a sociological enterprise, once it has been accepted that the 'goodness' of knowledge is socially (communally) determined and cannot be otherwise arrived at. Traditional concerns of philosophy have been submerged by sociological reason. Husserl's strategy has been reversed: it is now the socially and culturally induced, supported and protected representations that are exempt from reduction and bracketing away, while the search for foundations is re-directed from transcendental subjectivity to the immanent, this-worldly context of daily-life practice. Arguably the most poignant prefiguration of the new relationship can be retrospectively gleaned from Wittgenstein's curt description of understanding as 'knowing how to go on'. A watershed separates this description from the pretence of legislative reason to the unique understanding that allows it and it alone to tell the goers how and where to go, and what for.

Freed from the blackmail of legislative reason, sociology may concentrate on the task to which – due to the nature of its inquiry – it has been always best prepared. It may 'come out' – openly become what it was destined to be all along: the informed, systematic commentary on the knowledge of daily life, a commentary that expands that knowledge while being fed into it and itself transformed in the process.

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Notes

- 1 A fuller discussion of the two categories can be found in my *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Postmodernity and the Intellectuals*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987.
- 2 All quotations from Kant in this section are in J.M.D. Meiklejohn's translation (*Critique of Pure Reason*, London, Dent 1969). Quotations from Descartes come from Margaret D. Wilson's edition of *The Essential Descartes* (London, The New English Library, 1969). Plato is quoted in W.H.D. Rouse's translation (*Great Dialogues of Plato*, London, The New English Library 1956). Spinoza's 'On the Correction of the Understanding' is quoted from Andrew Boyle's translation, included in Dent's 1986 edition of Spinoza's *Ethics*.

- 3 'Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is an assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims . . . We owe the notion of philosophy as the tribunal of pure reason, upholding or denying the claims of the rest of culture to the eighteenth century, and especially to Kant, but this Kantian notion presupposed general assent to Lockean notions of mental processes and Cartesian notions of mental substance' (Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1981, pp. 3–4). Commenting on Kant's assertion that appearances must themselves have grounds which are not appearances, Hannah Arendt observed that 'the philosophers' "conceptual efforts" to find something beyond appearances have always ended with rather violent invectives against "mere appearances"' (*The Life of the Mind*, Part One: 'Thinking', London, Secker & Warburg, 1978, p. 24). Philosophers sought to prove the 'theoretical supremacy of Being and Truth over mere appearance, that is, the supremacy of the ground that does not appear over the surface that does' (p. 25). Let us add that the postulated 'ground' was by definition out of the reach of ordinary, lay and commonsensical sensual impressions, and thus its supremacy reflected symbolically and legitimized the supremacy of the mental over the physical, and of the practitioners of 'theoretical practice' (Husserl) over those engaged merely in the menial, manual operations. The search for grounds and denigration of appearances was an integral part of the assault against non-philosophical, autonomous truth-claims. To quote Arendt again, 'the fact is, that there is hardly any instances on record of the many . . . declaring war on philosophers. As far as the few and the many are concerned, it has been rather the other way round' (ibid., p. 81).
- 4 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *German Ideology*, Moscow, International Publishers, 1968, p. 413.
- 5 Alvin Gouldner, *For Sociology: Renewal and Critique in Sociology Today*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, p. 420.
- 6 Emile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (1895). Quoted after Anthony Giddens's translation from *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*, Cambridge UP, 1972, pp. 59–60.
- 7 Quoted after *Max Weber: The Interpretation of Social Reality*, ed. by J.E.T. Eldridge, London, Nelson, 1972, p. 102. Note that from the Weberian perspective awareness and knowledge can be accredited to lay actors only if put in inverted commas; that is, only allegorically.
- 8 Quoted in translation by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons in Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, New York, Free Press 1947, pp. 88, 92–3, 97.
- 8a See Dick Atkinson, *Orthodox Consensus and Radical Alternative: a Study in Sociological theory*, London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1971.
- 9 I have discussed this question at greater length in 'Legislators and Interpreters: Culture as Ideology of Intellectuals', in: *Social Structure and Culture*, ed. by Hans Haferkamp, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1989.
- 10 Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, transl. by Garrett Burden and John Cumming, London, Sheed & Ward, 1975, pp. 263–5.
Note the striking affinity between these formulations of Gadamer and the interpretive scepticism of Freud, ever more pronounced toward the end of his long life devoted to the 'hermeneutics of human self'. From 1936 on, Freud repeatedly asked the question 'is there such a thing as a natural end to an analysis or is it really possible to conduct it to such an end?' ('Analysis Terminable and

Interminable'), 'what guarantee we have while we are working on these constructions'? ('Constructions in Analysis'), only to admit that 'it may seem that no general reply can in any event be given to this question', and, more seminally yet, that the practitioners of psychoanalysis may not 'pretend that an individual construction is anything more than a conjecture which awaits examination, confirmation or rejection' (comp. *Collected Papers* Vol. V, London, Hogarth Press, 1950, pp. 319, 363–5). Freud retained the vocabulary of 'confirmation' and 'rejection' while the thrust of his argument suggested absence of operational procedure that could make such ideal types of legislative reason applicable in psychoanalytical practice.

- 11 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, transl. by Richard Miller, London, Jonathan Cape, 1976.

In *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, 1969, pp. 40–1) Maurice Merleau-Ponty brought into relief the new image of interpretation as continuous and, in the end, monotonous process: 'For when an illusion dissipates, when an appearance suddenly breaks up, it is always for the profit of a new appearance which takes up again for its own account the ontological function of the first . . . The dis-illusion is the loss of one evidence only because it is the acquisition of another evidence'. The break in quality the linear vision of the legislative reason made us to expect is not forthcoming in the process.

- 12 Comp. Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinical Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1982; particularly pp. 49–50, 91, 131. Handelman presents Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction as a re-assertion of the Rabbinical tradition of interpretations that 'form part of the mesh and interweave with the text itself' as against the 'protestant literalism' – that 'hermeneutics of immanence and univocal meaning'.

- 13 Comp. Joseph H. Smith's and William Keniger's introduction to *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis and Literature*, the book they edited (Baltimore, John Hopkins UP, 1984).

- 14 Comp. *Midrash and Literature*, ed. by Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick, Yale UP, 1986, p. XI.

- 15 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 179.

In 'Truth and Falsehood' (comp. *History and Truth*, transl. by Charles A. Kelbley, Northwestern UP 1979), Paul Ricoeur insists that 'science is never more than one "praxis" among others, a "theoretical praxis"', as Husserl says, constituted by the decision to suspend all affective, utilitarian, political, aesthetic, and religious considerations and to hold as true only that which answers to the criteria of the scientific method in general, and the particular methodology of such and such a discipline'. In Ricoeur's view, it is the 'ambiguous nature of our will to unity' that is at one and the same time 'the goal of reason and violence', and a constant source of a temptation 'to unify the true by violence'. A temptation, Ricoeur says, that was surrendered to by the Church and the State, but which, one may add, always threatens to seduce the philosophy of legislative reason.

- 16 Comp. *Fin-de-siècle Socialism and Other Essays*, by Martin Jay, London, Routledge 1988, pp. 34, 50, 60.

- 17 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore, John Hopkins UP 1978, p. 3. White indicates that every 'applied syllogism contains an enthymemic element, this element consisting of nothing but the decision to move' from one plane to another, a decision which 'logic cannot

preside over'. 'And if this is true even of the classical syllogism, how much more true must it be of those pseudosyllogisms and chains of pseudosyllogisms which make up mimetic-analytic prose discourse, of the sort found in history, philosophy, literary criticism, and the human sciences in general?'

- 18 Agnes Heller, *Can Modernity Survive?*, Cambridge, Polity Press 1990, pp. 25–6.
- 19 Manning Nash, *The Cauldron of Ethnicity in the Modern World*, University of Chicago Press 1989, pp. 128–9.
- 20 Chantal Mouffe, 'Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?', in: *Universal Abandon?; The Politics of Postmodernism*, Edinburgh University Press 1988, p. 37.
- 21 As Peters and Rothenbuler wittily commented, '[j]ust as the street criminal is too productive a worker in our society to be utterly stamped out (he sustains the law, prisons, police, burglar alarm installers, crime beat reporters, and prime-time TV writers), so the positivist, with his adoring attachment to a reality apart from everything human, has sustained a major part of the academic criticism for the past decade (supporting Marxist, hermeneutic, and deconstructive criticisms, for instance, since he takes the political as the neutral, the made as the given, and the exercise of will as apparent truth)' (John Durham Peters and Eric W. Rothenbuler, 'The Reality of Construction', in: *Rhetoric in the Human Sciences*, ed. by Herbert W. Simons, London, Sage Publications 1989, pp. 16–17.
- 22 Comp. Richard Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode*, Cambridge, Polity Press 1985, pp. 53, 57.
- 23 Thirty-five years have passed since Dwight Macdonald offered the myth of 'community' as a cure for present-day atomization and loneliness, yet his lyric poetry (replicated in this country to great effect by F.R. Leavis) is still distinctly audible in the confident, no-doubts-allowed convictions that the 'community' will do what the discredited 'society' spectacularly fails to achieve. Community, in Macdonald's memorable rendition, is 'a group of individuals linked to each other by common interest, work, traditions, values, and sentiments; something like a family, each of whose members has a special place and function as an individual while at the same time sharing the group's interests (family budget), sentiments (family quarrels), and culture (family jokes). The scale is small enough so that it "makes a difference" what the individual does, a first condition for human – as against mass [Macdonald would have probably written today 'contingent' – Z.B.] – existence' (Dwight Macdonald, 'A Theory of Mass Culture', in: *Diogenes*, 3/ 1953, pp. 1–17).
- 24 Comp. Michel Maffesoli, 'Jeux de masques', in *Design Issues*, vol. IV (1988), nos. 1 & 2, pp. 141ff. Maffesoli draws on earlier ideas of Gilbert Durand and Edgar Morin.
Maffesoli's term, it seems, tries to capture the phenomenon similar to that discussed by Eric Hobsbawm under the heading of inventing of tradition, and by Benedict Anderson under the heading of imagined community.
- 25 Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*, Columbia UP 1988 p. 32.
- 26 Ibid., p. 38.
- 27 Comp. Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, University of California Press 1979.
- 28 A comprehensive discussion of these arguments can be found in Léon Robin, *Pyrrhon et le Scepticisme Grec*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France 1944, part 3, chap. 1; or Adam Krokiewicz, *Sceptycyzm Grecki*, Warszawa, Pax 1964, vol. 2.

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