

Differentia: Review of Italian Thought

Number 8 *Combined Issue 8-9 Spring/Autumn*

Article 10

1999

Community/Difference: The Tragic Community of Beings

Adelino Zanini

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia>

Recommended Citation

Zanini, Adelino (1999) "Community/Difference: The Tragic Community of Beings," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*: Vol. 8 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol8/iss1/10>

This document is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* by an authorized editor of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu, hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu.

Community/ Difference: The Tragic Community of Beings

Adelino Zanini

1. Modern/Postmodern

Il problema filosofico della modernità era rappresentato dalla condizione del soggetto come essere capace di diventare plurale; problema lasciato insoluto dalla modernità è il soggetto divenuto plurale ma, per sua condizione, ritiratosi in universi singolari, assolutamente omogenei nella loro forma, quanto irripetibili nella loro serialità. Una stessa condizione, riprodotta in serie, ma non più vissuta come mezzo per proporre il plurale come valore capace di superare quella serie. Io vedo in ciò quanto di più irresolubile esista nell'orizzonte del pensiero critico. La condizione moderna ha di fatto esaurito un ciclo espansivo del pensiero: ogni vocazione filosofica che ambiva ad una liberazione dell'umano dal limite si è dovuta misurare con una duplice crisi: da un lato, con l'ingovernabilità dell'oggetto che aveva contribuito a creare, dall'altro, con l'insubordinazione dei soggetti che, spesso, ne avevano anticipato lo sviluppo. La condizione moderna, dunque, quanto più ha espresso un'alta socializzazione e razionalizzazione, tanto più ha generato "luoghi" del differire, . . . caduchi non per condizione, ma per relazione—non rispetto alla potenza, ma al potere. In ciò, d'altra parte, in questo residuare e moltiplicare di potenze, il compiersi del ciclo si è tramutato in un rimando continuo. Il moderno è costante residuare dell'essere, il differire esprime potenza e residua storia. Effettivamente, tra Nietzsche e Heidegger il compimento sembrava definitivamente inverato, giacché aveva condotto fuori da ogni dialettica. In realtà, ciò che fu ribadito—oltre ogni umanesimo fenomenologico ed esistenzialistico—fu proprio l'essere come rimando: una comunità dell' essere tragico. (Zanini 1991)

Modern/Postmodern: it is certainly not a dialectical dyad, nor a time sequence. It is an unsolved problematic point—perhaps with no solution—almost an abyss, from which the philosophical intelligence of the last ten years has not managed to emerge¹. The Modern is unresolved, because it is unresolvable. The Postmodern is not the fulfillment of any tradition, because Western metaphysics cannot be fulfilled until collective forms of subjectivity—lacerated and plural as much as you like—deposit an absent reminder of being. For these reasons, I am

convinced that it is useless to try to define a time scansion, ages of thought defined in time by a Modernity eventually achieved and by a Postmodernity displayed before us in any case—if you like, as a simple strong “ideology.” The presence of a possible, fatal, certainly indefinite, hypothetical “transit” is looming up.

All this in order to put forward two aspects: I doubt it is possible to assume the diversity between Modern and Postmodern as an irrevocable time transaction; I doubt it is necessary to label postmodern ideology as progressive or not. We are faced with a given theoretical reality: again bringing up the question of the essential paradigms of Modernity—rationality and subject, *in primis*—articulated in sociological, scientific and philosophical reflections. This reality is strong. It is, of course, a reality which is implicit in the modernity of authors such as Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Heidegger, Wittgenstein; it is a reality which was not “created” but assumed by the Postmodern, without having to “expect” any fatal achievement. This is the point: it does not go without saying that Modernity may be achieved, it does not go without saying that Postmodernity can legitimize itself only after this eventual achievement. *Il moderno persiste nel residuare un problema di fondo: una comunità dell'essere tragico; il postmoderno—quando non è chiacchiera—amplifica questo problema come condizione.*

2. Habermas versus Weber

Habermas, it must be said, has forcefully addressed this set of problems². I doubt that Habermasian solutions really solve the problems, but they do repropose, in no uncertain terms, the real questions in their doctrinal complexity. However, I do not wish to discuss the very complicated articulations of Habermasian solutions, but rather their ethical-linguistic implications, in relation to one of their polemical referents. Attention has already been given to the eventual comparison between Habermas and Lyotard's reflection³ (Rorty 1984). From my point of view, I will just consider it from one particular aspect, inherent to the rationality/subject relationship; a relationship which is dominated by a linguistic “excess”. For convenience, I'll follow the Habermasian course starting from the cruciality of the theme of rationalization in the Weberian sociology of religions.

It is well known, thanks to a series of valuable works, that the subject of rationalization has found in Weber its genesis in the comparative studies of the so-called world religions. The subject of Western rationalization, in particular, has been efficaciously understood from the subjects of the sociology of religions. Essentially, from a Weberian point of view, a religious disposition induces man to calculate the consequences of his actions on the basis of expectations; inevitably, this attitude promotes a calculating rationality, which makes man rational-

ize his existence with respect to what surpasses and confounds human sense. Of course, modern science can meet the earthly needs to face uncertainty and human pain; however, the questions which remain continue as an unacceptable limit. The search for a superior instance motivates the need to find an extreme ratio, which better explains the sense, even extreme, of the human condition.

Briefly, this is the space where the excess of the sacred is placed; on the other hand, this excess, humanizing in the extreme the presence of God in the World, can only reduce God in the World. Effectively, if God is expressed in and for the World, questioning the sense of the latter we can find the ultimate answers: the sense of this extreme ratio is resolved in the disenchantment and secularization of the divine image. By means of the paradox of theodicy, man discovers the sacred in mundane habits, he experiences, at the same time, freedom in excess: the relativization of all values, disenchantment and politeism. The line of escape of the Weberian sociology of religions can only indicate in Politics, therefore, the instance in which the Modern is accomplished: it is rationalization.

Such an outcome, until a few years ago ascribed only to Weber's political and economical works, therefore, has been completely "re-written" by Habermas in his *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. He confirms, of course, that the subject of rationalization has found in Weber its essential point in theodicy—to which it follows, moreover, not only the proclaimed politeism of values, but the most radical thesis of the loss of meaning of the World—but he comments: "In him [M.W.], that experience of nihilism—typical of his generation—which Nietzsche had strikingly emphasized, is reflected: reason splits into a plurality of spheres of value and destroys its universality (Habermas 1986, I, 349-350). It is clear that a strategic insufficiency in the Weberian theory of action is immediately apparent to Habermas, since in the very dispersion of distinct rationality, of spheres of value which break up the universality of reason, he indicates an inadequate schematism. Briefly, Weber would venture "too far when from the loss of the substantial unity of reason he infers a politeism of the strength of faith in conflict, whose irreconcilability is rooted in a pluralism of the incompatible instances of validity," because "on a formal level of argumentative satisfaction of pretenses of validity, the unity of rationality in the multiplicity of the spheres of value rationalized according to its own autonomy is guaranteed" (Habermas 1986, I, 352).

Substantially, the rejection of the Weberian "steel cage" is aimed against the insufficiency of a theory of action which, in the Weberian process of rationalization, is accomplished in rationality with respect to the aim, lacking the extension on an institutional level of that broad concept of rationality which Weber placed "as the basis of his investigations into cultural traditions" (Habermas 1986, I, 358).

Disenchantment, actually, if intended as a space of the exclusive domination of calculating action, simplifies the different meanings of the rationality of a social action.

Putting aside the considerations that the Habermasian "re-writing" stimulates, let us try to gather the essence of this complex argumentation. Evidently, the critical point is Weber's reduction of the rationality of action to mere instrumental intention. Obviously, Habermas does not intend to misunderstand the importance of instrumental rationality; but he insists on those distinctions which should save, so to say, what has "universal" value in rationality. The theory of communicative action is this: the expression of rationality, constituted by reasons of last instance, belonging to "agents with language and action," subject to, and "accessible to an objective evaluation" (Habermas 1986, I, 79).

Very synthetically, the agents, whose actions meet, cannot be intended as mere executors of processes of rationalization foreign to them; their meeting each other comes about on the horizon of a *Lebenswelt* made up of "the basic convictions, more or less widely held, ever a-problematic." This is why, of course, meeting each other and understanding each other must define the space within which "the agents communicatively set the situational contexts which are problematic each time, in need of agreement" (Habermas 1986, I, 138). The theory of communicative action is not represented, therefore, as a procedure with forgone harmonic results, at all. It is much more realistic to imagine a "groping" procedure, in which one goes "from one occasional convergence to another" (Habermas 1986, I, 177). So, the concept of *Verständigung*, as a "process of convergence between subjects capable of language and action" (Habermas 1986, I, 395), is absolutely problematic, distinct from a "mere factual convergence" and, therefore, an unimposed expression "of a rationally motivated assent." But in any case, what is relevant is this distinguishing, in rationality, between what is instrumental action from what is available for understanding between the agents capable of language and action, who establish interpersonal relationships, try to understand each other, just in order to coordinate their mutual action. Therefore, "the problematic of rationality" is an essential reference mark, since communicative actions always need "a rational interpretations in formulations" (Habermas 1986, I, 183).

The aim of the theory of communicative action is therefore to permit "a conceptualization of the social nexus of the life, which is cut out on paradoxes of modernity" (Habermas 1986, I, 46). The Habermasian project must be referred to in order to understand the Modern as is expressly indicated in the ample and less monumental subsequent reflections to *Theorie: Die philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*.

Habermas, actually, is an irreducible critic of the presumed transition between Modern and Postmodern: Modern is “unachieved project.” This is true, in so far as the meditations which should have made postmodern argumentation sensible—meaning by the latter the strenuous and radical criticism of rationality—rather than render the overcoming of the background on which the Modern is measuring itself possible—the philosophy of the subject, in the first place—have systematically re-proposed it as an unresolved theme (Habermas 1987, 57).

This is true for Hegel, whose Absolute “uses the philosophy of the subject in order to overcome the reason centered in the subject,” defining itself, however, as “the infinite process of self-connection, which absorbs within itself all the finite” (Habermas 1987, 35-37); this is true for Marx, whose philosophy of praxis “remains a variation of the philosophy of subject, which does not place reason in the meditation of the knowing subject, but in the finalistic rationality of the subject agent” (Habermas 1987, 67). Far more complex, it is true, is the process starting from the Nietzschean meditation; nevertheless, it becomes crucial for this reason: there where the tension about the Human is extreme, in fact, one reaches that “particular theodicy, according to which the world may be justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon” (Habermas 1987, 98). It follows, according to Habermas, that the Nietzschean “unmasking rational criticism of reason” is caught up “in the dilemma of a criticism of reason which refers to itself and has become total.” Substantially, “Nietzsche must affirm, (. . .), the possibility of a criticism of metaphysics, which exhumes the roots of metaphysical thought” (Habermas 1987, 100); therefore, the thought of the origins in no case overflows from Modernity: neither with Nietzsche, nor with the most radical interpreters of the end of Western metaphysics. It does not overflow with Heidegger (Habermas 1987, 141), in whose philosophy “an authentically human privilege which requires explanation” remains; nor with Derrida, who “inherits the weaknesses of a criticism of metaphysics which cannot free itself from the intention of the philosophy of the original” (Habermas 1987, 184); nor, *mutatis mutandis*, it overflows with Foucault, whose concept of Power, besides being “borrowed from the same subjective philosophy” (Habermas 1987, 278), remains moreover caught up in an indefinable antagonism “of the disqualified knowledge of the ‘people’ ” (Habermas 1987, 284).

If the instance of the reconciliation of the subject seems to be essential for Hegel and Marx, an aesthetic and ecstatic dimension seems essential for Nietzsche and Heidegger, for Derrida and Foucault. Metaphysics as Word, the subject as a Body cannot be renounced. For this reason, Modernity is at least unfinished, and Habermas repeats his point of view. The Modern is unfinished because the disownment of a strong subject by a weak subject does not go out-

side a philosophy of the subject. As the different assumptions of a weak subject are based on the contraposition between instrumental reason and the crisis of reason, they lose, with the sense of discursive rationality, the possibility of changing the approach, of renouncing the immense task of crowning metaphysics.

Only to such a renunciation would follow in fact the possibility to instigate "the subversive force of the same modern thought against the paradigm of the philosophy of the conscience applied from Descartes to Kant" (Habermas 1987, 312). And there would follow also the retrieval of rationality as a disposition of agents and talking subjects, able to acquire a fallible knowledge. Substantially, the leading of communicative action as far as "conceiving the rational praxis as embodied in history, in society, in bodies and in languages." (Habermas 1987, 318). In the social relationships—where instrumental action is entwined with communicative action—the *Lebenswelt*, as the original belonging to every agent, would substitute the "conscience" of the subject: "With the concepts, which integrate each other, of communicative action and of the world of life, there is introduced a difference between determinations which—differently from the difference between labour and nature—does not dissolve again as moments in a superior unity." "The procedures for the discursive formation of will established, in a structurally differentiated way, in the world of life are destined to ensure social links of everyone with everyone, through the equal considerations of the interests of each individual" (Habermas 1987, 341-45).

We accept this hypothesis provisionally—even though it is no less important that the accomplishment of the Modern "exclaimed" by Heidegger or by Foucault does not allude purposely to any postmodern typology. We accept, hypothetically, that the Habermasian confrontation with the philosophy of praxis is resolute. A singular situation results. Habermas, by "linguistically" confirming the existence of a social, dialogical link, arrives at proposal which are at least partially similar (Habermas 1987, 363) to those which Lyotard reaches after denying the resistance of the same social link. Evidently, something is wrong. Perhaps, the maintenance of rationality is not sufficient to differentiate Habermasian language from Lyotardian language; perhaps, the "linguistic" act works, both in the accomplishment of Habermasian's Modern and in Lyotard's invoked dissolution of it, as an exemplifying and simplifying referent. This hypothesis is, all things considered, not far-fetched, and is sufficiently easy to structure itself through a concise comparison.

3. Lyotard versus Habermas

In comparison with Habermas, Lyotard's criticism starts from an

essential assumption: the search for the linguistic univocity in ordinary language is certainly "une tâche noble," however, it remains a platonic instance: it remains dialogue. Or rather, such a search must bear a weight which in the end is excessive: the weight of an indemonstrable universality and rationality of communication. The dialogical instance is in essence platonic in the end, because it does not grasp in the "épilogues de la modernité"—Kant and Wittgenstein—the drying up of a unirational and universalistic approach (Lyotard 1983, 11). To be explicit, Lyotard's criticism of Habermas contained in *La condition postmoderne* points out that the Habermasian instance of the *Diskurs* gets caught up in "the search for a universal consent," obtainable in a dialogical way; in this way, says Lyotard, the heteronomy of the rules and the search for dissent disappear. In the Habermasian *Diskurs*, in fact, the modern instance of emancipation, as a "universal" discourse, remains integral.

Lyotard's criticism of Habermas are certainly pertinent. One could in any case ask if Lyotard's criticism on the one hand, and the Habermasian universalism, on the other, are really irreducible if they are translated in terms of "practical reason." It is true, in Lyotard, the *différend* is the instance which removes the dialogical consent as *telos*; nevertheless, I do not feel that in the latest Habermas, the consent, feasible in a dialogical form, interprets its universality as completeness. Of course, rational instance has an insuppressible space for Habermas—not like Lyotard's—and it confides in the dialogically feasible agreement. It does not presuppose a universal consent, it is a local consent, even if it is, of course, on a dialogical basis.

On the other hand—when we reach the "practical reason" of the linguistic act, what we are interested in—not even Lyotard can renounce mutual understanding, a transitory consent (probably, one could discuss about the means which make this consent possible; it may express itself through silences, but it is still a relationship, otherwise the *con-senso* (*consensus*) is a contradiction in terms). If this is true, the following comparison may be indicative.

Habermas:

For both the [interpreting] sides, the interpretative task consists of including the other's interpretation of the situation in one's own interpretation [. . .]. However, this does not mean that the interpretation must produce in any case, or normally, a stable, differentiated correlation unequivocally. The stability and unequivocality rather represent the exception in normal everyday communicative praxis. More realistic is the image of a diffused, fragmentary communication, which undergoes a constant revision, which is only momentarily successful, in which the participants base themselves on unclear and problematic presuppositions, groping their way from one chance convergence to another. (1986, I, 177).

Lyotard:

The recognition of the heteromorphia of the linguistic games is a first step It implies (. . .) the relinquishment of terror, which supposes and attempts to realize its isomorphia. The second step is the principle on the basis of which, if consent exists about the rules which define each game and about the "norms" which are put into practice in it, this consent ought to be local, obtained by the interlocutors moment by moment and subject to possible revision. (1981, 120)

Dialogue/dissension: it would be wrong to reduce the differences excessively—not by accident Habermas proposes as the critical object that Postmodern which Lyotard would just ascertain. However, it may be noted that the focalization of ethical intelligence on linguistic acts greatly reduces the margins of differing, where one reaches a "practical reason" departing from strong common starting points—in this case, Wittgenstein. This, in fact, may transform itself into a real linguistic excess, if it is deprived of that mystic enchantment which Wittgenstein explicitly leads to. Substantially, the problems are at least twofold: the first contemplates the respective coherences of these linguistic excesses; the latter should measure the degree of credibility, in terms of "practical reason", which these excesses may exhibit since they are both expressions of what surpasses any residual of subjective philosophy.

Now, the excess does not create any flaw in the internal coherence of the Lyotardian postmodern theory: not just because every philosophy of history is naturally absent, but because every intention towards projectable results in history is absent as well: Politics, after all, is just one of the tragic beings, aesthetically lived as "rules," with no necessary links with rationality. Linguistic excess, in this case, does not show anything, it just shows itself in the transparency realized by the Modern and accomplished by the Postmodern.

Similar observations, for obvious reasons, are not applicable to Habermas. Not so much because there is a historicistic residual in his theory, but because the intention towards history (which is not philosophy of history) is there and it is shown in the conviction that rationality has an unequivocal place and that transparency, disenchantment, though dialectically irredeemable, are beings given but modifiable by rationally motivated reasons of agreement. Of course, no matter what Habermas says, communicative action does not turn into the semantics of language: anyway it is hard to understand how it can mediate an undoubted privilege of linguistic action, where language is a later ratification of otherwise explicit behavior; or rather, as the undoubted privilege of linguistic action is not necessarily the privilege of "saying," even where the source of *con-sentire* and *dis-sentire* are rationally unpronounceable. It is in these terms, besides, that Lyotard's

criticism of Habermas explains itself, because linguistic excess in both authors assumes strategies which are differently connected with rationality.

What returns to reproduce similitudes between our two authors is the demolition of any residual subjective philosophy as a common strategy just to linguistic excess—demolition in which simplifying moments are certainly not missing. The most important of these is surely the one according to which the subject is only what the Word represents (or can no longer represent) as it is conscience. In short, it is the Cartesian subject which Husserl criticized, in this form meditated and re-meditated by the Heideggerian and hermeneutical tradition, easily “compromised” by Luhmannian functionalism, or, it is a vulgar Marxian Prometheus, of which, thank God, we cannot remember. Such a subject, always singular, not by accident (Nancy 1990), has fatally crashed on a discursive track—from Descartes to Foucault—which is really suspicious. Perhaps, it is not by chance that Habermas simplifies Foucault considerably, especially the latest Foucault and, in general, it is not by chance that strategy of difference is understood by Habermas just as a simple polysemy.

It may be observed that even this similitude is, after all, irrelevant, if one admits that Lyotardian linguistic excess does not allude to a space in which social action is redefined. Actually, things are not quite like this. The Lyotard of *La condition postmoderne*, at least, reaches a “practical reason,” whose results are not significantly far from Habermasian results as already indicated above. And now for the second problem.

In short, I am convinced that the definition of a linguistically based “practical reason”—both if it exasperates the Wittgensteinian disenchantment without taking on its mystical disclosure, and if it transcendentalistically re-interprets it as a rational universal—in any case, reaches an apparent solution to the theme of Modernity: the subject. Both the Lyotardian linguistic excess and the Habermasian excess talk about transcendental subjects, which do interpret a large part in the culture of modernity, but not in all of its essential articulations inherent to the subjects (the plural is deliberate). Apart from that, then—apart from the fact, that is, if this really is the crunch with the cultures of Marx and Weber—another aspect is no less curious: both Lyotard and Habermas, in the end, invoke, in support of the “practical reason”, empirical subjects, about which they are unable to say anything. The fact is, that proclaiming the end of a transcendental subject is not so important if it serves to recuperate, sociologically, spaces for generic empirical subjects—both if they are Habermasian dialogical agents and Lyotardian decision-makers. Either these subjects are empirically qualified, or it is useless to invoke even their marginal presence. The linguistic excess is not therefore resolute—it remains

this side of Wittgenstein.

In other words, if the passage from Modern to Postmodern is in these terms of difficult definition, it is also due to this: to the constant remaining of the theme of the "community of tragic beings," within a philosophical language which either does not have the courage to disown the human Voice and, therefore, continues to redeem its sense within a dialogic "practical reason"; or, even though it does have the courage, it continues to play at returning with "practical reason" as a disagreement (where the human Voice is not removed, but the pretenses of its unirationality are annulled). In both case linguistic excess reaches reiterated extremes, but never the radical threshold of real silence, there where Wittgenstein is silent: "This rushing at the limits of language is ethics" (Wittgenstein, 1980, 21-22)

4. The community of tragic beings

What is the sense of the "community of tragic beings," involved in this silence? The osmotic proceeding of development and progress was characteristic of full Modernity; what we are now living as our condition is, still, the constant evolution of the roots of evolution, prescinding from any normative idea of progress. We are that is "caught" in an ambiguous development—which does not mean "weak" or without explicit connections of interest, of course—the more energetic, the more void of normative referents, which are in fact untenable, because they are unable "to bear" a horizon of possible accomplishment. Modernity, the ideology of progress aimed at a dialectical accomplishment, a kind of self-overcoming in development; its normative ideal was certainly "utopian," but compulsory and therefore regulative. Now, however, it is clear that there is no dialectical relationship between development and progress, since the former meets and ignores major limits—geographical, ethical, ecological—well before the latter can "accomplish itself," independently of this accomplishment. Development no longer alludes to any "accomplishing-in-progress."

This is manifestly true in economic terms, it is true in political terms. In fact, it has not only produced the enormous economic differences between the world hemispheres, but also our democratic political systems, in which the maximum transparency—and therefore the maximum development reached—corresponds to the minimum involvement. However, it is only an apparent contradiction, since it is really a terminal manifestation of a unique ambiguity—in the literal sense of the word—maximum transparency and strategic withdrawal in the *ipseitas*, to which, "enlarged," an accomplished tragic instance corresponds: where the Modern remains an insuppressible residual and it resolves itself in a real aesthetic of the tragic.

This aesthetic of the tragic strengthens, at the same time, the ethical undecidability of politics and its resolution in government. It resolves, that is, what appears contradictory and is really ambiguous, replacing it in a growing complexity. Actually, undecidability and decisionism are both—even though opposites—possible extensions of the epistemological figure of complexity. Complexity is “a negative notion: it expresses the fact that one does not know or one does not understand a system, in spite of a background of global knowledge which lets us know and denominate this system (. . .) it implies that one has a global perception, and at the same time the perception not to control it in detail” (Atlan 1986, 96). The decisionistic approach, of course, makes an “instrumental” use of the indeterminate and resolves politics in technique; the opposite approach, *viceversa*, grasps in the indeterminate the infeasibility of one technique and of that technique. What remains common to both is anyway the “human” groundlessness of politics and the resolution of the tragic in minimal ethics. In any case, that is, the complexity is an autopoietic figure: it interprets possibility or impossibility of politics, always, as government—whether it is efficacious or not. Politics is “humanly” unfoundable, substantially, because it cannot be “other” with respect to government. Both are shown in complexity, in the breaking down of self-referential processes, in the hyperreality of a complete practical disenchantment. The human instance does not found politics, therefore, since no superior Periclean rationality founds a privileged language of politics. What is residual of human is only spread: minimal ethics. Without any excessive forcing, politics, as a relationship of relationships, may be reflected in determinate epistemological forms—“politeistic,” “gnostic,” “dual” (cf. Bateson 1972), deprived of subjects—forms which do not admit “one” rationality and, therefore, characterize politics as a contingent government of complexity. *At any rate, the problem remains: is it impossible that what presents itself as a postmodern transcendental aesthetic of the tragic be transfigurabile into an ethics of the tragic community of beings?*

Let us assume this “datum” in order to climb back up the slope of ethics, let us assume it, shifting however the contingent from the political sphere to the ethical sphere. Let us turn to Baudrillard (1987). The velocity of development characterizes social experience as a desert in the eighties: flat territory, where any reference is absent or transitory and therefore subject to constant shifting and cancellation. The causal nexii are therefore forgotten; time no longer has any depth, it does not permit plotting of indicative sedimentations, because time is spending in the immediate of the eternal equal: the line, the geometrical element whose curves, at the limit of possible experience, is only imaginary. Social experience has lost the place where it can be found, because it no longer has a memory. The “triumph of surface” creates an absent

space where traces are unthinkable more than unobtainable. The velocity of elapsing leaves no wake: it is pure velocity, total, which does not remember the starting point and therefore has no destination to reach. Amnesia makes the wayfarer inebriated, makes of it just a moved subject, moving on a surface with no indications inherent to the travelled and worn road, inherent to the road ahead. Pure velocity takes the same wayfarer towards a possible catastrophe, there, where even the inebriation of pure velocity, of the straight passing into the immediate, is no longer noticeable by any experience. Inebriation of development, in fact, leads to the desert, to the absent totality of social experience: to the desert, or the place of apparent lack of life, whose ecological balance actually keeps our infinite social history in its complex geology, in its "baroque linearity", in its past splendor, in its remaining contingency.

The long metaphor may embody, I think, some essential assumptions: the inebriation of development leads to a desert, to absent totality of the represented human experience. Politics is a constitutive part of this desert, it governs its "baroque linearity" in the form of repeated and complex contingencies. Its abstraction is equal to the transparency generated by development. Ethics, *vice versa*, has no relationship with any contingency, because it is the set of contingencies, as opaque as the idea of *pro-gresso* in complexity, of a striding forward. Therefore, ethics is a *residual*, an *indicative sediment*, since the relationship between development and progress is not resolvable, nor subject to accomplishment: it is a paradox, a modern puzzle which is destined to last as long as the collective character of its remaining lasts. Politics consumes time, theologially it leads to the end of times, or better, it is at the beginning and end of time. It is theophany which has been accomplished: powers legitimate powers, contingency creates complexity. However, ethics recuperate marginal time, what is left: in the uncertainty of duration it alludes to a destiny—shrouded in ruins—which is not to be accomplished.

The angel of history must have this aspect. He faces the past. Where we are faced with a series of events, he sees a single catastrophe, which unceasingly accumulates more and more ruins and it spills them at his feet. He wishes to restrain himself, awake the dead and put the broken together again. But a storm is blowing up from paradise, which has got caught up in his wings, and is so strong as to prevent the angel from closing his wings. This storm irresistibly pushes the angel towards the future, to which he turns his back, while the mound of ruins rises to the sky in front of him. (Benjamin 1981, 80).

What is ineludible is the tragic: but in the aesthetic image of politics the instantaneous time of that image is consumed; in the ethical image our destiny remains in a deep time.

Utopia? Not really: no ideal place returns as a lost language. Contingency, however: "for no other cause a thing is called contingent, except that it regards a defect in our knowledge" (Spinoza 1973, I,33,1). Contingent ethics is, in fact, what in its complexity does not permit: a discovery of its own "true" external determination, a sort of emanationism. What cannot be determined positively is its cause and, therefore, its immediate opacity, its depth in time, its residual of future memory. It is not redemption, it is not promised accomplishment: it is a simple and essential expression of imperfect being, of the collective body tragically outstretched. Politics resolves itself in an aesthetic of the tragic, since it fixes one of the possible instantaneous solutions of the contingent in the complexity, in the image of the accomplishment of times; ethics does not resolve itself in anything, it remains the tragic [tried] in duration, since the complex lives in it as contingent, and this contingent is thus constitutively unsolvable.

Negri observed (1987, 54) that "through the discovery of contingency, we put forward in radical terms the problem of foundation (...)—this foundation is the starting point for the maximum widening of the dimension of possibility. A tragic possibility, an eventual[ity] that our reason and heart cannot sometimes bear—the destruction of being, such a generalized death as not to have repetition—in a word, the end of time." Independently of whether or not we consider the problem of foundation, I believe it is essential to think of ethics as an unfolding of possibilities; or rather, in the terms which have been used so far, it seems essential to consider ethics not as a tragic image, an instant which resolves time, but as tragic duration, as far as possible linked to the safeguarding of a memory of the future: ethics can only be a memory of the future. The extreme speeding-up of human trying has cancelled time-duration, substituting it with time as a succession of instants. As we have said, politics, precisely for this temporal breaking-up, can govern the complex through the contingent; ethics, *viceversa*, suffers this breaking up, as it is a complex contingent. In short, if an idea of composition may be given, it will not be an idea of "recomposition," of "redressing;" it may only be given as a "possibility of possibilities," precisely, the beginning of sedimentation of a contingent in the complex contingency, of a new "remembering" of time starting from now: memory of the future. Ethics is the more tragic side of a thinking which is exposed to the death of time; the extreme possibility of not reaching the end of time, of not consuming the future in the instant: the Modern as an insoluble residual.

NOTES

1. It would not be too farfetched to state that Italian philosophical culture has attained an international relevance, especially when, beginning in the early eighties, it tackled this thorny problem, the question of modernity. It is understood that there had been some profound views before that, but they were often considered as secondary against an originary European culture, or at any rate, too heavily bogged down by ideologies, whether Catholic or marxist, which made them either too radical or too retrograde for the international community. The paradox of the '80s is that suddenly the national fortunes are inverted: Gentile resurfaces, while Gramsci disappears; Del Noce reemerges as Paci and Preti vanish in the background. Simultaneously, the doors of the philosophical communities are open wide to non-Italian thought (thanks also to unusual and questionable alliances).

2. In Italy, the thought of Habermas has enjoyed a vast reception and diffusion, first, in the strong French critique of Western capitalist rationality/pragmatism, then that baluardo beyond the lagare of luhmanian technocratic functionalism, as it is thus originally interpreted in the ethic of the *Diskurs*. Especially on the Left, its reception has been by necessity diversified, whether in relation to the evolution of Habermasian thought, or in relation to the diverse schools of thought and to the changing nature of its occurrence/application in political practice.

3. The fortune/reputation of Lyotard in Italy is owed above all to his pamphlet *La condition postmoderne* and consequently, to more strictly philosophical texts. On the other hand, the translation of this text in 1979 happened at a moment in in which more than ever, philosophy recognized the growing impact of information technology and the technologies of knowledge. One has only to look at the collected issues of "alfabeta" or "aut aut" of those years.

WORKS CITED

- Atlan, H. [1979], *Entre le cristal et la fumée*. Paris (Ital. tr., Florence, 1986).
 Bateson, G. [1972], *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. New York.
 Baudrillard, J. [1986], *Amérique*. Paris (Ital. tr., Milan 1987).
 Benjamin, W. . . . [1955], *Schriften*. Berlin (Ital. tr., Turin, 1981).
 Habermas, J. [1981], *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Frankfurt.
 ———. [1985], *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*. Frankfurt.
 Lyotard, J-F. [1979], *La condition postmoderne*. Paris.
 ———. [1983], *Le différend*. Paris.
 Nancy, J.-L. [1990], *La communauté désœuvrée*. Paris.
 Negri, A. [1987], *La fabbrica del soggetto*. Livorno.
 Rorty, R. [1984], "Habermas, Lyotard et la postmodernité", in *Critique*, 442.
 Spinoza, B. [1973], *Etica*. Torino.
 Wittgenstein, L. [1980], *Lezioni e conversazioni*. Milano (cf. original in *The Philosophical Review*, 1965, LXXV, Ithaca: Cornell University Press).
 Zanini, A. [1991], "La pensée "faible" entre être et différence. Esquisse critique d'une éthique molle", in the anthology *Le gai renoncement*. Paris.