

## **Antidogmatism and weak thought.**

*The hinges of Problematicism in the time of Crisis*

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Anti-dogmatism and weak thought constitute one of the highest points in the evolutionary process of civilization. The ability to think in an open, critical, disinterested way is the condition set by Morin upon leaving the “second prehistory” and is the distinctive trait of the School of Pedagogical Problematicism. Unfortunately, over the last few decades, the dominant culture has appropriated the languages of this tradition and converted them to the rhetoric of the negative, with the effects of absolutizing their nihilistic implications and relapse into dogmatism. What arises is a groundless metaphysics, which rests on the ratio of arbitrariness and which does not possess the necessary requisites to go beyond the reasons for critical thought: a setback, certainly not a contribution to historical and cultural evolution.

*Keywords:* Anti-dogmatism, development, rationality, crisis, return to metaphysics

*Antidogmatismo e pensiero debole. Gli snodi del problematicismo nel tempo della Crisi*

L'antidogmatismo e il pensiero debole costituiscono uno dei punti più alti del processo evolutivo della civiltà. La capacità di pensare in modo aperto, critico e disinteressato è la condizione posta da Morin all'uscita dalla “seconda preistoria” ed è il tratto distintivo della Scuola del Problematicismo Pedagogico. Purtroppo, negli ultimi decenni, la cultura dominante si è appropriata dei linguaggi di questa tradizione e li ha convertiti in una retorica

del negativo, con l'effetto di assolutizzarne le implicazioni nichilistiche e la ricaduta nel dogmatismo. Ne deriva una metafisica priva di fondamento, che poggia sulla *ratio* dell'arbitrarietà e che non possiede i requisiti necessari per andare oltre le ragioni del pensiero critico: una battuta d'arresto, non certo un contributo all'evoluzione storica e culturale.

*Parole-chiave*: antidogmatismo, evoluzione, razionalità, crisi, ritorno alla metafisica

### *Wanderers in the garden of history*

Antidogmatism and weak thought are the dominating cyphers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: they were imposed towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the philosophy of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, they took hold in the following decades with existentialism, pragmatism, analytical philosophy, the various forms of problematicism and phenomenology. Fuelling the metaphysical crisis, even Marxism contributed to the birth of critical thought, along with psychoanalysis and human and social sciences.

In Italy, we owe antidogmatism first and foremost to Banfi's thought. Recalling the central categories of metaphysical tradition, subject and object, becoming and transcendental, essence and experience, Banfi shows how it is possible to free these categories from their traditional dogmatic assumptions and make them an instrument of critical thought. Of course, in doing so he changes their consolidated representations and helps us to defuse a whole series of automatisms, which we still take for granted and which we still have trouble letting go of: for example, that related to the identification between subject, consciousness, intentionality and freedom, between object and inanimate reality (Banfi, 1959).

Obviously, the antidogmatic effort played a key role in the years in which Banfi wrote *Principi di una teoria della ragione* (1967) and in those immediately afterwards in which he began working as a university professor. Banfi inaugurated this reflexive tradition in 1926, at the height of the Fascist regime, forming a generation of intellectuals who would play a major role in cultural life after the Second World War: Anceschi, Bertin, Cantoni, Formaggio, Paci, Papi, Rossanda are just some of the names that can be mentioned here,

all sharing a widespread commitment to rejuvenating our intellectual debate and the academic life of our country. Aware that being antidogmatic may not have been enough, Banfi integrated his critical rationalism with a Marxist perspective, to which he assigned the task of guiding political and social action towards the philosophy of practice (Banfi, 1960).

He did this by making two perspectives of thought that were traditionally irreducible to each other dialogue together: the Kantian and the Hegelian. From Kant he borrowed and developed a historicist concept of the mind, dropping all references to intellect, due to their ontological and mentalistic implications, and radically identified with the concept of reason: working in the praxic and historical-effectual world, this demand called to take on the most varied and heterogeneous nuances depending on the referred historical context. From Hegel he kept the strength of a dialectic tension, which supports the process of evolution towards the construction of increasingly complex and sophisticated syntheses: in place of the absolute Spirit is the sense of a cultural action which is declined historically, due to the specific priorities of each era. Underlying this different concept of dialectic is the recognition of the elements of legitimacy of both poles of antinomy, which make it impossible for one to prevail over the other (Papi, 1961).

We would have to wait for the generation after Banfi's pupils to see the birth of "weak thought": in the climate of the Nietzschean and Heideggerian renaissance, Bodei, Vattimo, Rorty, Zabala modernised Banfian thought, without distorting its underlying effects. Indeed, weak thought feeds off the so-called "ontology of weakening": that is to say, it is not a matter of abandoning metaphysics, renouncing all its conceptual and categorial constructs, but of continuing to move within it and re-interpret it. Going back to key words, purifying them of all absolutism, highlighting the semantic and heuristic potential, without re-proposing the constraints and traps that those words brought with them from previous traditions of thought. Thinking became an essentially hermeneutic operation, in which both the texts of metaphysical tradition and reality itself, in turn thought of as text, were rewritten and re-interpreted (Zabala, 2012). At the height of Constructivism, thought is convinced of being able to exercise a significant conditioning power on the historical effectual world. The interpretations of reality thus became more important than reality itself (Watzlawick, 1988).

In any case, the 1980s were the greatest period of well-being after the Second World War: the Berlin Wall would soon fall, in Western countries

welfare seemed a fail-safe construction, the trust in democracies was so high as to discourage all possible forms of pessimism, to an extent that even the sliding wage scale seemed to be an 'outdated' accomplishment. In this context, weak thought developed neither strong Messianic expectations nor the propensity to political and social commitment: we were convinced that the philosopher was a wanderer in the garden of history, and even the fact of thinking of history as a garden rather than a minefield says much about the spirit of the era. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Francis Fukuyama was even convinced that humanity was close to the extinction of historical development and that, thanks to liberal democracy, mature capitalism was destined to blossom into a period of peace and the overcoming of conflicts: almost taking on board Hegel's thought, while dismissing that of Marx (Fukuyama, 1992).

At that time, being antidogmatic was relatively simple: the traditional bonds of identity and community had weakened, along with the languages of utopia, while the diversification of lifestyles and the culture of differences questioned common sense. Teachers formed with Gentile and Croce had left the schools, while the incoming generation had experienced the events of 1968 first-hand. The new generations were taking part in a culture of education, family and school, which was certainly more democratic than the previous.

*Returning to or overcoming the past? Weak thought and its evolutionary tensions*

Much water has flowed under the bridge since those days filled with naïve optimism, and that water is far from transparent! We don't really need today to repeat how the gap between rich and poor has grown, that social inequality has become increasingly visible, what is ahead of us does not seem to be a world able to reabsorb conflicts and disparities... In this changed order of reality, our confidence in fair and progressive development has waned, but even more serious is the fact that the trust in being able to guide historical development in a positive direction has also waned. The optimism of Constructionism seems to have become the will of Constructionists, those who think they can impose their own will and point of view, beyond any legitimate criterion.

This turning point also raises epistemological issues, forcing Problematicism to ask if it is possible to continue to believe in the effectiveness of weak thought and the centrality of the antidogmatic exercise or if it is a matter of weak models, to be relegated to the time of metaphysical crisis, unable to deal with the problems of our time. Over the last decade, several authors have tried to leave these models behind them, thinking for various reasons that they are responsible for a process of involution and weakening of the philosophical debate and the retreat of knowledge into itself and its most recent outcomes. One of the first to express themselves in this way was Maurizio Ferraris, who in his *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, published in 2012, attacks Constructionism with these words:

That water is H<sub>2</sub>O is wholly independent from any of my knowledge, indeed water was H<sub>2</sub>O even before the birth of chemistry, and it would still be if we all disappeared from the face of the Earth. Especially as regards non-scientific experience, water wets and fire burns, whether we know it or not... At a certain point, there is something that resists us. It is what I call “unamendability” (Ferraris, 2012, p. 30).

In saying this, Ferraris even attacks Descartes and Kant, guilty, the first, of having made us doubt the gnoseological legitimacy of sensory experience, and the second, of having convinced us that the mind is not a neutral, disinterested mirror of those parts of experience it sets out to investigate. Behind the words of Ferraris lie the degeneration of an epistemological approach, which, according to him, risks giving more weight to the interpretations of facts than to the facts themselves, as if someone could delete entire portions of reality, merely by denying their existence. Obviously, it is a naïve concept of weak thought and its hermeneutic declination, which, in the words of Eco, does not take into account the differences between good and bad interpretations: i.e., the real exists in its radical autonomy, after which, when trying to know it, we have to elaborate interpretations that change in depth and meaning, depending on their ability to give meaning to the observed facts (Eco, 2012).

In this historical time, for example, the analyses underlining

- the increasingly reduced spaces of market economies and the prevailing logics of financial speculation (Caritas, 2017);
- the predatory attitude the world’s powerful express towards civil society,

- to the extent in which we talk of the upturned class struggle, rich against poor (Gallino and Borgna, 2012);
- the increasing deregulation of economic relations, which make historical development revert to dimensions of cohabitation which are closer to those of the jungle, despite being urban (Napoleoni, 2008);
  - the close ties between the process of economic globalisation and the delocalisation of means of production (Chossudovsky, 2003);
  - the reduction in processes of economic and social emancipation through school, which no longer seems to constitute a tool of potential social elevation (Baldacci, 2014)

are incontrovertible data of the social life of our time, not empty words and unfounded interpretations. Similarly, it would be controversial to state that the delocalisation of means of production has improved the quality of life in countries that are less developed than our own, as on the other hand it could have, rather than ending up, for example, as new forms of exploitation of child labour. Different interpretations are possible, of course, but would these be “good interpretations”?

It appears obvious that the attempt to overcome weak thought through the return to naïve forms of realism and old positivism is doomed to failure: even in the terms of Hegel, one of the philosophers from whom Ferraris deems it possible to restart, we tend to hide the value of epistemological evolution of our time, hiding the dialectic forms of one of its phases: to be overcome, weak thought requires that new conditions for overcoming it be identified, which are able to impress a further evolutionary boost on philosophy, which demands the elaboration of a broader and more comprehensive synthesis. In this regard, more interesting is the thought of two other authors whose works fall into the field of Neorealism: M. Gabriel and Quentin Meillassoux. The first wonders:

What is new about “new realism”? Just this: full awareness of coming after the post-modern, having crossed (and hopefully overcome) the prevailing anti-realism of the latter half of last century... its fundamental features... share not a dismissive critique of anti-realism, but rather the attempt to conserve their emancipatory demands... (Gabriel, 2012, p. 49).

In this direction, Gabriel describes a hyper-realist ontology, whose facts include not only all that materially exists but all that contributes to giving meaning to reality. Herein, it borrows the very concept of existence, understood as “the appearance of a field of meaning”: the existence of Harry Potter is no less true and realistic than that of Christ or Buddha, that of water or the universe.

Now, as far as I am concerned, Gabriel’s hyper-realism is undoubtedly convincing: there is no doubt that there are eras and contexts in which certain words and interpretations are as founded and convincing as the empirical findings of reality itself, and the fact that the adventures of Harry Potter have contributed to modelling the *forma mentis* of an entire generation of western society seems hard to dispute.

This is all understandable, but how does Gabriel’s hyper-realism defeat the anti-realism of weak thought? Underlying the latter is firstly that antidogmatic assumption that demands the renunciation of all forms of absolutisation of knowledge, so Harry Potter or Christ or Buddha are not valid in their own right and abstractly, but in the context in which they acquire meaning and generate their own fields of meaning, and on this plane the interpretations are in any case bound to fuel the cultural debate and assert different principles. The interrelations that have to be established between the various fields of experience and knowledge are not themselves clear and neutral, but come from a continuous interpretation of the validity of the theoretical analyses and their empirical, praxic and experiential findings.

And now on to Meillassoux. Knowing is possible if we are also able to situate knowledge outside of the human universe. The study of facticity must push us in the direction of those ancestral dimensions of existence, “before the appearance of the human species and all forms of life on Earth.” To know, we must linger “on the time of science, and not that of conscience”, so that the analysis is not conditioned by the experiences of the subject who sets out to investigate a given phenomenon. In this sense, the subject should be reduced to its own bodiliness, and knowledge itself should be anchored to the representation of the outside (Meillassoux, 2012). What can we say? In my opinion, an interesting limiting perspective which may be valid as a regulating element of an otherwise self-referential, inward-looking knowledge which I myself used, even before Meillassoux published *Dopo la finitudine*, in a work from 2003 (Fabbri, 2003).

*Knowledge, between experience and facticity: it is not antidogmatism but crisis that is in crisis*

These studies however return obsessively to the concept of facticity: why facticity and not experience? Because experience calls into question all those who take part in the events of facticity, orienting them and conditioning them or in any case reacting with them. The demand could be that of absolutizing facts, without incorporating in them their connections with the life of our species. There is no doubt that science has done and can do this in relation to some moments of the process of evolution, but does it make sense to do so today, in a phase of the evolutionary process in which the role of humanity is increasingly pervasive and in which everything that is extra-human now lives at sidereal distances from humans themselves?

None of these cases create the conditions that allow the essential elements of contemporary epistemology (antidogmatism, relativity of knowledge, contextualisation of sources, methods, concepts, the epistemology of connections) to be considered incorporated into an epistemology of a superior order that overcomes them. It is not enough to declare ourselves posterior to post-modernity, to be freed from it; equally, it is not enough to declare ourselves post-reflexive in order to be emancipated from reflexivity. The interesting signal that can be caught in some of these studies is the will to subtract the philosophical and cultural analysis from a risk of hermeneutic self-referentiality, which privileges exegetical debate over confrontation with reality (Corbi, 2010). On this level, moreover, Bertin and Contini, albeit from a perspective akin to weak thought, such as that of Pedagogical Problematicism, had already expressed the fear, referring to Horkheimer's strong model of reason, that the projecting and emancipatory faculties of anti-dogmatism could weaken (Bertin, Contini, 1982, n. e. 2004).

However, the underlying problem – in relation to which it is unacceptable to regress the thought to pre-Kantian outcomes – is the very conception of reality, which from Kant onwards cannot be studied and understood except through experience: and all experience, however dominant and pervasive, is part of reality, but does not fully superimpose on it. No analysis is able to give us back the face of reality as such, not even in a globalised world like ours, which has drastically reduced the processes of natural, cultural and social diversification. From this point of view, the very concept of “realism”



is dangerous, for it threatens to foster forced identifications between the knowledge and the reality one presumes to know.

At this historical moment, for instance, we attempt to declare the crisis of antidogmatism and weak thought, but this is done in a social and cultural context that promotes and conveys new absolutisms. The most radical of these is that of a reality of Crisis, which is increasingly entropic and hard to govern, as it is removed from all logic of political, economic and cultural negotiation (Fabbri, 2014; 2018; 2019). Let us ask ourselves: can knowledge of the “reality” of our Time really be dismissed through nihilistic analyses, which one-sidedly highlight its involitional and dissolving factors? The writer believes that these analyses are riddled with an excess of realism, that they are vitiated by a problem of hyper-realism, so that they turn out to be “too” realistic and convincing to be true. Reality, however, is more complex, and complexity entails ambivalence and its contradictions: there are also crises, of course, and the dissolution of traditional values, but behind them lie processes of transformation of the world, of history, of the human condition, of civilisation, which cannot be read only in a negative light (Fabbri, 2019).

Once again, we are in a conflict: among those who wish to take the current process of evolution to extreme consequences and those who fear it, looking to a past in which strong – when not authoritarian – community identities inhibited the experimentation of individual differences with regret and nostalgia. For some, antidogmatism and weak thought are obsolete and outdated, the heritage of a certain phase of historical development which would have led to the current situation of decadence. For others, on the other hand, they embody the reasons of the time, constituting the only tools able to govern the crises and conflicts of our era.

To go beyond this contradiction, thought, and in particular pedagogic thought, must be able to interpret the reasons of both, without underestimating the fears of those who fear the current changes. Listening and empathy can defuse the violence of those who fear the today’s evolution or those who simply uproot themselves from the past, seeing only its regressive and reactionary elements. This is however possible if we are able to circulate visions of reality, in which the crisis is not gloomy, total and depressive, but a driver of interesting processes for most people, whatever their vision of time and history.

Every crisis corresponds to precise signals of change and evolution: however, these signals give shape to demands for emancipation that threaten

the privileges of those who, naively, do not fear it, because they think that they can dump it on the more fragile parts of the social context.

Every crisis has its reasons: analysing and knowing them means recognising their foundations and developing rigorous analyses in both theoretical and empirical terms. Disowning the realm of theoretical analysis, radically replacing it with empirical findings on the other hand means absolutising the place of a facticity, which is not experience but rather the mystification of experience itself. Increasingly more often, we risk identifying the realm of research with that of pure empiricism, when instead empirical methodologies make sense and are valid only when placed within a theoretical framework that legitimises their initial hypotheses.

More and more often, theoretical works are defined as compilatory: certainly, many works actually are, but there are research works which have their own theoretical significance and foundation of reflexive originality, which it would be disrespectful and naïve to define as compilatory.

Delegating facticity to empiricism risks creating a new dogmatism, no less dangerous than the previous: far from being objective and incontrovertible, every fact hides possible horizons of meaning, which must be able to be the object of empirical investigation and theoretical reflection. We are able to think, when we are able to interpret, supporting our own interpretations of data and reasoning, tolerating the fact that they may be proven wrong by experience.

In this regard, it is impossible not to recall Edgar Morin's distinction between rationalisation and rationality. The former is the elective terrain of ideology, which claims to safeguard its own presuppositions, even when they are clearly contradicted by experience; the latter supports free and disinterested analyses, in which the researcher is willing to distance himself from his own expectations and desires: it is not possible to develop knowledge if one binds it to inferences and concerns external to knowledge itself (Morin, 1999).

However, in doing this, we have to pay attention to the potential implications of reflexive thought, firstly that of formulating banal and foreseeable interpretations, the result of the mere activation of our own spontaneous, judging thought: one can believe oneself to be free and unencumbered, not ideological in fact, but unaware of reiterating reflexive mind-rooted automatism. The term Reflexivity rests on an abused verb, to "reflect", which has become a tatty, worn word, in everyday language and

common sense as well as in the professional scientific language. When we invite someone to reflect or we do so ourselves, it is as if we were telling them, or telling ourselves: “Stop and think!” The problem however is that such thinking may be ineffective or unproductive.

Martin Heidegger (1979) wondered: “What does thinking mean?”. Answering this question may be a bit simpler, if we are able to upturn it and wonder: “What does non-thinking mean?” Non-thinking may mean limiting ourselves to repeating the words and phrases they have educated us to repeat, whatever their relevance; stating the validity of points of view, which are valid for us; repeating the mandatory nature of rules, which for others could be flouted.

Vice versa, we become reflexive, when we realise the ineffectiveness of the teachings received and of our own *forma mentis*: not absolutely ineffective, but towards certain contexts or people. Learning to reflect means not thinking that, as they work for some people, they must work for everyone. According to Magda Arnold, when we perceive a particular situation, we assess it, according to categories which are conditioned by our previous experiences and the education we have received: at that point, we feel an emotion, which is conditioned by the assessment that we ourselves have expressed (Arnold, 1960).

In this statement it is not easy to see a passage which could perhaps be taken for granted: when our emotions make us inadequate in coping with the problems of a context, much of the responsibility is our own, as we ourselves have contributed, with our assessments, to putting us in a position of cognitive and emotional hardship. Whenever we are in difficulty or even close to failure, we should attempt to upturn these assessments, trying to express different points of view from those we have learned and made our own. Thinking about doing it is relatively simple, but being able to much less so, as the acceptance of a thought that is divergent for us meets with the resistance of our emotional experience.

Upturning the point of view means thinking that it is not normal for crises to be without prospects or opportunities for compensation; that critical events are not themselves the bringers of a transformation rich in potential; that learning difficulties are not in turn heralds of an epistemological density that can significantly increase the results of learning itself. Did we need, and do we need great minds to contribute to the creation of new paradigms? Certainly, but these were great minds that were allowed to make mistakes.

Now remove the *Zeitgeist* from the mortifying spirit of a negative Pygmalion effect, which seems to consider Crisis as a sentence and a fate, rather than an opportunity, and civilisation will be free at last to follow its own path.

In this framework, antidogmatism and weak thought maintain a tension towards outdatedness: certainly, they are current, as they symbolise one of the most precious achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but they remain outdated as they are the new hostage of metaphysical legacies and absolutisms that continue to try to cancel these achievements. When they lose their outdatedness, they will become “custom”, “idea” and “ideology”, to use the words of Giovanni Maria Bertin (1977), and at that point the possible routes for overcoming weak thought will finally be visible. But only at that point.

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