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Strategies of Approximation: Critical Theory and Philosophical Anthropology

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Andrea Borsari

1. *Strategies*

As much as both have profoundly shaped twentieth-century philosophical discussion, particularly in Germany, a systematic reconstruction of the relationship between Philosophical Anthropology and Critical Theory seems to have long been lacking. Work has only recently begun on a reconstruction of the main modes of relationship, the history and possibilities of dialogue between them, and the themes of such confrontation, such as the different connections they envisage with respect to nature.¹ The urge to break out of their separate spheres comes from the need to rethink the problems of the contemporary world as a whole, without submitting to the division of labor among different philosophical schools and disciplines. Phenomena such as the role of the life sciences, the increasing technical intervention in human nature and its environment, as well as the conclusion of the illusions of development and globalization that let injustices and social inequalities re-emerge, the set of transformations of life on the planet that go under the common denominator of the climate crisis and the anthropocene, impose the redefinition of the different philosophical traditions that have marked the recent past and the reexamination of the overall conceptual frameworks that have characterized them.

This paper therefore aims to reconstruct and discuss the most relevant approximation strategies between the two lines of thought as they have emerged in recent scholarly production. These strategies are characterized as argumentative, conceptual reconstruction, historical genealogies and combinations of reference authors. They are analyzed on the basis of certain conceptual figures that emblemize their ability to propose different ways of connecting the two philosophical traditions: alternative paradigms (§ 2), critical anthropology (§ 3), political contrasts and cultural-critical agreement (§ 4), divergent critiques (§ 5), approaches to an anthropological critical theory (§ 6). Concluding, finally, on the prospects for the inheritance of their critical potential (§ 7).

2. *Alternative paradigms*

Quoting the influential article *Anthropology* by Jürgen Habermas for the Fischer Lexicon of Philosophy (1958), Joachim Fischer, the scholar most committed to defining Philosophical Anthropology not as a sub-genre of philosophy but as a «direction of thought» (*Denkrichtung*), argues that «The Critical Theory of Society and the Philosophical Anthropology of Modernity have been in a relationship of competition with each other – they are fighting for primacy in the rivalry for a theory of the world of human life in the present»². Habermas in fact stated that «Sociology cannot, as there

¹ See *Mensch und Gesellschaft zwischen Natur und Geschichte. Zum Verhältnis von Philosophischer Anthropologie und Kritischer Theorie*, edited by Th. Ebke, S. Edinger, F. Müller, R. Yos («Internationales Jahrbuch für Philosophische Anthropologie / International Yearbook for Philosophical Anthropology», vol. 6), Berlin, De Gruyter, 2017.

² J. Fischer, *Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft versus Philosophische Anthropologie der Moderne. Alternative Paradigmen aus dem 20. Jahrhundert*, in *Mensch und Gesellschaft zwischen Natur und Geschichte*, pp. 3-28, here p. 1. For the overall reconstruction of the philosophical-anthropological approach, see: J. Fischer, *Philosophische Anthropologie. Eine Denkrichtung des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Freiburg - München, Alber, 2009. For a review of the debate at that date, see: A. Borsari, *Notes on «Philosophical Anthropology» in Germany: An Introduction*, in «Iris: European

is a certain tendency to do in Germany, allow anthropology as a kind of basic science to dictate the standards [...]. Rather, anthropology must fundamentally allow its concept of man to be explained by the concept of society in which it arises and does not arise by chance – only in this way does it avoid the temptation to pass off what has become historical as nature par excellence»³.

One can thus hypothesize a «critical anthropology» in which the anthropological element according to Habermas would be sub-ordinate to the theory of society, thanks above all to research, such as that of Herbert Marcuse, that relates psychoanalysis and sociology. Conversely – Fischer suggests – from the perspective of sociologists and philosophers such as Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen, Erich Rothacker and Adolf Portmann, it should be understood that that the sociality of human beings and the concept of society of modernity can only be explicated in a roundabout way via a systematically acquired concept of natural-historically broken nature, which refers the humans to «natural artificiality» and «mediated immediacy».

Fischer's proposed analysis unfolds in several stages. Firstly, he summarizes the relationship between Critical Theory and Philosophical Anthropology in three stages. It begins with the relations between Max Scheler and Max Horkheimer at the end of the 1920s, which were full of the alternative possibilities of a «Frankfurter Schule». The analysis then moves on to the multifaceted history of the post-World War II relations between Plessner and Horkheimer and Adorno, who had returned from emigration, the former to Göttingen and the latter to Frankfurt, with their partial working cooperation and with strong theoretical-systematic differences. And finally, it arrives to the striking dispute between Gehlen and Adorno in the sixties, when in the public debates initiated by Adorno with his antipode Gehlen the alternative relationship between Philosophical Anthropology and Critical Theory seemed to crystallize and fix itself in the run-up to the 1968 debates.

Secondly, Fischer sets out to dig deeper into the history of the theory by finding that the actual difference in depth of the paradigms did not only manifest itself between Adorno and Gehlen in the mid-1960s, but was already suddenly visible between the approaches in the early 1920s, in the socio-philosophical disparity between Lukács and Plessner. A difference between *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and *The Limits of Community* (1924) which profiles a seminal alternative of 20th century social philosophy with regard to the status of a «bourgeois society» in modernity.

Thirdly, digging further, the contribution comes to determine that the tension between Critical Theory of Society versus Philosophical Anthropology of Modernity seems to be a profound difference in 20th century German-language philosophy in general, which only became drastically recognizable late, namely in the mid-1960s with Adorno's guiding category of «negative dialectics» in the book of the same title from 1966 in contrast to the new edition of Plessner's *The Levels of Organic Life and the Human: Introduction to Philosophical Anthropology* (1965) with its basic concept of «eccentric positionality».

To limit ourselves to just a few passages of Fischer's argument, we can see how to him the central point of the comparison between Lukács and Plessner is that only from the conceptual operations of Plessner's social philosophy one can recognize that Lukács' critical theory of society occurs in the emphatic name of the authentic community and from there gains its critical certainty even though Lukács himself does not directly refer to the concept of community. The fact that Plessner's social philosophy appears in principle as an alternative to the later so-called Frankfurt school, even if one thinks of the contrast with Lukács is already decided by the basic relationship between society and community. Reinterpreting therefore the Marx- and Lukács-inspired social philosophy of critical theory as centered on a nostalgia for community, Fischer thus attributes to Plessner the ability to read Marxist social philosophy as a critical theory that sees modern society as an alienation from the community; it seems to him actually a critical theory in the name of the

Journal of Philosophy and Public Debate», 1 (2009), no. 1, pp. 113-129, of which this contribution is a further deepening. Where not referred to a printed translation, all quotations from languages other than English in the text that follows should be understood as translated by the author of this article.

³ J. Habermas, *Anthropologie*, in A. Diemer and I. Frenzel (eds.), *Das Fischer Lexikon: Philosophie*, Frankfurt am Main, Fischer, 1958, p. 18-35, here p. 34.

community. The Philosophical Anthropology à la Plessner was, from the very beginning, social-philosophical and, as a consequence, sociological in disposition contrasting an allegedly dominantly natural-philosophical approach to philosophical anthropology. Plessner unfolds a public sphere in which people indirectly interact with each other in artificial procedures and ceremonies, in masks and roles. In a kind of Niklas Luhmann *ante litteram* theory – Fischer remarks – we are faced with an «open system» of the traffic, communication or trade (*Verkehr*) «between unconnected people»⁴.

The Luhmannian double contingency – or, in Plessnerian terms, the inscrutability by principle of people in relation to each other and the unpredictability of life situations – thus opens up a conception of the emergence of society and the public sphere as a mediating medium of forms of interaction and distance. From his social theory, Plessner placed the greatest value on the sociology of this artificial code, on the artificial forms of manners, on the need for sociological observation of the constantly renewed socialisational and public genesis of the habitus of «sociability» (*Geselligkeit*) as the core of indirect communication. In order to maintain the complex play of this society, there is a need for the habitus of «diplomacy and tact», of distance and irony, of the play forms of «ceremony and prestige» and the so called «ethos of grace»⁵. Plessner's indirect reference figure here – according to Fischer – is the Simmel of *Sociology* and the *Grundfragen der Sociologie*. Whereas for Critical Theory, the preferred reference for Simmel is the *Philosophy of Money*. The Plessnerian Simmel is therefore the theorist of «forms of interaction» (*Formen der Wechselwirkung*), of complex and complicated «sociability». But Plessner differs from Simmel by constructing his own bourgeois theory of society against the anti-societal affect of the «social radicalisms», a category uniting movements of the 1920s of opposite political orientation.

After the contrasts between Scheler and Horkheimer, Plessner and Lukács, Adorno and Gehlen, the conflict between Critical Theory of Society and Philosophical Anthropology of Modernity – in Fischer's reconstruction – reaches its greatest significance in the opposition between the two key notions of negative dialectics and eccentric positionality, which exemplifies and brings to the highest level the two alternative positions condensed in them. From this perspective, the concept of «negative dialectics» constitutes the culmination of Adorno's work, from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, through the *Minima Moralia*, to his writings on music and literature, and, at the same time, of the Critical Theory in general. Turning idealistic dialectics into materialistic terms, Adorno identifies the process of dialectical self-clarification (*Selbstvergewisserung*) with the critique of self-alienated subjectivity in its social being of bourgeois-capitalist society. The critical dialectics intends thus to clarify the pretended independence of the enlightened Self as trapped in the spell of self-produced but reified mediations of the bourgeois form of life. «Negative dialectics» is the form of thinking of the objection to identifying thinking as a compulsion that undercuts the non-identity between concept and thing (*Sache*). In this way, «negative dialectics» as a determined negation preserves the non-identical against the totally inverted relations, against the total contexts of blindness (*Verblendungszusammenhänge*). The «negative dialectics» as a placeholder of the non-identical opens up space for the reconciliatory return from self-alienation and for the rectification of the human position from totally inverted conditions into solidarity. That is towards the Marxian true resurrection of nature, the naturalism of man carried out and the realised humanism of nature.

On the other hand, «eccentric positionality» is the key concept of Plessnerian Philosophical Anthropology that enables it to conceive human life-world from the natural relations and from the vital relations of the living world. Philosophical Anthropology is concerned with the «analysis of the human form of life» and the «characteristic human modes of expression», such as language, action, but also «laughing and crying» and the «smile» (*Lächeln*), in contrast to other living beings such as plants and animals. In this way, the «eccentric positionality» indicates that human beings are inherently relegated to «natural artificiality» and that in the brokenness of their natural relations, they

⁴ H. Plessner, *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft. Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus* (1924), Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2002, p. 95.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

must invent or construct vital sustainable artificial, constructive solutions, including cooperative and competitive societies, without, however, being able to leave nature.

In conclusion, Fischer's interpretation centers the difference between Plessner and Critical Theory around the assumption of the necessity of alienation or **estrangement** (*Entfremdung*). According to which, the very concept of «eccentric positionality» proposes categorically to understand the autonomy of the human being as mediated through the heteronomy of nature – through the «living thing» (*lebendige Ding*), i.e. a deep-rooted category of «reification» (*Verdinglichung*). The concept of «positionality» thus signals the constitutive «non-identity» of the human position, without attributing it to a specific form of society, but to the eccentric character of its nature and position in general. Fischer thus identifies as constitutive for the Plessnerian perspective, as opposed to that of Critical Theory, the process of «reification and supersession» (*Verdinglichung und Verdrängung*) of one's own body. Referring back to Plessnerian essay on the *Conditio Humana* (1961), the interpretative proposal then emphasizes that only in the identifying diversions via others (*Umweg über Anderes*), detached or separate strangers, e.g. the «identification with roles», does the human lack of equilibrium stabilize itself, and only in the shadow of alienated institutions and masks does the human living being grasp itself⁶. That is, one must pass through the other as oneself and, at the same time, other than oneself.

This is a Plessner traced back to a point of convergence with Arnold Gehlen – the necessity of alienation and the passage through institutions of various kinds – and in the framework that would later give rise to Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory, where the eccentric disposition of human beings corresponds to the complex character of differentiated roles typical of modernity with their balances of tensions. Any attempt to show any compatibility between the two schools of thought in 20th century Germany – Fischer concludes – must be confronted with the acceptance of these opposite directions in the development of Philosophical Anthropology and Critical Theory.

3. Critical anthropology

It is precisely from the questioning of such an incompatibility of approach between the two schools that Hans-Peter Krüger's contribution to the same volume takes its starting point⁷. Krüger's argument proceeds through a series of moves that correspond to successive explorations of possible relationships between the two domains. At first, he compares Max Horkheimer's philosophical paradigm with Helmuth Plessner's and concludes that they are incompatible. In a second moment, he identifies a possible complementarity between Adorno's «negative dialectics» and Plessner's «negative anthropology». Reading them, then, as parts of a desirable «critical anthropology», Krüger's contribution discusses the different aspects of this complementarity and, in a final argumentative move, he extends the analysis to the way Jürgen Habermas refers to Plessner in order to include the human condition and the expressive modes of our experience as essentially embodied persons in his project of public democracy in a pluralistic society.

Referring to Max Horkheimer's canonical text *Traditionelle und kritische Theorie* including the *Nachtrag* (1937) from his exile in New York for the purpose of focusing on his notion of criticism, Krüger notices that Horkheimer rejects «general criteria» for the critical character of this theory⁸. However, the critique of the capitalist society of commodity production provides the critique with a certain stability of object. Against the development of monopolistic capitalism and its concentration of power which extends itself into the conditions of the «authoritarian State», Horkheimer deploys

⁶ See H. Plessner, *Die Frage nach der Conditio humana* (1961), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8: *Schriften zur Conditio humana*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1983, pp. 136-217.

⁷ H.-P. Krüger, *Kritische Anthropologie? Zum Verhältnis zwischen Philosophischer Anthropologie und Kritischer Theorie*, in *Mensch und Gesellschaft zwischen Natur und Geschichte*, pp. 29-54. See also H.-P. Krüger, *Homo absconditus. Helmuth Plessners Philosophische Anthropologie im Vergleich*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2019, especially chapters 19-20, and Krueger's contribution, *infra*, in this thematic section.

⁸ See M. Horkheimer, *Traditional and Critical Theory* (1937), in Id., *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*, translated by Matthew J. O'Connell, New York, Continuum, 2002.

the classic notion of reason found in Kant and Hegel. This broad and above all practical conception of reason from the revolutionary times of the rising middle-class however then gets transformed in a Marxist sense. The ideals of the French Revolution are brought to resolve social antagonisms, which produce above all an orientation to solidarity rather than competition. Horkheimer, on the other hand, proposes to formulate the anthropological problem of Critical Theory as a distinction between the current capitalist alienation and the future identity of individual and society in the labor process. Horkheimer then expresses the negative side of his own critique, the demand to eliminate exploitation and class domination, as the materialistic content of the idealistic concept of reason.

The conception of Philosophical Anthropology defended from his exile in Groningen by Plessner in his text of the same year (*The Task of Philosophical Anthropology*, 1937) is defined against all «materialistic, idealistic, existentialistic one-sidednesses»⁹. This qualitative unity of aspects that is primordial in the phenomenological sense – explains Krüger – cannot be derived from a knowledge of other states of affairs, it is not given to us as something unquestionable, but rather wrought from our existence in its becoming history, hence to be uncovered hermeneutically. The Philosophical Anthropology is then aware of its theoretical limits in view of its practical responsibility towards the inscrutability of the humanly possible, and the formulation of knowledge of the essential constitution does not entail any conclusive implications about the values to be affirmed but ensures the inscrutability of the human and thus a responsibility for all that is possible.

Without ever naming Plessner but focusing on Gehlen and Scheler, Horkheimer's and Adorno's critiques of Philosophical Anthropology converge in pointing out its limitations as naturalistically reductive anthropology and philosophically pessimistic or optimistic anthropology in the tradition of Hobbes and Rousseau. Adorno deploys negativity to defend the non-identity of the singular against its conceptual identification and thus, in his philosophy of the identity, also renders obsolete Horkheimer's anticipation of the future society as a community (1937). For Adorno, however, this negativity remains the prerogative of his dialectical philosophy, while the expression «anthropology» is referred to ideological images of humanity. His reply to Plessnerian Philosophical Anthropology is therefore dogmatic – Krüger comments – since it unifies in the same critique of essentialism opposite directions of thought that move from the Schelerian ecstatic openness of the world but lead, on the one hand, to the Heideggerian fundamental ontology of empty being and, on the other hand, to the Plessnerian openness through nature as surpassing that distinguishes humans and their language from animals without recourse to a beyond of that which exists by nature¹⁰.

To overcome these incompatibilities, it is at this point to investigate more deeply the possible connections between Plessner's negative anthropology and Adorno's negative dialectics. In his discussion of Adorno's philosophy, Plessner – Krüger notes – introduces some considerations of appreciation and convergence. First, since a philosopher must, according to Plessner, be a writer, it will have to be acknowledged that the Frankfurter has that gift, «at least as an interpreter of great music and poetry»¹¹. In addition, and especially from a philosophical point of view, Adorno's attempts to avoid the hegemony of the subject with the philosophy of identity through an «ensemble of model analyses», to pursue the «dignity of bodiliness» without a dualistic straitjacket, to use a series of constellations of concepts instead of an exclusive hierarchy of subsumptions and his composition of historically understanding types as steps in the direction of historical reality, all of

⁹ H. Plessner, *Die Aufgabe der Philosophischen Anthropologie* (1937), in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1983, vol. 8, p. 38.

¹⁰ As Karl Löwith – unlike Adorno – acknowledged in his *Natur und Humanität des Menschen*, in K. Ziegler (ed.), *Wesen und Wirklichkeit des Menschen. Festschrift für Helmuth Plessner*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957, pp. 58-87 (see p. 85). For a broader articulation of the argument on this point, see H.-P. Krüger, *De-Zentrierungen und Ex-Zentrierungen. Die quasi-transzendentalen Unternehmungen von Heidegger und Plessner heute*, in T. Ebke and M. Schloßberger (eds.), *Dezentrierungen. Zur Konfrontation von Philosophischer Anthropologie, Strukturalismus und Poststrukturalismus*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2012, pp. 17-48.

¹¹ H. Plessner, *Adornos negative Dialektik. Ihr Thema mit Variationen* (1970), in *Politik – Anthropologie – Philosophie. Aufsätze und Vorträge*, ed. by S. Giannusso and H.-U. Lessing, Munich, Fink, 2001, pp. 265-281, here p. 271.

these are very important to Plessner¹². As well as – following a different ascendancy from Simmel, Krüger might note here, with respect to both *Sociology* and the *Philosophy of Money* – the orientation toward the micrology of materiality with the refusal to exhaust individual existences in their ontological dimension and the consequent valorization of the uniqueness of the unrepeatable and, stylistically, the choice of essayism as a form of expression. In short, Plessner seems to share with Adorno the anti-dualist reading of Kant, again in the name of the materiality of the social and the rejection of the philosophy of identity, and of aesthetics as a kind of negative theology or interrupted Beckettian transcendence, in which all that is luminous is founded on black. It is a convergent view that sees in the work of art the «archaic rationality» which allows its autonomy to become paradoxical in experience and recalls «the repressed mimesis-spell of the powerful through adaptive resemblance, which is not to be conflated with imitation of something given»¹³.

After recording Habermas's various swings toward Plessner's thought between 1958 and 2001, between appreciating its materialistic side – the party taken for the sensory, the resistant, the external – and resolving universal history from an anti-revolutionary perspective, till to the resorting to the Plessnerian *Körper/Leib* distinction in his *Future of Human Nature*, Krüger finally questions the possibilities of a critical anthropology. Starting with suggestions from a 2016 lecture by Herbert Schnädelbach in Potsdam, precisely on the comparison between the two traditions of thought, in conclusion Krüger points to five tasks for the possible development of a critical anthropology: the inclusion of a philosophy of animate and inanimate nature; the development of the problem of the new «life forces» in high capitalism thanks to the critical approach to one's own nature through psychoanalysis; the expansion of our understanding of communication – with respect to Habermas – to include the categorical subjunctive and all forms of expressivity including mimesis; the bringing to convergence negative dialectics and negative anthropology in the rejection of a society with pre-established authorities and in openness to the future against the fixation of prior positivities in deterministic forces, including a prefixed human essence; in seeking to make philosophically possible the fragmentary openness of the world without getting stuck once again in the gnoseological and ontological self-privileging of an individual or collective self-consciousness.

4. Political contrasts and cultural-critical agreement

In his wide-ranging examination of the contrasting relationship between Arnold Gehlen and Theodor W. Adorno, the editor of the critical edition of Gehlen's works and promoter of a political-historical reading of the relationship between Philosophical Anthropology and Critical Theory Karl-Siegbert Rehberg sought to perimeter the relations between the two philosophers and sociologists around convergence and opposition, precisely: «political contrasts and cultural-critical agreement»¹⁴.

The biographical destinies and political orientations of Adorno and Gehlen, in fact, unfolded in completely opposite directions. The former of Jewish descent and linked to the Marxism of the Institute for Social Research, was in exile first in Oxford, then in the United States, from where he returned in 1950 as a director, together with Horkheimer, of the Institute and later to take up service as professor of philosophy and sociology at the University of Frankfurt am Main. The latter adhered to Nazism, carried out «his great philosophical career»¹⁵ in the 1930s and until 1945, in Leipzig, Königsberg and Vienna, but was nevertheless the first in postwar Germany to be called to a chair in sociology, at the Speyer School of Administration (1947). Both children of Germany's educated bourgeoisie at the turn of the century, after the World War II both of them took a skeptical view of

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 273-274.

¹³ H. Plessner, *Zum Verständnis der ästhetischen Theorie Adornos* (1972), in *Politik – Anthropologie – Philosophie. Aufsätze und Vorträge*, pp. 286-296, here p. 291.

¹⁴ K.-S. Rehberg, *Theodor W. Adorno und Arnold Gehlen: Politische Gegensätze und kulturkritisches Einverständnis*, in «Scenari», 14 (2021), no. 1, pp. 209-237. For the critical edition of Gehlen's works, *Arnold Gehlen Gesamtausgabe* edited by K.-S. Rehberg, see at least volumes 9. *Zeitbilder und weitere kunstsoziologische Schriften*, and 5. *Urmensch und Spätkultur sowie weitere Schriften zu einer Theorie der Institutionen*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2016 and 2022.

¹⁵ K.-S. Rehberg, *Theodor W. Adorno und Arnold Gehlen*, p. ...

Federal Republican society, as well as of general cultural and political developments in modernity, from a diverse range of sources. At the same time the thinking of both was shaped by catastrophes they had experienced, the ruinous series of destruction that followed in Germany from defeat in World War I until the dissolution of the Reich in 1945, in the former case, and «the damaged life» that followed the advent of the Nazi regime and exile, in the latter case – as Rehberg informs us. Who also comments that it was then surprising, against this background, that Adorno developed close contact with Gehlen, which not only led to an extensive exchange of letters, but also to visits by the Adorno couple in Speyer (and vice versa of Gehlen and his wife in Frankfurt am Main).

Never really friends, they rather expressed very distrustful judgments about each other's political orientations, to which Rehberg himself, as a young student of Gehlen, was also a direct witness. They did, however, enact a prolonged confrontation in the guise of «public intellectuals» evidenced by four radio or tv conversations between 1964 and 1967, devoted to questioning what the public sphere properly is, whether sociology is a human science, what the relationship between freedom and institution is, and how the sociological experience of modern art is shaped. On the first occasion the two thinkers discussed the fact that the press and the electronic media create the public sphere, as one of the prerequisites of democracy, although there is also an «independence of the public sphere vis-à-vis the people», because the public media also have «concrete material interests». Both discussants were in agreement, that the world of the media also has a «denaturation effect» (Gehlen) and a «moment of the illusory, and therefore also with ideologies» (Adorno). In the second conversation, Gehlen presented the positions of Philosophical Anthropology, as an interpretation of human beings on the basis of the natural sciences – comparing humans to other animals for the loss of instinct or their special brain development and language ability – although arriving at an idea of man as a historical being, agreeing with Adorno. Who, for his part, talked about «socialized man» and the «moments of crisis» in society, which had «taken on a life of their own towards human beings». Against the anthropological background of the cultural being by nature, Adorno suggested to analyze social developments and their sociological consideration where the framework of relations of production becomes decisive, while Gehlen talked about single «absolute cultural thresholds» such as the sedentarization of man in the Neolithic or industrialization in the 19th century. Finally, a lingering difference emerged between the two interlocutors regarding institutions, which then was developed in the third radio encounter. When Adorno insisted that a «critique of institutions [...] is unavoidable for the sake of people» since – according to the Hegelian conception of the objective spirit – their effect is produced within human consciousness by making the oppressive and repressive character of institutions prevail. Whereas Gehlen emphasized above all their performance of relief or lightening (*Entlastungsleistung*) for human being since many people could hardly solve their problems without an institutional framework. Gehlen added finally that «freedom is to a large degree alienation [*Entfremdung*]», which the critical theorist even admitted. Lastly, in the fourth discussion, which failed in a strange way according to Rehberg, the two speakers examined different aspects of contemporary art, such as happenings, criticized as an artistic translation of the standardization and mechanization of the world or a replacement of spontaneity by fiction. They both conversed that social forms of industrial production (Gehlen) and relations of production (Adorno) had a formative influence on the new arts.

Having thus circumscribed the divergent political perspectives and the opportunities for public conversation, Rehberg then contours the many points of agreement between the two thinkers, with their specific differences, by making extensive use of their still unpublished epistolary. In perfect agreement on noting the social constraint of individuality, the causes for this were interpreted differently from the different overall perspectives for which Gehlen attributed the loss of social order he observed to a concatenation of political disasters, while Adorno pointed out the misfortune of the catching of society by reification according to the principle of exchange. In both one finds a deep pessimism toward notions of a productive future, from Gehlen's side characterized as *posthistoire* by a cultural crystallization. This is also a stabilized purpose for religions, political systems or the arts, while only in the natural sciences and technology can undoubted and measurable progress be reliably

expected. When Rehberg recalls that for Gehlen it would also no longer be possible to exist outside of the technical contexts or that in the foreseeable future the world will look more or less the same everywhere, also comments that Adorno could hardly have said it differently.

The area that, however, produced the greatest closeness, but also some distances, between the two thinkers was art. Indeed, what triggered their meeting was the Parisian art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler's suggested sending of Gehlen's book on the sociology and aesthetics of modern painting, *Zeit-Bilder* (1960)¹⁶, which made an «enormous impression» on Adorno. As he assured him in a letter dated December 2, 1960, he was touched particularly by the fact that Gehlen «identifies himself with the cause of the new art without falling into apologetics and denying the moment of negativity that necessarily belongs to the cause itself». As much as Gehlen was a man of the eye and Adorno a man of the ear, due to their primary interest in painting or music, both – Rehberg notes – made use in relation to art, even if only implicitly the former, of the concept of mediation (*Vermittlung*) of Hegelian origin. Hence comes the propensity, common to both of them, to see the implicit reference of works of art to society, which should, however, be sought in the reference to works of art themselves and not only in external biographical, political, etc. positions of artists or their audience. In his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno shows how art refuses any definition, because the works possess a «life sui generis», but, at the same time, they are also «social antithesis to society» and therefore «not directly deducible from it»¹⁷.

About the art of industrial society, a difference lies in Gehlen being aware of the expansion of knowledge through material experiments and experimentation, while Adorno admired the intellectual creations through New Music and its distance from any culture industry. Both disputants were united – Rehberg establishes – by their insight into aesthetic innovations, based on daring unprecedented, and thus often scandalizing, artistic forms of expression. The decisive factor in these processes was intellectuality (*Intellektualität*), for Adorno in music, for Gehlen in painting. Anyway, the fundamental difference between the two interpreters of art lies in the fact that Gehlen – unlike Adorno – does not understand the *peinture conceptuelle* as a refuge against the dominant capitalist principle of exchange, but on the contrary as being deeply anchored in the structures of thought and action of the industrial society.

5. Divergent critiques

In addition to ascertaining some unexpected convergences between the two, such as their common rejection of Expressionism and aversion to Heidegger, Rehberg notes how they both expressed a deep distrust tinged with despair with respect to their own epoch. If Gehlen called himself – in a letter to Hanno Kesting, 1971 – a «commentator of the ruin» (*Kommentator des Ruins*), Adorno with his highly driven cultural sensibility distrusted all conventional appeasements under the impression of the horrors of the 20th century. Beyond the specular political outcomes of melancholic conservatism and critical thinking, they both produced a reconsideration of the subject's position in society. As Gehlen emphasized in a letter to Adorno of 31.8.1962: «there are very substantial points of agreement between our positions: of the abdication of the subject [and] I am also convinced of the supremacy of evil» and of the fact that we live «in the epoch of “carrying on for its own sake”». In an information-saturated world, the real risk is the loss of experience or its becoming second-hand experience, which is coupled with the growth of subjectivism that Gehlen understood as the emergence of personality as an «institution in a single instance» (*eine Institution in einem Fall*)¹⁸. In Adorno, a dialectic of

¹⁶ A. Gehlen, *Zeit-Bilder. Zur Soziologie und Ästhetik der modernen Malerei* [1960, Time-Images. On the Sociology and Aesthetics of Modern Painting], in *Arnold Gehlen Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by K.-S. Rehberg, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2016, vol. 9, pp. 1-332.

¹⁷ Th. W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, ed. by G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970, trans. by R. Hullot-Kentor, *Aesthetic Theory*, London - New York, Continuum, 2002, pp. 4, 8.

¹⁸ A. Gehlen, *Die Seele im technischen Zeitalter* (1957, 1972), in *Arnold Gehlen Gesamtausgabe*, ed. by K.-S. Rehberg, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2004, vol. 6, pp. 1-137, here p. 133, translated by P. Lipscomb, *Man in the Age of Technology*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1980.

radical de-individualization is given precisely in the age of individualization through the capitalist functionalization of human beings, which makes it – the individuality – an unfulfilled promise. Even if the radical, individual, unresolved traits in a human being are always that which is not completely grasped by the respective ruling system, that which happily survives.

After specifying, from his perspective, that although might the hopelessness on Gehlen's side and Adorno's deeply frightened view of the conformity of people in the age of mass consumption and the irrefutability of a capitalist society that has solidified in «late capitalism» have similarities, the contrast of their positions could not be overlooked, Rehberg concludes his remarks by commenting that:

It seems to me that the entire cultural criticism in the 20th. Century has been determined by this fright before the dissolving bourgeois subjectivity. And it was this that between characters as habitually different as those of Adorno and Gehlen, a common ground not so much of analysis than of the basic feeling about an increasing irrelevance of personal responsibility. If I also see it as the decisive shortcoming of Critical Theory is that its main authors did not have [...] an original critical continuation of Marx's analysis of capitalism. The subtlety of Adorno's cultural analyses is an indispensable part of the social-theoretical thinking. However, a one-sidedness that could not be avoided in the process that he increasingly brought this thinking into opposition to the scientific discourses of his time¹⁹.

Building on the research of Christian Thies (1997) who had also greatly insisted on the shared background of educated bourgeoisie that had fostered their reluctance to mass society and individualism, Olivier Agard's (2014) contribution had already emphasized at some points of similarity also the character of divergent perspectives not easily composed of Adorno's and Gehlen's approaches²⁰. Both paradigms of social philosophy have a strong interdisciplinary character of integration between philosophy and empirical sciences but – Agard notes – Philosophical Anthropology turns to biology, while Critical Theory takes reference to psychoanalysis. In order to define the emergence of culture and the construction of the subject in relation to nature, the reference to anthropology and ethnology also became necessary for Horkheimer and Adorno, at the height of the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, although their project of a dialectical anthropology remained in the draft state. In Adorno one can trace a utopian anthropology that proceeds from the experience of childhood and outlines an alternative to aggression and the drive for self-preservation, which became an object of disagreement in conversations with Gehlen. As much as there were some points of contact between the objects of anthropological interest in the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* and Philosophical Anthropology, such as the relationship between nature and culture or to the philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*), Gehlen otherwise dislocated himself from the domain of instrumental reason. At stake here is the opposition between a view that thinks of second nature as the fulfillment of human beings and one that critiques it as estrangement (*Entfremdung*) and reification (*Verdinglichung*). What for Gehlen is exoneration (*Entlastung*) becomes estrangement for Adorno. Although he regarded the process of institution-building as positive, even if exposed to the danger of their autonomization, Gehlen interprets industrial society as a decadence of institutions and destined for the triumph of the individualism of mass society. In the disenchanting world, human beings seem destined to be reduced to consumers and to atrophy their creative abilities. This opens a space for a

¹⁹ K.-S. Rehberg, *Theodor W. Adorno und Arnold Gehlen*, p. 228. On the contribution of Critical Theory to the building of Federal Germany after World War II, see C. Albrecht, G. C. Behrmann and M. Bock, *Die intellektuelle Gründung der Bundesrepublik. Eine Wirkungsgeschichte der Frankfurter Schule*, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 1999 (and, in relation to Adorno, also by C. Albrecht, *Lucille, oder: der Teufel und die «Dialektik der Aufklärung»*, in «Sozblog. blog der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie», 2014, <<http://www.soziologie.de>> (accessed 1-11-22)). For Adorno's hostility to developments in sociology, particularly against the use of Talcott Parsons, Rehberg refers to a personal conversation with Habermas, who instead used it for his theory of communicative action committing by this a kind of «patricide» (*ibidem*, p. 228).

²⁰ See Ch. Thies, *Die Krise des Individuums. Zur Kritik der Moderne bei Adorno und Gehlen*, Reinbeck bei Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1997, and O. Agard, *Kulturkritik und Anthropologie. Adorno und Gehlen*, in *Philosophische Anthropologie nach 1945. Rezeption und Wirkung*, edited by G. Raulet and G. Plas, Nordhausen, Traugott Bautz, 2014, pp. 21-36.

connection between these Gehlenian acquisitions and Critical Theory's critique of mass society. But the polemical target remains for Gehlen the Enlightenment claim to emancipation based on individual autonomy, with respect to which the disrupted order must instead be reestablished.

Even as they assume the posture of critics of culture, both authors also position themselves as modern sociologists who make use of empirical methods of field research, albeit with different points of reference²¹. In both cases we are dealing with critics of culture, however, who simultaneously exercise a critique of the critique of culture. For Adorno, it shares a blinding connection with its object made blind with respect to its genesis. For Gehlen, the point of ambivalence is in the relationship with technology that is deeply inherent in human beings and, at the same time, risks taking over by making them dependent on it in an excess of exoneration and the triumph of modern organization untethered from institutions. Here, too, the critique is equally a self-critique when viewed with a sociological distance as a reaction of the German society to the process of civilization. Considering Gehlen's critique of Critical Theory and Adorno brings their opposition deep back to an underlying anthropological contrast between vulnerability and aggression, as has been emphasized recently²².

6. Approaches to an anthropological critical theory

In recapitulating his own research on the critical potential of Philosophical Anthropology, the French Germanist Gérard Raulet circumscribes around Walter Benjamin's thought the possibility of an anthropological critical theory²³. In his canonical text that codified a kind of geopolitics of Critical Theory (1999) Axel Honneth, while acknowledging suggestive force in Benjamin's work, had removed it from any theoretical and political relevance with respect to the present day: «For the systematic questions that play a role today in philosophy, cultural theory, or social research, the components of his work are virtually devoid of significance»²⁴. In opposition to such an argument, Raulet sets out to show how Benjaminian elaborations on the mimetic faculty allow for the sketching of a broad, if not grounded, anthropological critical theory and for taking on a problem that is also central to Adorno's social philosophy, reification. In both cases the mimetic faculty contributes to the primary goal from which – as Honneth correctly argues, Raulet notes – the entire Benjaminian philosophical enterprise moves, that of autonomously grounding the sphere of knowledge beyond the separation of subject and object.

According to Benjamin, the mimetic faculty is not only concerned with hypnotic states and the dream dimension, but also invests cultural phenomena such as play, childhood activities, dance, graphology and astrology, in which human beings consciously and unconsciously seek, through ritualized behaviors, to discover correspondences and trace structures of similarity. The mimetic relationship with the world and nature represents an anthropological foundation rooted deep in the phylogeny of the human body. Within the framework of this organic-symbolic bond of the human-nature relationship, the ability to make oneself similar and behave accordingly has developed. Similarity rises to a property of matter when with the birth of language and writing, the mimetic ability to create and discover non-sensible similarities unfolds. The mimetic faculty, which is often wrongly interpreted in a mystical or theological-religious direction – Raulet summarizes – proves to be metaphysical only in the sense that its transcendent constitution is emphasized in the terms precisely of non-sensible similarity: «authentic knowledge arises in the perception of a similarity, or

²¹ In particular, with the experience of Lazarsfeld's Radio Research Project (Adorno) and the reception together with H. Schelsky of American sociology and G.H. Mead (Gehlen). See Agard, *Kulturkritik*, p. 30.

²² D. Burghardt, *Von Mangel, Zucht und Führung. Über Arnold Gehlens Anthropologie, die Kritik der Kritischen Theorie und die Rezeption in der Neuen Rechte*, in «Paragrana. Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie», 29 (2020), no. 2, pp. 37-49, here p. 43.

²³ G. Raulet, *Mimesis. Über anthropologische Motive bei Walter Benjamin – Ansätze zu einer anthropologischen kritischen Theorie*, in *Das kritische Potential der philosophischen Anthropologie. Studien zum historischen und aktuellen Kontext*, Nordhausen, Traugott Bautz, 2020, pp. 323-363. See also G. Raulet, *Das befristete Dasein der Gebildeten. Benjamin und die französische Intelligenz*, Konstanz, Konstanz University Press, 2020.

²⁴ A. Honneth, *Die zerrissene Welt des Sozialen*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1999, p. 93.

affinity, in any case in a form of adequacy, which cannot be reduced to concept or meaning»²⁵. It is not about the nexus with archaic background, but about the consideration of a foundational layer of experience, which always precedes historical experience and can rightly be defined as *a priori*. If we thus eschew the mystical speculations to which Benjamin's philosophy of language has gone, even the theory of the original language, the primacy of the name and the mimetic faculty will show us that language and experience are not to be separated and that therefore language cannot be reducible to a system of signs for instrumental purposes, since it is a constitutive structure of experience. In contrast to any theology, one can regard the Benjaminian philosophy of name as the cornerstone of his materialism, as shown by Adornian developments of the theme of nominalism in which «a dialectical and materialistic critique proceed from the problem of the relations between concept and reality, word and thing»²⁶.

Mimesis is the opposite of subjectivism; it does not project the gaze of the subject onto the world but goes in the direction of the primacy of the object. Unlike Adorno, who remains anchored in the Horkheimerian premises of Critical Theory (1937) for the dissolution of the affinities through their inscription in their respective historical act of execution and fulfillment, the Benjaminian conception of mimesis does not reduce it to the alternative between false mimesis and not-estranged mimesis but refers to the immediate mimesis that does not need the mediation between spirit and secondary psychic processes. The transcendental affinity is thus transferred to the body (*Leib*) as the seat of the highest substantive knowledge and actual carrier of mimesis. This materiality finds its focus in an anthropological reformulation that concerns both the theory of knowledge and the ontology underlying it: «the first matter [*Materie*] on which the mimetic faculty tries is the human body [*Körper*]»²⁷. Therefore, corporeality turns out to be the foundation of the relationship with the world.

Even with respect to the consideration of reification as a mode of relationship between subject and object diametrically opposed to recognition as it has been suggested by Honneth, Raulet points out how it does not take into account the possibility introduced by Benjamin and Adorno of thinking about and through things²⁸. Instead, according to Adorno's *Aesthetics*, when identity is determined by reification, the object is that which can no longer be reflected by the subject proceeding within it. To the same extent that in the context of the «total administration» tending towards the closed system the philosophy must be cautious of the system, in the face of the trending process of reification, the subject must give priority to the object, a kind of homeopathic procedure that drives out evil with evil. This is the only way to think the unthinkable – as Raulet makes clear – and in the words of *Aesthetic Theory*: «Only as things [*Dinge*] do artworks become the antithesis of the reified monstrosity»²⁹. In his review of Roger Caillois's *Mante religieuse*, Adorno notes a progressive side of the procedure that traces the psychological phenomenon back not to the conscious life of the autonomous individual but to somatic facts: «thanks to its valorization of nature against nature in general and the dominating society in particular, it offers an “authentically materialistic aspect”, which, of course, would be to be gained from Caillois' “mythizing way of thinking”»³⁰. What interests Raulet here, then, is an Adorno who goes much further in the direction indicated by Benjamin, while remaining firm on the necessity of dialecticization (*Dialektisierung*).

²⁵ G. Raulet, *Mimesis*, p. 332.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 333 (on Materialism/Nominalism, see also pp. 352-353). On the Benjaminian mimetic plexus in relation to G. Tarde, R. Caillois and Adorno, see *ibidem*, pp. 334-339.

²⁷ W. Benjamin, *Zur Ästhetik*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1985, pp. 108-129, here p. 127.

²⁸ See G. Raulet, *Mimesis*, pp. 346-353. The reference is to A. Honneth, *Verdinglichung. Eine erkenntnistheoretische Studie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2005 (*Reification: A Recognition-Theoretical View*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁹ Th. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), p. 167.

³⁰ G. Raulet, *Mimesis*, p. 351. For the review, see Th. W. Adorno, *Rezension von Roger Caillois «La Mante religieuse»*, in «Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung», 7 (1938), no. 3, pp. 410-411.

Benjamin's interest in reification is related to the experience of decentralization and duality/double in the age of the masses and commodity exchange. This produces a conception of communication quite different from that of the continuators of Critical Theory who hold to the concept of a conscious subject, keeping them alien to the supra-individual anthropological dimension of mimetic communication. This also takes place through the channel of the mass, which forms in a complementary way to the body and the materiality of language the foundation of Benjaminian materialism³¹.

In conclusion, thanks to Benjamin we arrive at the definition of two extreme issues – Raulet observes – the myth and the commodity world. A theoretical construction that matches the problems of contemporary society tries to do justice to both, combining phylogenetic and sociological reflections in a broad philosophical anthropology and bringing to light a shortcoming of Critical Theory: its forgetting of the material world of production, in which not only reification (and not only estrangement) processes take place, but in which also deeply rooted phylogenetic development processes take place, which are ultimately at stake in the good social and economic order. On how these gaps are answered, beyond the solutions already attempted by theories of communication or recognition, depends, according to the author, how to strive from a philosophical perspective for more equitable and fair forms of life.

7. Legacy and critical potential

In order to reactivate the critical potential of Philosophical Anthropology, it is therefore necessary to go beyond the suspicion toward anthropology that is typical of Critical Theory. Or rather, it is a matter of overcoming the imputation of the absence of historicity addressed to it and the attribution to naturalism of its propensity for scientific knowledge³². There is a need, for example, to think of a philosophy of history of an entirely different kind, as Raulet himself proposes in the text collected here. Namely, a definition of ontogenesis, of the history of the individual, as a path stretched between the degree zero of first nature and the death of the organism, and as the management of the interaction between need and desire.

On the other hand, it is also a question of how it is possible to inherit a critical theory broadly understood as a «progressive, post-metaphysical, and oppositional critical» type of thinking.³³ Following a conception of inheritance centered on interpreting, «which is able to open to the moment of radical inheritance and not stop interpreting, any real interpretation is itself inseparable from the concept and experience of inheritance»³⁴, as happens in the text proposed here by Gerhard Richter regarding Adorno's *Aesthetics*. In complementary form, then, it is necessary to open philosophical anthropology to the critical instance that crosses cognitions about human nature with analyses of the historical bearing of capitalist society of the other, overcoming mutual rigidities, as Hans-Peter Krüger suggests in the contribution that follows here.

The prospecting suggested by this paper thus focused first on the reconstructive hypotheses that foregrounds the discontinuities between the two philosophical traditions (Fischer). Through a genealogy comparing Scheler and Horkheimer, Plessner and Lukács, Adorno and Gehlen, this approach comes to define two alternative paradigms that tend to be irreconcilable. In the opposition between the notions of negative dialectics and eccentric positionality and in the insurmountability of estrangement for Philosophical Anthropology, as well as in the antithetical directions – instances of order or obstacles to the full unfolding of autonomy – toward which institutions in the two

³¹ On the relationship between mass and corporeality in Benjamin's anthropological materialism, G. Raulet, *Mimesis*, pp. 358-359.

³² See G. Raulet, *Jenseits des Anthropologieverdachts*, in *Das kritische Potential der philosophischen Anthropologie*, pp. 9-36.

³³ G. Richter, *Die Kritische Theorie erben?*, in *Verweiset Hinterlassenschaft. Formen gespenstischen Erben*, Berlin, Matthes & Seitz, 2016, pp. 191-208.

³⁴ G. Richter, *Erbe als verwaiste Hinterlassenschaft*, in *Verwaiste Hinterlassenschaft*, pp. 7-51, here p. 13.

perspectives are oriented, the points of disagreement that prevent easy assimilations seem to be concentrated. In a second step, the proposal to emphasize instead the bridging and converging moments between Critical Theory and Philosophical Anthropology was considered (Krüger).

Focusing on the comparisons between Horkheimer and Plessner, Plessner and Adorno, this hypothesis seeks to read them as contributions to a possible critical anthropology that also involves the outcomes of Habermas' confrontation with the Plessnerian notion of bodiliness and points to an implication of animate and inanimate nature, the broadening of the idea of communication through the inclusion of different forms of expressiveness, and to rejecting prefixed human authorities and essences. In a third moment, thanks to the provision of a comparative analysis of the dialogue and contrasts between Adorno and Gehlen (Rehberg), according to the formula that follows their opposing political options but also shows their affinities in confronting their own epoch in a posture of critique of culture, an attempt was made to detect the different boundary notions between the two settings, such as, for example: the work of art and its connections with industrial society, the historical delusion of the German educated bourgeoisie, the growth of individualism and, at the same time, the emptying of its subjectivity, the inability to produce an adequate social economic analysis.

Weighing in the opposite direction, that is, in favor of greater distinction, are the conceptual oppositions between exoneration and estrangement, and between emancipation based on individual autonomy and institutional mediation as restoration of order (Agard). In a concluding moment, the proposal for a critical anthropological theory that foregrounds and reactivates Walter Benjamin's contribution is finally contoured (Raulet). The theories of mimesis and reification, as a shift from the center of gravity of subjectivity which decrees a sort of primacy of the object, are enucleated as the backbone of an idea of knowledge which programmatically re-evaluates the sphere below the threshold of awareness and restores the commonality between the known as the basis of a different anthropology.

Overall, the areas in which the confrontation between the two philosophical directions seems to be more promising for inheriting their richness in the face of the challenges of the contemporary world appear to be that of social philosophy and social analysis, of the transdisciplinary integration between the human sciences and the natural sciences, life sciences in particular, of the aesthetic-perceptive relationship with the world and with the forms of artistic expression and, precisely, of a renewed critical anthropology.

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Strategies of Approximation: Critical Theory and Philosophical Anthropology

The article proposes a discussion of recent studies on the relationship between Critical Theory and Philosophical Anthropology, especially in German thought. Starting from different forms of the relationship – alternative paradigms, convergences in critical anthropology, political oppositions and commonalities of critique of the time and culture, divergences of perspective and the construction of a critical anthropology – the text explores and attempts to reconstruct the elements for a reactivation of the critical potential on the contemporary world. The researches of scholars such as J. Fischer, H.-P. Krüger, K.-S. Rehberg, O. Agard, G. Raulet around authors such as Plessner, Gehlen, Horkheimer, Adorno, and notions such as exemption, estrangement, reification, negative dialectics and eccentric positionality, are thus examined.

Keywords: Critical Theory, Philosophical Anthropology, Exoneration, Estrangement, Mimesis, Reification.