Epistemology of the social control

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Abstract

In the phenomenological and hermeneutical perspective, the analysis of the relationship between intellectual phenomena and social dimensions tends to consider both the cognitive moment and that of social conditioning as interdependent elements. In this context, the cognitive dimension, as it fulfills a function of the representation of reality, can appear deeply connected to the logic of power, which proceeds in the attempt to «make eternal» a normative structure historically founded. Historically, the criticism of ideology along the lines indicated by the School of Frankfurt in the thirties, has shifted its attention from the denouncing of totalizing conceptions to the analysis of the multiple processes through which the logic of dominion intervenes in the building of social reality.

Key words: *social control; social order; power.*

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The same interpretation that Habermas has of ideology as distorted communication is connected to such a perspective's change, although in itself, recognizing the indissoluble link which unites any type of knowledge for a specific possibility of interests, ends up presenting itself despite the intentions of Habermas as historically conditioned.

As seen, in the phenomenological and hermeneutical perspective, the analysis of the relationship between intellectual phenomena and social dimensions tends to consider both the cognitive moment and that of social conditioning as interdependent elements. In this context, the cognitive dimension, as it fulfills a function of the representation of reality, can appear deeply connected to the logic of power, which proceeds in the attempt to «make eternal» a normative structure historically founded.

Following this line an important contribution comes from Michael Foucault and his *microphysics of power.* Thus, we will momentarily return to Foucault, but now without having touched upon the origins of the structuralism thought of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

Lévi-Strauss, whose thoughts have deeply influenced the way in which the contemporary sociological theory has understood the cognitive-cultural moment, believes that a rigorous scientific investigation of the cultural forms can be developed showing how beyond the variety of their manifestation, remain in them some basic *common structures.*

As in the order of the sciences of nature general and principles are given reducible in mathematical formulas, so the *cultural order* seems inscribed within some invariants

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connected to an «unconscious purpose of the spirit» (Lévi-Strauss 1947, 527). Departing from such presuppositions, in an analogy with the linguistic theory of the Swiss (1857-1913) and especially with the historical-structural phonology of the American linguist Roman Jakobson (1896-1984) of Russian origins, Lévi-Strauss understands the cultural sphere as a *system of signs* produced in an unconscious way by the unchanging mechanisms operating in the human mind.

In this context, which negates the *humanistic* value of social sciences, refusing any system of historicist evolutionism, culture and society appear both as single expressions of a deep organization, which dictates the rules of the constitution of both the cultural forms and those of the social order. The *diachronic* transformations, which take place in the historical times, are nothing else but epiphenomena linked to some constant categories of *synchronic nature.* Therefore, it is not about examining the relationship between society and culture but, rather, it will be necessary to understand how the social order is the reflection of the cultural order and how this is. In turn, this is directed to the structure that is at the basis of the human mind.

In this way, Lévi-Strauss is convinced he has resolved the antinomy between historical determinism and conscience finalism, which had characterized the sociological thinking of the end of the Nineteenth century, as the purpose of the mind determines *de facto* the socio-cultural horizons, as well as in the variety of their manifest contents. The latter, for their part, no longer are the result as the decisive highlight to the underlying structure of social phenomena:

In anthropology as in linguistics, therefore, it is not comparison that supports generalization, but the other way around.

If, as we believe to be the case, the unconscious activity of the mind consists in imposing forms upon content, and if these forms are fundamentally the same for all minds – ancient and modern, primitive and civilized (as the study of the symbolic function, expressed in language, so strikingly indicates) – it is necessary and sufficient to grasp the unconscious structure underlying each institution and each custom, in order to obtain a principle of interpretation valid for other institutions and other customs, provided of course that the analysis is carried far enough (Lévi-Strauss 1958, 21).

Analogously, defining the *episteme* as coherent *system* of ideas and values in which the image that an epoch has of itself materialize. Foucault, while remaining extraneous to the idea of a constant structure of the human spirit, conceives the totality of the discursive contexts present in a determined society not only as a matrix of the collective methods or representations of reality, but also as the source of the *production* of the objects and of the social subjects.

For Foucault, scientific rationality as it has already been partially seen, does not proceed in a linear and cumulative way, nor does it contain a set of logical laws absolutely true and irrefutable. The idea of an evolutive *continuum* is absolutely fictitious, since the passage from one epoch to another takes place through *epistemological fractures,* whose emergency is totally *causal.* The rational path of humanity configures itself, as Nietzsche's way, as a «series of interpretations», always revocable, which are born from a complex of practices socially shared. In this sense, the possibility to reference a concept of rationality in an absolute sense becomes unthinkable. Rather, one will need to recognize that different forms of rationality that exist, each one characterized by its own "spirit of time" (cf. Foucault 1969). Therefore, Foucault denies the naturalness of the Cartesian ego, reducing the subject to a simple *support* of the signifying and of the significances. It is, that is observed once again, against the historicist exaltation of the subject who acts in history, the attempt to oppose history and its subject of *structure,* thinking a

historicity without subject (cf. Masullo, 1996: 260 and ff.).

Hence the effort, always of Nietzsche an influence of understanding philosophy in the same manner of a diagnostic activity, which configures itself as a truth «archeology of knowledge» (cf. Foucault 1969).

In *Madness and Civilization: A history of Insanity in the Age of Reason,* Foucault shows how in the epoch of the classical rationalism (Seventeenth century), the *episteme* affirms itself according to the instrumental method, as seen in Bacon, Galilei and Descartes, of the «operating in accordance with an end», that is of the rationalization in the terms of Max Weber. Such an affirmation, at the same time, institutes a strict division between rationality and madness, in which the first appears linked to criteria of productive efficiency while the second is defined as a *senseless wandering*, characterized by the absence of productive capacity. The need to produce goods makes it appear as abnormal, insane, what is not part of the logic of production, although this happens not so much to exclude what does not let itself be included in the system, but rather to *delimit* and *impose* itself through the opposition with an antagonist (cf. Bodei, 1997: 141).

The rising of the mental institutions in the modern age, is interpreted by Foucault as an expression of an increased social control of the deviation oriented to the *normalization*, by virtue of what appears *deviant* everything that is not part of the parameters of the productive rationality: the confinement assumes the significance of the net separation that the new culture intends to establish between madness and reason. Separation which assumes the elevation of the latter to the level of the normative parameter as of the gnoseological, ethical, or individual order and social. The consequence which immediately arises is the gnoseological-ethical alienation of the insane for which he is considered the "alienated" *tout-court* and madness ends up being confused with immorality, the crime and the licentiousness of any kind (Corradi, 1977: 47).

These theses, which lies at the base of the contemporary anti-psychiatric movement, gently push the reflection of Foucault from the analysis of the «effects of power » produced by the «medical look» to the study of the epistemological field in which knowledge is given.

If the Renaissance *episteme,* dominated by the semiotics of similarity and of identity, interprets words as things to decipher (cf. Foucault, 1966: 49), the *classic* episteme (from the second half of the seventeenth century forward), represented by the *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, expresses the distress and the crisis of a world in which writing has ceased to be the prose of the world, «similitudes have become deceptive» and things «still remain stubbornly within their ironic identity»; things, that is, «they are no longer anything but what they are; words wander off on their own; they lie sleeping between the pages of books and covered in dust» (*ibid.*, 53). The age of the Cartesian *Regulae*, in which the aesthetic fantasies of similarity leave the place to the ideal of the *mathesis universalis*, for which the significance of a thing coincides with the order that it occupies within the universal *mos geometricus*: the logic of representation supplant that of similarity.

In this phase, representation is configured as *order of signs* which expresses the external reality as such. An order which, however, is unhinged, but at the same time inevitably maintained, by the repeated obscure violence of desire that, rejected by reason, asks to be *epistemically* rehabilitated in the manifesting of transparent and impeccable representations, such as those expressed in the literary work of Sade and in the philosophy of ideologists (cf. *ibid.*, 230, 262).

From the epistemic crisis of the âge *classique* comes Kant, who, with the concept of

transcendental subject, is able to give a solid foundation to the representation: «If going forward a knowledge will be possible, this will take place only as its legality, its validity are referred to a synthetic subject, constituent, organizer of the experience» (Cotesta, 1979: 54). In this perspective, for Foucault, occurs the «birth of man», in the sense that before the end of the eighteenth century, man properly did not exist.

Writes Foucault:

In the scientific discourses that the contemporary man has formulated from the seventeenth century forward, it appeared, in the eighteenth century, a new object, man. With man appeared the possibility of constituting human sciences and it also appeared a kind of ideology or of general philosophical theme which was that of the imprescriptible value of man. When I say imprescriptible, I intend it in a very precise sense that is that man has appeared as object of possible sciences – the sciences of man – and, at the same time as the being thanks to whom every knowledge was possible. Thus, man belonged to the field of knowledge as possible object and, on the other hand, was radically at the point of origin of all sorts of knowledge (Foucault 1969, in Caruso, 1969: 106-107).

The appearance of man is accompanied by the emerging of the «finitude», which, for Foucault, originates when the human being begins to exist within his organism, in the shell of his head, in the armor of his limbs and in the whole structure of his physiology; when he begins to exist at the center of a labor by whose principles he is governed and whose product eludes him; when, finally, he lodges his thought in the folds of a language so much older than himself that he cannot master its significations, even though they have been called back to life by the insistence of his words (Foucault, 1966: 346).

Starting from Kant, who also thinks about finite based on finite itself (cf. *ibid.*, 343), the subject comes to be committed both on the *empirical* front and on the *transcendental* one, exalting in the first case the gnoseological-sensorial abilities of man and showing, in the second case, the *historical-social character* of knowing. In both cases, man finds himself thematizing his own limits, at the same time of subject and the object of knowledge. It follows the possibility to relate to the limit of the *unthought-of* and the unknown; in fact, the margin of finitude within which the subject is cannot not resend to the other from himself:

The unthought-of (whatever name we give it) is not lodged in man like a shriveled-up nature or a stratified history; it is in relation to man, the Other: the Other that is not only a brother but a twin, born, not of man, nor in man, but besides him and at the same time, in an identical newness (*ibid.*, 355-356).

So, the Other configures himself in the modern man as infinite dislocation of the origin, as impossibility of seeing his own beginning (cf. *ibid.*, 360).

However, the subject, for Foucault, has already inscribed in himself the germ of his own dissolution, being born within a paradoxical situation. Man, in fact,

Finds himself in the dominion exercised on him by things, objects, by positivity, but he disperses himself in it; in that dominion man finds the beginning and the end of his history, the alpha and the omega (Corradi, 1977: 103).

What exists is not man, but the structures, which are the only real *object* of human sciences (which Foucault reduces to three: psychoanalysis, ethnology, linguistic). The «death of man», for Foucault, is an irreversible fact:

In our day, and once again Nietzsche indicated the turning -point from a long way off, it is not so much the absence or the death of God that is affirmed at the end of man (that narrow, imperceptible displacement, that recession in the form of identity, which are the reason why man's finitude gas become his end); it becomes apparent, then, that the death of

God and the last man are engaged in a contest with more than one round: is it not the last man who announces that he has killed God, thus situating his language, his thought, his laughter in the space of that already God, yet positioning himself also as he who has killed God whose existence includes the freedom and the decision of that murder? (Foucault, 1966: 420).

Man «speaks, thinks and exists in the death of God»; therefore «his murder itself is doomed to die»: man, himself will «disappear» (cf. *ibid.)*.

Within such disappearing, the *problem of language* assumes a central role. In line with his previous analysis, Foucault asks himself:

Since man was constituted at a time when language was doomed to dispersion, will he not be dispersed when language regains its unity? (*ibid.*, 421).

Thought can do nothing but escape the paradox of the totalizing individualization, abandoning «the illusory refuge of closing within himself» (Bodei, 1997: 147) and reflecting on the «technologies» and the mechanism, as anonymous as socially shared, which are at the foundation of the same construction of the self.

The criticism of subjectivity joins with the criticism to power. Consistent with the premises contained in the theory of language and of the *episteme,* intended as autonomous structures producers of reality, power too is considered as an active principle which creates the types of knowledge and determines the methods of production. Against the juridical conceptions of power which consider only the question of sovereignty and its legitimacy and so reconnect the power to a subject or a state apparatus. Foucault intends the power as the control system *internal* to the types of knowledge and that of common language, to the mechanism of censorship, the system of rewards, the totality of the interpersonal and collective relationships. Power segregates, supervises, punishes, criminalizes who opposes it, exercises in humble places, more than in the splendor of the parliamentarian chambers or of the courts: in the dormitories of mental institutions and of barracks, in the hospitals' wards, in the rooms of colleges, in the classrooms (Bodei, 1997: 143).

It follows that «the power is not above but within society, it does not spread only through ideology or consensus, but through thousands of practices which involve the body and the space» (*ibid.*).

It is thus possible to emphasize the *devices of power*, those mechanisms that the analysis of Foucault can discern, and which are all the more effective, the more they are intimately connected to the fabric of sociality and the more they enter into the psycho-physiological domain of the individual.

According to Foucault, power is not a social institution, nor a pure form of interdiction, nor «a certain power of which some would be endowed», but it rather is «something that circulates, [...] that functions and exercise itself through a reticular organization» (Foucault, 1977: 184).

In the radicalism of Foucault's setting is delineated, after all, the path travelled in our days, by the criticism of ideologies. If, starting from Marx, ideology presented itself as a covering or a mask of the domain, now it is precisely the latter to be considered the source of language and knowledge. At this point, the possibility of discriminating what is ideological from what is not is no longer given. Everything, in a certain sense, has become «ideology»: the same social sciences respond to practices of power aimed at the *prevision* and the *control* of events, actions and actors, limiting the complexity of the actions.

With Foucault, the relativism which Mannheim wanted to prevent becomes the normality of a sociology of knowledge in which, rather than a distinction between conceptual

apparatuses and sphere of the social, configures itself in a sort of commingling of material and cultural factors as constitutive elements in the process of formation of «reality».

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Myth and Reality of the Global Terrorist Threat

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Abstract

The media constantly bombard the public with all sort of threats: the terrorist threat, the environmental threat, criminality, immigration and epidemics, without bothering to distinguish, clarify the context, weigh the messages and be responsive on the ultimate effects of their alarms. Not to mention the idea of a great vulnerability to lethal incidents such as terrorist attacks. Yet, both domestic and international terrorist events are in decline. On this subject, the mismatch between public perception and the reality is extreme.

Key words: *Human security, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction.*

1. Overblown threat

Most figures, facts and interpretations of global security and terrorism developed on academic level in recent years have passed unnoticed or have not been transferred to the public discourse. Governments and the media ignore this kind of knowledge and the non-disastrous vision of the current human security that derives from it. They run the opposite view and promote a paranoid way of looking at the matter. Many people, and among them many individuals devoted to human progress and peace, are convinced, therefore, to live in a world ever more dangerous and violent.

The media constantly bombard the public with all sort of threats. *If it doesn't bleed it doesn't lead* has become the creed of news broadcasted around the clock. The final result of this hysteria is the spreading of a sense of powerlessness, if not cynicism and indifference, about what happens in the most unfortunate parts of the earth. Not to mention the idea of a great vulnerability to lethal incidents such as terrorist attacks.

On this subject, the mismatch between public perception and the reality is extreme. Almost everyone thinks of September 11th 2001 as a symbolic event, which inaugurate a new era of global insecurity. But how many – apart from a handful of scholars and insurance companies – care to quantify the temporal diagram of terrorist actions and their frequency and severity in order to measure their real level of danger?

The media censor this aspect. Rarely do they publish graphs that show the real picture, because they prefer to dwell on sales based on the amplification of fears that increase audience and circulation (and spread terrorist propaganda at the same time). Western governments pretend to follow the U.S. in the holy war against the fundamentalist devil and leave the public at mercy of media alarmism, without worrying about providing

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people with serious evaluations of the actual scale of the threat.

A menace that is much smaller than most people think. Because both domestic and international terrorist events are in decline.

Yes, in decline. And not just recently, but for at least 25 years in almost every part of the world. The perception of transnational terrorism as a growing, existential threat to global security is wrong and misleading. This misconception is due to a twofold error of calculation and interpretation.

At the root of this error is the conflation of terrorist attacks properly said on one side, and violent attacks and casualties occurring in warzones, acts not classifiable as terrorist but under the category of "insurgency" on the other side. This conflation is a byproduct of the hysterical post 9/11 media and governmental approach to terrorism. The tragedy did have a strong impact on how terrorism has come to be understood, creating a definitional confusion. "The vast majority of what is now commonly being tallied as terrorism occurs in war zones like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan. But to a considerable degree, this is the result of a more expansive application since 9/11 of standard definitions of terrorism, to the point where virtually any violence perpetrated by rebels in civil wars is now being called terrorism… Before 9/11, terrorism was, by definition, a limited phenomenon. It was often called the "weapon of the weak" because it inflicted damage only sporadically. If terroristic violence became really sustained and extensive in an area..the activity was generally no longer called terrorism, but rather war or insurgency…" (Mueller, Stewart, 2016).

The terrorism/insurgency conflation has become increasingly popular (Hoffman, 2006: 20-34; Kilcullen, 2010: 35; O'Neill, 2005: 33). Typical insurgency entities like the Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, Nepali Maoists[1] (Khalil, 2013), are currently labeled as "terrorist groups", as well as all players in the Syrian and Iraqis civil war that do not fit into the political taste of a major contender: " the United States brands those fighting the government of Bashar Al-Assad to its own convenience: ISIS fighters are deemed to be "terrorists," while those insurgents approved by the United States are labeled the "moderate opposition." Assad himself is more consistent, if equally self-serving: any violent opposition to a sitting government, he says, is "terrorism." (Khalil, 2013).

This distorsion creates the false impression that the world is awash in terrorism. Moreover, it reduces the reliability of all numbers produced by most databases on terrorist attacks and casualties.

There is a way to generate more trustworthy figures, as shown by two RAND Corporation researchers who tried to disaggregate attacks occurring in warzones afflicted by insurgencies and civil wars from attacks occurring in non-conflict areas. They used the University of Maryland Global Terrorism Database for the quantification of terrorist attacks, and numbers on civil war and insurgency from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program in 194 countries (Ziegler& Smith, 2017).

Figure 1 shows that global terrorist attacks a) decreased drastically and regularly for the 25 years from 1989 to 2014: from more than 4.000 attacks in 1989 to less than 1.000 in

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[1] According to a scholar who makes an (unconvincing) case against distinguishing between the two entities " unlike their insurgent counterparts, terrorists: (a) are less reliant on the simultaneous use of nonviolent methods, (b) apply specifically uncompromising forms of violence, (c) operate with limited community support, (d) are numerically smaller, and (e) do not maintain territorial control.

2004. b) attacks rose dramatically after 2004 reaching almost 17,000 in 2014. The numbers from 2015 and 2016 (not shown) have remained remarkably high, but below the 2014 peak. " It is tempting to surmise from the strong trend upwards in Figure 1 that terrorism is on the rise and that the threat is expanding worldwide. However, this is only part of the story. More than 70 percent of the attacks in the past 10 years transpired in just two regions, both of which have seen extensive insurgency and civil conflict during that time: North Africa/Middle East and South-Central Asia. Most terrorism transpires in the context of insurgency, but to equate the two phenomena is misleading and inaccurate " (Ziegler& Smith, 2017).

Figure 1. *The* researchers proceed calculating the number of incidents outside of places beset with civil wars and insurgencies producing less than 1.000 battle-related death in a given year. Figure 2 shows terrorist attacks between 1989 and 2014 in countries with and without active civil wars.