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ON THE POLITICAL (PRE-)CONDITIONS OF PHILOSOPHICAL CULTURE

Die Philosophie kann auch als die Wissenschaft der Freiheit betrachtet werden . . . nur in der Philosophie ist die Vernunft durchaus bei sich selbst. (Georg W. F. Hegel, Enzyklopädie 1817, par. 5)

En philosophie, tout l’espace est toujours déjà occupé. On n’y occupe donc une position que contre l’adversaire qui occupe cette position. (Louis Althusser, Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants)

Intellectual life is first of all conflict and disagreement. (Randall Collins, The Sociology of Philosophies)

Abstract
This paper sails between the pitfall of philosophism (idealization of philosophy that forgets about the political conditions of philosophical thought and its development) and the opposite pitfall of sociologism (reduction of philosophy to one field of human activity among many, sharing functional characteristics with them) in order to develop a viable conception of philosophical culture. Innovatively, the key notion of reflexivity is taken from sociology, which implies that philosophers (like others) relate actively to the very conditions of their endeavor, but (unlike others) additionally relate reflexively to their own activity as one place where the human mind cultivates itself.

Key words:
Reflexivity, Hegel, philosophism, Bourdieu, sociology of philosophy, Collins

1. The first version of this paper was presented at the conference in Helsinki in 2008, mentioned in the Preface to this issue. In the paper, there is frequent reference to the concrete situation of a ‘paper presentation at a conference’ – this, however, can be transposed to any other philosophical conference.


1. Introduction

Some academics make a habit out of saying, at the outset of their presentation, that they have changed the title of their paper. Usually, such an announcement meets with a mixture of suppressed irritation and mild understanding. The irritation stems not only from the fact that we have to change our expectations, but also from the fact that we live under the illusion of a cumulative positive science, in which intellectuals produce small pieces of knowledge and conceptual development, adding these to what they had accumulated to far. The concomitant image is that of a library – or a hard disk – in which one bit of information is added to all the other bits of information. Going home from a conference, we carry along more new names, titles, and ideas than we came with, and certainly more than we are going to actually use. This generates another image, not an illusion this time, viz. that of a mer à boire of theories and insights. However, the failure to incorporate all this new information does not, by itself, destroy the illusion that, in principle, everything there is to know could be gathered in a single representation of the world as it really is: there is only one world, hence there can be only one true cognition of it. This conviction sits deep – as Hegel put it: “Die Wahrheit ist eine; – dieses unüberwindliche Gefühl oder Glauben hat der Instinkt der Vernunft.”

Undermining this illusion irritates.

Mild understanding comes from another aspect: it has to do with the fact that we all know that, unless we simply repeat something that we have said before, or refuse to review our own work, each and every paper is the reflection of a work in progress called ‘thought’. It is far from me to inflate this ‘thought’ into some lofty kind of free-floating and disinterested purely intellectual activity; on the contrary, I aim to contribute to a better understanding of what actually is going on when we are thinking, or doing philosophy or, more broadly, intellectual work. The fact that freedom is necessarily involved in this activity, is not as such a good or a bad thing: it simply is a fact that we have to take into account. Next to freedom, plurality is involved: the multitude of minds that, unassistedly, seek truth. Philosophy, at least in its Western form, is permanently oscillating between the idea of a single true cognition of reality and the fact of a multitude of perceptions and positions: if it is, to put it in Hegelese, absolutes Wissen, it includes this oscillation and realizes it on a permanent basis.

I have not, in the present case, changed the title of my paper. The reason for this is that the paper is about the paper itself. It is, in this precise sense, reflexive. This relates, quite fundamentally, to my FIRST THESIS, namely that philosophical culture is not to be conceived as an object ‘out there’ that can be studied, but as something in which subjects are involved from the very beginning: a philosophical culture is a subjective-objective entity. This is not to deny, of course, that it can be studied as an object, too, nor that that can be a fruitful endeavour; in fact, I aim to offer some suggestions and hypotheses concerning such an approach. It is to claim, however, that such an objectifying