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**The end of philosophy in the age of democracy**

It is probably useful, when we talk about the role of philosophy in the late-modern and post-modern societies, to underline the analogies that exist between a writing such as *The open society and its enemies* of Karl Popper and the ideas that Heidegger has discussed in many of his works, especially in a lecture concerning *The end of philosophy and the task of thought* (1964). This is obviously a paradoxical approach, especially because Heidegger does not exactly seem a “democratic” thinker. But the reasons that push Popper to line up against Plato are basically the same that move Heidegger in his polemic against metaphysics, and, as he writes exactly at the opening of that lecture, it is always Platonism, from the ancient times arriving to Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche. In fact, if, instead of the expression of Popper “open society”, we write the Heideggerian term *Ereignis*, “event”, we do not betray neither the intentions of Popper nor the intentions of Heidegger, even if both of them would not be content of this small hermeneutical “violence”.

Popper maintains that Plato was a dangerous enemy of the open society because he had an essentialist concept of the world: all that is real corresponds to a law that is given as a structure of being, and the society too, must simply conform itself to this essential order.

As the one who knows the essential order of things is the philosopher, to him will be given the duty of commanding the society. The function that philosophers – and today scientists, technicians, experts – have claimed for themselves during the centuries, that of supreme advisors of princes, is strictly linked to this basic persuasion: that individual and societies should always correspond to an order objectively given, and therefore valid as the sole possible moral role. A modern principle such as that one that says “*auctoritas, non veritas, facit legem*” has always been subject to the rationalistic criticism inspired by metaphysics, even when moved by the best revolutionary intentions. Everywhere, in politics, we are faced with truth, there begins the danger of authoritarianism, just that “closure” that Popper stigmatizes in his work.

Now, what Heidegger calls “metaphysics” is precisely the idea that being is order objectively given once and for all, the that also Nietzsche reproaches to Socrates, seeing in him the beginner of modern decadence, guilty of having killed the great tragic spirit of the ancients. If being is a stable structure given once and for all, there is no possible openness in history nor any freedom.

Obviously, such a vision is much more reassuring than the tragic one which, assumedly, characterized the preclassical Greeks; but the reassurance, we could suggest, functions especially for those who are already sure in the actual order, and who, above all for this reason, recognise it as rational and worthy of remaining valid forever. (Here, besides Nietzsche, I recall the thesis of Benjamin concerning the philosophy of history). I remember that, in the same first pages of the mentioned lecture on the end of philosophy, Heidegger cites, just besides the name of Plato, that of Karl Marx, as the one who has already carried out, and before Nietzsche, the overturning of metaphysics and so of platonism. With this I do not want to say that it is possible to fill up the gap between the marxist overturning and that "overcoming" (Ueberwindung) which Heidegger tries to prepare by his work. But it is not absolutely arbitrary, as for us, to recall the marxist ideas on the origin of alienation in the social division of work when we try to understand, with Heidegger why and how metaphysics has established itself in such a radical way in the history of our world. Here I leave aside the debate on the "historical" or "eternal" nature of metaphysics in the thought of Heidegger, which could probably lead us to retrieve his dependence on the biblical myth of the original sin, a myth which he never could completely get rid of.

Although the notion of metaphysics is meant by Heidegger in a rather peculiar way, I think that the analogy, even if paradoxical, with Popper could clarify in which sense it is also shared by much contemporary philosophy; obviously, it should not be difficult to recognize it in Wittgenstein (Die Welt ist alles was der Fall ist. The world is everything that is the case: Tractatus, 1), and, of course, in pragmatism and neopragmatism. I know some philosophers are still talking about metaphysics, in a way terminologically concordant, both the continuer of the classical thought and of the neoscholastic tradition, and that peculiar neoscholastic that is analytical philosophy – in which metaphysics is identified with a set of rigid "regional ontologies", i.e. the formal structures, or conditions, of knowledge, deprived of that elasticity and historicity still recognizable in the transcendental of Kant and also of Husserl. But it is quite clear that at least in a great part of contemporary philosophy, metaphysics in its heideggerian sense, as identification of the true being with a stable structure, objectively recognizable and source of rules, is largely rejected, even without any explicit reference to Heidegger himself.

It is exactly on the basis of the rejection of metaphysics understood in that way – a rejection that may be motivated either with nietzschean – heideggerian reasons, or with wittgensteinian ones, or with the arguments of Carnap or Popper – that I propose to start talking about the problem of the end of philosophy in the era of democracy. Or, better: going also beyond Heidegger and Popper, we could simply

identify the end of metaphysics with the affirmation, practical and political, of the democratic regimes.

Where we find democracy it is not possible to find a class of holders of the real “truth” who either exert directly the power (kings-philosophers of Plato ) or give to the sovereign the rules for his behaviour. That is why, I repeat, I think that it is symptomatic the recalling of Marx in the pages quoted before from Heidegger’s lecture. In those pages, the talk is about the end of philosophy as a consequence of the dissolution it undergoes in the specializing of particular sciences, from psychology to sociology, antropology, logic, logistics and semantics, till cybernetics ( today’s computer science ).

It’s easy to understand that this is absolutely not an abstract theme: those among us who teach philosophy in schools and universities can experiment this progressive dissolution of philosophy every day.

In the universities where new courses of psychology, antropology, computer science are set up, the enrollment into philosophy courses decreases rapidly. Funds at disposal of philosophy studies are reduced as well. At the very end, all this is very reasonable, but unpleasant for many of us and expecially for our students.

Anyway, the phenomenon appears to be an aspect of the end of philosophy having nothing to do with democracy, being linked just to the increased human sciences’ autonomy. But, as Heidegger also says , it corresponds to a growing social power and prestige of specialists, which means a much greater “scientific” – and less democratic - control on the various aspects of associate life.

In view of all this, one understands that the end of philosophy leaves an open gap that democratic societies must take into consideration. On one hand, philosophy intended as the sovereign function of the wises in the government of the polis, is dead. On the other hand - as it is suggested by the title of Heidegger’s lecture , which speaks of a “task of thought” after the end of philosophy – the problem, specifically democratic, remains to avoid that the authority of the king–philosopher be substituted for by the uncontrolled power of the many technicians in the different sectors of social life. This latter is a much more dangerous power, because more deceitful and fragmented – so much that the revolutionary purpose of “striking the heart of the state” becomes totally unrealistic, as the power is distributed into so many centres. If we wanted to use a psychiatric metaphor, we might say that, with the end of philosophy in the specialized sciences, our world runs the risk of becoming a schizophrenic society, where sooner or later a new supreme power will arise, required in view of making collective life possible, even at the cost of freedom.

We should then change the title of Heidegger’s lecture into: The end of philosophy in democratic societies and the ( political ) task of thought. The sovereign role of the philosopher is finished, because sovereigns are finished. It is

not easy to say if those “ends” are linked in a cause–effect relation. Like Marx, Heidegger would say that the end of metaphysics and, consequently, the end of the claims of philosophy to sovereignty did not happen just thank to the philosophers. In his view, all this is an event of being to which the philosopher has to “correspond”. But his difference from Marx looks rather slight : where does the being speak to which the philosopher must answer? Not in the economic–materialistic “structure” of the society, as Marx would say ; or, anyway, not just in it. But Heidegger’s call to not being satisfied with the “daily presentation of what is present as vorhandenens” ( die vorhandene Gegenwaertigung des Anwesenden; in Zur Sache des Denkens, Niemeyer 1969, page 79; it. page 179 ) recalls not just superficially the marxian critique of ideology, that “ school of suspect” which is expressed , for example, in Brecht’s slogan – “what always happens, do not find it normal”.

Also the possibility, for me here, to propose interpretations which see an analogy between Heidegger’s refusal of metaphysics and Popper’s apology of the open society, and which until twenty years ago would have appeared absolutely scandalous – also this possibility I am developing does not represent a “theoretical” discovery; as far as it is arguable, it just corresponds to (reflects, interprets) the new conditions of our time. Compared to the moment in which Heidegger and Popper wrote their works, the world of today is much more strongly “rationalized” and “scientifically organized”. The phenomenon of the end of philosophy and the schizofrenia of the specialized sciences and techniques, with the possible consequence of a new authoritarianism – I am thinking of Bush’s America, of course; but not exclusively - is infinitely more visible and pervasive. When I propose the thesis of the relatively paradoxical nearness of Heidegger and Popper I am not claiming that this is the definitive truth, I am just trying to correspond, with this interpretation, to the event, to the concrete situation in which I think we live.

Following Heidegger and Marx, maybe not also Popper (although it could be argued that is the case for him as well), the task of thought in this situation is to think what remains hidden in the “everyday presentation” of what usually happens. I.e., for Marx, the dialectic concreteness of the interrelations which are concealed by the false consciousness of ideology; for Heidegger, the truth as alétheia, the basic openness of a horizon (we might speak of a paradigm) which makes possible all truth meant as correspondence to the state of affairs, be it a verification or a falsification of propositions. As I said, it is not immediately clear that this effort to think what remains hidden in the everyday presentation of the world corresponds also to Popper’s idea of the task of philosophy; I don’t want to discuss the problem here. As to Heidegger and Marx, the question is: may we talk of the hidden alétheia which Heidegger has in mind as if it were identifiable with the

concreteness of the economic and social interrelations of Marx's materialism? In other words: how shall we imagine the task of thought in the epoch in which philosophers no longer (believe that they) have a privileged access to the eternal truth, on the basis of which they would be entitled to govern society or to be the advisors of the sovereign? Should we follow exclusively Marx, we would return to a metaphysical and rationalistic historicism, in which the task of the philosophers is to express the definitive truth of history, which is known clearly only by the proletariat which also makes it real by the revolution. If, on the contrary, we had to follow exclusively Heidegger, we would find ourselves entangled in that "groundless Mysticism, bad mythology, dangerous irrationalism" (grundlose Mystik, schlechte Mythologie, verderblicher Irrationalismus: Zur Sache des Denkens, cit., ibid.) which he sees as a risk connected to his theory. In order to avoid these risks, which are not only Heidegger's, but of several contemporary philosophies – at least of those which don't want to become harmless complements of the specialized human sciences – one has to step forward on the way of the "urbanization of the Heideggerian province" (I recall here Habermas' famous definition of Gadamer's hermeneutics). This means, for me, to go back to an undeveloped passage of Heidegger's lecture on "The origin of a work of art" (1936). In a page of that essay, Heidegger – as you know – defined the work of art as the "putting into work of the truth", in other words as the place in which the event of being happens, opening up an epoch etc. From that moment on Heidegger has developed his "ontology" mainly, if not exclusively, on the basis of this idea of the event: he tried again and again to catch the event of being by listening to the inaugural words of poetry, of the ancient wisdom (Der Spruch des Anaximanders, e.g.), etc. But in the essay of 1936 he also named, without further explanations, other ways of the opening of truth, i.e. of the event of being. Among them, also "the foundation of a state", or politics. It is very likely that he did not develop his meditation on this point also because of his unhappy nazist adventure. For me, it is nevertheless important to recall this allusion to politics as a possible place of the event of being, because what I want to suggest is that, in the epoch of democracy, the inaugural event of being might no longer be the work of art, but, in some sense, the political agora. It was in the epoch of metaphysics that the event of being happened in those privileged moments which were the great works of art; not forgetting that the great works of art have always had something to do with the power of the sovereigns (painting, architecture, theatre, music; even poetry, in many senses). In those privileged expressions, being speaks still in the form of an "essential" truth which still entitles, or claims to entitle, the philosopher to sovereignty.

My, provisional, conclusion would then be that if we want to "correspond" to the event of being in our specific historical situation we shall try to catch its voice in

something which has much more to do with politics than with art, or with any kind of profound invisible announcement. I have proposed to describe this kind of thought with a term of the late Foucault, “ontologie de l’actualité”, ontology of the present, as it were. The event of being to which thought has the task to correspond in the epoch of democracy is the way in which being gives itself, from time to time, in the collective experience. The hidden which tends to remain un-thought in the specialization of the sciences is the “on he on”, the being as being, the wholeness of the individual and social experience, which is to be subtracted to the technological schizofrenia and to the relapse into authoritarian social discipline. If one still speaks here of ontology, entrusting once more the task to the philosophers – no longer as sovereign or as advisors of the sovereign – means that one has to imagine a new and still undefined social role of the “intellectual”, closer to that of the artist and of the priest than to the one of the scientist and of the technologist. At any rate, it should be a priest without a hierarchical church, or a street artist. In a less picturesque way, we might describe this role as that of a historian and a politician – somebody who does ontology insofar as he helps in connecting the current experience with those of the past and with those of other cultures and societies, building and rebuilding a continuity which is the very meaning of the term logos, dis-course. (I think again of the idea of the philosopher as a Dolmetscher, a “translator”, proposed by Habermas). Does all this have anything to do with “being”? one might ask. But: is being anything different, more profound and hidden, than this, its, “event”?