

was forced to emigrate once again, this time ending up in Switzerland.

After the war he declared that he was deeply disappointed in Hitler. The Führer, he said, had misused a good idea. “Fascism was correct, since it was based on sound national-patriotic sentiments without which no people can either assert their existence or create a culture of their own.” He now professed himself an adherent of democratic elections, but he viewed them as basically ritual in nature, a way to advance a Leader as the distilled expression of the popular soul. He quite naturally began idealizing Spain as a model for the future Russia: a union of church and state and a strict social hierarchy with “el Caudillo” at the summit as the incarnation of the national idea.

**IN HIS OWN WORDS**, Ilyin viewed himself as “a child in the lap of Mother Russia.” Indeed, he probably was and remained a child. He passed his entire life in exile gazing at the Russian nation, locked into his infantile imperial fantasy. Of Ukraine he finally wrote that nationalistic demands for independence must be combated with all available means, for such perversities threaten to drive Russia insane.

The grand-godson of the tsar himself, Ilyin yearned for the Kremlin and the harsh rule of his grandfather. So now he is there. This is the deeply flawed fascistoid thinker on whom Vladimir Putin has pinned his hopes. It is with his incendiary message that the Kremlin wants to fire up its subjects. Europe is stagnant, but Russia can rehabilitate our civilization. ❌

Translated by Charles Rougle

## ZIGZAGGING THROUGH CURRENT CHALLENGES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

**G**etting Rid of the West: *Critical Social Sciences in a Post-Colonial and Post-Socialist Age*, a talk given by French sociologist Jean-Louis Fabiani at New Europe College – Institute for Advanced Study in Bucharest, on 16 January 2018, questioned the manner in which social sciences can be practiced nowadays when the conditions of their founding ground – policies such as colonialism or states of geopolitical tensions like the Cold War – have changed. Namely, what should be preserved or reviewed from the paradigms that arose in a certain historical context and claimed to be timeless and universal.

Jean-Louis Fabiani, who specializes in cultural policy, sociological theory, the sociology of culture and art and the history of sociology, is professor at ÉHESS Paris and CEU Budapest and, this year, a fellow of the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study. His PhD thesis, defended in 1980 under the supervision of Pierre Bourdieu, addressed the sociological history of philosophy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century–early 20<sup>th</sup> century by pursuing not only abstract ideas (as philosophers do in their histories), but also reflecting on social contexts, schools, professors’ careers etc.

Resembling a highbrow journey in the life of concepts, Fabiani’s presentation started with a reference to physics and the disaccord that inherently resides in this amalgamate operation called *scientific research*. Contrary to our commonsensical expectations, it is this very trait that does not weaken the body, Fabiani explained by quoting Peter Galisson’s starting argument from *Trading Zone: Coordinating Action and Belief*: “(...) science is disunited and – against our first intuitions – it is precisely the *disunification* of science that underpins its strength and stability.” Thus, none of the established

practices in use or the instruments a researcher needs for his/her investigations should be seen as acting in isolation, but in a permanent process of intercalation with their neighboring traditions. This is also the case with the social sciences, by definition a field of inter-relations – from linguistics and history to economics and politics – and a space where methods are as diverse as human beings. Looking for their homogeneity or regretting their apparent fracture is not at stake here because this multitude of approaches makes science stable and cohesive in spite of an unfriendly climate, assuring it the energy for living. To sum up, Fabiani argued for two rational duties: 1. acceptance of “the irreducible plurality of our cognitive endeavors (in theory as well as in research practices)”, and 2. the plea for “cohesiveness of our goals and the necessary interconnection of our knowledge production.”

**SINCE PIERRE BOURDIEU** dissected the social sciences, no analyst has embarked on an exploration of the field without referencing him. Mentioning *Science of Science and Reflexivity* – Bourdieu’s elaborated study on the objectivity and validity of the social sciences – the French professor reminded the audience about the researcher’s fundamental ethics: discarding biases. This is essential because only this continuous effort of becoming reflexively conscious of your own partiality will prepare the laboratory for an objective approach – not forgetting that “an unconscious anthropology is always at work in our own research practice”, Fabiani concluded. However, turning the mirror inwards should not become a mere automatism, but a natural, enriched gesture – “a constitutive disposition of scientific habitus” (Bourdieu) –, and, consequently, the methodology heading towards this will reach its maturity, its full growth. Together with this penetrating



Fabiani's work includes more than 50 journal articles and books. Some of his most frequently cited pieces are *Les philosophes de la République* (1988), *Qu'est-ce qu'un philosophe français?* *La vie sociale des concepts* (2010) and *Pierre Bourdieu: un structuralisme héroïque* (2016).

and reflexive look comes the test of the environment. As many scholars put it, social sciences are bound to historicity, and the historical context is perceived as a validation tool. How does one's hypothesis work in the big narrative? Researchers do not screen past or current circumstances to simply collect data, but also to probe their theories. "In order to check that our assertions are true or false, we must index them on specific historical contexts", Fabiani further added.

Reconsidering traditions is an elementary step towards profoundly understanding a community. Once you show skepticism to certain practices, you create space for more refined perspectives and stimulate innovations in thought – as if you embrace a never-accommodating attitude that is constantly interrogating what has been researched and concluded in the dominant narrative. One of the most notable examples in the area, at least for Europe, is the French Revolution, the symbol of modernity and emancipation that has begun to be seen as misunderstood since the mid-1990s. French historian François Furet deconstructed the revolutionary myth when he published his classic *La Révolution Française* in 1965 and reflected on the roots of social change. Democratic views and egalitarian ideals existed as early as

1781 and were not necessarily based on class struggle, as Marxist historiography claimed, but on a pursuit to reduce the grandiose, concentrated power of the state. And this explanation is much more related to a "chronicle of the mentalities" than to a politics-driven historiography. The former perspective has given rise to an approach to history called *long-term social history*, which has been cultivated by the French journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale* since 1960s.

Another twist in the investigation of societies happened with post-colonial studies, whose vista, to a certain extent, has also sprung from the (re)negotiations between political and social powers. Changing the emphasis from the colonizer to the colonized and giving voice to those who were constrained to undergo the experience of the Western emancipa-

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tion has been of major interest in the last forty years or so. Core concepts such as *universal good*, *enlightenment* and *progress* were sanctioned for misconduct and interpreted as intruders that brutally ignored the bare reality. "Something went wrong because the very idea of 'cosmopolis' involved a gross oversimplification of the notion of natural and social order", Fabiani argued. On the other hand, this zeal to catch up with the periphery of the world might become as culpable as the contested counterpart. Some theoreticians tend to reduce the colonial past to that and only that: imperialism and white men's supremacy. Arguing narrowly that the mainstream sciences did not leave room for margins to express themselves and thus failing to appropriately explain social phenomena in the area might itself evolve into a kind of dogma. Thus, as history evenly glides into ideology and vice versa, and it becomes more and more difficult to grasp the truth, we are entitled to question: who is to blame after all? At this point, Fabiani's position seems more than pertinent: "As we like to unveil our ancestors' colonial amnesia, we should ask ourselves about our own lack of concern for so many present social disasters."

**BRINGING INTO** discussion the Eurocentrism that influenced mainstream social

sciences, Fabiani pointed to Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, a seminal book on post-colonial and subaltern studies (albeit criticized for its radicalism). The author of Indian origins dismantles the 'First in Europe, then elsewhere' structure and hints almost ironically at Europe's pretense to have modernized the world, explaining that only historicism – the theory that history is determined by immutable laws and not by human agency – led to this perspective. Through this lens, the world is divided into Western and non-Western, the inhabitants of the latter being situated somewhere in the "waiting room of the history" (Dipesh Chakrabarty) on their way to overcoming the cultural distance. Moreover, what is publicly declared as *transition* from a specific system of understanding a democratic state, and life in general, has in practice altered to *translation*, a rather mechanical process in which humanity turns opaque. Thus, although hypothetically present or reminiscent in people's mentality, the European heritage is finally incompetent to explain life practices in "other parts of the world".

Michal Buchowski, the Polish author of the *Twilight Zone Anthropologies: The Case of Eastern Europe*, served as an analyst for Central-Eastern anthropology. After the collapse of communism, the East began to look at the Western style with great respect, and its economic superiority – which by comparison was overwhelming – transferred to the social sciences as well. Post-socialist countries began to feel like provinces searching for connections with the parent nation, Fabiani noticed, citing Buchowski: "For many, Western-style social and cultural anthropology was fetishized and constituted an iconic model to be followed. These politically conditioned relations within Western scholarship led, especially after 1989, to a self-imposed colonization similar to the processes that have taken place in the fields of economy and politics." To go further into Buchowski's argument, the concept of *twilight zones* is worth mentioning. Aware that extreme thinking

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affects the bare truth and that keeping the mind captive in either hegemonic ideas or marginalized fundamentalism is pointless, the Polish anthropologist highlighted the immense potential of *borders*. His perspective not only reconciles the never-ending discussions about the status of Central Europe – is it *affiliated* to the West or to the East? – but also brings in a fresh productive angle for the social sciences. It deserves full citation: "By referring to the example of Central Europe, I have just wanted to emphasize that (1) we should always be aware of the existence of such twilight zones that constantly emerge and re-emerge on the global anthropological map, and (2) that thinking in terms of blocks and lines is not only essentializing, but also intellectually futile." The metaphor of the twilight for border thinking is indeed valuable, as it intuitively sends us to a space of both dialogue and transverse approach within the field of social sciences.

TOWARDS THE END of the presentation, Fabiani referred to another crucial moment in the foundations of the sciences: understanding the Enlightenment. Going back to the article *What is Enlightenment?* by Michel Foucault, who himself drew on Kant's 1784 essay, the audience was invited to (re)discover the *benefits* of reasoning. Although the despotism of rationalism can never be forgotten or abandoned, Foucault rethought the intellectual and philosophical movement that animated Europe during the 18<sup>th</sup> century and detected a rather neglected thin ray of light: reason is autonomous. "As Foucault reminds us after Kant, the autonomy of reason does not imply the notion of absolute reason and nor does it imply the universalization of local principles. Autonomizing reason implies that we know

its limits and its rules," Fabiani argued. This led – after a brief look at Dona Haraway's *Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* (from which it emerged that rational knowledge does not mean disengagement, but *power-sensitive conversation*) – to an all-encompassing concluding remark. Specialists should seek the all-inclusive dialogue of self-reflective stories. "The issue is now: how to construct a conversation that would involve all the members of the *Cité savante*, a notion coined by Georges Sorel with critical overtones, but re-appropriated in a more positive way by Bachelard and Bourdieu, to account for their own situation in a reflective way? This is the only condition for the creation of a new common world," were Fabiani's closing words. ✘

Ana-Maria Sirghi

Note: The conference was organized by the New Europe College in collaboration with Centre Régional Francophone de Recherches Avancées en Sciences Sociales (CEREF-REA) of the University of Bucharest.