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Andrea Brighenti, Ph.D.
andrea.brighenti@soc.unitn.it
www.bung.it

Paradigms *en abyme* in the Cultural and Theoretical Construction of Europe and its Other.

Conference paper

ABSTRACT. The paper raises a conceptual issue in the study of culture which, it is argued, has major impact on contemporary European political and legal landscape. The point concerns the epistemological problem of positioning theory *vis à vis* its own objects. Specifically, when the object at stake is the phenomenon of socio-cultural diversity, the question is whether, and to which extent, theory, as well as normative discourse, are in themselves part of such diversity. Most academic discourse aims at positioning itself on a distinct – usually conceived of as more general – level than the objects it strives to explain. The same holds for most normative European philosophical and legal discourses *vis-à-vis* the subjects they claim to apply to. Hence, the question can be articulated as follows: is theory at the service of one of the Weberian warring gods, or is it a *sine ira nec studio* view over the world? Interestingly, these two alternative views can, in their turn, be understood either as *descriptions* of the actual relationship between theory and objects, or as *prescriptions* about the correct way to imagine the proper role of theory.

1. Conceptualizing culture, conceptualizing theory

The title of our session, ‘Theorizing Culture’, invites, to my mind, not only to conceptualize culture, but also, I think, to conceptualize theory, or, in other words, to face the epistemological problem of the positioning theory *vis à vis* its

own objects. Indeed, just as culture, theory, too, can be seen as an inherently *boundary-making* as well as *bridge-making* activity. Both culture and theory involve territorial devices and territorial linkages, at least if we understand territory as a relational structure. This means that culture and theory make (or remake, or attempt at making) territories of relationships, which bound some together and bridge to some others. Such boundaries and bridges may of course be consensual or conflictual, they may define acceptance or rejection, hierarchy or coarchy. Yet, when seen from this perspective, a fundamental difference also appears between culture and theory. Whereas talks about culture usually evoke *subject-to-subject* relationships, talks about theory evoke *subject-to-object* relationships.

In particular, when the theoretical objects at stake are phenomena such as cultural change and socio-cultural diversity in the construction of Europe, the question becomes whether theory itself is part of such diversity or whether, on the contrary, theory lays on a distinct layer. If the latter is the case, it is generally assumed that theory is more abstract and encompassing than the objects it strives to explain. To frame our question in a Weber-like terminology, is theory at the service of one of the warring gods, or is it a *sine ira nec studio* regard over the world? Or even: which is the degree of autonomy of sociological theory, seen as a scientific field, from the social field where the production of such theory is embedded?

Both alternative views of theory, as located alternatively *over* or *among* its objects, can, in their turn, be understood as either *descriptions* of the actual relationship between theory and objects, or *prescriptions* about the correct way to imagine its most proper and suitable role. This said, we find ourselves at the outset of *the* problem: how to think of, how to conceive and describe the nature of multiplicity in the European society and the European culture?

To put it simply, the answer is of course a matter of points of view and, above all, a matter of taste (Feyerabend has become famous for claiming that science at large is a matter of taste). Yet, as matters of taste become history, they also get caught in complex social power relationships. The birth of sociology as a discipline was marked by an epistemological break away from common sense and intuitive knowledge. An attempt was made at separating *etic* from *emic* categories, scientific categories from native categories. Durkheim (1894) first lamented the fact that the problem with doing sociology is that everybody thinks s/he can be a sociologist. It was thus necessary for him to distinguish sociological knowledge from the layperson's knowledge, to build a specific methodological and conceptual apparatus which could guarantee the independence of sociology from other forms of knowledge about society. This is clearly a territorial issue in the ethological sense of the word, and possibly – as I hinted at before – the whole history of scientific disciplines may be written as a

territorial history. Along a Durkheimian line of thought, we arrive at the idea that socio-cultural diversity *qua* multiplicity must be described by a theory of cultural pluralism, or a theory of multiculturalism. We may call this a scientific position.

Do people who are part of cultural multiplicity have a saying in how a theory of multiculturalism should look like, how the units, the building blocks of multiplicity are defined, where group boundaries are drawn and even what is the nature of such boundaries? From a scientific perspective, I am afraid not: indeed, they seem to have none. In this respect, what the scientific view overlooks – or hides – is that theory-making is in itself a practice. It is a social and cultural practice. When we ask ‘who are the subjects of socio-cultural pluralism’, we raise not only a *sociological question*, which points to the description of the social world, but also a *question of sociology*, which points to the epistemological standpoint we have adopted to look at multiplicity. This is the reason why some have called for a ‘second epistemological break’ (Bourdieu 1997), which would mark a separation, not from lay knowledge, but from the academic doxa, in order to reveal the process of autonomization of scholarly knowledge (i.e., theory) from its own social conditions of possibility.

Because knowledge is a social process, which deploys itself through practice, but most of all because people think – not enough attention is paid to the

seriousness of this clause – defining what is at stake is part of what is at stake. In political philosophy, for instance, pluralism does not refer simply to the existence of conflicting doctrines that exist within a political unit, but also, crucially, to alternative and incompatible models of what the very political unit is, and where are its boundaries to be drawn. Yet, many philosophical theories show serious limitations in their capacity to imagine diversity as a constituent part of Europe (Blokker 2006). The same holds for cultural pluralism and multiplicity in Europe as imagined by social theory and research.

2. *Abymes and vicious circles*

I have devoted some my past research to study the production and circulation of the public, mediatic and social-scientific discourse of ‘immigrants integration’ in Italy (Brighenti 2004). To make a long story short, one of my main arguments is that large part of mainstream debate on migration and immigration in Italy – I also attempted some comparisons at the European level and concluded that the situation is not radically different when we look at Europe in general – is based on an essentialistic conception of socio-cultural pluralism. A number of implicit but crucial assumptions are made by mainstream research, as well as by the public debate, which remain *out of* the debate itself. One such assumptions, particularly clear in the Italian debate, is for instance the postulated equivalence of minority groups and cultural groups: ‘one minority group equals one socio-cultural profile equals one identity’.

Consider for instance the fact that in many European countries, minorities – whether immigrant or settled – are routinely classified, in national surveys as well as in academic scholarship and in the media, by their national origin. Some Italian researchers introduced the expression ‘ethno-national’ groups, suggesting that each of these groups shows distinctive and consistent collective features. This goes along – and, so to speak, even hand in hand – with the discourse of multiculturalism. The interchangeable use of these categories is, to put it mildly, far from accurate, as the fault-lines among them do not coincide. One minority does not equal to one socio-cultural profile, which does not equal to one national citizenship, which does not equal to one social identity. We all know things are much more complicated than that, but it seems that seduction of the oversimplifying model that portrays cultural diversity in terms of *paradigms* is pervasive and capable of shaping our imagination.

Consequently, I became interested in what I dare to call ‘the implicit ideology of paradigms in multiculturalist debates’. By this phrase I mean that, because of the projection of an essentialist image upon them, minorities are thought of as distinct socio-cultural paradigms. While almost nobody explicitly claims to be doing so, a number of theories and scattered comments on social diversity that circulate in the media, in public communication and in the scientific community implicitly adopt and support the conception of socio-cultural groups as paradigms. Once this conception is applied, one can judge it as an independent,

objective fact, and even find it good or bad according to one's political orientation and values. But these judgements are mere truisms that depend on the starting assumption. Once the paradigmatic interpretation is applied, frequently alleged accusations that minority groups tend to become 'identity fortresses', for instance, are easy to formulate, as they almost amount to saying that people belonging to these groups want to be what they are.

3. The Debate on Paradigms

This is puzzle for contemporary social theory, but, arguably, it bears important consequences for the political and legal construction of Europe. In order to make my point a little bit clearer, I suggest to retrieve the original conceptual tools at stake. Interestingly, all these concepts derive from the epistemological debate of the Sixties and Seventies, at a time when neopositivism was having a hard time and critical rationalism was in its hey-day. Before researching on what are the theoretical implications of portraying social and cultural distinctive groups in terms of alternative paradigms however, it must be recalled that concepts such as 'paradigm' by Kuhn and 'research programme' by Lakatos, were originally conceived to be applied at a theoretical level, rather than at the level of social diversity.

Thomas Samuel Kuhn (1962) observed that history of science is not made of simple competition among theories, because more general and comprehensive

worldviews are always involved, which take the pride of place. These worldviews are 'implicit set[s] of interlaced theoretical and methodological beliefs' (Kuhn 1962: 36). Kuhn's is a discontinuist philosophy of science, which aims at explaining successive turnovers of these 'implicit sets of beliefs', which he called paradigms. A paradigm, not only dictates a series of scientific postulates - or *dogmas* (Kuhn 1963), statements not to be questioned - but it also and foremostly directs attention towards a series of legitimate problems and phenomena to be studied. Thus, a paradigm provides at least: a list of problems to be addressed (a problem field), the definitions and the tools to address those problems, a set of problem-solving heuristics, the criteria to tell whether the advanced solutions were effective and acceptable or not. Thus, it is *within the field* designed by a paradigm that scientific problems can be focused, circumscribed and coped with.

Substitution of one paradigm with another one is a diachronic process, and the paradigmatic shift spans over a relatively limited interval of time. Conflicts between paradigms are thought to be interstitial and transitional. Each conflictual period marks the boundary of other periods of 'normal science', defined by the fact that a single paradigm is established and widely accepted by the scientific community, which makes it is easy to distinguish *orthodoxy* from *heresy*. However, paradigms are also affected by anomalies, i.e. minor shortcomings that need to be adjusted - at least, until it is possible to do so.

When anomalies become unbearable, an unsettled period comes along, which puts the paradigm as a whole in crisis. When a paradigm undergoes a crisis, alternatives begin to thrive – or better, they become visible, as a crisis could be defined simply as the *visibility of alternatives*, previously crushed by the hegemonic framework.

Whereas theories may be *incompatible* with each other, paradigms are *incommensurable* with each other. Incommensurability is not mere incompatibility, as it is not simply the manifestation of a plurality of options or affiliations. Incommensurability indeed refers to the lack of a common standard for comparison among different options or affiliations. In short, there is no neutral standpoint for comparison among incommensurable items. Consequently, it is not possible to reach any exhaustive, univocal translation of concepts, terms and even research questions through different paradigms. This is why paradigmatic transition has been described by Kuhn as a ‘Gestalt re-orientation’, and even an ‘act of conversion’. In between two paradigms there is a logical gap that cannot be rationally filled.

Lakatos reinterpreted paradigms as ‘scientific research programmes’ (Lakatos 1970). By doing so, he attempted to provide a middle way between old-style neopositivist ‘rational reconstructions’ of scientific development and the lack of rationale for change suggested by Kuhn. It was a brilliant solution, aimed at

bringing pluralism within a rational framework. Whereas Popper's critical rationalism was monotheoric, insofar as it allowed the substitution of a single theory with another one, and whereas Kuhn's irrationalistic model was likewise monotheoric, Lakatos recognized the constant proliferation of theories, and the tenacity (a quality which may look irrational) their supporters adopt in defending them against criticisms. At the same, he stressed that theories do not float in a vacuum: they develop within threads of theories marked by a distinctive degree of coherent heuristics and methodological continuity. These threads he called research programmes. The attempt to retrieve the aspect of continuity throughout revolutions is a crucial feature of Lakatos' philosophy of science.

A further, more radical step was made by Feyerabend (1978a; 1999). He refused Kuhn's and Lakatos' models as fictitious accounts of scientific activity, and maintained that there are no general mechanisms to describe the growth of scientific knowledge, least of all overarching dominant paradigms. He contended that there are only - as I said before - scientists' personal preferences and tastes. 'What we are facing - he wrote - are not superb cathedrals, but falling remains, architectonical monsters whose existence is fatigably prolonged by the architects through inelegant props' (Feyerabend 1978b). Among these architectonical remains, the most heterogeneous styles and occasional devices are massively used to undertake the construction, thanks to a sort of *invenire*

faciendo that excludes any paradigmatic firmness. One may say that Feyerabend combines Lakatos' acceptance of pluralism with Kuhn's irrationalist thesis (Feyerabend and Lakatos 1999). In other words, the progression Kuhn – Lakatos – Feyerabend marks an increasing recognition of pluralism, even at the expense of strict criteria for comparison and selection (rationality).

4. The Consequences of Imagining Cultures as Paradigms

Kuhn, Lakatos and Feyerabend can be seen as three modes of looking at socio-cultural multiplicity. When we move to the case of Europe in the light of what just said, both ideas about clashes of civilization at various levels and scales, and arguments about the irreducible diversity of some socio-cultural or national groups, can be redescribed as a matter of incommensurability among cultural units. The belief in this incommensurability, it is now clear, derives from a rigid application of Kuhn's model to social life. One should also be warned that the definitional uniformity of socio-cultural group is not a matter of mere intellectual amusement. It is a real social process in itself. How is the continuum of socio-cultural details that are irreducible to general categories to be constrained and structured into public, well recognizable categories? *Public* categories means *visible* categories, inasmuch as what is visible is irreflexive and perceived as objective. Visible, or public categories are categories that are not interpreted or worked upon explicitly, but simply perceived and seen

immediately (something similar to the 'professional vision' described by Goodwin 1994, on a larger scale).

Here we have to face another territorial issue, that of group boundaries. At the level of highly general trends, it can be argued that the more group boundaries are seen as fixated, the more the situation is configured as a paradigm-based one, and, consequently, the more strongly the incommensurability problem emerges. *Essentialism* and *fluidism* can be thought of as two opposite - but, to an extent, complementary - regards on the incommensurability problem. Essentialism and fluidism form one of those conceptual pairs which - along with agency and structure, individualism and holism, etc. - endlessly face each other as matters of theoretical choice, and as expressions of sociological pathos. Whereas for the essentialists, belonging is objectively defined, for the fluidists it is situationally deployed. A very interesting question is the one asked by Francisco Gil-White (1999): 'If ethnic actors are primordialists, what remains of the circumstantialist/primordialist controversy?'. In other words, how do socio-cultural actors, not simply behave in a certain way and draw group boundaries in a certain way, but also conceive of themselves while doing so? Please note that I am not interested in the first place in the empirical verification of the hypothetic conditions posited by Gil-White. In fact, we may as well legitimately ask: 'If ethnic actors are circumstantialists, what remains of the circumstantialist/primordialist controversy?'. We will probably always find

that some actors are circumstantialists while some others are primordialists, that some admit to be primordialists or circumstantialists and some others do not. The point, however, is not simply about ideological statements made by people for their group affiliation, but rather about the subtle interweaving of practice and theory, and precisely of *lay* practice and *lay* theory. What counts is who and how, in each situated context, orient her/himself with local, endogenous categories and theories, while claiming to adopt those categories and theories as described in their own terms. It is the resulting balance of forces in these orientations and declarations that guide people's positioning along boundaries, which in the first place they have to draw in some way, that ultimately shapes the distribution of majorities and respective minorities. This resulting balance of forces, in other words, determines not only the well-known fact, that inside each majority is entrapped some minority, but also the less recognized and far more insidious fact that inside each minority, there lurks a majority.

In conclusion, I would like to give some hints about the implications of imagining *theories* of multiplicity and socio-cultural diversity as paradigms in the European context. Here, again, we find issues of boundary-making, incommensurability and visibility. But at the level of theory-making, closure and incommensurability seem to be linked mainly to disciplinary and methodological differences, and maybe more subtly to value differences.

Besides that, when theories of pluralism are observed as paradigms, a sort of *mise en abyme* occurs: theories as (second order) paradigms about paradigms (cultural groups). This may look terribly complex, but it is even more so, and accordingly more real, if we accept that the two levels, that of theory-making and that of social processes of heterogeneity, diversity and multiplicity, cannot be separated from each other. From this point of view, theory-making is very much a *distributed social activity*, no less territorial than culture: both can be seen in their double aspect of boundary-making and bridge-making activities.

The aim of this paper has been to suggest that the debate on the legal and political construction of Europe could take advantage of an argument that appears most clearly in the fields of culture and social theory: there is no heterogeneity, diversity or multiplicity apart from the ways in which we imagine them. Tenacity and matters of taste, as Lakatos and Feyerabend called these *ways of imagining*, are part of the game, not in an individualistic manner, but in a fully social one. The theorist of social and cultural diversity and of social and cultural change is, in a way, condemned to be a *spokesperson*. And the question is: a spokesperson of whom? Well, first of all of herself/himself. And then, of whom else? She will be best able to discover it the more she will be able to develop her sociological imagination, to link her own biography to history, to understand her own social position, her political and scientific value orientations as part of what she is as part of what she is talking about in terms

of socio-cultural groups, boundaries and minorities. Finally, I think that this *mise en abyme* is recognizable if we renounce to the scientific view that calls for *theories of* socio-cultural heterogeneity, diversity and multiplicity, and if we focus instead on tactically deployable and recursively applicable observative and interpretive concepts.

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