

## KULTŪRA IR VISUOMENĒ



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# (Post)Modernizing Contemporary Intellectual Culture<sup>1</sup>

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The article constitutes the third part of a broader investigation into the intellectual culture of contemporary (primarily Western, but ever more global) societies. The main focus is on the two general tendencies of contemporary intellectual culture, namely, a turn to anthropology in the sciences as the principal source of motivation and validation for research and the prevalence of relativistic modes of thinking in matters of value (axiological relativism) and knowledge (epistemic relativism).

**Keywords:** contemporary intellectual culture, anthropology, relativism, epistemology, axiology.

In the preceding installments of the article series<sup>2</sup>, I presented an overview of the *general* tendencies of contemporary culture that create conditions for the emergence of its intellectual proclivities. I then focused on the *intellectual* life of today, in particular, what might be called the intellectual *avant-garde* of this age, also known as postmodernism. In this article, I will divert my attention to the general intellectual traits of the *whole* age – specifically, a turn to anthropology in the sciences and the widespread adoption of relativistic modes of thought in matters of value and knowledge.

## A turn to anthropology

What is special about the *whole* spiritual-intellectual culture of our time? Hair bristles when thinking about how broad and complex this question is and how slippery and elusive the answer must be, or rather just an attempt to answer. I shall base my observations on a review of extensive literature examining today's diverse trends in science, the arts, and other spiritual fields; observations that, in my humble opinion, at least in part identify some of the essential features of the intellectual culture of our time.

After the upheavals, coups, and wars of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, the proponents of which sincerely hoped for utopian moral progress

1 Continuation. Start in Vol. 10, No. 1.

2 See Stepukonis, Aivaras. "(Post)Modernizing Contemporary Intellectual Culture", 2022.

and a brighter tomorrow, believing that the advancement of natural evolution and technical progress are equally characteristic of the social plane, it was painfully realized that the prophetic words of the leaders and the heroic sacrifices of their followers did not produce the expected results and that human relations, as a result, should not be interpreted and predicted in terms of evolutionary and technical categories, and thus in terms of development and progress. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Europeans knew far too much about construction, machinery, planes, satellites, rifles, explosives, chemical weapons, pesticides, and preservatives, while knowing far too little about man himself. Something had to be done by reviving the humanities, making man the main and hottest topic of discussion, and handing over the academic scepter to the superdiscipline of all disciplines, anthropology.

Martin Heidegger discussed the prevalence of anthropology among the sciences with deep upset but accurate and undistorted language. In his view, “[p]hilosophy in the age of completed metaphysics” – that is, in *our* age – “is anthropology.”

Whether or not one says ‘philosophical’ anthropology makes no difference. In the meantime philosophy has become anthropology and in this way a prey to the derivatives of metaphysics, that is, of physics in the broadest sense, which includes the physics of life and man, biology and psychology.<sup>3</sup>

3 Heidegger, Martin. “Overcoming Metaphysics”, p. 99.

The penetration of anthropology is said to be not only into the human sciences but also into the natural sciences. Moreover, the tendency of anthropology to take everything into its own hands:

is not exhausted by the study of man and by the will to explain everything in terms of man as his expression. Even where nothing is studied, where rather decisions are sought, this occurs in such a manner that one kind of humanity is previously pitted against another, humanity is acknowledged as the original force, just as if it were the first and last element in all beings, and beings and their actual interpretation were only the consequence.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, the macrocosm’s structure obeys the microcosm’s self-perception; ontology, or the objective realm, obeys psychology, or the subjective realm. The principle of world-viewing and world-making (!) once again reverts to the famous saying of Protagoras: “Of all things the measure is Man, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, according to Heidegger:

the solely decisive question comes to predominance: To what form does man belong? “Form” is thought here in an indefinite metaphysical way,

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels’ “Fragmente der Vorsokratiker,”* p. 125.

that is, Platonically as what is and first determines all tradition and development, itself, however, remaining independent of this. This anticipatory acknowledgment of “man” leads to searching for Being first of all and only in man’s environment [...].<sup>6</sup>

The return to man in thought is not caused by human vanity, selfishness, or narcissistic self-admiration – these flaws have always existed, but their manifestations have changed. No, the roots of such a reversal lie in the experience of global dialectics and world conflicts, and in the realization that the author of this turmoil and chaos is none other (i. e., not some “objective” circumstances) but man himself. Hence, the sources of the rise of anthropology must be sought in the recognition of the tragedy of the human state, that man who pretends to understand everything is often eliminated by his own failure to understand *himself*. Anthropology is first and foremost an awareness of such a condition. It may also turn into a struggle against the evils of such a condition.

### Relativismus über alles

The human problem is, for the most part, a problem of human *irrationality*. While acknowledging and appreciating the scale of this problem, but most importantly, its *reality*, contemporary thinkers and actors lean toward Romanticism and tend to reject the universal power of reason canonized in the age of Enlightenment<sup>7</sup>. The philosophical

apriorism inherited from Kant is as unpleasant today as the dogmatism of scholastic metaphysics was to Kant himself back then. Since human irregularity directly follows from human irrationality, the only safe and reliable method of studying man must be *a posteriori*-empirical. Consequently, as the twentieth-century intellectual switches to empiricism and confronts global processes, along with the increasingly predominant dialectic of different cultures, tastes, and opinions<sup>8</sup>, he turns this “practical” dialectic into “theoretical” relativism. Can one even afford a different attitude in an age when, according to Robert Heilbroner, the “regularities themselves are no longer so regular”<sup>9</sup>?

Axiological relativism asserts that values arise from the relationship with the subject, and thus the evaluator himself determines the fact, degree, and rank of the value. The same thing can “embody” a value for one person while not for another person; it can “embody” one value for one person (say, the value of holiness) and another for another person (say, the value of pleasure). According to Lawrence Scaff,

Not only are different value spheres, such as the political and the ethical, or the ethical and the aesthetic, *not* identical, it is also the case that *within* a sphere of value (e.g., the ethics of personal conduct) a system of uniform rules, say, of a Kantian type, ‘cannot’ be found

6 Heidegger, Martin. “Overcoming Metaphysics”, pp. 99–100.

7 See Maus, Heinz. *A Short History of Sociology*, p. 24.

8 See “The Dialectics of Tastes and Opinions” in Aivaras Stepukonis, “(Post)Modernizing Contemporary Intellectual Culture,” no. 1, pp. 48–50.

9 Heilbroner, Robert. *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers*, p. 318.

that will “solve” once and for all the problems of action and choice. Instead, “ultimately everywhere and always it is really a question not only of alternatives between values, but of an irreconcilable death-struggle like that between ‘god’ and the ‘devil.’”<sup>10</sup>

All this is the work of the dialectic of tastes. The relativization of values is, however, equally effected by a certain agnosticism or solipsism – I am not even sure what to call it – towards other people’s inner experiences. I mean the attitude that is eloquently and convincingly expressed by Ludwig von Mises in the following passage:

Since nobody is in a position to substitute his own value judgments for those of the acting individual, it is vain to pass judgment on other people’s aims and volitions. No man is qualified to declare what would make another man happier or less discontented. The critic either tells us what he believes he would aim at if he were in the place of his fellow; or, in dictatorial arrogance blithely disposing of his fellow’s will and aspirations, declares what condition of this other man would better suit himself, the critic.<sup>11</sup>

10 Lawrence A. Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber*, pp. 91–92; Max Weber, „Der Sinn der Wertfreiheit der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften“, S. 507.

11 Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, p. 19.

Value is everything I value. I value everything I seek, want, or desire. Everything I seek, want, or desire is a purely personal matter. A purely personal matter is knowable and understandable only for me. The argument of axiological relativism and its denouement, hence, is this: All value systems are, in principle, the *epiphenomenon* of the individual (social stratum, nation, race). The individual is their *legitimate* creator, transformer, and, if necessary, reverser. Any haranguing on the normativity and universality of values is not only ignorant but also malicious.

In addition to axiological relativism, there is also an epistemological one, and a situation is quite likely where one is defended while the other is denied. For example, Ernest Gellner says he is not “sure whether we indeed possess morality beyond culture,” but is “absolutely certain that we do indeed possess knowledge beyond both culture and morality,” which, he adds, “must be the starting point of any remotely adequate anthropology or social thought.”<sup>12</sup> However, this is not the view of most of those who adopt epistemological relativism, sometimes called pluralism or polylogism, along with the axiological one; namely, those who are convinced that since truth arises from a relationship with a subject, individual thinking must determine the fact, content, and form of truth and not the other way around. *In general*, everything we have said about value relativism can be used to describe epistemic relativism. What differs is the order of their mutual compatibility: the same person

12 Gellner, Ernest *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, p. 54.

can relativize values without relativizing knowledge, but cannot relativize knowledge without relativizing values. Also, the concrete manifestations of both types of relativism differ. Epistemological relativism is only easier to talk about because its main instigators are reason and language.

It should be noted that the relativization of knowledge is essentially different from the relativization of the *value* of knowledge. The question of the value of intellectual vocation and brain work has, for example, haunted sociologist Max Weber for many years, whose thinking was something like this: if the “quest for knowledge” is considered to be “just *one* among many possible life-orientations [...] the alarming provisional conclusion” is that “‘our science’ thus is without grounding in any ‘ultimate’ sense.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, science is relativized as a value. A cyclist, a music lover, a president, a philosopher, a charlatan, or a philatelist – none of these life paths are superior and none have intrinsic value. Thinking in this manner, we are still holding back in the domain of axiological relativism. However, epistemological relativism, as I have said, targets the very foundation of knowledge – truth.

Depending on whether the original source of truth is maintained to be an individual, social stratum, nation, culture, race, or some epoch, epistemological relativism branches out into individualism, soci-

ologism, anthropologism, or historicism. It is assumed that every individual, social group, nation, or epoch has “its” truth and only the truth “for itself.” For example, extreme historicism argues that “all knowledge and values *express* the perspective of a tradition or historical context rather than *represent* the world.” According to Aviezer Tucker, the author of these words, “historicism under this definition abolishes the distinctions between science and ideology, knowledge and opinion.”<sup>14</sup> It cannot be any other way: without the concept of truth, everything is either fiction or plain gossip.

What triggers one or another manifestation of epistemological relativism? There are a multitude of reasons, but behind them all, there seems to be (*a*) a need, or at least a desire to communicate, and (*b*) a divergence of views. In the absence of condition *a*, there would not be a need to relativize divergent views; it would be sufficient to admit that one or both of them are false. Without condition *b*, convergent views would not impede the recognition of universal truth and, in fact, would encourage it. And if neither condition *a* nor *b* were to obtain, truth would spread only at a pre-theoretical level, at which relativism is impossible to begin with.

Since the days when only four subjects were taught in European universities – theology, philosophy, law, and medicine – a long time has passed by. It is not dozens, but hundreds of scientific specializations that we now find in university *catalogs*<sup>15</sup>!

13 Lawrence A. Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber*, pp. 76–77. Also cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, pp. 116–117, where the author asserts that science has lost its ideal and self-confidence, having become confused and afraid to acknowledge its depressed and hesitant state.

14 Tucker, Aviezer. “Historicism”, pp. 414–415.

15 The index of the “systematic of scientific disciplines” by The Austrian Research Promotion Foundation (*Fonds zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen*

Heidegger's<sup>16</sup> summary, written in the inter-war years, sounds as if it were uttered today:

The fields of the sciences lie far apart. Their methodologies are fundamentally different. This disrupted multiplicity of disciplines is today only held together by the technical organisation of the Universities and their faculties, and maintained as a unit of meaning by the practical aims of those faculties.<sup>17</sup>

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*Forschung*) mentions 6 main disciplines (science, technology, medicine, agriculture-forestry-veterinary, social sciences, and the humanities); each branch is further divided into fields, for instance, natural sciences into mathematics, computer science, physics, mechanics, astronomy, chemistry, biology, botany, zoology, geology, mineralogy, meteorology, climatology, hydrology, hydrography, geography, etc.; or humanities into philosophy, psychology, pedagogy, theology, history, philology, literature, cultural studies, art history, journalism, etc. The fields of each branch are in turn broken down into subfields or specializations, for instance, theology into Old and New Testament exegesis, atheism, biblical archaeology, Christian philosophy, dogmatic theology, fundamental theology, catechesis, liturgical theology, canon law, ecumenical theology, pastoral theology, patristics, religious pedagogy, theology, etc.; or chemistry into general chemistry, analytical chemistry, inorganic chemistry, biochemistry, biochemical technology, chemical technology, electrochemistry, solid-state chemistry, forensic chemistry, food chemistry, organic chemistry, photochemistry, physical chemistry, radiochemistry, radiation chemistry, structural chemistry, technological chemistry, theoretical chemistry, etc. In total, about 920 different specializations (!) are listed for the students to choose from and pursue at the university.

16 His own academic activities included professorships at the Universities of Freiburg and Marburg, as well as a rectorship at the University of Freiburg.

17 Heidegger, Martin. "What Is Metaphysics?" p. 261.

The surplus of information that has accumulated and continues to accumulate at lightning speed eventually becomes incomprehensible and "in turn ensures the paradox of knowing more and communicating less."<sup>18</sup> Let me quote Heidegger again: the contemporary university "is real as an orderly establishment that, in a form still unique because it is administratively self-contained, makes possible and visible the striving apart of the sciences into the particularization and peculiar unity that belong to ongoing activity."<sup>19</sup> Specialization – that incurable and almost fatal rush of technological society – and the desire to learn *as much as possible about as little as possible* meant that the university, once a symbol of completeness and universality of knowledge, had long ceased to seek a synthesis of the sciences by tracing back their *common* ontological and theoretical origins. The role of the contemporary university is exclusively organizational in nature.

I hope to have shed light on two prominent intellectual traits of contemporary intellectual culture: 1) a fundamental shift toward anthropology in the sciences, primarily in response to the tragic experiences that humanity endured in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a collective determination to do something about it; 2) the relativization of values and knowledge as a result of increased cross-cultural interactions in the world, growing exposure to the dialectics of taste and opinion, and the crippling overabundance of information in the age of global communication.

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18 Lawrence A. Scaff, *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber*, p. 229.

19 Heidegger, Martin "The Age of the World Picture", p. 125.



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