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Towards a New Enlightenment

In their contributions towards a sustainable future, the humanities and social sciences should not limit themselves to criticizing the shortcomings and social pathologies of the current development model. They can connect past, present, and future by bringing their diverse methods to bear on issues of global social concern. In this way, they do not merely describe or analytically criticize modern social formations but can actively and creatively shape them. In this way, they can orient themselves in light of a conception of a desirable future, an orientation designed to overcome the apocalyptic deadlock which currently constrains our social imaginaries for an open and potentially better future.

In today's critical situation, there is a widespread call for a New Enlightenment no longer limited to prolonging the projects of the 17th and 18th century European Enlightenment. One of the distinctive features of a New Enlightenment is that it will have worked through the justified critique of the false universals and dialectics of the European Enlightenment which resulted in the modern decoupling of technoscientific progress from notions of human flourishing and moral progress.

Constantly renewing the link between theory and practice thanks to the critical reflection that indicates which value representations, mindsets, and social practices ought to be rejected and exceeded characterizes the Enlightenment ethos.⁶⁴ It also explains that Enlightenment is always associated with a project of individual and collective emancipation and a critical use of our capacities of imagination.⁶⁵

Key principles

Four key principles constitute the Enlightenment: The defence of autonomy, a society based on freedom and equality, equality among human beings, and the defence of philosophical-scientific rationality.

The central idea behind the defence of autonomy is that the future is uncertain, and that humanity can take its destiny into its own

hands through reflexive, critical activity. Instead of basing society on heteronomy, in particular on religion and essentialist worldviews that justify the enslavement of a part of humanity and the maintenance of hierarchies, the Enlightenment promotes an ideal of individual and collective emancipation.

This way of making autonomy the key to emancipation also explains the desire to establish a society based on freedom and equality, and not on heteronomous and hierarchical order. This is the second principle that characterizes the Enlightenment and proves that it is always connected with a political project.

This project, which takes the form of democracy or republicanism, goes hand in hand with the affirmation of equality among human beings. This is the third principle of the Enlightenment. It is concretized in the defence of human rights. However, the content of these principles is renewed over time. Their defence sometimes requires that the foundations of the past Enlightenment are critically examined.

For example, whereas the first generation of human rights pertains to the political sphere, the second generation focuses on social and economic conditions. Moreover, if the inclusive dynamic of today's liberal democracies is to show fidelity to the principle of equality, it is necessary for minorities to question the hegemonic universalism and eurocentrism of the past Enlightenment in order to be recognized as full citizens. In the same way, the 2015 Universal Declaration of Human Rights supplements the declaration of human rights while making the protection of the natural and cultural heritage of humanity as well as the concern not to mortgage the living conditions of future generations new imperatives limiting the rights of individuals.

Not only do freedom, dignity, and peace between peoples depend on the preservation of the conditions of life on earth, but, in addition, it is necessary to go beyond the atomistic and abstract foundation of the past Enlightenment in order to take into account the materiality of our existence and our dependence on nature and on others, human and other than human.⁶⁶

The fourth main principle of the Enlightenment defends philosophical-scientific rationality in order to fight against superstition and mythology. Reason is the privileged instrument of emancipation. It overcomes prejudices and justifies the cessation of outdated, unfair, and even violent practices.

Key challenges

These four principles are rejected by the Anti-Enlightenment, whose contempt for human rights and hatred of reason serve the project of establishing a hierarchical and heteronomous society.⁶⁷ The Anti-Enlightenment opposes nationalism against human rights and rejects the idea of the unity of the human race and cosmopolitanism by proclaiming that particular communities, based on tradition or even ethnicity, are incompatible. It thus justifies the subjugation of one nation by another and of some human beings by others.

This conflict between the Enlightenment and Anti-Enlightenment is particularly relevant at a time when we are witnessing the awakening of nationalisms, the return of fanaticism and theocratic claims, and at a time when there is war in Europe, after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The distrust of channels of knowledge, i. e. the sciences, and the discrediting of democratic institutions, which are accused of being incapable of remedying market deregulation and reducing inequalities, also underlines the importance of referring to the Enlightenment. However, it is not enough to simply apply these principles to the current situation. Supplementation is required, as described above with human rights.

In general, the former Enlightenment anthropology needs to be supplemented with the taking into account of our earthly condition and vulnerability. This leads to a reconfiguration of autonomy in light of our dependence on nature and other beings. Moreover, this Enlightenment is new because of the epistemological and technological ruptures existing between the eighteenth century and today, but also and above all because it is born after the eclipse of the Enlightenment due to the tragedies of the 20th century and postmodern critiques.

Daring to speak of Enlightenment today requires being aware of the blind spots and errors of the past Enlightenment.⁶⁸ However, postmodernists must not be confused with the Anti-Enlightenment: Far from rejecting the Enlightenment project of emancipation and its ideal of justice, feminists and post-colonialists rightly show that it has been unable to keep its promises of a more inclusive society. Their critiques should be taken seriously: the past Enlightenment has defended a false universalism by using so-called universal principles to hide the desire to impose a hegemonic lifestyle on other cultures.

Not only must the reversal of rationality into irrationality and barbarism be explained, but we must also be aware of the tendency of all universalisms to become hegemonic and blind to differences. It is imperative to create the conditions for a true dialogue with other cultures. Lastly, the New Enlightenment must aim at responding to current ecological and economic challenges, which are largely the consequence of a model of development based on the unlimited exploitation of nature, of other living beings and of some human beings by others. The New Enlightenment must offer pathways towards promoting a fairer and ecologically sustainable model of development while exploring and elaborating options to recouple economic prosperity and humanistic goals, and even how to overcome capitalism.

These are the three main challenges of the New Enlightenment. Its ability to meet these challenges is the condition of its relevance. This goal also stresses the humanities as specific and irreplaceable in today's society. If the humanities can defend this project of a New Enlightenment and be future-oriented by offering some keys to get us out of the current impasse, it is because they seek to explain the link between the political, ecological, technological, and geopolitical challenges mentioned above. In spite of a diversity of approaches and perspectives, or rather thanks to them, it is actually possible to connect around a common project, which could open up a horizon of hope. In order to justify this affirmation, we have to answer some questions.

Open questions guiding the way forward

The first question concerns the diagnosis or the genealogy of nihilism. Which amputation of reason explains the deviation of rationalism and this reversal of progress into regression that gave birth to phenomena like totalitarianism, Nazism, capitalism, and the destruction of the planet? Do these phenomena have a common root? Why didn't the past Enlightenment preserve us from such a destructive dialectic?

The second question concerns our capacity to promote a non-hegemonic rationalism. This implies a return to the notion of lateral universalism, which not only involves taking responsibility for the colonialism of the past Enlightenment but requires a culture of difference in the sense that Derrida gives to this term, namely, thinking

of the way other cultures challenge and displace us.⁶⁹ How is it possible to achieve this goal?

To answer the first question, it is necessary to critically examine modern and contemporary rationalism. An inquiry into rationality that aims at explaining the reversal of progress into regression leads to denouncing instrumental reason which is characterized by the fact that the latter is reduced to calculation and does not enable us to distinguish between right and wrong. However, this diagnosis we find in Adorno and Horkheimer does not suffice. We also have to question the dualism of nature and culture that permeates the West. This dualism and radical separation between humans and other living beings engenders a violent humanism founded on the oblivion of our condition as living beings. It is largely responsible, as Claude Lévi-Strauss says, for the discriminations and tragedies of the 20th century.⁷⁰

Because such dualism is specific to our civilization, the New Enlightenment is inseparable from an anthropological revolution that entails the questioning of whole sections of our education. It calls for reconciliation with our finitude and our carnal and earthly condition. Beyond this existential and anthropological dimension, which refers to the way humans perceive their place in nature, it is also important to insist on the role of the social and economic structures that shape our psyche and explain our behaviour with regard to others, both human and non-human. For this, it is helpful to think in terms of the notion of a 'scheme' and specifically of a scheme of domination (Pelluchon, 2021a: 98–99): A scheme is the set of conscious and unconscious representations that determine our social, economic, and political choices. It is a matrix or a dynamic device that organizes modes of production, assigns a value to certain activities and objects, and intrudes into people's minds. To speak of the scheme of a society is to say that we are dealing with a mental map which imposes a development model. Our society is governed by the scheme of domination, which is a three-fold domination, as Adorno and Horkheimer have said: over others, over external nature, and over our internal nature. This is to say, it is linked to the repression of our nature or carnal condition. The scheme of domination implies a predatory relationship with nature, the commodification of living beings (including oneself), constant competition, and the obsession with mastery and external control.

It transforms husbandry, work, politics, and even human relationships into a kind of war.

Nowadays, the scheme of domination takes the socio-economic form of neoliberal capitalism, which is an organization structured around the rule of profit and the subordination of all activities to the economy narrowly construed. However, to speak of a scheme avoids limiting ourselves to denouncing capitalism without understanding the reasons it is still victorious despite its multiple perverse effects, which are at once environmental, sanitary, social, and political. The notion of the scheme also allows us to say that, if it alienates us, we have nevertheless instituted it. We can dispose of what we have instituted.

Many scholars would like to bring humanistic insight to the table of public deliberation concerning the very shape of economic activity.⁷¹ In the absence of a deep shift in one's mindset, it is often wishful thinking. On the contrary, when ecology defined as the rationality (*logos*) of our inhabitation of the earth (*oikos*) and understood in its environmental, social, and anthropological or existential dimension, it has an emancipatory force: It can dispense with the scheme of domination because it requires that we overcome a narrow anthropocentrism and put into question the dualism between nature and culture. This existential transformation leads to acknowledgement of the value of each being and to making room for other beings. Thus, ecology implies the reconciliation of nature and civilization both at the individual level of representations and lifestyles and at the collective level of structural transformations linked to the reorientation of economy and changes in production modes.

As ecology means taking into account our interdependence and the community of vulnerability that unifies all living beings, it modifies our mindsets and mental maps from top to bottom. It also generates powerful affects like wonder, compassion, gratitude, and the desire to cooperate. This emancipatory force explains why ecology is the translation, on the social, economic, and political level, of the scheme of consideration which makes the value of each being and the preservation of the common world the two goals from which to guide economic, technological, and political choices. The New Enlightenment is therefore inseparable from a renewed conception of the human being whose freedom and dependence on others and nature are equally acknowledged. Can this humanism be suspected

of excluding other cultures and of re-entrenching the domination of certain nations over others, of men over women, of humans over animals? How can we think of a common project that rests on universalizable foundations while welcoming difference and without making the recognition of diversity a mere word or alibi?

To answer this second set of questions, we have to acknowledge that the former humanism was based on elitist criteria, chosen in reference to a model set up as a norm. On the contrary, the humanism characteristic of the New Enlightenment as well as its insistence on the relational dimension of the human being and on our embodiment, is inclusive: although society and culture constitute large parts of our identity, all beings have a body, we need air, water, food. The degradation of nature represents a global and universal threat.

Reality is not an apprehension from above dictated by an overarching reason claiming to have a total vision of things. Nonetheless, it is possible to describe phenomena in an objective way, albeit partial, as we see in the method of phenomenology. The plurality of approaches is essential to the New Enlightenment. It is an unfinished process and is perspectival. Moreover, the awareness of the partial character of its approach and of the blind spots that dictate its perspective, as well as the memory of the faults committed in the name of an arrogant rationalism, must make possible a true dialogue between cultures. It is not a question of simply welcoming other cultures in order to avoid the accusation of Eurocentrism. The point to understand, as Derrida stresses when speaking of Europe, is that the Enlightenment lives through its difference. It actually lives through this difference with itself, through this gap and its self-critique. This is not to be confused with saying that a culture does not have an identity. It means that its characteristic, in particular when it defends an ideal of emancipation, is 'to be able to say "me" or "we"; to be able to take the form of a subject only in the non-identity to itself... in the difference *with itself [avec soi]*' (Derrida, 1992, 9–10, original emphasis).

Under these conditions, it is possible to achieve a balance between universalism and historicity which is the condition for an intercultural dialogue that allows us to avoid two impasses: cultural particularism and the impossible communication between peoples, on the one hand, and Eurocentrism and cultural colonialism on the other.⁷² The stakes are considerable: it is true that the supporters

of any hegemonic universalism seek to impose a particular way of life to the detriment of others, but the supporters of relativism and cultural particularism who deny any common horizon represent another dead end, since they can generate hostility between peoples. Moreover, they leave the way open to the Anti-Enlightenment as well as to those who want to defend the status quo and business as usual instead of achieving ecological transition.

The paradigm of this intercultural hermeneutic or of this balance between universalism and historicity is translation.⁷³ Just as humanity is both one and plural, things can be said in other ways and thus be different each time. Translation actually forces one to find in one's own language an equivalent of what is said in another idiom. In so doing, the translator thinks between languages, opening up to another way of mapping reality and rediscovering at the same time their own language. Things can be put differently, whether in another language or even by a reformulation in one's own language. We can thereby be enriched by a real dialogue with other cultures that can enlighten us, in particular on questions relating to our relationship with death, nature, and with other living beings.

7 Suggestions for the way ahead

It is time to bring the full range of humanistic and social-scientific knowledge to bear on the urgent issues of our time in an institutional context of large-scale cooperation. For this, we need a new 'spirit of trust', as Brandom (2019) calls it in his book with the same title, which allows us to rethink the global social formations within which human becoming takes place in the 21st century.

The approach of the New Enlightenment project re-couples value perspectives with large-scale cooperation between different sectors of society and hence may restore the link between theory and practice. It invites a number of contextual and trans-sectoral research endeavours, including the following: