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**To Lucian Hölscher**

**On epistemological apriorism, constitutive uncertainty and the  
lyricism of historiography**

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Dear Professor Lucian Hölscher,

your paper (*Zeitgärten. Zeitfiguren in der neuzeitlichen Geschichtsschreibung*) at the *Göttingen Symposium*<sup>1</sup> was one of the most exciting.

Here is the quote I promised you in our short break:

„It is a custom, for retail researchers and dry souls, whose objectivity is nothing more than the inability to be subjective, to consider as dilettantism everything that is presented in other clothing than mere formulas of transmission.

(...) The historical »truths« are of discernment, not of simple finding and reproduction. To catch them requires all the profound knowledge of the language, everything that the creative fantasy of definitions can find finer and more delicate. To talk about the people

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<sup>1</sup> Das 2. APHIN-Symposium: *Realität und Wirklichkeit - Vom Finden und Erfinden unserer Welt*. Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, 29. November 2019.

and things of the past in the current vocabulary means to fail from one end to the other.

I wish I had more »poetic« talent to be closer to the truth.”

This quote is from Nicolae Iorga<sup>2</sup>, one of the titans of Romanian historiography, along with Dimitrie Cantemir and A. D. Xenopol, as I think you know.

I have read very little of Iorga's work, which (according to Wikipedia) numbers over 130 volumes.

I took this quote from the historian Neagu Djuvara (1916-2018), from the volume *Is There a True History?*<sup>3</sup> – a small treatise on the method, in which, with his well-known verve, Neagu Djuvara confessed his own profession of faith – reiterating Kant's ideas, like Iorga, without knowing it.

According to Neagu Djuvara, *the historical truth is uncertain by its very nature*. But with this observation, I would like to point out, he has done nothing more than reformulate the fundamental problem of Kantian epistemology in the field of historiography.

In my opinion, the dilemma of *historical truth* is epistemologically congruent with the dilemma of the *thing in itself*.

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<sup>2</sup> Nicolae Iorga (1871-1940), *Materiale pentru istoriologie umană* (fragmente inedite publicate de Liliana N. Iorga., Ed. Acad. RSR, București, 1968, p. 5. (English translation is my own)

<sup>3</sup> Neagu Djuvara, *Există istorie adevărată?*, Humanitas, 2004, p. 74

Therefore, I do not want to talk here about the subjectivism and relativity of historiography (about which I do not think I could tell you anything new), but about the *constitutive uncertainty and methodological apriorism of historiography as a science*.

## § 1.

*What certainties can we have in regard to something that remains for us eternally hidden?* – Kant wondered, in his own way, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*; and, in principle, his answer was that, since *reality (thing in itself)* always remains somewhere *outside, beyond the limits of our own sensibilities*, it means that everything that seems to us (at one point) we perceive is nothing but a construction of our own productive imagination.

This is precisely why, Kant continues, in order to advance in the knowledge of nature, we must first deepen into our own questions and then go on to unknown realms, otherwise our empirical experiences would be nothing more than a groping in the dark.

*Empirically (historically), the object precedes the concept, but, phenomenologically (historiographically), the concept precedes the object.* Kant's entire philosophical work revolved around solving this *epistemological antinomy*, and the solution he found – the *critical solution* – was precisely the phenomenological deconstruction of this antinomy

and its reconstruction according to the canons of a new logical architecture (a paradoxical, dynamic and, apparently, contradictory one).

Kant's Copernican revolution actually consisted, as Kant himself puts it, in *a revolution of our way of thinking*. But, this brave and not without danger jump of thinking could not have been made without a metaphorical (poetic) violation of classical logic.

*Critique of Pure Reason* is full of metaphors and philosophical parables, whose purpose is precisely to guide the reader towards a different type of reading and interpretation than the literal one (lawyer-like). If you try to check Kant with the comb of Aristotle's logic, as Jacobi tried, you are lost. At Kant you must enter with an epistemological vision already formed and with a scientific culture at least comparable. To understand Kant you have to know what he is talking about and have something to say beforehand about that subject.

## § 2.

In Kant's transcendental logic, the antinomy of pure reason (which is nothing but a paradox) is not a logical fallacy, but an *ontological matrix*. The thesis and the antithesis do not suppress each other, but limit each other their fields of validity. This is the *pons asinorum* of

philosophy, which the materialists, the empiricists and the positivists instead of crossing, are striving to destroy it.

The Kantian epistemology is not a *dualistic* one (the classical reproach of the empiricists, who want to get the knowledge of nature exclusively from experience), but a *stereoscopic* one, that is, the two sources of knowledge (empyria and thinking) are not parallel (disjunctive, as in Descartes), but *orthogonally conjugated (complementary)*, precisely so that by combining them we can have a complete vision of knowledge as a phenomenon – just as only by combining the flat images of the two eyes we can have a view in space (3D).

The same thing happens in historiography.

The historical reality always remains hidden.

What we seem to know about the past is always a combination of artifacts and interpretations. No artifact has an obvious historical significance by itself.

Science, from Galileo onwards, is a mathematical hermeneutics of nature, by which we do nothing but recognize in our empirical experiences data our own *a priori mathematical intuitions*.

*Mutatis mutandis, historiography is a political hermeneutics of our social existence*, whereby we do nothing but project our entire repertoire of political ideas and interests onto the past, constructing a hypothetical historical reality more or less theoretically consistent with the available artifacts.

That is why, the culture, imagination, literary talent and political interests of historians always have a constitutive value in the avatars of our *collective memory*.

The past is not a given thing once and for all. The past is constantly being reshaped by the present, even after any trace has disappeared, precisely because the past survives and continues to evolve through us.

Unable to know the history in itself, historiography inevitably becomes an art of *reinventing the past as beeing possible*.

Based only on *plausibility criteria*, *historioographical truth* is a mythological (lyrical) one by its very nature.

### § 3.

A Spanish psychology professor once took his students to a bullfighting arena, lined them up like trees in an orchard, and told them to stay still, without fear, promising them that it would happen nothing bad. Then he released a bull into the arena. For many minutes the bull ran among the students, without touching any. He just didn't see them. Like a *newborn children* (or like *Cheselden's blind*)<sup>4</sup>, the bull had his vision perfectly intact (he saw practically everything), but in his dowry of patterns no *recognition scheme* had yet been established for

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<sup>4</sup> The clinical case mentioned by Kant in KpV, A 27.

»man«. To the bull, students were just *ordinary environmental objects* (*Gegenstände*).

Have you seen how cats are jumping up when they see a cucumber around them (as if something had burned to their feet)? Something *long, green and glossy* is probably in their genetic code the universal pattern of the *snake*. This is why, after they instinctively jump to the side, the hunter in their genetic code immediately turns back, cautious, to see what it is, ready at any moment of attack. After the cats clarify themselves that it is not a snake, they become careless again and see their affairs further. There are a lot of clips on Youtube with such scenes.

The same thing can happen to an archaeologist: he may pass carelessly near some artifacts, because he does not have their concept, or, on the contrary, he may spontaneously notice them, precisely because he had them *a priori* in his mind, as *being possible or historically relevant*.

#### § 4.

On this principle are based the prestidigitators too: they manage to amaze you only because you do not know their tricks, making you always look in the wrong direction; otherwise their art would lose all charm and their business would end.

The same principle is used by scammers, without warning you, but claiming that their loot is nothing more



than "tuition fees" (as they say in related slang). Thieves don't consider that they are stealing, but that they are teaching life lessons (helping you grow up) and that the wallet they take out of your pocket is their natural right.

Maybe God himself is a magician, and nature is his show of illusions, for which we are automatically taxed through some sort of Ministry of Universal Finance until we die.

In these circumstances, our only chance to gain our freedom is to *disenchant the world* (as it was said). And, the only way to decompose its creator's tricks is to reinvent them. This is exactly what we do through science and engineering. In fact, since Adam and Eve, we have been doing nothing but plagiarising God.

Perhaps our daily lies and deceptions are nothing more than exercises of style in the logic of our becoming as a species. After all, our inventions are nothing more than plagiarisms of technical solutions that nature discovered long ago, but which we are only now, in the light of our own inventions, able to recognise as such. At first, we only saw levers and ropes in our bodies, then we began to see hydraulic pumps, internal combustion engines and electrical circuits, so that today we can see all kinds of quantum phenomena.

The Kantian *epistemological apriorism* does not say that we can *deduce* by *a priori synthetic intuitions* the *empirical reality itself*, but, on the contrary, that we can *guess*

*in advance* only the forms in which the empirical reality can appear to us.

The senses are not meant to render us the historical present (contemporaneity), as it seems at first sight, but the past, precisely so that, by our own imagination, we can anticipate the future.

The illusion of the actuality of our sensory perceptions is due only to the speed with which in our minds the *subreption* (as Kant says) *between concept and object or between phenomenon and the thing in itself* occurs.

Our sensations are in fact only relics of our epistemological past.

## § 5.

Empirical knowledge is an *a posteriori* knowledge – Kant argues – that is, a kind of knowledge that comes usually too late, when not only the object of knowledge has disappeared, but perhaps even the subject (I mean, we ourselves have changed our mode of perception even during perception).

*Historical reality can only be the object of historiographical knowledge in its own posterity.* It is therefore impossible to produce a *historiography of contemporaneity*. You cannot be both a *player* and a *spectator* at the same time, both in the center of events and outside them. It is impossible to write the journal of your own death. If you

can still say something, you're still alive, and if you're already dead, you can't say anything. The present is the limit (the imaginary border, without dimensions) between the past and the future. Just when you think you've caught the present, it has already become the past.

The *historical present* exists only in our own imagination.

In the coordinate system of *history*, the *present* is the *origin* (zero point). *Heroic time* (the time of action) and *historiographic time* (the time of remembrance and evocation) are the two orthogonal axes (ordinate and abscissa) of *history*.

*Heroic time* and *historiographic time* do not fit into one and the same hourglass; they flow in two orthogonal (linearly independent) hourglasses and the equation that manages the ratio between them is the equation of the circle (the sum of their squares must always be equal to 1). Therefore, to the extent that man develops his player skills in history, he loses his objective observer skills, and as he improves his observer skills, he loses his player skills. This is the *principle of uncertainty in history*.

## § 6.

For us, the image of the Sun is actually a relic of what he was eight minutes ago. The starry night sky is actually

just the image of what he was thousands and millions of years ago.

In the cosmogony of our *affective life* as well, the feeling of love is a kind of distant star, which we begin to see and truly cherish only after it is extinguished – in the poetic vision of Gottfried Keller (1819 - 1890), in the poem *Siehst du den Stern*.

The *historical present* is like the *affective present*: it exists precisely insofar as we are not aware of it, and when we finally become aware of it, it has already fled into the past.

*"Concepts suppress love" – said Emil Cioran.*

*Lucidity and happiness are mutually exclusive.*

*Object and concept cannot be contemporary.*

*This is why historiography is a lyrical science par excellence.*

*The stylistic matrix of historiography are the Psalms of King David – ode and elegy.*

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