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TABLE OF CONTENT

Editorial	3
Iulian Warter	
Counting on Creativity (Cultural Contexts of Knowledge)	7
Slawomir Magala	
Leading Through Language: What Do You Speak (And Hear)?	13
Thomas Zweifel	
In Life as on Paper? The Influence of Emotions on Personality Perceptions in an Interactive Setting	21
Ursula Hess, Michel Cossette, Shlomo David, Shlomo Hareli	
Ethical Aspects of NATO-EU Cooperation.....	31
Florin Şuhan, Vasile Cocris	
Three Theses on Recognition Culture and Human Security	39
Anton Carpinschi	
Universality and Culturalism in the Management of European Projects in Pre-University Education	43
Vasile Cocris, Diana Vicol	
Psychological Dimensions of the Political Behavior. Cognition, Emotions and Vote in Romanian Presidential Elections	49
Silviu-Petru Grecu	
The Culture of Royalty Political Reintegration. The Case of Romania and Other Eastern- European Experiences in Post-Communism and Before and After EU Accession	61
Alexandru Muraru	
Multinational Companies - Between Hope and Disillusion	73
Ioana Buhac, Vasile Cocris	
Book Review	79
Aurelian Virgil Băluţă	

COUNTING ON CREATIVITY (CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF KNOWLEDGE)

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“During the second quarter of the nineteenth century the same scientific myth found its expression in three images: the womb became the source of life, the universe the source of energy, and the population the source of labor force.” (Illich, 2013, 92)

“The humanities alone create social value. Their languages, buoyed by the creative arts, evoke feelings and actions instinctively felt to be correct and true. When knowledge is deep enough and all set in place, the humanities become the preeminent source of moral judgment.” (Wilson, 2017, 69)

Abstract

What we know changes. So do our reality checks and dreams. Knowledges and mythologies - both change in spite of claims to universality. Changes influence different contexts, reshuffle distributed agents and observers, generate events which can be real, virtual or in-between. Contexts change. It's not only that times they are a-changing. We change as well as times and spaces or more. Knowledge evolves, space curves, time loops, and so do the social and cultural contexts of knowledge. Those who teach – change, but so do those who are taught, not to mention that which is being taught, learned and applied, forgotten, modified or rejected. Knowledge blows libraries up, disappears into clouds, rains on happy users. Attempts of the philosophers of science to account for transformative mutability did not end with the evolutionary epistemology of conjectures and refutations. The most important contribution to our understanding of creativity is the discovery of tacit methodologies in communities of thinking by the Polish microbiologist and a medical researcher, Ludwik Fleck. This contribution to our understanding how we grow knowledge has been translated from Polish German (Fleck, 1979) into American English (Kuhn, 1970) and smuggled into philosophy of science in order to explain evolving knowledge. The smuggler, Thomas Kuhn, relabeled it as “paradigm” and shipped it in a container marked as a “structure of scientific revolutions” to global academic and political communities. The container is still being unloaded in all branches of academic research destinations and in media folklore, where paradigms replaced archetypes as master keys to fast intellectual food. In social sciences and in the humanities researchers catering to intellectual *haute cuisine* tease out the dialectics of entropy and creativity.

Keywords: creativity, paradigms, communities, knowledge, strategic action fields

Background

An emergent climate of disenchantment with the classical Enlightenment did not softly dissolve in the re-enchantment of the world with relativity and quarks, Wikipedia and googled scholars. The first Enlightenment, from Copernicus, Galileo and Descartes to Vico, Newton and Lavoisier focused on Reason. But neither propaganda commissars of this first Enlightenment like Voltaire, nor its bloody managers, like Robespierre, survived the military and political career of *raison au cheval*, as Hegel lovingly nicknamed Napoleon Bonaparte. Reason, universal and immutable as the rules of logic and the tautologies of set theory – has

been locked away in an imaginary Fort Knox of professional expertise (which used to be located near Paris and London but moved to Boston, Chicago and California after WWII). The market and the state bought the keys and access codes, Wikileaks and anti-ACTA activities notwithstanding. The abstract formulae of the covering laws were kept under lock and key – as well as a model of a unit of a distance or a model of a unit of a weight, both tucked away in Sevres. The experts have symbolically carved the surface of the Earth - as in the Greenwich embodiment of a meridian or Mason's and Dixon's plotting of a politically charged parallel. The road to GPS was open.

However, the Enlightenment did not fare so very well one and a half centuries later. Frits Haber invented poisonous gases and introduced them to the allied trenches around Ypres. This embodiment of Reason and a Nobel laureate left us ambiguous pesticides and unambiguous Cyclon B. Reasonable choice? Already in the 1930ies the disenchantment with the cult of Reason led two leftist philosophers of culture, Horkheimer and Adorno, to the critical analysis of “the dialectics of Enlightenment”. According to their diagnosis, progress had replaced the opium of an organized religion with an opium of science for the elites and an opium of cultural industries for the masses. The authors of “The Authoritarian Personality” (currently undervalued as a specimen of a fake research, which does not allow for any empirically verifiable conclusions) escaped Nazi- and communist-dominated Europe and experimented with college education in the United States. As they did, still in the frozen trenches of class struggles of the 1930ies, the contexts around them accelerated both evolutionary and revolutionary transformations. Transformations facilitated new deals, new deals aided global policies and global policies changed contexts of feasible actions. Neither Dutch punitive expeditions into Indonesia in the 1940ies nor Franco-British invasion of Egypt in the 1950ies succeeded. The leftist avant-garde left Europe divided between Hitler and Stalin and started designing skyscrapers for the US corporations. The marriage of convenience of Chrysler Corporation and Mies van der Rohe became a fact. The divorce of communism and democracy became irreversible. The impact of changes became visible slowly, as if viewed through a dark glass, very slowly. For one thing, there was indeed a “Manhattan project” run for the political elites by the academic elites. The show was a success and helped to win a war, in which one of the two dictators lost, but another one, changing allies, won. The masses west of Elbe did not have to worry – the commencement of the cold war has been softened by a consumer revolution, and facilitated by a Charlie Chaplin and a Mickey mouse for the masses. The masses east of Elbe did not have a chance to worry – they had been subjected to a communist terror, which demanded a never ending manifestation of enthusiasm for the masters of the communist universe.

The Enlightenment, however, was not dead yet. The communists gave it a new lease on life, by sugar-coating their dictatorship with the educational indoctrination and by claiming that they liberated the masses from the yoke of slave labor and slave consumption (well, at least the liberation from consumption rang true behind the iron curtain). But the free world also gave it a new lease on life claiming that only a neo-positivist “hard” science can breed the best and the brightest conquerors of the moon, winners of the Vietnam war and suppliers of happiness on a daily basis.

Emergent communities of creative knowledge games

Today, more than a quarter of a century after the rise of the Polish “Solidarity” (1980) and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), we know already that a Cold War imbalance in the development of scientific knowledge worldwide gets reduced, but not automatically and not everywhere. Russian and Chinese academic communities accepted molecular biology and genetic research instead of Lysenko and Michurin, and the Chinese entered the digital mobility race with Huawei. The European Union, the United States, Japan, China and Russia

all gamble at the cold fusion casino slowly built under the hills of Provence. Most of the world's top political and military intelligence centers include liberal education in the intellectual capital endowment of the young elites. Still, asymmetries continue. Pentagon's ARPANET did evolve into the world wide web, GRU or KGB networks did not. Russian trolls of the military counterintelligence, churning out fakes number more than 15.000 employees, more than entire US Department of State.

Does it mean that our epistemology is as evolutionary as biology? Because knowledge grows and looks like it might grow forever? Creativity emerges as one of the key concepts driving contemporary quest for the latest equivalent of the Holy Grail. The Holy Grails of the past used to be pursued by the best and the brightest – the knights of the round tables and the masters of digital powers. Today, creativity has been driven deep into the lower, densely populated strata of contemporary societies. Multimedia invade public attention spans. Millionaires are born among slum-dogs and immigrants (both Steves, Wozniak and Jobs, for instance). The shock troops of PR and advertising design, seduce and terrorize everybody, the poor and the uneducated. No level of ignorance protects human individuals against contamination with political correctness, but by the same token no level of education closes off from new knowledge clusters. **The most significant transformation of creativity in an era of knowledge explosion concerns the gradual breakdown of the gated communities of experts.** The representatives of the supremely educated and most meritorious castes – the judicial and the medical, the academic and the political – join the clergy and the media gurus in lamenting the relative loss of status and relevance with each turn of the technological and political screws. Gradual but systematic breakdown of expert authorities demonstrates the decline in professional control of creative energies. Does erosion of authority include the relatively insulated elites of the military-industrial and secret service establishments?

Emergent plots: entropy of institutional control vs creativity of random clustering?

The events are all there is, and they are four-dimensional at least. Historical analysis requires a comparative study of their clustering and the re-clustering of explanations. Events curve spatiotemporal whirlpools around human individuals. Events are experienced on an individual scale as if we were swimming in a sea of intertwined processes. Processes, cutting through spatiotemporal clusters involve individuals, influencing them alone and in various constellations. These influences, causal, structural, motivational and others, nudge us in many differentiated situations. Variety and density of these nudges push us to navigate by simplifying and making intuitive choices. This is what orientation is all about. Orientation is a sub-species of communications. Communication, far from an addition to the hard reality, is an indispensable core component of all realities. Signs, symbols, abstractions, codes, stereotypes, routines, improvisations, the list of the communicative venues and reincarnations is never finite. What we ask is as important as what we don't, what we fail to think about asking, not necessarily because we are afraid.

We do not ask why it is more expensive to get a mortgage after a financial crisis or why a political party wins elections after economic downturn. Instead, we try to see these questions as clustered consequences of bunched up underlying processes. We ask, for instance, how financial services or political support change as manifested by their institutional frameworks. How institutions evolve? This question, whose verbal component clearly indicates a debt to Charles Darwin and Karl Marx, but also to Mary Douglas and the new institutionalism (How Institutions Think, cf. Douglas, 1986, the new institutionalism, cf. Powell & DiMaggio, 1991) has had many answers, but none very satisfactory (cf. Thelen, 2004). The theory of strategic action fields is one of the latest attempts to answer the question in a methodologically promising way (Fligstein & MacAdam, 2012). The concept of strategic action fields is an attempt to focus on the creative evolution (with occasional

revolutionary shortcuts) in order to explain why actors responsible for some events were unable to secure the institutional continuity of reaping the benefits of a positive change. The authors analyze the victory of post-segregationist forces in the American South (from the first protests in buses to King on the streets and Johnson on the Capitol). They conclude that the victorious organization of diversified alliance in the southern states of the United States did not survive a gradual take-over of the civil rights movement by the educated white leftists in the north. Left activists and their media allies did not share loyalties to the poor black constituencies in the south and they did not respond to the backlash of “white power” over the period 1932-1980. Another example they analyze is the case of the emergence of the mortgage securitization industry in the years 1969 – 2011. The pressure of the lower classes to gain access to the mortgage facilities provided the original push. It was reinforced with the development of the new digital technologies for developing new financial products and their rapid circulation. All these developments resulted in a spectacular rise of the professional class of the superheroes of the Wall Street. The Wolves of the Wall Street, the bonfires of vanities rose at the expense of the original underwriters of the universalization of housing mortgage and the original controllers of the securitization procedures. These changes of the strategic action field produced effects, which resulted not only a crisis but also in a genuinely new negotiation of actors.

The intuitive analogy between the abovementioned sociopolitical analysis and historical reconstruction of two US cases makes me wonder if the development of strategic action fields in the post-communist societies did not follow similar mechanisms. Instead of the “blacks” and the “whites” in the US, in the post-communist Europe and instead of the ambitious poor and ruthless superrich, we would have the “former enslaved citizens of the communist satellite states” and the “former enslaving elites of the communist satellite states”. The attempts of the representatives of the “former oppressed” to de-communize are being regularly thwarted by the “former oppressors”. For instance, the contemporary Polish government wants to reform the judicial system by limiting the role of judges who had been guilty of subverting justice in the name and on behalf of the communist rulers. This present majority government, of prime minister Morawiecki and the political party of Kaczynski, which is considered conservative by liberal media, has economic and social policies which are much more pro-social and pro-lower classes than the policies prescribed by the neoliberal political forces. However, the political elites of the European Union, instead of welcoming this break with the undemocratic communist past, made a deal with the post-communist elites, hoping to secure a neocolonial status to the new member states of the European Union, which had previously belonged to the eastern side of the Iron Curtain. In order to secure the loyalty of the new elites of these postcommunist member states they had coopted some of their members – Donald Tusk, a former prime minister of Poland and the present chairperson of the European Council - is the case in point.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Well, restructuring the strategic action field of the European Union (the tacit dictatorship of France and Germany does not work anymore) looks like an attractive option. But what strategic economic, social and political actors can emerge outside of the national contexts and promise some degree of sustainability? Can we always count on creativity? Fligstein and McAdam do hope so:

“For the first time since 1960s, scholars have created a set of theoretical concepts which transcend subfield divisions. The prospect of a broad synthetic theory is quite exciting in a discipline that has more or less given up on the idea of a general theory for at least forty years.”(Fligstein & McAdam, 221)

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