

**Branko Mitrović**

## **Philosophy of History and the Demise of the Postmodernist Worldview<sup>1</sup>**

My ambition in this talk is to address the wider intellectual situation in which our conference is taking place and to argue that we find ourselves at the moment of a major change of the dominant paradigms that affect all of the humanities.

For the past two days I've been involved in an architecture conference in which discussions precisely concentrated on the rapid changes of dominant assumptions in that field. A year ago I was involved in a book project led by Nathalie Bulle and Francesco D'Iorio that re-opened the debate about methodological individualism in the social sciences—and anyone who has worked and published in the philosophy of the social sciences knows that the idea that social phenomena result from interactions between individuals has been highly controversial (more exactly, suppressed) for decades.

The book *The Poverty of Anti-realism* that Tor and I co-edited, and that motivates this conference, results from a similar effort to break the counter-intuitive dogmas that postmodernist anti-realism has imposed on work in the philosophy of history.<sup>2</sup> In this talk I want to consider the contours of the wider shift in paradigms that I believe is unavoidable, and how this change is reflected in the philosophy of history. We are facing the demise of an entire worldview and whether we want it or not, our discussions here are part of something much bigger.

Consider, for instance, the claim made not very long time ago by a prominent anti-realist philosopher of history that “all contemporary philosophers, of whatever denomination, agree about, that language determines experience.”<sup>3</sup> The claim is plainly false. It might have been true in the 1960s, though even in those days it would not be hard to find counterexamples. When it comes to sense experience, the view that vision or hearing depend on conceptual or language-based mental processes was indeed popular in the 1950s as part of the so-called “New Look” psychology. It has been abandoned long since. The standard view in the philosophy and psychology of perception today is that vision is impenetrable for higher mental processes, including thinking in a language.<sup>4</sup> Vice-versa, if the claim pertains to the experience of internal

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a re-edited version of my talk at the *Past-the-Post* conference at Oslo University, 6 May 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Tor Egil Førland and Branko Mitrović eds, *The Poverty of Anti-realism*, Lanham: Lexington, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012, 214.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Zenon Pylyshyn, “Is vision continuous with cognition? The case for cognitive impenetrability of visual perception”, *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 22 (1999), 341-423. Chaz Firststone and Brian Scholl, “Cognition does not affect perception: Evaluating the evidence for ‘top-down’ effects”, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 39 (2016), 1-77.

mental processes, visual imagination is certainly not dependent on thinking in a language, and it has been studied by psychologists and discussed in modern philosophy since Roger Shepard's experiments in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> In the 1980s it was still common for philosophers to assert that all thinking is verbal; today this is a minority view.<sup>6</sup> As Christopher Gauker observed in 2007 "the language-independence of conceptual thought is now certainly the orthodox position."<sup>7</sup> The view that language determines experience is particularly unlikely to be credible to scholars in the humanities, who work with materials in different languages and know that such a position makes the translation of homonyms impossible.<sup>8</sup>

The problem with views such as the one I have just cited is not merely that they are dated, but that they reflect philosophical fashions from half a century ago or more, such as the linguistic turn. The author of the statement mentioned supports the above view by citing Sellars, Rorty, Davidson, Quine, Derrida and even (inaccurately) Gombrich, who all formulated their views between four and six decades ago.<sup>9</sup> In spite of what he says, they are certainly not *our* contemporaries.<sup>10</sup> The problem is, however, not merely that a view widely rejected long time ago is presented as universally shared today, but that the arguments that led to its rejection are simply suppressed. Such poor philosophical culture is standard among advocates of anti-realist philosophy of history. They will thus invoke the final sections of Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" but not discuss Larry Laudan's devastating criticism of the claims Quine made there. They will repeat, with blind obstinacy, the claim that "events exist only under description", but omit to mention and fail to respond to criticisms of that view by Anscombe, Davidson, or more recent ones.

---

<sup>5</sup> See Roger Shepard and Jacqueline Metzler, "Mental Rotation of Three-Dimensional Objects," *Science*, 141 (1971), 701-703. For a good popular presentation of these experiments see Michael Eysenck, and Mark Keane, *Cognitive Psychology: a Student's Handbook*, Howe: Psychology Press, 1995, 203-232.

<sup>6</sup> Arguably, the groundbreaking moment for the rejection of the dependence of thought on language was the publication of John Searle's, *Intentionality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. A good presentation of arguments in the debate is Bermudez, *Thinking without Words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003. In more recent times, the authors who defend the impact of language on thinking are careful to emphasize that this impact is limited, see Christopher Gauker, *Thinking out Loud*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, 1 and 25. 6. Peter Carruthers, *Language, thought and consciousness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 1, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Gauker, "On the alleged priority of thought over language" in Savas Tsohatzidis, *John Searle Philosophy of Language: Force, Meaning and Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, 125-142.

<sup>8</sup> For the reasons why the view that all thinking is language dependent makes translation between languages impossible see Branko Mitrović, "Intentionalism, Intentionality and Reporting Beliefs". *History and Theory*, 48 (2009), 180-198,

<sup>9</sup> The reference to Gombrich in this context is inaccurate. In *Art and Illusion* (90) Gombrich did discuss favorably the view (that he attributed to Benjamin Lee Whorff) that language does not give name to pre-existing things or concepts so much as it articulates the world of our experience. But this needs to be read in the context of his subsequent opposition to the social-constructivist readings of this book. The 1972 version of his essay "*Icones symbolicae*" (*Symbolic Images. Studies in the art of the Renaissance*, London: Phaidon 1972, 123-195, 165) rejects the view that it is we who, through language, create the categories and even the stable objects of our experience, "simply because language is a social institution that has evolved along lines of utility." (165)

<sup>10</sup> Remarkably, in his written response to Paul Roth's criticism at the recent History and Theory Conference (Ghent 10-13 June 2013) that "contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophy" leaves no room for Ankersmit's kind of argument Ankersmit agreed that "20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Saxon philosophy" is of little help.

Consider another fashionable postmodernist claim, also repeated *ad nauseam* by anti-realist philosophers of history, that facts cannot be separated from theories and that no facts can be pre-theoretically given.<sup>11</sup> If “fact” is taken to mean merely “a true proposition” then the claim is an uninteresting platitude. The alternative meaning would be that this “fact” is something *real*, the way things are or were independently of human thinking, in accordance with the Latin meaning of the word *factum*, “thing done”. Understood this way, the claim is a variation of Latour’s claim that Ramses II could not have died of tuberculosis because Koch’s bacillus was discovered only in 1882.<sup>12</sup> We are, however, never told why it is so that facts do not exist independently of theories—and (unlike 70 years ago) modern psychology of perception precisely tells us that we can perceive dispositions of physical objects in space—the way things are— independently of our beliefs about them, or our theories. Perception, as mentioned above, is impenetrable for theoretical thinking. At the same time, the same as the unfortunate claim that events exist only under description, the view that facts cannot be separated from theories ends up in infinite regress. One should just consider the question whether it is a fact (whether this is the way things are) that facts cannot be separated from theories. This fact requires a theory about the relationship between facts and theories; this theory being true will be a new fact, that will require a new theory and so on. The infinite regress thus ultimately makes it impossible to know that it is true that facts are inseparable from theories.

Time limits prohibit me from providing more examples, but I believe the wider worldview that I am depicting here is well known. At the same time, at this conference we are concerned with historical anti-realism, understood either as the claim that the past cannot be known, or that historians’ knowledge cannot be true on the basis of correspondence to a stable past independent of historians’ beliefs, or some variation of views that entail that the past did not happen in a form that is independent of historians’ mental states.

This agnosticism or direct denial of the past, is at the same time regularly accompanied by remarkable expansive ontologies. One prominent anti-realist philosopher of history thus postulates an entire zoo of descriptions, theories, practices and similar forces that can retroactively create (not merely describe!) past events and that somehow exist independently human individuals. We are told that historiographical practices exist independently of historians who would practice them. His colleague similarly operates with a jungle of narratives, narrations, narrative substances, representations, representands, that also exist, he insists, on their own, independently of the intentional mental states of historians.

---

<sup>11</sup> Frank Ankersmit: *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012, 61. “a crude nineteenth-century positivism that still maintains the possibility of strictly separating fact from theory. ... Facts are indeed not pre-theoretically given...” Similarly, Keith Jenkins, “Introduction” in idem (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader*, London: Routledge, 1997. 1-35, 17: “The factualist/empiricist idea so rooted in traditional historical thinking, that if we can find ‘the facts’ then this will stop interpretative flux, fails because only theory can constitute what counts as a fact in the first place.”

<sup>12</sup> As Latour concludes “... the bacillus [in the body of Ramses II] has been there *all along*, but only *after* the sanitary flight to Paris that allowed ‘our scientists’ to retrofit all of Egyptian history with a Pharaoh that, *from now on*, coughs and spits Koch’s bacilli..” Bruno Latour “On the partial existence of existing and nonexisting objects”, in Lorraine Daston (ed.), *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999, 247-269, 266.

Clearly, such ontological expansions are merely variations of the postmodernist tendency to postulate culture, society, language, discourses and similar as abstract forces on their own right, that exist over and above individuals and their interactions—*de facto* spiritual forces with genuine causal capacities on their own. Typically we will be told that “individuals do not produce ideas or cultural systems, ideas and systems are there already and individuals ... get born into them just as they are born into a language and into an entire set of assumptions about identity, conduct and How Things Work”.<sup>13</sup> We will never be told where these languages, assumptions, identities and so on come from, who created them if not individuals, whether they float in the air, what they are, or where they derive their causal capacities from. Questions of ontology are firmly suppressed. The important moral of most postmodernist theorizing is that individuals are passive participants in contexts in which top-down social interaction is the only possible one. Above all, we are not supposed to question the interests that such postmodernist ontological myths conceal. However, as Ian Verstegen put it once, “ontology is not a philosophical pastime. It is the very basis of social emancipation.”<sup>14</sup> Overcoming this suppression of ontological questions, and with it the silence in political matters that such suppression enables, could be hopefully the most significant wider impact of the demise of the postmodernist worldview.<sup>15</sup>

I have discussed elsewhere possible reasons for the popularity of Postmodernism in the final decades of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

One possibility is religious, strange as it may sound. Religions are not only about God, but also about anthropology, insofar as they define the human position in the universe and its relationship to Deity. It is therefore reasonable to expect that many people retain the anthropology of their religion when they become atheists. In the case of religions such as Protestantism, that attribute strong causal role to God’s will, and strong involvement of God’s will in everyday life, conversion to atheism leaves the need to fill the position of the Deity with another force that would perform the same role. An imaginary supreme supra-individual force, called Culture, Language, Social Context, or similar is then invoked in order to fill in the gap. The same as in the case of God, one is not supposed to ask where they come from. More often than not (as in the segment cited above), the roles attributed to Culture, Society, Language and so on by many postmodernists are equivalent to the role of God, for instance, in Calvinism or in Luther’s polemic against Erasmus. It is not insignificant that except for France, Postmodernism had only limited acceptance in countries where the historically dominant religion emphasized free will of individuals.

Time does not allow me to elaborate on these question into a greater details, but another possible explanation for the popularity of postmodernist views pertains to the economic interests of academics in developed countries. In my book *Materialist Philosophy of History* I have analyzed these interests and how the standard theoretical positions that we classify as “postmodernist” reflect the need of Western academics as a

---

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, “Beyond History” *Rethinking History* 5 (2001) 195-216, 196,

<sup>14</sup> Ian Verstegen, *A Realist Theory of Art History*, London: Routledge, 2013, xv.

<sup>15</sup> See Ian Verstegen, “Is Historical Anti-realism (Ever) Politically Progressive” and Branko Mitrović, “Arguments, Partisanship and Politics” in Følrand and Mitrović, *Poverty*, 141-162 and 183-209.

<sup>16</sup> Branko Mitrović, *Materialist Philosophy of History*, Lanham: Lexington, 209-218.

class and enable them to argue for a better share in the division of wealth acquired by the exploitation of the Third World.

A third possible explanation for the popularity of postmodernist views is that it somehow reflects the experiences of the generation born in the West in the aftermath of World War Two. It is during the 1990s, when that generation was at the peak of its academic influence that the impact of postmodernist ideas was also at its strongest. An unkind way to put this would be to say that Postmodernism is boomer metaphysics.

It is unlikely that any single of these explanations can account of the full complexity of the influence of Postmodernism as a social-cultural phenomenon and the motivations that stand behind it. But it is clear that times have changed and that the social situations I have just described have less and less importance. The role of religion in Western societies is largely diminished compared to half a century ago; the economic situation of Western countries is rapidly changing with the rise of the Global South, and with it economic interests of academics as a class; there are fewer and fewer active academics who were born in the years after World War Two.

When it comes to philosophy of history the demise of anti-realism is a much more simple matter. For decades, its domination as the mainstream of the discipline has been justified a meagre diet of remarkably poor arguments. Articles in the book Tor and I have co-edited repeatedly refer to and describe the poor quality of arguments used to justify anti-realist claims. But how could this happen? How could views, so poorly justified, become the mainstream of our discipline? Clearly, what came to count as “the mainstream” has been established to reflect the postmodernist mainstream in other fields of the humanities. But, still, how could so many frankly awful arguments come to dominate the justifications of this mainstream? It is hard to imagine that for decades, no philosophers noticed that the arguments presented in favour of historical anti-realism are so profoundly deficient. The only explanation for the fact that anti-realism survived as the mainstream of the discipline for decades, in spite of the intellectual poverty of the arguments with which it has been defended, is that it has been institutionally favoured, and that alternative views were systematically suppressed. I am sure that all of us, who have worked long enough in the discipline, know a good number of examples that illustrate such practices.

Such favouring of bad arguments and suppression of criticism, however, have become unsustainable in the era of the internet. The Corona-virus epidemics has significantly contributed to the wider awareness of the possibilities that the internet offers. The idea for the book that Tor and I have co-edited came after a massive response that I received on Academia.edu for a paper that surveyed the political implications of historical antirealism. (The paper is now published as the last paper in our book.) A number of contacts that we established with our contributors came through subsequent internet exchanges. Simply, in an era of free communication on the internet it becomes hard to suppress objective judgments about the quality of bad arguments. The discipline, and the way philosophy of history is practiced will have to change.

And this is why I believe that the current conference announces the end of one of darkest, and intellectually most unproductive eras in the history of the philosophy of history.