

Introduction

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Abstract: This brief introduction presents the historical setting of the debate that took place between Michel Foucault and Giulio Preti in the early 1970s. It expounds some elements of the theoretical background of the debate, mainly focusing on Preti's philosophy. It attempts to explain the main philosophical tenets that led Preti to confront some of Foucault's positions, and tries to suggest some possible paths for reconciling the ideas exposed by the two authors.

This conversation between Michel Foucault and Giulio Preti was published for the first time in 1972. It was released in issue 22/23 of *Il Bimestre*, a bimonthly cultural journal (in its Italian description, a *Quaderno bimestrale di cultura*) published in Florence between 1969 and 1973. Its founding editor, Sergio Salvi, an independent scholar who would later develop a strong interest in linguistic and ethnic minorities, explained the reason of this publication in a short foreword:

Last Summer Giulio Preti passed away in Tunis. He was possibly the greatest contemporary Italian philosopher. We, who have been his students and were nourished by the rigor of *Praxis ed empirismo* – even if we eventually disagreed with the attitude of intellectual aristocracy he took during the students' protests – believe that the best way to commemorate him is to publish this lucid and still recent debate with Michel Foucault.

Il Bimestre went through a short yet intense life. A groundbreaking endeavor in several points of view, its contributors included recognized as well as rising names of Italian literary, artistic, and philosophical culture. In the issue that released the Preti-Foucault debate, we find essays by authors such as Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti (“L'anticommedia del Marescalco”), Felicita Audisio (“Il grottesco” e “I viaggi di Gulliver”), Luigi Brioschi (“Mito e letteratura in America”), and Marco Forti (“Jazz: universo negro e minoranze americane”). Andrea Zanzotto contributes a poem in a section devoted to contemporary literary texts, while a section

called “Opinions” includes papers ranging from literary genres to Vittorio Bodini’s poetry, Luciano Anceschi and British empiricism, homosexuality, the creation of the Nova Press agency in France... Aldo Carotenuto, Guido Davico Bonino, Morando Morandini, and Paolo Fossati held regular columns on, respectively, psychoanalysis, theatre, cinema, and art. Each issue included a section on linguistic and ethnic minorities in Europe: the one we are considering is devoted to Scotland, presented with its Gaelic name Alba.

Few particulars are known about the setting of the encounter between the two philosophers. Witnesses report that Preti traveled to Viareggio, a small town on the Tuscan coast, to meet with Foucault, who was spending some leisure time there. Information about the date when the debate took place remains largely uncertain. It is usually assumed to date back to 1971. In Mario Dal Pra (1988: 84), a volume richly edited by F. Minazzi, it is suggested that the meeting took place “probably towards the end of 1970”. As Carlo Gabbani kindly reminded me, in November 1970 Foucault was actually in Florence, lecturing on Manet’s *Le Bar des Folies-Bergère* (see Foucault 2001: 37). The possibility that the meeting took place on that occasion cannot be excluded. However, in the few words preceding the conversation, Salvi recalled that the meeting was “still recent” at the date of its publication, in the Fall of 1972. Considering that Preti had suddenly passed away in July of that year, it might be as reasonable to set the encounter in the first half of 1972.¹ Unfortunately, we have no evidence for it, and our possibilities for a deeper inquiry are, at the present time, too limited to be successful.

Hardly any presentation is needed to introduce the life and work of Michel Foucault, one of the most influential and celebrated intellectuals of the 20th century. On this occasion, he had in front of him a far less known scholar, the Italian philosopher Giulio Preti (1911-1972).² Although he was widely considered as one of the most brilliant scholars of his generation in Italy, and certainly a leading intellectual figure in Florence, it is only in recent years that his work has been increasingly acknowledged as an exceptionally original reflection in the theory of knowledge. A few words are called for to present the main tenets of

¹ Ian Hacking (2009: 81) states that the debate “took place in 1972, the year of Preti’s untimely death”.

² For further readings about his work and its significance, please see Scarantino (2007, 2011). An overall view about Preti’s works, bio, related literature and conferences can be found on the website giuliopreti.eu, run by Duccio Manetti and Silvano Zipoli Caiani.

Preti's work, along with their historical and theoretical background. His philosophical achievements cannot be dissociated from the wider movement of Italian *transcendentalism*, or, as it is frequently called, *critical rationalism*. In the early decades of the 20th century, when the *Zeitgeist* of European philosophy, literature, and art, was pervaded by the sentiment of an ineluctable decline of Western culture and civilization, the Italian philosopher Antonio Banfi (1886-1957) sought a more radical response to the intellectual climate than the irrational or vitalistic philosophies that were then proliferating. He chose a "transcendental revolution" that, in a Husserlian and neo-Kantian frame, provided a theory of knowledge where the traditional correspondentist approach to knowledge was replaced by a functionalist construction of the object. He thus restored philosophy's educational role by building an open, free, creative, non-authoritarian interaction on a specific set of epistemic structures.³ His work opened a new path in Italian philosophy – one that could be considered today as the main theoretical contribution of 20th century Italian philosophy to the international debate. A professor at the University of Milan, Banfi became rapidly a venerated teacher of a whole generation of young intellectuals: not only philosophers, but also literary critics, painters, musicologists, poets, artists, architects, movie makers and critics, were influenced by his philosophy and his teaching.⁴ His influence on the Italian culture of the second half of the century was impressively wide, although its actual extent has only recently been decoded. From many points of view, and despite their theoretical distance, the scope of this influence can only be compared to the one exerted by Benedetto Croce. It is in this unique environment that Giulio Preti's philosophy took shape. Preti developed Banfi's transcendentalism into a universal reflection on the structures of knowledge and their historicity. His critique of foundationalism was built on a fully achieved historicization of the *apriori* that did not override the formal nature of knowledge. Rational persuasion, as the mode of an open and free interaction, stemmed from a functionalist construction of objectivity, whereas representations and concepts were conceived as culturally-sensitive tools for exchanging experience. Violence, as opposed to persuasion, was seen in its deepest epistemic roots, while his conception of experience, and correspondingly of the moral laws, opened the way to a philosophy of inter-

³ See Scarantino (2007: 47-112).

⁴ I tried to reconstruct the importance of the journal "Corrente di vita giovanile" in building the generation that would make postwar Italian culture in Scarantino (2007: 17-45).

culturality that is neither rigidly universalistic nor subjectively relativistic. Preti's work, much like Foucault's, is, in short, a lively philosophy. It helps us understand the crucial cultural phenomena and transformations of our contemporary world in a way that few thinkers of the modern time have succeeded in doing. But, unlike Foucault, he centered his work mainly on the most abstract, hence pragmatically powerful, structures of knowledge. Their conversation therefore depicts the engagement of two philosophical styles. In this brief foreword, we will mainly attempt to bring to the fore the philosophical background that led Preti to conduct the discussion in the way he did.

The third actor of the play is Michele Dzieduszycki.⁵ His exact contribution to the debate remains partly unclear, although he is ambiguously credited for the role of *curatore*, a term that might refer either to the textual editing of the conversation, or to a more substantial participation in the exchange itself. In a case, he hardly seems to play a significant role in the discussion. We may plausibly look at him as the one who triggered the encounter between the two philosophers. Born and based in Florence, where his family had moved from Poland in late 19th century, Dzieduszycki was an outstanding representative of a peculiarly Italian professional figure. He was a "cultural journalist" – a fortunate blend of both reporter and critic, whose main task consisted in providing an insight into the nation's cultural life, habits, social and public practices, as well as expounding on the evolution of international relations and political life, mainly through deep interviews of influential or emerging intellectuals, artists, social and political actors. It is most likely thanks to his initiative that the meeting between the two philosophers could take place and eventually acquire a publishable shape.

Ian Hacking (2009: 82) elaborated on some aspects of the paper, remarking that "the discussion between the two men (...) reads as half-debate, half-interview". Since the onset, their roles are clearly defined. Preti is the one who poses the questions and, by so doing, leads the conversation through its various arguments: Foucault's conception of philosophy as a diagnostic activity, the nature of his interest in Nietzsche's work, the dynamic between subject and consciousness and the role of the unconscious, the presence of Sade, the pansexualism of the period, to the final distinctions between morality and ethics, and the political and the social.

⁵ Michele Dzieduszycki passed away in November 2005. A collection of his interviews and writings has been posthumously published in Dzieduszycki (2007).

However, Preti was no journalist. His focus was philosophical. He scrutinized Foucault's ideas rather than merely interviewing him. Since the very beginning, he raised a point that would constitute a *leitmotiv* of their dialogue. He detected a risk in the conception of philosophy as diagnostic activity. His concern was whether in Foucault's view philosophical concepts are indirectly given some sort of transcendent or metaphysical status. He wondered whether the risk of extracting philosophy out of its own cultural context was embedded in the metaphoric figure of a "diagnosis". Preti's entire work, since his early "Difesa del principio d'immanenza" (1936), aimed at showing how any critique of foundationalism (in his words, of "ontological realism") was incompatible with any other stance than a radical immanentism. In his view, and in contrast to Foucault, the formal, therefore immanent nature of the transcendental subject of knowledge is a necessary condition to combine the historicity of knowledge with the formal nature of knowledge itself.

Foucault was therefore right when he detected an appeal to the transcendental in Preti's queries. Their conceptions of the "transcendental" were clearly in contrast. Foucault's referred to the transcendental as "a residue that cannot be eliminated" once knowledge has been fully historicized. He excluded the transcendental from historicity. Preti, on the contrary, conceived historicity as possible only in a transcendental framework. Historicity, in his view, has to do with a functional reconstruction of knowledge, and this can only be possible as far as we conceive the constitutive principles of knowledge as embedded in our pragmatic, daily experience. Throughout his work, he made clear that what he calls the "transcendental subject of knowledge" is neither an empirical nor a metaphysical entity. It rather consists of the "formal network of categories", the frame of formal and constitutive rules through which a particular system of knowledge is recognized as valid and contributes to shape a concrete, historical culture. This subject, Preti elaborated in his writings, lacks any substantial, psychological, or sociological connotation whatsoever. It is instead the product of an ultimate abstraction: the one that, from the concrete cultural facts, extracts "a particular logic and categories, isolated from their historical and empirical (sociological) context, and recognizes them as the criteria of truth and the forms of the constitution of the object" (Preti 1983: 181).

This subject is therefore radically immanent in experience – in cultural experience as well as, at a deeper level, in everyday's experience. It is the system of transcendental ideas that permeate a culture and a system of knowledge in their historical development. Put in these terms, Fou-

cault's *episteme*, here defined as the whole set of "relationships that existed in a particular era between the various fields of Science", presents some closeness to Preti's transcendental. It is therefore unsurprising that, in a late manuscript, Preti (1973: 20) established a link between his conception of the transcendental and Foucault's *episteme*, which he described as "a network of apprehensive forms that constitute a code to organize experience".

Foucault did not seem to share this radical immanentism. On the contrary, he equated the transcendental with the "residue" left over after historicization has taken place. To Preti, there may be no such ahistorical residue: the quest for "the historical conditions and transformations of our knowledge", as Foucault puts it, coincides for Preti with the historicization of the *a priori* principles of knowledge. In his own words, the result of this process of "historicizing to the utmost" is "the network of transcendental forms – or, in a more accurate wording, a name that designates the *transcendental function* or *structure* in general, abstracting from its (relatively) concrete determinations" (Preti 1983: 183).

To reach this stage, a process of abstraction from the complex cultural heritage embedded in our experience is required. This is precisely the task of philosophy as a social discipline, or as *Kulturwissenschaft*. It is through this analysis, one that goes far beyond the mere syntactic or linguistic analysis and must reach the deepest cultural root of our daily experience, that the formal and conceptual structures which shape our life-world can be extracted:

"such is precisely that 'transcendental subject' that forms the object of the transcendental analytic of knowledge from Kant onwards (and perhaps, since the earlier stage of Locke and Leibniz). Bruno Bauch, followed by Antonio Banfi, has precisely pointed out, against any psychologistic transcendentalism, that this is the only meaning in which the expression 'transcendental subject' makes sense" (Preti 1983: 181).

The "transcendental" is therefore immanent in the *episteme*, and to some extent it coincides with it. It is in this formal and constitutive sense that Preti argued for "a particular form of transcendentalism" that "has little kinship with the subjectivist and idealistic one that can be traced back to Kant's work. Indeed, it does not deal with pure forms of a consciousness *überhaupt* (the 'I think'), but rather with schemes and frameworks, built by the humans (why and how they have been built being rather the matter for a positive anthropology, such as a sociology of knowledge, than of a philosophical speculation). This is a historical-objective transcendentalism (...). In other terms, it is a transcendental On-

tology – or, rather, transcendental ontologies – that does not try to seize the forms and structures of a Being in itself, but attempts rather to define the mode(s) of how the category of being is at work in the historically changing and logically conventional (arbitrary) construction of ontological regions – a construction made possible by scientific knowledge in particular, and by culture in general” (Preti 1976: 485-486).

Ian Hacking was right when he observed that, in this discussion, “Preti is so self-effacing” (2009: 82). He was not trying to present his own philosophical stances. Nonetheless, these were present under the surface, and fully inspired the way he led the play. Through this personal exchange, he seemed eager to verify the accuracy of the critical opinion he expressed during the same period in a manuscript that was published posthumously: “the notion of ‘transcendental’ as a system of the structures of objective mind – this precious notion that reaches neo-Kantianism from a Hegelianism sieved through criticism, and that we can find more or less sharply in Simmel, Windelband, Rickert, and closer to us in Cassirer (...) remains alien and incomprehensible within the framework of traditional French philosophy” (Preti 1973: 23-24). Foucault resisted this criticism. He refused to identify the subject with consciousness, although he admitted that “the overwhelming majority of philosophers from the 17th to the 19th century has identified subject with consciousness”, making clear that “it is true of 20th century French philosophers as well, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty included”.

How might this engagement provide new insight on the two main actors? Two styles, two intellectual focuses, two different backgrounds... On the one hand, we observe an approach to philosophy that changed the nature of scholarly work in the field of social thought, and used philosophical concepts to show the embeddedness of power and violence in the organization of social life through the ages. Foucault used history to substantiate – and instantiate – theory, and drew theories out of their concrete historical immanence. On the other hand, we find an equally revolutionary scholar, who attempted to build a moral world, with its modes of interaction, persuasion, trust, and violence, upon the most abstract features of our epistemic world. By linking social action to the forms of representation, Preti conceived philosophy as *paideia* in the deepest sense of the term – as a tool to guide our reasoning in a way that would have direct effects on our social behavior. The emphasis on history is the tie between them, and the differences evident in their dialogue invite us to inquire further, in as well as beyond the boundaries of Italy.

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