

# Renaissance, now. Negotiating the release of Humanity in the age of plastic

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We are witnessing some signs justifying an apology for a veritable Renaissance. It is not a surprise that social sciences and humanities are under attack. Being this carried out by the elimination of public [endowments](#) in US, or by [linking the number of university spots to labor market needs](#) in Denmark, the signs of war are many. The explanations of such movements often focus on the view of social sciences and humanities as commodities which must be financially profitable, like potatoes or medical drugs. Social sciences and humanities are now indexed to some kind of a price table which parameters are defined in a reductionist marketeer-like way.

In my point of view, such explanations hide a (more) profound issue. As we know, social sciences as well as arts and humanities in general are fundamentally fuelled by critical views, approaches and analyses on every kinds of apparatuses of power. Through such a movement, this part of the sociopolitical consciousness helps humanity to look at history from a critical position. This is a truly work of enlightenment. And it is here that seems the problem dwells. In any historical context, upper echelons are reactive to criticism. By their side, a question rises that they end up asking: "why should I invest my money (if a private investor) or give my license (if a public policy maker) to someone who criticizes the way I became wealthy or the way I rule?"

Even considering that to criticize is not necessarily to denounce (Carrier, 2016), the fact is that, in the particular case of anthropology, the main focus on studying down has become a matter of concern for anthropologists (Latour, 2004) which must be addressed (Nader, 1972), since "studying down" entails a critical gaze on such apparatuses of power, which are mainly controlled by upper echelons. In fact, in order to deal with complex worlds, anthropologists have to study up and sideways as much (or even more) as they study down (Stryker & González, 2014). This means that anthropologists need to look at the upper echelons as partners throughout their ethnographies, not as targets of their criticism in an unquestioningly way.

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As a means to avoid mistrust behaviors by the side of the powerful, their inclusion inside ethnographies claims for the observer to operate both a sharp and a slight modification in his/her ethos, that is, i) one that allows to treat them as sources of particular perceptions and interpretations about reality, not as targets, and ii) one that allows to look at the new subjects as

interlocutors instead of as mere informants, similarly to the experts with whom ethnographers relate in collaborative contexts. This implies to look at the subjects of our inquiry as "epistemic partners" (Holmes & Marcus, 2008) with autonomy, "thus resisting to the established image of the contemporary roles of ethnographer-informant" (Pinto da Costa, 2017). This change would favour the production of thoughts and the emergence of surprises from contexts where almost everything is new (Strathern, 2016). Such intellectual partnerships would perhaps serve as grounds for role negotiations and understandings. This is a kind of a technique that may give rise and cultivate a dialogic imagination between us (social scientists and humanities workers and artists) and them (those who manage the funds and evaluate the price of our work). So, the language used into such dialog is necessarily a business-like one. After all, it is this type of naive-realistic language that natural sciences use, and they are successful. Perhaps if we look at the accomplishment of the goals proposed by research projects we would find out that social sciences are much more effective than hard sciences.

Thus, to negotiate a proper place for humanities and for social sciences inside the neoliberal agenda implies to know as much the rules of the game as the rulers. Playing the game is always a choice, and, while playing, the practical competency of the player depends on his/her ability to translate the language into discursive and non discursive performances more or less in accordance with the expectations the other players have in the context of a particular social field (Bourdieu, 1976, 1991). Studying up (in this case over and above studying sideways and down), should give us more skills to play the game and thus should help us to gain it more often. The keyword here is self-evaluation, or, in more technical terms: reflexivity.

Anthropology is, perhaps, the most reflexive of all sciences. In this respect, I think it is fair to recognize the immense work anthropologists are making since James Clifford's and George Marcus' *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). *Writing Culture* is, so to speak, the foundation myth of anthropology's postmodern self-criticism. It is maybe less profound than the previous Marshall Sahlins' *Culture and Practical Reason*, but much more disturbing and thought-provoking.

The rereading of some classic works has allowed to resituate the Dilthey's *Empirie, nicht Empirismus* axiom in the center of ethnographic inquiry, leading, thus to the very core of William James' radical empiricism, which "must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced" (James, 1904:534). Through this reflexive effort, anthropologists escaped, thus, from the dangerous idea of an ethnographic fictionalization of reality (as well from the colonial ghosts anthropology carried with it from its very beginning). A collateral outcome of such effort was the performance of a profound critique on the conditions of anthropological science autonomy. Both of these results strengthened ethnographic endeavour (see, for example, the volume edited by Allison James, Jenny Hockey and Andrew Dawson, 1997).

Epistemologically speaking, it was time to refound the ethnography as a situated methodological endeavour. The watchword was "situational analysis". Adele Clarke sums up the idea in this way:

*"...we are today in the midst of a renaissance of qualitative approaches to research for a situational analysis as a means for overcoming postmodern crisis in social sciences, where they have had considerable longevity if not prominence, but also in the humanities professions, and beyond. Within this renaissance, established methods are also being reinterrogated. Questions are raised not of their validity in quantitative terms that ignore challenges to the truth claims of positivism but rather regarding their capacities to resituate both the inquirer and inquiry itself within new transdisciplinary sites around the postmoder turn."* (Clarke, 2005:xxi).

*Writing Culture* was to phenomenological pragmatism what Feyerabend's *Farewell to Reason* was to positivist rationalism. Therefore, it adjusts perfectly to the spirit of Renaissance, since it promotes the examination of ethnographic productions in order to refine the need for a quest for Truth, the Good and Beauty (Szakolczai, 2006). Thus, anthropology accomplished its redemption and recovered its rightful place among the other social sciences that fight for "affirming [their] autonomy against all forms of power" (Bourdieu, 1990:169)

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I think that such resituation is needed as a strategy for bringing the upper echelons back to the path of Humanism.

Renaissance today is moved by the same need of Renaissance in the XIV-XVI centuries: a critique of *Zeitgeist*. Though, at that time it was too early, as humankind had not yet a consolidated notion of its universality and of its culturally diverse expressions (Josephson-Storm, 2017). But now... Now we live in an age of self-consciousness when it is not possible to think humanly without situating Humanity in its location, that is, in a place inhabited but never realistically owned or subdued.

Perhaps a veritable Renaissance needs to be made by alternately fold and unfold turns and returns, showing now a facet, then another, of a chain which links are not only ethics and ontology (da Col, 2014), but also epistemologies and attitudes. Such entanglement is necessarily animated by a basic dialectic confronting Nature's and Man's forces. As the past and the present, the future life of the Mankind on Earth is necessarily an eco-anthropology. Everybody may agree that there is no future for humans without Humanity as there is no future for sciences without Humanities.

At the center of the Raphael's *School of Athens*, we see Plato and Aristotle. The Professor is pointing up and the Pupil is outstretching the hand down, signifying that all the cosmos is equally significant as object of study for sciences and philosophy. After all, both spirit and matter are always matters of *human* concern.

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