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*Feyerabend, Rorty, Putnam: Relativism and
the Construction of Subjectivity*

1. Responsible subjectivity in Feyerabend

1.1. A crucial feature of Feyerabend's epistemological project, as set out in *Against Method* in 1975, is without doubt the concept of irrationality. The author holds this concept to be exempt from what he saw as »the paradox of modern irrationalism«¹.

This paradox lies in the fact that »its proponents silently identify rationalism with order and articulate speech and thus see themselves forced to promote stammering and absurdity«². This results in various forms of mysticism and existentialism, which reduce man »to a whining stream of consciousness«³ opening the doors to the Absurd, the Other. Let us make it clear that Feyerabend does not reject mysticism *tout-court*. Using arguments similar to those of Winch on magic in »Understanding a primitive Society«⁴ he deplores those forms of Western mysticism and existentialism which he considers to be an unjustifiable flight from reason, performed by those who share rationalism's conviction that the only possible rational discourse is the rationalist one. He believes he can offer us a different perspective, or rather a plurality of perspectives, within which rationalism is not absent but, so far from monopolising, and thus reducing to itself, the theme of rationality, is able to find a new place for itself in the historical-cultural context. Without feelings of guilt with respect to any particular methodology or culture, Feyerabend's irrationalism does not seek therefore an escape into the a-rational, it does not drown in the abysses of the Other, nor does it yield to the calls of a certain existentialism of the Self; put simply it remains open to the »otherwise«, to that which differs. This »otherwise«, as it takes shape, is not theorized; it does not, that is, become *a* philosophy of difference. He does not try to resolve the meaning of otherness into the formulas of some philosophical assertion, but rather moves towards an awareness of the ex-

¹ P. K. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, NLB, London, 1975, p. 218.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ P. Winch, »Understanding a primitive Society«, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, (1/1964).

istence of other forms of life different from our own and the necessity, consequent on this, of a methodological and gnosiological pluralism. Feyerabend does not believe that this problem concerns the scientific sphere alone. His project, let us not forget, has a twin purpose; on the one hand that of freeing science from the threatening and arrogant hold of the methodologists, who would sacrifice its originality and creativity on the altar of truth of some or other Method; on the other, that of freeing man from the hold of science itself, from its pervasive Titanism, its need for truth, by reminding him of the plurality of perspectives within which his humanity can express itself.

»A society that is based on a set of well-defined and restrictive rules so that being a man becomes synonymus with obeying these rules, forces the dissenter into a no-man's-land of no rules at all and thus robs him of his reason and his humanity.«⁵ Thus for Feyerabend irrationality is not so much the choice of the dissenter, who through the richness of his or her humanity challenges the rules imposed by the rationalist model, as the condition, the threat, the blackmail, the sentence which the rationalist model passes on those it calls irrational, the banishment of those who do not accept *its* rules to a territory with no rules at all. In the same way the Romans used the term »barbarian« for anybody outside the borders of its empire. What we have said is fundamental for an understanding of one of the crucial points that the critics have insisted on: *Anything goes!* In reality, at various points in *Erkenntnis für freie Menschen*⁶, the author had gone to some pains to make clear that »*Anything Goes*« did not constitute *the* »principle« of his new methodology, but rather, the way in which the traditional rationalists would probably describe his way of representing traditions, their interactions and their development.

He does not therefore defend the cause of irrationalism, except, as he said in *Against Method*, in the sense of an »undercover agent who plays the game of Reason in order to undercut the authority of Reason (Truth, Honesty, Justice, and so on)«⁷. Rational and irrational are merely two sides of the same rationalist coin that always asks us to play the same game of heads or tails; 'Either with me or against me'. Feyerabend holds that the game can be changed, but in order to do so, to be able to rise above this stifling dualism, one must be able to examine it from outside. Now, the outside to which Feyerabend refers is not the mystic or the rational's »Other«, but rather, as we said at the beginning, that which differs.

⁵ P. K. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

⁶ Cf. P. K. Feyerabend, *Erkenntnis für freie Menschen*, Suhramp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1980, Part I, cap., 6-7.

⁷ P. K. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

1.2. The possibility of placing oneself outside rationalist discourse does not constitute for the author the assertion of a principle, an abstract ideal. Anthropology and history provide us with numerous examples of rational alternatives to contemporary western rationalism, but to be able to make use of these one must be open to a *democratic relativism*. We should immediately make clear that for the author relativism is an alternative instrument of comprehension to rationalism and empiricism, as is logic, and not a truth capable of embracing the others thereby reducing them to itself. The existence of something *other than oneself*, than one's own culture, and the possibility of referring to this, does not make the choice banal, or detract from its dramatic quality. In the same way it does not render all possibilities equally valid, otherwise the difference would vanish into the eternally Equal, throwing Relativism into the dogma of the Ultimate Truth, forcing it into a paralyzing scepticism. His relativism, which, it is worth clarifying immediately, was to live through many seasons before being dropped, at least as a term, together with objectivism in that it had become a diversion, from the beginning displayed a number of features.

The relativism which he defended concerns *traditions* but also opinions, concepts and theories, inasmuch as these have a meaning only within a given tradition. The accusation of subjectivism, made explicitly or implicitly by authors who, like Putnam, have taken literally »*Anything goes*«, is therefore unjust. In fact Feyerabend, without actually ever declaring himself to be a follower of Wittgenstein always acknowledged the debt he owed to the great Austrian philosopher, who was noted for having maintained the impossibility of a private language. Furthermore, that other figure of great inspiration for Feyerabend's relativism, B. Lee Whorf, maintained the dependence of individuals on the grammar of the different cultures in which they express their ideas. Thus he stressed the necessity of comparison with other grammars and cultures in order to know the limits of one's own. No subjectivism then, not even in this case, and no solipsism either. It is however important to underline here how the Subject in Feyerabend does not disappear in his discourse, is not annihilated in a kind of grammatical or semantic determinism. The Subject in Feyerabend is active. It is down to him to articulate within himself the greatest number of languages with the aim of constructing not a secret code, which even he would not be able to master, like the solipsist which Wittgenstein talks of, but an individuality in which the experience of the world may be personalized.

On the other hand, pluralism does not mean placing all cultures on the same level of validity or truth. Otherwise the entire operation would be useless.

Feyerabend, in fact, did not intend to affirm that all traditions have the same value or that they are in any case equally true. What he sought to make clear was that the possibility of judging the various traditions originates from the comparison with other traditions since traditions, considered by themselves, are neither good nor bad.

Pluralism, relativism and irrationalism are simply the different terms applied by Feyerabend to the *freedom of choice*. On the freedom of choice, inherent in his democratic relativism, is founded the possibility itself of a *subjective responsibility*. He was in fact to ask himself, in his autobiography if it is possible to have a responsibility without choice. To construct or suggest alternatives to one's own system of values and truths represents an ethical (in that it is consciously chosen) way of living out one's own humanity, since »La responsabilità presuppone che si conoscano alternative, che si sappia come scegliere fra loro« (»responsibility presupposes that alternatives are known, [and] that one knows how to chose between them.«)⁸ The responsibility which the author speaks of evidently must not be confused with any kind of legal or ethical responsibility, in that these are imposed on us from without; by the laws, through the courts, and by ethics through cultural indoctrination. Subjective responsibility is the fruit of individual action, of the choice between different options. One is responsible to oneself and to others in that one's actions derive from a choice. As we can see, responsible action in this sense does not derive from ethics but creates it, so to speak, as the problem of the relations between responsible agents. Within a single tradition it is not possible to speak of true responsibility, but of *objectivity*. The participant will be held responsible in relation to the options that his or her tradition offers. The responsible subject allows the ethical certainties that he shares with the community to vacillate, and takes upon himself the dramatic nature of the choice. The freedom that the author thus refers to however, is certainly not Liberty: another hypostasis in the grey vista offered by the eternal truths. Freedom for Feyerabend is always something concrete, something which finds its expression and its limits in the comparison between different cultures and different moments of their history. In the same way, he does not aspire to any kind of primitivism, an improbable return to an idealized and therefore abstract nature, incapable of justifying the originality and the specificity inherent in being a person.

To be free therefore, does not mean an absence of rules, in that freedom is awareness in their use. To be able to act means to be free only insofar as one has this awareness and within this awareness one seeks the best

⁸ P. K. Feyerabend, *Ammazzando il tempo. Un'autobiografia*, Laterza, Bari, 1994, p. 198. (Our translation)

conditions for expressing oneself. An amoeba is not free in that it has no awareness of its own actions – if it did it would probably recoil in horror at the rigid rules which determine its behaviour in all situations. In the same way, Feyerabend recoils in horror at rationalist determinism. But in that case it is precisely conscious (aware) action which raises choice to the level of freedom and ushers in the ethical moment of responsibility. To be free means to be aware of the language that one adopts, of the culture that one expresses, of the aims which one desires to pursue. To do this it is initially necessary to step outside of one's own language, one's own culture, one's own ideology. That is to say, one must transform oneself from participant into observer. By this movement the subject introduces choice, and with it responsibility. Feyerabend's relativism, as we have already said, not only does not lead to scepticism but, consistent with his own critical development, he opposes it in that it constitutes an implicit refusal of one's freedom of choice. Feyerabend's relativism aspires to the construction of a subject whose autonomy is responsible action in the historico-cultural situation in which he actually expresses himself and achieves. In a certain way Feyerabend is proposing that we adopt the idea of a knowledge *in* questioning, a philosophy of doubt. Not the hyperbolic doubt of Descartes, who finds peace in the ultimate truth of the *cogito*, and which is at the origin of modern rationalism, but the Socratic dialogue, which is at the origin of ethics and which does not seek conclusions but wishes to be open; capable of infinite reformulation. This does not mean that it is inconclusive, but always, dramatically present. The dialogue we speak of is that which lies at the origin of philosophical *thinking*, peculiar to everyone who desires to know himself, rather than philosophical *thought*, by which is meant the historically determined result of the activity of a category of specialists.

2. Putnam: internalism and relativism

In *Reason Truth And History* Putnam had explicitly declared that he wanted to defend the internalist perspective, »because it is characteristic of this view to hold that *what objects does the world consist of?* is a question that it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description of the world«⁹. In citing this position the autore distinguishes it from relativism, with which some may try to associate it. The definition that follows makes it clear that the reference is not to just any kind of relativism but particularly to Feyerabend's.

⁹ H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 49.

»Internalism is not a facile relativism that says, 'Anything goes'«. He continues, »denying that it makes sense to ask whether our concepts 'match' something totally uncontaminated by conceptualization is one thing; but to hold that every conceptual system is therefore just as good as every other would be something else«¹⁰. Given what we attempted to clarify in the preceding paragraph regarding Feyerabend's irrationalism we feel it necessary to reject, as being completely beside the point, both the reference to the accommodating dimension of »*anything goes*« and the presumed absence of discrimination between the various conceptual systems. We would like however, to dwell a while longer on the difference between internalism and relativism in order to clarify the distinctive goals which the two authors pursue, thereby illuminating, perhaps, the crux of their polemic.

We may assume that Feyerabend would have subscribed to Putnam's declaration. That is, he would have considered it necessary to distinguish his own position from any and all forms of internalism.

In the notes to »Marxist Fairytales from Australia«, written in reply to J. Curthoys and W. Suchting, and published in *Inquiry* in 1977, he had maintained that the notion that we see reality in the terms of our own concepts amounts to a special case, citing various articles in which he had tackled the question. However, the most interesting aspect as far as our argument is concerned may be found a little further on in note 36, where the author argues the necessity, if one intends to examine traditions from the »inside«, of adopting the ideas and procedures utilized by those who participate in those traditions. Reconstructing their phenomenological world evidently means trying to see the world as they see it. This is not the same thing as supporting internalism, in that if they do not distinguish the real from the theoretical, then neither should we. Feyerabend distinguishes this kind of analysis from those he calls »symptomatic readings« which deal with external criteria¹¹.

For Putnam the task of internalism was to avoid the so-called *Eye of God* problem posed by Metaphysical Realism and Metaphysical Relativism. This is the conviction that one can supply an external vision (from which *externalism*) of reality. The passage cited, however, implicitly accuses internalism of wishing to provide a fully comprehensive reading of the problematic relationship that each culture establishes with reality, and in this sense, of recreating the *Eye of God* problem. However the most important thing that seems to emerge from this passage is that if in examining traditions from the in-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹¹ Cf. P. K. Feyerabend, »Marxist Fairytales from Australia«, *Inquiry*, vol. 20, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo (2-3, 1977), p. 396.

side we must take into account their vision of the world, then not only internalism, but also relativism can and must be valued on a case by case basis. This is not at all inconsistent, since for Feyerabend the disputes between realists and relativists, internalists and externalists, etcetera make firm sense solely within the specific context of Western culture. For other cultures or traditions these disputes might appear otiose or irrelevant.

What we have said should clarify a point which Putnam has often stressed, attributing to Feyerabend the point of greatest inconsistency of the relativist position:

»That (total) relativism is inconsistent is a truism among philosophers. After all, is it not obviously contradictory to hold a point of view while at the same time holding that no point of view is no more justified or right than any other?«¹² He then concludes »the important point to notice is that if all is relative, then the relative is relative too«¹³.

Before continuing it will be as well to underline that, as we have seen, even for the relativist Feyerabend relativism must itself be relative, but while for him the conclusion represents an element of consistency within his own position, for Putnam this conclusion constitutes the decisive element of inconsistency for the confutation of the validity of the relativist argument, whose acceptance would cause our very comprehension to vacillate. The crucial point is that the inconsistency to which Putnam refers is logical, while the consistency to which Feyerabend appeals is historico-anthropological.

Citing the polemic between »Protagoras and Plato Putnam says that »if every statement X means 'I think that X', then I should (on Protagoras' view) really say (1) I think that I think that snow is white. But the process of adding 'I think' can always be iterated! In Protagoras' view, the ultimate meaning of 'snow is white' is then not (1) but (2) I think that I think that I think that I... (with infinitely many I thinks') that snow is white. This Plato took to be a *reductio ad absurdum*.« But Plato's argument is faulty; indeed, »why should Protagoras not agree that his analysis applies to itself?«¹⁴ In reality it seems that neither of the interpretations adapt well to Feyerabend's relativism which, distinguishing between the participant's questions and those of the observer, holds that one has 'objectivity' when the participant in a tradition is not aware of it and thus does not mention it in his judgements.¹⁵ This position, also appears to be very close to the interpretation of Wittgensteinian anthropology provided by Bouveresse, for whom the need to interpret

¹² H. Putnam, *op cit.*, p. 119.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 120.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Cf. P. K. Feyerabend, *Erkenntnis für freie Menschen*, *op. cit.*, Parte, II, Cap. 3.

a language can exist solely for someone who (for an instant or permanently) finds himself outside it; this need can be satisfied and vanish only when one feels completely at one's ease in that language, when one has appropriated it, in short when one speaks it.¹⁶

In this case the participant will question himself simply on how to act in certain situations and using the term »snow« in the terms of his own culture he will simply think »snow is white«. The observer, whether he be the component of another culture or belong to a certain tradition, who, for some reason has placed himself in the 'no-man's land' spoken of earlier, will apply his own considerations to his own culture. However, his new condition will render him extraneous to his own tradition, and thus he will simply say 'I thought the snow was white'. The *reductio ad absurdum* can be avoided in that the sentence should be reformulated in these terms: (3) 'I think that you think (or that I thought) that the snow was white'.

Thus I can never be the object of my reflection while I think something as a component of a tradition or culture, in that to think as a participant in a tradition means to act, even in linguistic terms, as a participant in that tradition. The moment I withdraw from it I no longer think within that culture but about that culture.

In the same way, Feyerabend's position dodges Putnam's other attack: considering Plato's argument against relativism to be insufficient, he believes he can obtain greater enlightenment from Wittgenstein who extended it to the argument on private language. However, as has been often repeated, and contrary to what Putnam continues to assert¹⁷, Feyerabend does not consider the subjectivism of the methodological solipsist possible in the least. Feyerabend's relativism, as with irrationalism, is just as far from Realism as Relativism, in his eyes a sort of »Stammering Realism« intended to supply a different, but no less dogmatic, theory of Everything. Feyerabend's relativism is aware of being the expression of a culture and that its assertions may find no space in other cultures. *His relativism is not relative to itself, but to the Western culture of which it is an expression.* Perhaps for this reason as well he maintained in his autobiography that »obiettivismo e relativismo sono non solo insostenibili come filosofie, ma anche cattive guide per una collaborazione culturale fruttuosa« (»objectivism and relativism are not only unsustainable as philosophies, but also poor guides for a fruitful cultural collaboration«)¹⁸.

¹⁶ Cf. J. Bouveresse, »Wittgenstein antropologo«, in *Note sul »Ramo d'oro« di Frazer*, Adelphi, Milano, 1992, p. 73.

¹⁷ Cf. H. Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Cap. VII, 1990.

¹⁸ P. K. Feyerabend, *Ammazzando il tempo*, *op. cit.*, p. 171. (Our translation)

3. Rorty and ethnocentrism

In the work of Rorty, as in that of Feyerabend, one notes the need for an invented subjectivity, constructed via the redescription and redefinition of one's own vocabulary. There are, however, important differences.

At once symbol and creator of subjective redescription, for Rorty, is the *liberal ironist*: »I borrow my definition of 'liberal' from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use 'ironist' to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other beings may cease.«¹⁹

Despite probably not agreeing with the statement in which the liberal boasts a monopoly on disapproval of cruelty, Feyerabend would generally have acknowledged the necessity of acting against repression and murder, without giving credit to the ethnic justifications of tyrants and assassins²⁰. There is one point however, with which he would definitely not have agreed; Rorty's enthusiasm with respect to the intellectuals, about whom Feyerabend had written: »Si tratta di una comunità molto speciale, che scrive in un modo speciale, ha opinioni speciali e sembra considerare se stessa come unica rappresentante legittima della razza umana, il che in pratica significa solo altri intellettuali.« (»We are talking about a very special community, that writes in a special way, has special opinions and seems to consider itself as the sole legitimate representative of the human race, which in practice means just other intellectuals«)²¹.

This polemic should not be taken lightly, considering that in *Contingency, Irony, and solidarity*, the liberal ironist is frequently identified with the intellectual. Besides, Rorty was not unaware of the accusations of elitism that had been levelled at him also by other critics, and in the work cited he gives an answer, which however, is not particularly convincing. In fact, one has the impression that some highly generic statements are transformed into arguments in favour, while the conclusions end up by producing the opposite result, reinforcing the reader's conviction that for the author the role of the

¹⁹ R. Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. XV.

²⁰ Cf. P. K. Feyerabend, *Ammazzando il tempo*, op. cit., p. 171.

²¹ *Ibid.* p. 165. (Our translation)

intellectual as the guide of humanity, is not just ideal, but also utopian and thus to be hoped for: »We tend to assume that nominalism and historicism are the exclusive property of intellectuals, of high culture, and that the masses cannot be so blasé about their own final vocabularies. But remember that once upon a time atheism, too, was the exclusive property of intellectuals. In the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, although the nonintellectuals would not. The latter would, however, be commonsensically nominalist and historicist.«²²

It seems that the intellectual we are talking about here, who is not described further, should not be confused with those who perform activities commonly assumed to be »intellectual«, for example the professions. In fact, he seems to be linked to the intellect in a more intimate way, freed from bodily limitations, in a sort of heavenly dimension with respect to the everyday. For this reason he constitutes the reconnaissance of humanity, the one who has the task of paving the way of common sense. Thus considered, subjectivity and responsibility as possible choices become the exclusive prerogative of the intellectual class.

Up to a point this may be witnessed in the effective difficulty experienced by the many in the daily task of redescription of their individual vocabularies. This is because most people apprehend the *contingency* in the unsophisticated forms of their daily needs, the *irony* in the necessity of re-describing every day their own dreams with the relative vocabulary in order to adapt it to the political and economic necessities with which they come into contact. Of course, these forms of cruelty may be condemned by the liberal ironist, even though they are regularly practiced within the most efficient liberal Western cultures, in that they would prevent the subject from redscribing itself. However, anybody who participates, even against his will, in the real progression of history (*real* in this context meaning »the taste of bread«) tries, depending on a series of individual variables, to intervene in this reality redscribing it in any way he can (by changing job, stealing or becoming a prostitute, but also by forming associations, collecting signatures, demanding the intervention of the institutions, etcetera.). The description of oneself and that of the reality in which one operates are pieces of the same puzzle. This is not the case for the liberal ironist who, having tackled an eminently philosophical problem, that of the critique of the final vocabulary, holds that the goal to pursue to the bitter end is re-re-redescription: »For us ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-

²² R. Rorty, *op. cit.* p. 87.

redescription.«²³ However, a redescription designed exclusively to reiterate its own meaning in a further redescription ends up by betraying its own historicist and pragmatist aspects, in that it loses sight of the context in which the vocabulary should be used, and thus, its utility. Decontextualized and aestheticized, the vocabulary of the ironist risks falling into solipsism or at any rate a practice reserved for the initiated. The dignified detachment of the metaphysical philosophers, scorned by Rorty for being intent on chasing after the Truth, seems to re-emerge in his project of a »proliferating realization of Freedom«²⁴. Shut up, like Faust, in his library, intent on mysterious semantic alchemies, he does not hear the voices in the street announcing the feast. Absolutely indifferent to human events, he carries on a »dialogue« with the only interlocutors in which he is really interested: his books.

»Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original. Nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture – for persons and cultures are, for us, incarnated vocabularies. So our doubts about our own characters or our own cultures can be resolved or assuaged only by enlarging our acquaintance. The easiest way of doing that is to read books, and so ironists spend more of their time placing books than in placing real live people.«²⁵

Despite the allusion to comparison with other people and other cultures, the ironist does not consider himself a relativist. He is rather a supporter of ethnocentrism, for which reason there is nothing to say about truth and rationality, beyond the description of *our* culture, as he himself makes clear.²⁶

Rorty's ethnocentrism, the (ripe) fruit of his pragmatism, seems to the formulation we gave of Feyerabend's relativism. A relativism for which the validity of certain questions cannot be stated in absolute terms, but only relative to *our* culture.

However, in contrast with Rorty, for Feyerabend the pragmatist attitude makes it feasible to overcome ethnocentrism. This position is more or less explicitly maintained in *Science in a Free Society* where, using the metaphor of the »traveller«, the figure of the *participant pragmatist* is described.²⁷ This

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. XVI.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁶ Cf. J. Raichman, C. West (Eds), *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, Columbia University Press, New York 1985, p. 5.

²⁷ P. K. Feyerabend, *Erkenntnis für freie Menschen*, *op. cit.*, Part I, cap. 2.

kind of pragmatist considers the traditions in the same way as a traveller considers the places in which stays for a period of time. He evaluates its pros and cons, but is fundamentally prepared to question the certainties with which he began his journey, arriving at a point where he can modify his own »nature«, which he holds to be just another tradition. This type of difference, between the pragmatism of Rorty and that of Feyerabend, helps us to understand why Rorty is able to justly claim near identity with the internalism put forward by Putnam in *Reason, Truth, and History*.²⁸

In Rorty the idea of the traveller is absent, and with it the responsibility that each person has to use their own liberty to its limits, to the point of changing one's own nature. Subjectivity for Feyerabend however, is born of the crisis of those certainties of which the subject believes himself to be the bearer, and as such is fundamental to the creation of responsible subjectivity. The liberal ironist on the other hand, while supporting pluralism, stays behind the wall of certainties that separates him permanently from what, out of prejudice, he is not willing to become: a non-liberal. He (and the tradition he represents) is never that which is questioned; it is never his liberal Western nature that is at risk. Thus conceived, the dialogue which he proposes loses the charm of a journey, reducing itself to a sort of cultural tourism. Keeping the metaphor of the traveller, one could say that Rorty is prepared to leave for other destinations, but only as long as he has already reserved his return ticket. He may be compared to one of those tourists who, when faced with any monument and, more generally, anything expressing the tradition of the country where they are currently staying, continue to make comparisons with the constructions and glories of their own country. Of course, they may also try some of the local food, but compared to theirs...! Thus they end up by collecting the most ridiculous »souvenirs«, vulgar reminders of clumsy excursions to foreign lands.

Seen in this light the dialogue with other cultures, which actually has a substantial part in Rorty's philosophy, becomes, or at least risks becoming, all one way, reducing itself to wise discussions among the members of the intellectual circuit; sophisticated reciters, painstaking critics, original circumnavigators of meaning, ready to spot unsuspected references, and joyful quotations.

In sum, ethnocentrism has much that is consistent with internalism; both are indifferent to the point of view of participants in other traditions (unless these are willing to let themselves be colonized by their explanations), and therefore to the creation of a responsible subjectivity and free of ethnic prejudices.

²⁸ Cf. J. Raichman, C. West, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

A final consideration

The content of the individual *responsible subjectivity*, belonging as much to the level of one's account of oneself as to the relations with others, constitutes the unique and unrepeatable event *par excellence*. It can never be fully accounted for in an exposition that deals with subjectivity in general and for this reason it has never been the object of our discussion. As has been said already, our aim was exclusively to make use of the »ford« offered to the discussion on subjectivity by the work of Feyerabend. After all, it is in the nature of fords that they provide an uncomfortable and slippery crossing and tend with the passage of time to disappear, in such a way that each traveller will be obliged to find his own, as occasion demands.

Translated by George Metcalf

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