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Giampiero Comolli

Alessandro Dal Lago

Maurizio Ferraris

Francesco Leonetti

Pier Aldo Rovatti

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# **Prometheus, Hermes, And Other Voices**

**Giampiero Comolli, Alessandro Dal Lago,  
Maurizio Ferraris, Francesco Leonetti,  
Pier Aldo Rovatti**

Excerpted from a roundtable discussion held in Milan in 1987 upon publication of *Prometeo e Hermes. Colpa e origine nell'immaginario tardo-moderno* by Carlo Formenti. Napoli: Liguori editore, 1987

## **Abstract**

The essay has two parts: the first deals mainly with epistemological themes, the second with theoretical-political subjects.

In the first chapter the author sketches the general outlines of the book, which can be linked to a project of radicalization of the metaphor of weak thought. This involves "taking the metaphor literally," in the sense that the modern subject should not limit itself to recounting its own decline, but should agree to step aside, to leave the floor to images. Nevertheless, this is not an invitation to abandon the way of the *logos*, of modern discursive and instrumental reason, to embark on the road of the ineffable, of mysticism, and of contemplation, but rather to grasp the ambiguity of the process of secularization, to discover how this is preparing the return of ancient mythical figures: Prometheus and Hermes.

The themes of the second chapter, which delineates the characteristics of the new Prometheus, are the Marxian category of second nature, revisited from an historical point of view as an artificial environment that shirks human understanding and the human

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*[Translated from the Italian by Michael Rocke]*

project; and the paradox of a productive subject that, while it disposes of modern technological powers, is forced to pay, to a greater extent than in any other epoch, the symbolic debt of original sin, that human gesture took possession of Nature.

The Promethean utopia of reconciliation with a Nature that has been completely absorbed by human sociability appears disarmed before the late-modern evolution of science and technology. We are in the era of Hermes, which the author describes in the third chapter, beginning with several key concepts elaborated by scientists and philosophers such as Prigogine, Thom, Serres, and Bateson. Hermes is the golden boy who teaches us to seize occasions in a world in which disorder and fortuitousness are increasing. He represents the knowledge of the premises, of circumstance, of the uncertain, he is the power of the "micro."

The second part, divided into two chapters, follows the road that leads from Prometheus to Hermes, viewed as a transformation of the modes of political rationality: from the "tragic" rigor of the opposition friend/enemy to the ambiguity of the systemic conception of politics, which seems able to overcome the antagonistic form of conflicts. In the first chapter the author develops a critique of Rene Girard's anthropological theories: the persistence of the sacred, associated with the decline of its structural apparatus (secularization), is the element that constitutes a reflection on modern political violence. The last chapter—which makes reference to the labor theories of the 1970s, the systemic cybernetic functionalism of Luhmann, and the culture of the "greens"—traces a path for an adequate distancing from the "sacrificial" results of the revolutionary project.

*Pier Aldo Rovatti:* Formenti's book has the ability to record, to sensitize, a number of theoretical events that have occurred in the last ten or fifteen years. This certainly describes the book, but in itself it is insufficient. If the book is a sort of sensory organ for what has happened in theory, or in a part of theory, it also intends to advance a point of view, a project of reflection: a modification, we might call it, of the usual way of thinking. In the main, I agree with this proposal.

A critique can begin to grow out of the means and the consequences we can derive from this modification. I found a sort of double movement in the book towards which we might orient the discussion. On one hand, and I think this is the sense of the reference, however cautious, to "weak thought," there is a loosening and a distancing—a movement away from violence, from forms of theory that involve violent elements, in short, a "relaxation of antagonism." There is also a taking of distance from these forms: the dual concept of the title, Prometheus and Hermes, can also be read in this light. Loosening/distancing from the violent elements represented by unity, by the *omnia in unum* (in Serres' sense in *Rome*).

Along with this movement, however, we also find the necessity of "remythicization": the positive suggestion of a reemergence of the sacred, in a critical relation compared to the usual debates on secularization.



To me, in short, the marriage of these two movements seems difficult: the loosening, with its suitable images, and the reemergence of the sacred, which evidently implies that something unknown will appear on the scene, something which is extraneous to us, invisible, and which thus perhaps cannot be assumed directly within an image or within the imaginary.

When in the book, for example, it is assumed that theory can fluctuate in accord with the fluctuations of the physical world, we find a sort of identification between modes of thinking about reality and modes of being in reality. But if that's the case, I don't see how the element of the "sacred" can intervene in this hypothesis of identification. Either it must be rethought in another way, or it constitutes a real contradiction.

*Giampiero Comolli:* One of the merits of Formenti's book is to show how we are faced today with the persistence of a mythical universe. The secularization of the post-modern, or better, late-modern world, is not pure and linear. Rather it gives rise to the labyrinthine emergence of myths, images, figures, the presence of sacrality. Secularization, therefore, as a form of remythicization: in the social field, in the field of knowledge, and in the sciences, we are witnessing the birth of new mythical figures. Prometheus and Hermes are among us once more.

It seems to me that Formenti's book helps us understand how this manifestation of myths, of images, also involves an alteration of the status of their reality [*statuto di realtà*]. These images cannot be taken as pure and simple images. From the first page of the book, when he speaks about the metaphor of "weak thought," Formenti tells us it is necessary to take the metaphor not allegorically, but "literally." Now it seems to me this proposal regards not only weak thought. It is late-modern myth in its entirety that has acquired a different form of reality, becoming, let's say, more real. Figures, metaphors, images are not—or are no longer only—signs of language, signifiers that stand for an absent reality; they no longer belong to the universe of communication, but instead enter the universe of the symbol. And the symbol is understood here in the sense of putting together, recomposing fragments of separate realities. It therefore no longer appears as a significant term, but rather as a form of being, of reality.

Accepting this meaning of the symbol, one can go so far today as to say that an analogy exists between consciousness and being: the structures of thought are revealed to be homologous to those

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of reality. Hermes is not an invention of our imagination, but "exists," in the sense that reality today assumes, or can assume, among others, also the form of Hermes. And therefore, in order to know and to act in reality, we must know how to think like Hermes, to be Hermes. Like Hermes, Formenti's book also wants to be messenger and "psyco-pomp": the guide of souls towards the host of late-modern images.

I think, however, that in order to be able to find one's way among such a multitude without getting lost in the labyrinth of images, one also needs to know how to distinguish them, to recognize their differences, and it is with regard to this differentiation that the road traced by Formenti still seems imprecise, uncertain. Let me give an example. Formenti speaks about the need to reduce the antagonism based on the opposition friend/enemy. This opposition derives from the persistence of the necessity of sacrifice, on which sacrality is based. The persistence of sacrifice informs us that secularization has not allowed us to escape sacrality. Remythicization, seen by Formenti as a positive phenomenon, goes along with resacralization (the necessity of "enemies" and of their sacrifice), from which Formenti wants to distance himself. Here then there's a problem, which regards precisely the reality status of images. The opposition friend/enemy collapses to the extent that one myth is born of another. The "other" is sacrificed since he no longer appears to be a man, but rather a human subspecies, a near-animal, a "not-man, but only enemy." But the moment I consider the other, literally, as a harmful animal, I am justified in killing, in making a sacrifice. In sacrifice, therefore, we also have an employment of literal metaphors. And the persistence of the sacred, the diffusion of new forms of sacrifice, derives from the fact that images are sacrificed by taking them literally. These sacrificed images are represented as realities that cast a spell over the subject, that overcome it and destroy it. In the opposition friend/enemy, the subject is overwhelmed by an image that appears to be real. It might be necessary here to introduce the notion of "fantasma," a form of presentation of a "para-real" image that coincides neither with the image of the metaphor nor with that of the symbol.

For, to conclude quickly, I also believe that between metaphor and symbol there cannot be one and the same reality status [*statuto di realtà*]. If the symbol is real and it places us in a homology between being and knowing, the fact remains that being does not coincide with knowing (except in "extreme" philosophies, like



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Zen, which would put us on another, still more distant road). Therefore, one can't simply or with impunity leave the universe of the sign to "symbolize oneself" in the real. Even in a symbolic means of recomposition within the real, the metaphor always remains sign, distinct in its turn from "fantasma."

To enter into the late-modern mythic universe it seems necessary, therefore, to distinguish between the different forms of images and myths that we meet. But how do we distinguish them? Distinguishing, in fact, is essentially a conceptual, abstract, and anti-mythical operation, a form of thought that forces us to leave just that world of images into which we want to or must enter. The way of distinguishing, and the form of conceptualization, therefore, must also change. But how? By employing images within concepts, Formenti tells us. So one can no longer distinguish between concepts and images. In this way the philosophy of difference (on which the Western *logos* is based) would end up caught in an unending spiral between image and concept (where the "between" would no longer be a difference but the constant annulment of difference). Formenti's book makes us reflect on the enigma of this mythic spiral.

*Francesco Leonetti*: I feel you two have very keenly investigated several points: the sacred, metaphor, myths. I would like to insist on these, but above all through a more general examination of the problem the book presents, in my opinion.

I believe the book utilizes, or wants to use, or wants to make use of, anthropological time, in the current absence of an historical project. It does this, of course, by showing the protracted incidence of the imaginary; but I would say that it feels the effects of this absence, this void so strongly that it calls into play several rather unexpected elements in theoretical discourse.

On the other hand, it seems that the book displays that point of view we are all familiar with—a traditional one in leftist criticism, and especially in critical Marxism, where in criticizing competing theorists one also uses them, or alternatively one tries to connect as much as possible and relate to one's own position that which theorists on the other side of the fence have advanced. These constant comparisons operate throughout the book and display a very precise and important review survey. This is true, for example, also with regard to Girard, from whom comes the most plausible influence, on the sacred. But it seems to me that even Girard's influence is not exhaustive. Formenti has produced a book that's

very sophisticated, challenging, intricate, and one wonders just how conscious he is of this, or whether he's a little bit sorcerer's apprentice, nothing bad intended, we all are a little. . . .

One notices that, as in Girard's case—not to speak of the critiques of excellent theoretical texts like Luhmann's and Bateson's and Serres', or perhaps of more remote works like Kerényi's, or questionable works, like Capra's—there's always a desire to criticize and at the same time to thoroughly examine current positions; since today the discourse of the theoretical left of the past no longer has any certainties, any foundations. One continues to do it purely as hypothesis, as the prolongation of a choice which today is impossible for all of us: linking theoretical arguments of different extraction to one of our basic materialistic positions which has kept its same constants, while really this position itself is at stake and demands a return to theoretical materialism on the essential points. Formenti draws out and augments the stakes.

Well, what happens then? As I see it, in the most interesting part of the book, Formenti postulates a certain relationship between *two moments of order and disorder*. Order isn't something at whose margins disorder exists—patrolled by a new science or a new philosophy of science—and there isn't even a basic disorder, as there in fact is in the new sciences, on top of which human mental representation establishes laws and reasons. For Formenti, however, there are two components that, though not in a dialectic relationship, are nevertheless fundamental. He presents these as "diurnal and nocturnal," and he pursues them in various ways, always with a certain instability since in effect the book isn't monolithic or developed in an explicit fashion. In my opinion, then, there's a sort of *dualism*, and this creates the need to offer alternatives, by showing that everything is determined but that, in effect, within this fixity there is no stability. This is a common philosophical-scientific assumption, but in Formenti's discourse it still manages to have a philosophical-political force. This is a possible reading that emerges every so often from the book, but at other times it gets tangled up in the direct debate with the texts it examines.

*Maurizio Ferraris*: I would like to emphasize three points related to the first part of the book, the epistemological-philosophical part, that appear to be of great importance for what we could define as the link between Hermes and hermeneutics.

The first is very general, and is partly connected to what Leonetti has already said. *Prometheus and Hermes* examines the



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transition *from* Prometheus *to* Hermes, which is like saying from tragedy to interpretation. Now Leonetti is right when he says that the way this transition is treated in the book is mainly anthropological, and at bottom doesn't sufficiently take into account the philosophy of history and of theology implicit in this transition. In short, the question is dodged: Why, with what motives, and pursuing what ends, did there occur this historical passage from a Promethean epoch to a hermeneutic one (with all the possible modulations in the Prometheus/Hermes alternation, starting with modern/post-modern)?

The second point is closely related to the first. The fact that the transition from Prometheus to Hermes is not sufficiently considered as an historical progression implies a limited mediation between the two, as if Hermes were the simple antithesis of Prometheus, and not rather his *Aufhebung*, so to speak, that which at the same time surpasses and preserves in itself what came before, Prometheus. In this way the transition to interpretation doesn't purely and simply exclude tragedy; rather, it assumes it and at the same time reelaborates it like its own opposite foundation. In short, it appears that the Prometheus/Hermes polarity, which is treated with great clarity and persuasiveness, is expressed in excessively dualistic terms.

Alongside this dualism, and this is the third and last point, it seems to me a certain positivistic aura still needs to be emphasized. In Formenti's discourse, epistemological transformations constitute both the point of departure and the last instance that governs an analysis that involves the anthropological study of collective imagination. Now why must science have this role as the instance of last appeal? Where does it get such authority, in comparison, say, with philosophy, with art, or with history? These considerations obviously do not point to a single shortcoming in Formenti's analyses, but rather to a comprehensive system within which these analyses are inscribed (I'm thinking especially of Serres and Thom), and in which one recognizes this quality, in my view positivistic, of the epistemological moment.

*Alessandro Dal Lago:* I will limit myself to a few considerations on the relationship sacred/secularization, which in my opinion is one of the central aspects of the book. First, I agree with the outline traced by Formenti: from the tragic foundation, which Formenti reconstructs through Girard, to the fact that the sacred, as it becomes inflated, circulates, becomes currency and then dissolves.



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This is the problem that returns in the book's conclusion. This is the theme of secularization, which needs to be seen together with the production of images as characteristic of the new knowledge (a knowledge that is not imaginary but the creator of images, which seems to replace classical rationality) and therefore characteristic of a presumed re-mythicization.

Now without getting into Maurizio Ferraris's comments on history of philosophy, I think the theme of secularization poses important interpretive problems. We're used to thinking of secularization as a sort of drying up of the sources of the sacred, while instead it appears to be a dispersion, a disintegration of the religious factor in modern life. I think that the notion of secularization, not only in philosophic terms but also in the experience of daily life, is more complex, and that it excludes a radical dualism such as sacrality/rationalization. Secularization takes on an ambiguous form. In the first place, it is the decline of religious authority, the end of the Church's grip on the formation of the imaginary and of experience. In the second place, this loosening involves a rebirth of religious experience. If we look at recent empirical studies on this theme, for example Garelli's, we find that secularization (the Church's loss of influence) produces phenomena such as the growth of fundamentalist groups, or the return to fashion of archaic, Eastern, or magical religious practices. The two things go together. It's difficult to say whether the rebirth of fundamentalism is a revival of the religious or an echo of the disintegration of religious culture.

This problem, which we could call the post-modernity of beliefs, runs parallel to another distinction posed by Formenti's book, that is, the breakdown of the friend/enemy relationship. To the extent to which the friend/enemy opposition is generalized, as Formenti shows, in the whole social world, in all areas of experience, it gets inflated and collapses. Antagonisms are substituted by fragmentation, nonconflictual pluralism.

I would like therefore to pose a question to the book's author, to conclude this first comment. If this is the evolution that Formenti reconstructs (and correctly, I might add), then why do the categories he uses come above all from scientific discourse? How does he legitimize the privilege ascribed to scientific discourse, even if it is the critical version of the new rationality, a version that renounces positivism, as Ferraris has already said? Why privilege scientific over other forms of discourse, literary discourse for example, or certain aspects of contemporary philosophy, which address this situation of ambiguity in an equally radical way? After

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all, at the end of the book even the author finds a way out through a type of thinking that is nonscientific: Eastern Philosophy.

*Francesco Leonetti:* It seems to me that many themes have been sufficiently and well discussed in this first round. Formenti has of course only begun to develop the arguments of his discourse, which he will continue to explain in future works.

I would simply like to make an observation directed both to Ferraris, who spoke about positivism, and also to Dal Lago, who asked explicitly why the theoretic-scientific discourse prevails over the philosophic one.

Ferraris should really specify what he means. We all know that positivism means reference to the fact, but after positivism, in the theoretical-scientific field, there's neo-positivism, which deals with linguistics rather than with facts, with a very marked displacement; and then there's post-positivism, which is characterized by the assertion that there is no sure experimental verification. In this sense, then, I find it interesting—which is not to say successful or settled, but interesting—that the movement of the relationship between the two fields (scientific and philosophical) that exists in Formenti's book, always refers to the neo-positivists or even to the post-positivists.

*Alessandro Dal Lago:* And in reference to the question I posed?

*Francesco Leonetti:* It remains open. With the clarification, however, that you pose a contradiction, whereas it seems to me that, precisely because we're no longer talking about positivism but, if anything, about post-positivism, the movement between the two camps is useful, and interesting, Formenti's book being a case in point.

*Pier Aldo Rovatti:* I have the impression that Carlo Formenti is moving in the direction of a physical-politics. The assertion of a physical-politics involves, however, an adherence to a philosophy, and this philosophy must be capable of mirroring this physical-politics. In my view, this direction clashes with the existence of a philosophy which instead recognizes the crisis of the idea of truth, and poses problems of distancing, of removal, of metaphor, of image, etc.

*Alessandro Dal Lago:* I wanted to emphasize that, as is pointed out in Formenti's book, one of the most interesting aspects of the new



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philosophy of science is that scientific discourse is no longer protected by an epistemological-rhetorical wall, as it was in classical positivism and in neo-positivism. It is well known that positivism is not so much a form of knowledge based on empirical understanding (one thinks of the human and social sciences at the end of the nineteenth century), but is rather a rhetoric of empirical knowledge. Formenti rightly emphasizes the anthropological background of scientific discourse, taking the origins of knowledge back to what I call the "tragic model," and therefore to a founding sacrificial act. This analysis seems completely acceptable. But a problem arises. When the positivistic wall crumbles, reflection on science is "de-positivized" (as in the authors cited by Formenti, Prigogine and others, who refer to Valéry, Bergson, etc.). Shouldn't the hermeneutical field of discourse on rationality then be broadened to include literature, poetry, narrative, as has already occurred in other sectors of contemporary philosophy (I'm thinking of Ricoeur)?

*Maurizio Ferraris:* I also want to clarify briefly something referred to by Leonetti, who rightly pointed out the obscure and imprecise points in my comment. I agree, there isn't a single positivism, but many different modulations of the same idea; Serres' positivism is different, of course, from that of Carnap or of Comte. More precisely, Serres' positivism does not consist of imposing everywhere and indiscriminately a cult of facts and of verifiability, but rather of attempting an alliance between natural science and science of the spirit, oriented mainly towards the former.

*Pier Aldo Rovatti:* In any case the fact remains that there is an important difference between the idea of science that Heidegger had and the idea of science that we might have. The problem is, what sorts of questions do we bring to bear on the new forms of knowledge? If anything it's philosophy that appears to be behind on this question and to use old models of thinking, expecting truths from science, when instead we should probably ask science for images and sketches of the imaginary that might not confirm the identification between the technique and the metaphysics of the subject.

*Alessandro Dal Lago:* It's true that philosophy, from a certain viewpoint, is incapable of confronting the new scientific subjects. After all, the critique of positivistic metaphysics already existed in the time of Whitehead and Bergson, who insist on the dynamic charac-

ter of scientific knowledge. But when Heidegger, for example, reflects on science, basing himself curiously enough on Heisenberg and consequently on his age's most advanced reflections on contemporary science, he presents an image of scientific knowledge that is somehow totalitarian, authoritarian, which the new reflections call into question. Here a problem arises: either Heidegger's criticism reveals, despite everything, a metaphysical bias (a unitary and nonproblematical image of science), or the new knowledge, which is at the center of Formenti's book, achieves a new form of authority that today is more difficult to characterize.

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