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## **Postmodernism is Old, Let Us Go Further: a pamphlet against deconstructionism, constructivism relativism and methodological anarchism**

This paper means to be a collective and intercultural *pamphlet* against the postmodern approach to knowledge. However, our criticism – mainly directed at deconstructionism, constructivism, relativism and methodological anarchism – is not grounded in old positivistic philosophy. We are young scholars and students whose teachers were mainly postmodernists, therefore we accept some of their ideas, but we also feel it necessary to stress the many limits of this approach and its inadequacy to respond to the challenges of the present day. From our perspective, postmodernism is not a *new approach* that must be simply studied, but an old one that needs to be surpassed. One of the merits of postmodernism is that it showed that positivism was too dogmatic and optimistic with regards to the progress of knowledge and civilization. However, in responding to positivism, postmodernism has gone too far in producing skepticism and pessimism. In addition, postmodernism is paradoxical when rejecting the categories of truth and progress, while still considering itself to be an approach better than positivism. Up to now the argument used to defend its preferability was its novelty. But an idea that is forty years old and was already anticipated at the beginning of the twentieth century<sup>1</sup> cannot be treated as new.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Kuhn – the first to challenge traditional epistemology – published his masterpiece *The structure of scientific revolutions* in 1962 (University of Chicago Press, Chicago); Jacques Derrida – the father of deconstructionism – published his three major works in 1967 and the translations in English appeared a few years later (*Speech and Phenomena*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL, 1973; *Of Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1976;

For all of these reasons this paper should be seen as one of the first examples of post-postmodern thought.

**Positivism against postmodernism: tertium non datur?** Postmodernism is a polymorphic cultural movement that contains in itself many different approaches. The form that postmodernism takes inside the philosophy of science is methodological anarchism, an explicitly antiscience doctrine formulated and defended by Paul Feyerabend. In general philosophy, it is worth mentioning the work of Jean-François Lyotard, Richard Rorty, and Gianni Vattimo. In literary criticism, postmodernism takes mainly the form of Derrida's deconstructionism. We also find postmodern approaches to art, economics, geography, psychology, and many other disciplines, but it is in the sociology of science that postmodernism has become totally dominant, in the form of constructivism or relativism. It is currently dominant to such a degree that today it is hard to find a non-postmodern sociologist of science. Here is a list of some of the postmodern practitioners of this discipline: Harry Collins, David Travis, Trevor Pinch, David Bloor, Barry Barnes, Steven Shapin, Donald MacKenzie, Bill Harvey, Andy Pickering, Roger Krohn, Richard Whitley, Karin Knorr-Cetina, Mulkay, Nigel Gilbert, Steve Woolgar, and Bruno Latour<sup>2</sup>.

To say what all of these approaches have in common is not easy task, but it is worth trying. According to us, most of the scholars who qualify as postmodernists in literature, philosophy, and the social sciences share the following features:

- Claim to novelty. They present their ideas as revolutionary or radically new, and they assume that new and fashionable ideas are preferable to old and unfashionable ones.
- Tendency toward pessimism. They qualify as modern or positivistic the approaches that precede them and consider them to be mistakes of the past.

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*Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1978); Paul Feyerabend – the father of methodological anarchism – published *Against method* in 1975 (Humanities Press) and *Science in a Free Society* in 1978 (New Left Books, London 1978); *Les mots et les choses: une archeologie des sciences humaines* by Michel Foucault appeared in 1966 (Gallimard, Paris); *Anti-Oedipe* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Editions de Minuit, Paris) was published in 1972; the manifesto of constructivism, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* by Ludwik Fleck was first published in German in 1935 and then translated into English in 1979 (Chicago University Press); the paper “Scientific Ethos: a Deviant Viewpoint” by Barnes and Dolby – one of the first contributions to postmodern sociology of science – appears in 1970 in the “European Journal of Sociology”, vol. 11. The name for the movement was invented by Jean-François Lyotard in 1979 (see *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, Editions de Minuit, Paris), but Lyotard himself specified that postmodernity began at the end of the Second World War.

<sup>2</sup> We do not find ourselves in a position to furnish a detailed bibliography of all the quoted scholars. We are confident that the reader will be able to find by him/herself further information about these authors and their writings.

This is mainly because, in their eyes, positivism showed too much faith in human reason, science, and technology. This optimism is seen as a mistake because it was then betrayed by history (in the form of World Wars, totalitarianism, the Holocaust, nuclear threat, pollution, poverty in the third world, etc.).

— Ambiguous skepticism. They refuse the category of truth and they make all possible effort not to use this concept-and-term in their writings. They nonetheless criticize other works and believe their own to be preferable to those produced by their critics. They also deny the category of cognitive progress, and likewise take pains not to use it in their writings. However, they seem to believe that the paradigm-shift from positivism to postmodernism was a good thing.

— Anti-scientific attitude. They believe that human reason, and especially western-type rationality (which finds expression mainly in science and technology), is harmful to humankind and that it is one of the major causes of problems in modern societies. Indeed, they generally accuse positivism of having privileged mathematics, engineering and the natural sciences, while having undervalued art, humanities and the social sciences. In response they do the opposite.

In brief, postmodernism equals supposed novelty, skepticism, pessimism, and antisience (plus a certain degree of logical incoherence). We are perfectly aware that characterizing in such a synthetic way a movement formed by hundreds of thinkers with their own specific ideas and personalities could be interpreted as an oversimplification, but it was hard to avoid this inconvenience in the space of such a short paper. However, even in longer writings, postmodernists did not take the trouble to distinguish between rationalists, positivists, logical positivists, neorationalists, analytic philosophers, critical rationalists and other types of modern thinkers, simply labeling them positivists. As post-postmodernists, we feel legitimated in doing the same. But why do we stress the fact that our criticism comes from a post-postmodern perspective? That is because we do not simply prefer tradition to novelty, dogmatism to skepticism, optimism to pessimism, natural sciences to humanities, as positivists would do. Our position is indeed an attempt at finding a third road, one alternative to those tread by positivism and postmodernism. Let us now present in detail our criticism of the above-mentioned aspects of the postmodern approach.

**Claim to novelty.** Why does the problem of novelty become of vital importance when speaking of postmodernism? Postmodernists affirm that ideas are neither true nor false, in a universal sense, but only “trendy” or “non-trendy”. To be sure, postmodernists are ambiguous concerning relativism: at times they appear

to accept it in order to stress their novelty in contrast to the modern perspective, but since relativism is self-refuting from a logical point of view and produces nihilism from a moral point of view, postmodernists distance themselves from it — when it is convenient — by using the now classic argument “but I never said that...”<sup>3</sup> If they never said that, that is, if they reject relativism, where then is the novelty of this approach? Relativism is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it is necessary in order to show originality, but on the other hand, the moral and cognitive criticism of consistent relativists is reduced to a matter of taste. Such criticism is meaningful only if one refers to universal values. If postmodernism does not fully embrace cognitive and moral relativism, then it does not exist — not, at least, as a *new* perspective. The postmodernists would still fall in the wake of the modern tradition, and due to their ambiguity and lack of clarity, they would be deemed of less value than modern thinkers. We do not evaluate postmodern thinkers more negatively than modern ones, as we interpret them to be radical relativists (and no consistent postmodern should complain about this interpretation because, after all, as Derrida said, all interpretations are equally good or bad and the intention of the author is not that important...). But if all ideas are equally right or wrong, correct or incorrect, and this applies also to relativism, why then should someone choose relativism? One of the typical answers to this question is that postmodernism is preferable to positivism, because it is consistent with the last change of paradigm, that is, because it is new and fashionable. As post-postmodernists, we are ready to accept this argument, but we must also stress that *now* postmodernism is anything but new. It *was* new. How can a doctrine forty years old be new or trendy? Postmodernism has its roots in the Counterculture and in the “Flower Power” age. We have already entered the post-postmodern era. Thus the ideas of the postmodernists, though interesting, are no longer adequately fit the current social situation.

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<sup>3</sup> Consider the following situation. Critical rationalists *à la* Popper assumed that a) the world exists; b) but we do not have an easy and direct access to the truth; and, consequently, c) we try to understand it by selecting the best theory among a number of competing ones, by means of open and critical discussion. After having rejected rationalism in the name of relativism, and having understood that relativism is self-refuting, some constructivists came to this surprising conclusion: “Epistemic relativism is not committed to the idea that there is no material world, or that all knowledge claims are equally good or bad, or to the idea that meter readings can be made to our liking. It is only committed to the idea that what we make of physical resistance and of meter signals is itself grounded in human assumptions and selections which appear to be specific to a particular historical place and time. This neither precludes development over time, nor does it require one to subscribe to conceptions of incommensurable world views...” (K. D. Knorr-Cetina, *The Constructivist Programme in the Sociology of Science: Retreats or Advances?*, Social Studies of Science, vol. 12, 1982, p. 321). Should we understand that epistemic relativism is just another name for critical rationalism?

Someone may object: but who decided that we entered the post-postmodern era? We may answer by saying that a passive acceptance of relativism made sense in the Cold War era, when humankind was separated into at least three independent worlds, but it does not make sense in a globalized and interdependent world, where the problem of one is the problem of all. Lyotard often referred to nation-states and governments, but *today*, pollution, terrorism and information know no borders. In the post-postmodern condition one can feel the growing need for common values — that is, human values — to face new social problems.

We could also mention the fact that the new generations are not as paranoid about computerization as was Lyotard. In 1979 it was hard to predict that the Internet would come to strengthen *individuals*, and not only multi-national corporations, as producers and consumers of ideas. This has, however, taken place, and information technology is now seen, especially by young people, as a factor of liberation, and not of oppression as in Orwell's 1984 scenario. It is not by chance that in Italian slang, all words connected with hi-tech now have very positive connotations. A "cyborg" is a "cool person", and "replicant" means "superior to human miseries". If you want to praise someone or something you say *plastiko*, *kosmiko*, *iper-tekniko*, *cyber*, *cibernetiko*, *robotizzato*, *mekkanizzato*. If you want to offend someone you say "flower power" which means "definitively out of fashion"; and *dulcis in fundo* "post-post" denotes something hard to define but surely very very trendy<sup>4</sup>.

But we have a better argument than these, that is, a postmodern one. Who decided that in 1945 modernity has finished and postmodernity had begun? Postmodernists — and without asking the permission to the modernists. To put into practice what we learned from our teachers, we freely assert that post-postmodernity starts from the day of the publication of this article.

**Tendency toward pessimism.** Postmodern philosophy has produced a quite pessimistic view of reality: humans — prisoners of the conceptual apparatus implanted in their minds by such superhuman entities as their Community, Society, or Historical Age — are hopelessly condemned to live in a world that they will never understand. Every human is supposed to be incapable of understanding him/herself, incapable of understanding his/her own society, incapable of communicating and dealing with humans belonging to other societies or having different worldviews, incapable of understanding the natural world, incapable of using technical knowledge for ethically acceptable purposes, and incapable of grasping the truth and meaning of existence. "Impossibility"

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<sup>4</sup> See G. R. Manzoni, *Peso Vero Sclero: Dizionario del linguaggio giovanile di fine millennio*, Est, Milano 1997.

can be seen as one of the key words of postmodernism. The forms of knowledge that have given some hope to humanity — philosophy, religion, science, and technology — are under the threat of this current of thought and risk being reduced to ruins. Are we exaggerating? This is not simply the image of postmodernism that a few scholars and students have acquired inside the world of universities. Pope John Paul II has decided to write an encyclical denouncing the dangers of postmodernism<sup>5</sup>, indicating that postmodern philosophy has also gained this same reputation outside academia. We may be believers or non-believers, this is not the matter here. With this quotation, we simply aim to show that defending or criticizing postmodernism is not just an innocent intellectual game inside academia. As is well known, the Church has learned through mistakes (e.g., the Galileo affair) to be very cautious when interfering with philosophical and scientific research. Thus, if the Church now moves, it does not do so rashly.

However, we leave to religious people the task of defending faith, and we focus our attention on the two most explicitly outraged forms of knowledge: science and technology. First of all, science and technology are understood all too often to be as one, and when rarely the difference is recognized, science is seen as the servant of technology. It is true, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that humans have clearly understood the connection between abstract knowledge and action, and so created a virtuous circle between science and technology. But the two activities remain in principle different. The theory of relativity was not formulated with the intention of bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Moreover, the theory was proved by means of small-scale experiments long before its military applications were discovered. This is to say that science is not and does not have to be necessarily produced in view of applications.

Lyotard<sup>6</sup> points out that science, and the logic it necessarily entails, speaks a “denotative” language. In other words, it aims to describe objective reality, but, contrarily to narrative forms of knowledge (e.g., myths), does not serve as

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<sup>5</sup> John Paul II writes (*Fides et ratio*, section 91): “[T]he currents of thought which claim to be postmodern merit appropriate attention. According to some of them, the time of certainties is irrevocably past, and the human being must now learn to live in a horizon of total absence of meaning, where everything is provisional and ephemeral. [...] This nihilism has been justified in a sense by the terrible experience of evil which has marked our age. Such a dramatic experience has ensured the collapse of rationalist optimism, which viewed history as the triumphant progress of reason, the source of all happiness and freedom; and now, at the end of this century, one of our greatest threats is the temptation to despair”. And he adds (section 56): “In brief, there are signs of a widespread distrust of universal and absolute statements, especially among those who think that truth is born of consensus and not a consonance between intellect and objective reality. [...] I cannot but encourage philosophers — be they Christian or not — to trust in the power of human reason and not to set themselves goals that are too modest in their philosophizing”.

<sup>6</sup> See F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, Editions de Minuit, Paris 1979, passim.

a normative guide to humans. As such, it is outside the realm of other very real and very true elements of human existence, such as love, hate, questions of morality, man's search for meaning, etc. Lyotard is partly right, but he is talking about that caricature of science produced by positivists — that is, a merely technologically oriented science. Comte, the father of Positivism, considered disinterested research a crime and invited scientists not to study macroscopic or microscopic objects (stars, atoms, etc.) because he considered them useless to the technological needs of humanity<sup>7</sup>. *Pure science*, however, being still strictly connected and intertwined with philosophy, always tries and has tried to answer the ultimate questions of man: who we are? where are we from? where are we going? what is life? what is matter? when and how did the universe come into existence? will it exist forever? etc. These are the same questions asked and answered by myths, religions, and philosophies. Pure science is marching in the same direction as these other forms of knowledge, albeit with different methods. Only those who do not trust their own beliefs can fear science, for all discoveries about the genetic code, the atomic structure of matter, the beginning of the universe, the origin of humans via evolution, the functioning of neurons, etc., are bringing us closer and closer to revealing the mystery of our existence. These answers are compatible with some religious and mythical explanations and incompatible with others, and thus may help to get rid of, or reinterpret, the incompatible ones. Those who really care about these fundamental questions can be anything but pessimistic when watching the cognitive progress of pure science in recent years<sup>8</sup>.

How can we say that science is *cold* or *merely denotative* when it aims to answer the ultimate questions of humans? Postmodernists, when speaking about science, are clearly talking about applied science or engineering. In this perspective, what they say is true: technical knowledge is mute about the uses

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<sup>7</sup> See A. Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*, vol. VI, Paris 1892, p. 751, and idem, *Système de politique positive ou traité de sociologie instituant la religion de l'humanité*, vol. IV, Paris 1900, p. 212.

<sup>8</sup> This is not true only for rationalists, but also for religious people who understood how distorted the image of science produced by positivists and postmodernists really was. John Paul II writes: "Finally, I cannot fail to address a word to scientists, whose research offers an ever greater knowledge of the universe as a whole and of the incredibly rich array of its component parts, animate and inanimate, with their complex atomic and molecular structures. So far has science come, especially in this century, that its achievements never cease to amaze us. In expressing my admiration and in offering encouragement to these brave pioneers of scientific research, to whom humanity owes so much of its current development, I would urge them to continue their efforts without ever abandoning the sapiential horizon within which scientific and technological achievements are wedded to the philosophical and ethical values which are distinctive and indelible mark of the human person. Scientists are well aware that the search for truth, even when it concerns a finite reality of the world or of man, is never-ending, but always points beyond to something higher than the immediate object of study, to the questions which give access to Mystery" (*Fides et ratio*, section 106).

that can be made of it. Technology is constitutively a-moral, therefore not necessarily moral or immoral. When talking about technology, we reject both the optimism of positivists and the pessimism of postmodernists, precisely for this reason. As an alternative, we try to focus on the possibilities that we have to use technology in *positive* ways, and here we have the problem of ethics.

Technological advancements have given us the tools to both help and hurt our fellow man on a scale yet unprecedented in human history, and this does, or at least should, give mankind pause when tinkering with the natural world. While such technology may be new, the propensity to act in such ways is fortunately and unfortunately not. If it were in fact something new, we could halt the whole process at the objections of postmodernism, and rest assured that kindness would prevail among men. The active rejection of “scientific” knowledge via *paralogy* would be the cure for the ills of society. This does not, however, reflect reality. Technology is too important to humanity to be left going where it wants or to be reduced to a target of blame and contempt. Technology must be governed. In order to come to consensus on a planetary level about the ways in which we are to govern technology, we must first believe there to be good and bad narratives and, secondly, via intercultural discussion, actively seek out the good ones.

In short, between a doctrine that seems to believe that the developments of knowledge and society are *necessary* and *necessarily* good and that science and technology are capable of solving all the problems of humanity (positivism) and a pessimistic doctrine that simply states the *impossibility* of progress in knowledge and ethics (postmodernism), we defend the idea of the *possibility* (that is, neither the necessity nor impossibility) of positive developments in both fields.

**Ambiguous skepticism.** We consider the problem of skepticism and methodological relativism to be one of the major weaknesses of postmodern thought. As mentioned before, writers who think of themselves as postmodernists refuse the categories of truth and cognitive progress. We can summarize their attitude towards research in the following single sentence: “the natural world has a small or non-existent role in the construction of scientific knowledge”<sup>9</sup>. At times, in order to support their opinions they attempt to discredit the work of scientific teams. A good example of this is the book *Laboratory Life* by Latour and Woolgar<sup>10</sup>. Despite their relativism, they are still ready to claim the ability to

<sup>9</sup> H. M. Collins, *Knowledge, Norms and Rules in the Sociology of Science*, Social Studies of Science, vol. 1, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> B. Latour and S. Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts*, Sage, Beverly Hills 1979. The two anthropologists studied empirically the work of a scientific team (working at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, California, and obtaining the Nobel Prize) and



criticize other works on the basis of some better (do they mean “more true”?) postmodern paradigm. Moreover, after stating that facts are socially constructed, and not simply theory-laden, some of them still insist on the empirical nature of their own findings and on the value of empirical studies in general. Knorr<sup>11</sup>, for example, seems to believe that direct observation of the object (science) will reveal its actual nature. This contradiction vanishes under one condition: one must assume that social scientists, unlike natural scientists, can directly observe their object of study and understand its real nature. If postmodern sociologists of knowledge have developed a special method that permits them to observe and understand reality, why do not they teach it to natural scientists? Do they keep secret their miraculous method because they enjoy *observing* natural scientists naively busy with *inventing/constructing* entities such as planets, stars, earthquakes, atoms, genes, neurons, and electrons?

Consistent relativists admit that they do not have such a miraculous method. In order to avoid the contradiction of claiming the universality of the negation of universality, they conclude that relativism is true only for relativists. Relativism is not supported by evidence, but is just one more ideology on a par with positivism. Relativism is a matter of faith. But even when they accept this painful conclusion, relativists are still able to contradict themselves. By trying to be logically coherent, they submit themselves to the universal laws of logic. Conclusion: we cannot escape universalism.

Postmodernists also say that their approach, being radically empiricist, avoids metaphysics. The constructivist Zybertowicz<sup>12</sup> writes that he is “against explanations of knowledge which refer to standards and categories that transcend the empirical reality” and that his “interest is not whether the ideas produced by science are true in any metaphysical sense, but in finding social

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concluded that what they produced was merely the outcome of a social negotiation among scientists. In spite of the fact that they did not know much about biology, they concluded that facts were socially constructed and not discovered. We could however conclude that Latour and Woolgar’s research cannot be taken seriously because, *symmetrically*, it was merely the outcome of social negotiation between anthropologists.

<sup>11</sup> “Indeed the internalist and microscopic nature of the constructivist endeavour would seem to be best served by methodological procedures which take advantage of the opportunity for direct observation [*italics supplied, hereafter*] which only the study of contemporary science provides... My argument is that the process of production of new scientific objects, as well as the process of acceptance (through contestation and incorporation), should preferably be scrutinized through *direct observation* of the site of scientific work. The loci of construction of scientific objects are the sites of action in which these objects are generated and transformed. *To observe* what happens in any one of these sites at some length would appear to be the best we can do to begin our project... The effort directed at a *better understanding* of how science *actually* works has just begun” (K. D. Knorr-Cetina, *The Constructivist Programme*, p. 323). We just think that these statements comment themselves.

<sup>12</sup> *The Success of the Natural Sciences Sociologically Explained, Studia Metodologiczne*, t. 29, 1999, p. 14.

causes of variation in their social reputation". However, it is enough to admit that there is an external world to produce metaphysics, because the existence of something outside our mind is not demonstrable with empirical methods. Only solipsism permits the avoidance of metaphysics, but most constructivists seem to believe that the scientists they are studying actually exist<sup>13</sup>. Conclusion: as we cannot escape universalism, we cannot escape metaphysics.

If so, why not accept a more reasonable image of knowledge? There are scientific theories that explain quite satisfactorily many natural, and even social, phenomena. There are devices built on the basis of scientific theories that work effectively in everyday life. There are also many cases of accidental discoveries in both the social and natural sciences. Why not accept the simple truth that *not every* fact that we observe is *necessarily* contained in the theories we already know and that *not all* knowledge is related to the social structure that regulates the behavior of scientists? Once we are aware of the unavoidability of metaphysics, why not use the terms "truth" and "progress", instead of the many ridiculous locutions used by postmodernists to symbolize the same concepts?

In short, in between a doctrine that seems to assume that *everything can be known* through the application of true scientific method, but then focuses only on the surface of phenomena (positivism) and a doctrine that seems to affirm that *nothing can be known* because all knowledge is relative and determined by the social structure (postmodernism), we believe that *something can be known* by means of observations, metaphysical reflections, logical calculus, intuition, deduction, induction, criticism, or rational discussion. Therefore, we encourage dialogue in all its forms and any attempt to search for truth, justice and beauty.

**Anti-scientific attitude.** Postmodernism is often associated with "antiscience". Sometimes the two are even equated<sup>14</sup>. These interpretations are not groundless, as seen in the following quotation:

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<sup>13</sup> This is not always clear however. Indeed A. Zybertowicz states: "[s]cientific cognition could not evolve as a legitimate form of activity unless it has become socially recognized that there is something out there to be searched for and eventually represented in language. Therefore I claim that not only the institution of science but also its subject-matter is a product of history" (idem, *Theory of Culture, Stages of Social Cognitive Change and the Paranormal Phenomena*, Studia Metodologiczne, t. 29, 1999, p. 43). What should we understand from this sentence? Are postmodernists ready to accept solipsism? If yes, how can they then form a movement?

<sup>14</sup> This is, for example, the diagnosis of Mario Bunge, one of the preeminent philosophers of science of our day: "The academic enemies of the very *raison d'être* of the university can be grouped into two bands: the antiscientists, who often call themselves 'postmodernists', and the pseudoscientists. The former teach that there are no objective and universal truths, whereas the academic pseudoscientists smuggle fuzzy concepts, wilds conjectures, or even ideology as scientific findings. Both gangs operate under the protection of academic freedom, and often at the taxpayers expense, too" (idem, *In Praise of Intolerance to Charlatanism in Academia*, Annals New York Academy of Science, June 24, 1996).

Science is much closer to myth than a scientific philosophy is prepared to admit. It is one of the many forms of thought that have been developed by man, and not necessarily the best. It is conspicuous, noisy, and impudent, but it is inherently superior only for those who have already decided in favour of a certain ideology, or who have accepted it without ever having examined its advantages and its limits. And as the accepting and rejecting of ideologies should be left to the individual it follows that the separation of state and church must be complemented by the separation of state and science, that most recent, most aggressive, and most dogmatic religious institution. Such a separation may be our only chance to achieve a humanity we are capable of, but have never fully realized<sup>15</sup>.

We do not know to what extent postmodernism is anti-scientific, but as postmodernists themselves affirm, it is only the reputation of ideas that really matters. To be sure, they have not done much in the way of clearing their name of such conclusions. Someone may object that Feyerabend and his followers are not antisience, but simply a-science. Indeed they do not state that science is worse than other types of knowledge, but only that it is not better. This is, however, a mere sophism. Consider a football match in which team A is much stronger than team B. Team A is close to winning, but the corrupted referee leads to a draw. Can we say that the referee is not anti-team A, merely because he did not make them lose?

It is true that science and myths have something in common: the questions. Nonetheless, it does not seem very reasonable to deny that science has gone much farther in answering some of these questions, especially those falling under the rubric of cosmology and ontology. Feyerabend, being a histrionic personage, was just exaggerating for the sake of discussion. There is evidence of this in his private correspondence with Lakatos. Unfortunately, an entire generation of students with no sense of humor took him seriously and has become much more dogmatic and aggressive than that science criticized by Feyerabend. If Feyerabend were still alive and could see how postmodernists behave, he would probably become a post-postmodernist!

Even assuming that science is a myth or narrative on par with others, to ask for the separation between state and science implies a reference to a superior value: democracy. If all narratives are equally good or bad, how can postmodernists assume the positivist myth of heroic science to be worse than a narrative like “full democracy”? To be consistent, they should accept the myth of science and respect it. But we know well that they do not. They react quite vehemently each time someone tries to defend what they call the ideology of science and reason. The real motto of postmodernism is not “anything goes”, but “anything goes, if you agree with us”.

Feyerabend showed some admiration for the scientist-philosopher of the past, who was professionally disinterested and dealt with the ultimate questions

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<sup>15</sup> P. Feyerabend, *Against Method*, Verso, London 1975, p. 295.

of man, while he has contempt for what he has called “the human ants” presently working in scientific laboratories<sup>16</sup>. If this is the problem, why not defend disinterested and philosophically oriented science? Also Lyotard complains, due to the mercantilization of knowledge students no longer ask if something is true, but rather of what use it is to them. At least two questions then arise: how can one be surprised that his/her students do not look for truth, if they are taught that there is no objective truth? And why does Lyotard, like Feyerabend, not lift a finger to promote disinterested knowledge? Indeed postmodernists were able to criticize the mercantilization of knowledge and, at the same time, to reject disinterested science as a pure ideology<sup>17</sup>. This is not, however, schizophrenia. The naked truth is that postmodernists could gain popularity by criticizing science, whether applied or pure, commercial or disinterested. At that time, attacking science and defending art, myths, and the humanities was original and also remunerative in economic terms<sup>18</sup>. In a world in which hundreds articles and book are published everyday, originality is much more important than truth.

Nonetheless, the times have changed. Now, to be antiscience is outdated, as was being a positivist in the 1970s. The internet and new graphic technologies have increased the number publications to such an extent that even the eccentricity of an author does not help him/her to be noticed in the noise. Thus, in post-postmodern times there is no longer a reason to *abandon* reasonability. Paradoxically, this first contribution to post-postmodern thought is original precisely because it is reasonable.

In brief, in between a doctrine that *glorifies* mathematics, engineering and the natural sciences as the only type of genuine knowledge or as an example for all other sciences (positivism), and a doctrine that *discredits* these disciplines and sets them against art, the humanities and the social sciences in order to gain visibility (postmodernism), we defend the ideal of *harmony* in the fields of culture and knowledge and we consider good intellectuals those who enjoy reading and discussing poetry, literature, religion, history, the social sciences, music, mathematics, engineering, the natural sciences, and all historically

<sup>16</sup> “As opposed to its immediate predecessor, late 20th-century science has given up all philosophical pretensions and has become a powerful business that shapes the mentality of its practitioners. Good payment, good standing with the boss and the colleagues in their ‘unit’ are the chief aims of these human ants who excel in the solution of tiny problems but who cannot make sense of anything transcending their domain of competence” (P. Feyerabend, *Theses on Anarchism*, [in:] I. Lakatos and P. Feyerabend, *For and Against Method*, edited and with an Introduction by M. Motterlini, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1999).

<sup>17</sup> B. Barnes and B. Dolby, *Scientific Ethos: a Deviant Viewpoint*, *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 11, 1970.

<sup>18</sup> In a private letter to Lakatos, Feyerabend admits to receiving much more money publishing postmodern nonsense in popular magazines, than from well written philosophical articles published in scientific magazines (I. Lakatos and P. Feyerabend, *For and Against Method*).

known forms of knowledge, in a mild and reasonable way. In other words, against harmful and idiosyncratic forms of specialization, we suggest a moderate form of polymathism — which should not be interpreted as the arrogance of *knowing everything*, but rather as the wise *openness to everything*.

**Conclusions.** In democratic countries there are specific social institutions in which knowledge can be treated as one social problem among others (e.g. governments, mass media). We do not think that academia is the right place to throw doubt upon the very *raison d'être* of knowledge. A philosopher who does not love knowledge appears to our eyes as a judge who dislikes justice, a physician who dislikes health, a priest who dislikes faith, an artist who dislikes beauty, a parliamentarian who dislikes democracy. If it is true that postmodernists do not love knowledge, then Bunge<sup>19</sup> is right in defining postmodernism as a Trojan horse stabled in academia with the aim of destroying it.

It is, however, possible that postmodernists never had such bad intentions. We cannot exclude the possibility that they have been, on the contrary, inspired by philanthropic feelings: by imposing relativism they simply wanted to serve humanity, as this was supposed to be the philosophical ground on which a world of peace, pluralism, and tolerance could be built. Even so, they would have failed to understand that it is not the degree in which humans believe that produce tolerance or intolerance, but rather the nature of the belief and the psychological profile of the believer. In certain cases, the stronger the belief, the higher the tolerance.

It is also possible that postmodernists are mere victims of yet another misunderstanding: they took too seriously the image of knowledge produced by positivists. Quite significantly, they adopted the worst version of the scientific method, the positivistic one, in order to discredit the scientific method. Similarly — with a clearly ironic intent — we adopted the worst postmodern arguments in order to refute postmodernism. Indeed we do not believe ideas to be good or bad simply because they are new or old, but rather that they are more or less plausible or, in the best case, true or false.

Nonetheless, we hope that a post-postmodern era will indeed be ushered in shortly by our work and that of other young scholars and students. Our hope is that this era will represent the age of the re-birth, or renaissance, of knowledge — not merely the practical knowledge praised by the positivists and attacked by the postmodernists, but that form of knowledge to which philosophy, science, religion, art, and myths — from their different but mutually enriching points of view — have always tried to tend: answers to the ultimate questions of humans.

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<sup>19</sup> M. Bunge, *The Sociology-Philosophy Connection*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick — London 1999, p. 223.

True, we do not know if such knowledge is attainable, but affirming the *impossibility* is as gratuitous as affirming a *possibility*. Thus, we prefer to engage in a joyful search for truth, justice, and beauty, rather than to despair in a horizon of nihilism. Nietzsche, the nihilist *par excellence*, said that man is just a falling drop of rain. We think that the human condition is not so sour, that is, if the drop can at least cultivate the hope of falling into the infinite ocean of truth.

**Postmodernism is Old, Let Us Go Further:  
a pamphlet against deconstructionism, constructivism  
relativism and methodological anarchism**

Summary

This paper means to be a collective and multicultural pamphlet against the postmodern approach to knowledge. The authors accept some postmodern ideas, but they also find it necessary to stress the many limits of this approach and its inability to respond to the challenges of the present day. From their perspective, postmodernism is not a new approach that has simply to be studied, but an old one that needs to be surpassed. They consider the problem of skepticism and methodological relativism to be one of the major weaknesses of the postmodern thought. Consequently, this paper-manifesto announces, in a ironical way, the arrival of the post-postmodern era. Authors hope this era will represent the age of the re-birth, or the renaissance, of knowledge — not merely the practical knowledge praised by the positivists and attacked by the postmodernists, but that form of knowledge to which philosophy, science, religion, art and myths, from their different but mutually enriching points of view, have always tended to: knowledge as an answer to the ultimate questions of human beings.