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LE SCIENZE DIMENTICATE: UN DIALOGO CON RENS BOD

a cura di

CRISTINA MARRAS E ANTONIO LAMARRA

ABSTRACT: In this interview, preceded by a brief introduction and completed with a comment by the editors, Rens Bod, professor of Digital Humanities and History of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam, reflects on some important and critical points of his research and publications. In particular the dialogue focuses on his *New History of the Humanities* of 2013, recently translated into Italian with the title *Le scienze dimenticate. Come le discipline umanistiche hanno cambiato il mondo* (Carocci, 2019).

KEYWORDS: Patterns; Principles; Modelling; History of Humanities; Philosophy

L'intervista a Rens Bod che qui presentiamo – e che pensiamo come momento di un dialogo ideale che vorremmo continui a svilupparsi fruttuoso – prende le mosse dalla recente traduzione italiana, *Le scienze dimenticate. Come le discipline umanistiche hanno cambiato il mondo*,¹ della sua innovativa monografia *A New History of the Humanities*, apparsa nel 2013.² Rens Bod è professore di “Digital Humanities and History of

¹ R. Bod, *Le scienze dimenticate. Come le discipline umanistiche hanno cambiato il mondo*, Roma, Carocci, 2019.

² *A New History of the Humanities: The Search for Principles and Patterns from Antiquity to the Present*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013; una prima versione del volume era uscita in olandese nel 2010: *De Vergeten Wetenschappen: Een Geschiedenis van de humaniora*, Amsterdam, Prometheus/Bert Bakker. Cfr. C. Marras, “Metodi, modelli e ‘perdita di immagine’ delle discipline umanistiche. Note per una discussione su *Le scienze dimenticate*”, nella rubrica “Libri in discussione” dedicata al volume *Le scienze dimenticate* che vede anche il contributo di Glenn Most e Gaspare Polizzi, nella rivista *Iride*, di prossima pubblicazione.

Humanities” all’Università di Amsterdam, nonché direttore del *Center for Digital Humanities* e del *Vossius Center for the History of Humanities and Sciences*. Nel suo lavoro di ricerca egli propone una riconsiderazione delle scienze umane, collocandole all’interno di una storia unitaria comparata e interdisciplinare, e ne sottolinea con convinzione il ruolo costitutivo per la storia delle idee. Si tratta per lo studioso di ridisegnarne la cornice storica e scientifica, evidenziando il contributo concreto che le scienze umane, oggi dimenticate, hanno dato e tuttora danno alla storia della conoscenza. La domanda da cui ha preso le mosse il suo lavoro è stata infatti: “Why then is there no overview of the history of the humanities, while there are dozens of overviews of the history of science?”³

A partire da ciò, l’idea di fondo tematizzata soprattutto nel volume ora tradotto in italiano, ma che è parte integrante di un più ampio progetto di ricerca dell’autore,⁴ è quella di una visione della storia delle scienze umane policentrica e caratterizzata da un approccio multidisciplinare, cui si unisce nell’impostazione di Bod la necessità di aprire orizzonti di comparazione anche ad altre aree culturali e geografiche come l’Estremo Oriente e l’Asia.

Per Bod, le discipline umanistiche si sono ritratte dal rivendicare il loro fondamentale contributo alla dimensione della scoperta e dell’innovazione, che è comunemente attribuita alle scienze naturali. Rens Bod sottolinea invece e mette a fuoco come anche le intuizioni e le ‘scoperte nelle scienze umanistiche’ abbiano cambiato il mondo, trovando applicazione in campi lontani e inaspettati, come nel caso, per esempio, di discipline quali la filologia e la grammatica, con la scoperta del sanscrito e delle lingue indo-europee, che hanno prodotto conseguenze molto più ampie del loro riconosciuto impatto sugli studi specifici di settore: si pensi al metodo della ricostruzione filologica che, per molti aspetti, è alla base dell’analisi genetica.⁵

Pertanto, alcune delle domande che abbiamo posto a Bod intendono richiamare la sua posizione sul ruolo della filosofia che, come la teologia, è per lui alla base dei modelli sviluppati nelle scienze umane. Ma soprattutto

³ Bod, *A New History of the Humanities*, p. xiii.

⁴ Si veda per esempio:

<https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/journals/hoh/pr/140915>

<http://www.historyofhumanities.org/> (consultati il 14/07/2020).

⁵ R. Bod, “Discoveries in the Humanities that Changed the World”, *Annuario*, 53, Unione Internazionale degli Istituti di Archeologia, Storia e Storia dell’Arte in Roma, 2011, p. 189–200.

ci siamo confrontati con Bod sul rapporto tra le discipline umanistiche e le scienze naturali e applicate. Il tema dei confini e delle definizioni disciplinari è infatti particolarmente presente nelle riflessioni dell'autore, che torna a porre al centro dell'attenzione le 'scienze umanistiche'. In questo quadro, e vista la sua attenzione al linguaggio e alla terminologia, abbiamo anche chiesto a Bod un parere sul ruolo della lessicografia nel quadro generale della sua ricostruzione storico-concettuale.

Una delle tesi caratteristiche del libro *Le scienze dimenticate* è che le pratiche umanistiche, in quanto mettono in relazione pattern e principi, possono essere intese al meglio proprio come forme di modellizzazione. L'obiettivo è quello di rintracciare, descrivere, spiegare e interpretare la storia delle idee e della conoscenza attraverso metodi, modelli e principi. Lo sguardo di Bod tuttavia non è rivolto al passato, ma guarda al ruolo delle discipline umanistiche per il futuro e individua nell' 'approccio computazionale/digitale' uno dei settori e dei metodi integrati che si sono delineati fra le nuove tendenze delle scienze umane, segno anche della loro dinamicità, rinnovamento e sviluppo. Una delle domande dell'intervista verte proprio su questo punto: Bod infatti accanto all'approccio digitale situa quello cognitivo e quello ancora dell'integrazione tra metodi (scienze umane, scienze sociali, scienze naturali), che egli chiama "integrazione di metodi sovradisciplinari". Una prospettiva, ci è parsa, di particolare interesse.

QUESTION: As you may know, the research activities of our institute have always developed along three fundamental axes: philosophical texts and traditions, lexicology and lexicography, digital treatment of texts. It is therefore not surprising that your book, *A New History of the Humanities*, so rich and stimulating, raises a number of different questions in us. However, we cannot avoid starting with a preliminary question about your way of seeing philosophy in relation to both sciences and Humanities.

Your work is very well known but could you explain for the readers of *Lexicon Philosophicum* which specific aspect of philosophical studies have suggested to you not to include a chapter on the history of philosophy in your book?

ANSWER: Thank you – this question has been raised before, so I am happy to explain it more extensively here. It may perhaps seem surprising that a

general book on the history of the humanities has no separate chapter on the history of philosophy. There is more than one reason for this, and I go briefly into it in the Introduction of my book. But I will elaborate a bit more on these reasons here.

First of all, while I notice in my book that the history of the humanities disciplines is understudied and sometimes even lacking, this does not count for the history of philosophy. On the contrary, the history of philosophy has been written over and over again since at least the 18th century. This is in stark contrast with the history of many other humanities disciplines for which there exist no general history to date. Thus, what I aim to do in my book is to emancipate these humanistic disciplines, which for many centuries, ever since the foundation of the first universities in Italy, were seen as a propaedeutic to fields like theology and philosophy. These latter fields had an immense status, whereas the status of fields like linguistics, dialectics and rhetoric (the *trivium*), as well as other fields, were quite low, and were only seen as elementary knowledge. In short: history of philosophy is not a neglected field, while the joined history of the (other) humanities disciplines is. It is only in the course of the 18th century and especially the 19th century that philosophy gets to be seen as part of the humanities, i.e. of *Geisteswissenschaften*.

However, the question remains why I did not integrate the history of these other humanities disciplines with that of philosophy. Of course, a full integration of the history of the humanities disciplines with philosophy would have resulted into a book twice as long. But to some extent I did combine the humanities disciplines with philosophy as far as the latter had an influence on the former. This brings me to the second reason that I did not want to create a separate chapter on history of philosophy, namely: philosophy plays a role everywhere. If you take a look at the Index of Terms of my book, you find entries on philosophy of art, Chinese philosophy, Hermetic philosophy, Islamic philosophy, philosophy of language, philosophy of logic, philosophy of science, and so on. Therefore, I write in the Introduction (p. 10) of my book: “I will often go into the immense impact of theology and philosophy on the humanities, but these disciplines will not receive separate chapters – they simply play a role (almost) everywhere.”

Finally, one can make a case that in (disciplinary) philosophical practice, a search for patterns in 'empirical' material is not always present. But this is a controversial issue because nothing stops a philosopher to search for patterns and certainly for principles in ethics, metaphysics, epistemology or in any other subfield of philosophy, even though there may be no such empirical material like paintings, sculptures or archeological artefacts. So, with hindsight this case does not constitute a reason for excluding philosophy of receiving its own 'chapter'. Instead the two reasons above are my main considerations.

QUESTION: We understand that, at least in a certain sense, the relationship between philosophy and Humanities can be considered very similar to that between philosophy and natural (or social) science(s): it is not part of them but is closely linked to each of them.

Would you agree with a similar way of seeing the problem?

ANSWER: Yes, this is one of the possible roles of philosophy. But historically, the *academic discipline* of philosophy was certainly perceived as a *Geisteswissenschaft* in the 19th century, or a "Scienza dello Spirito", as Benedetto Croce famously put it in his four-volume work of 1912. Yet the current role of philosophy is often a different one: it provides the philosophical background of and reflection on disciplines like the sciences. The importance of such a reflection should not be underestimated, as we can learn from Albert Einstein who stated that his work on Relativity Theory was deeply influenced by the philosophical works of Pierre Duhem, Ernst Mach and others. Similarly, humanities scholars are deeply influenced by the philosophical reflections on the humanities by philosophers like Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer. In this latter role, philosophy is indeed not part of the humanities but is concerned with the study and reflection thereof.

QUESTION: On the other hand, you include logic among the Humanities, just as we believe you consider mathematics to be part of science.

Is that the only branch of philosophy that you consider to belong to the humanistic field?

ANSWER: Definitely not, but as I explained above, logic (or dialectics) was part of the *trivium* of the *artes liberales*, together with grammar and rhetoric.

These fields were so formative for the humanities in both Europe and the Arab world, that they can't be missed in any history of the humanities. Sure enough, in India and China, the role of logic was a different one, but it was always closely connected to linguistics and rhetoric.

Of course, in the end I had to make a selection since it is impossible to include all disciplines into a single volume. Yet I hope to have included a representative sample of disciplines – around 8 from antiquity to the early modern era, and around 14 for the modern period after 1800 – such that the scope of the disciplines is broad enough to make some interesting observations that hold for the humanities in general, such their continuing search for patterns and principles and the process from descriptive to prescriptive analysis. As I mention in the Introduction, the *Lexicon der Geisteswissenschaften* (2011) edited by Helmut Reinalter and Peter Brenner sums up 42 humanities disciplines and is still incomplete. Thus, my coverage of the humanities by including 14 disciplines, is no more than a first beginning. My main goal was not to write a complete history but to find out whether the different humanities disciplines from very different periods and regions (ranging from China to Africa and Europe) have anything in common.

QUESTION: Some parts of your work and research focuses on complementarities and intersections between the different meanings of the concept of model, and at the same time, captures the methodological and interdisciplinary convergences that characterize models and modeling in the humanities. In the humanities there are different forms of modeling which can consist in describing the steps necessary to connect the models to the principles, in the use of external representations such as trees, graphs or rhizomes to connect schemes to principles, or even in the use of procedures, rules or constraints to establish these relationships.

To what extent modeling and patterns in the humanities differ from modeling in science?

ANSWER: This is a topic of current research, and at present it's hard to tell what the exact difference is between modeling in the humanities and in the sciences. In any case, the commonalities are much stronger than previously thought. In today's humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, modeling is part of everyday practice, even though humanities scholars usually don't like the word 'model' and prefer to use 'analysis' or 'interpretation' instead. Nevertheless, humanities scholars in, for example,

the field of literary studies do use the botanic notion of 'rhizome' to describe the interwoven structure of a novel, and thus are actually engaged in 'modeling' the intertwined relations in a narrative by a rhizome. This is not fundamentally different from modeling in quantum chromodynamics where, for example, the 'liquid drop model' is one of the available tools. The idea of using a liquid-drop to model the nuclear structure and their inter-nucleon interactions is analogous to using a rhizome to model the narrative structure and their inter-actor relations! Sadly, this is often overlooked by scientists and humanists alike, perhaps because they don't study each other's work. The main difference is perhaps that natural scientists use mathematics as a main tool while humanities scholars do not. But a model needs not to be mathematical. Its main goal is to make a part of the world more understandable by visualizing or describing it graphically, conceptually, mathematically, computationally or otherwise.

QUESTION: Currently, there is an ongoing discussion concerning the research of methodological principles and empirical patterns in the history of humanities especially based on crossing your publications and research.

Do you think that the concept of computation can be one of these patterns, able also to overcome the 'traditional' dichotomy between humanities and science?

ANSWER: It definitely can. However, one of the problems is that many humanities scholars lose interest if concepts like computation, modeling or pattern-searching are used. It was one of my goals to show in my book that these concepts have always existed in the humanities, albeit under different terms and categories. I've thus tried to embrace first the terms and categories used by humanities scholars – such as source criticism, grammar, harmonic intervals, stemma, stylistic analysis – after which I tried to show how they relate to terms like patterns, algorithm, methodological principle, procedure, and the like. I hope it helps to bridge the gap between these two domains by showing that there are (near-to isomorphic) mappings between terms.

QUESTION: Studying the lexicon of a language, and even more, the comparative study of the lexicons of different languages requires a strongly interdisciplinary approach, especially if one works in a historical and diachronic perspective: linguistic, philological, sometimes paleographic skills are required, together with a serious knowledge of the disciplinary fields covered by the sources that are studied.

In your perspective, how could the contribution of lexicology and lexicography be characterized in relation to the other fields of the Humanities?

ANSWER: It is of utmost importance to study the lexical terms used in different disciplinary fields (and in different periods and places), such as the widely used terms of source, composition, interval, stemma, rule, scheme, style and structure in the humanities, and next compare these with lexical terms in other fields, like algorithm, law, regularity, principle, procedure, structure, table, scheme, equation and model in the sciences. The results of such a comparison can be surprising: the same terms may mean different things across disciplines while different terms may sometimes mean similar things. The role of the comparative study of the lexicons used is fundamental: by searching for mappings between the lexicons in different disciplinary fields we can figure out how ways of knowing and disciplinary practices relate to each other. And this connects to one of my main arguments: it's nowhere that we come across an acute divide between the humanities and the sciences. We use highly similar metaphors and often similar methodologies, and both humanities scholars and scientists search for patterns and principles.

L'originalità del punto di vista di Bod e la ricchezza di contenuti che si sviluppano nel suo libro seguendo il filo degli svolgimenti storici di alcune fra le principali discipline umanistiche non si lasciano ridurre entro la dimensione di qualche breve riflessione. Ci pare che numerose e complesse siano le questioni che egli solleva, i nodi problematici che affronta con determinazione e innegabile rigore d'argomenti. In un frangente storico nel quale degli studi umanistici può sembrare si siano perse le ragioni profonde (e gli stessi umanisti introiettano talora il sentimento del disvalore delle loro discipline), il richiamo di Bod alla natura eminentemente cognitiva delle scienze umane e alla consapevolezza del contributo decisivo che esse hanno offerto al progresso del sapere suona come un invito a riconsiderare non pochi luoghi comuni culturali del nostro tempo. Se le discipline umanistiche si caratterizzano soprattutto per la loro capacità di ricondurre i dati empirici che sono oggetto di studio a modelli e principi, come egli sostiene, il dibattito che si apre con *Le scienze dimenticate* è di natura inevitabilmente metodologica. La posta in gioco tuttavia è di più ampia natura, perché a ben vedere riguarda la

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rinnovata definizione di un canone culturale che oltrepassi e ricomponga la frattura del sapere in campi reciprocamente esclusivi e incapaci di comprendersi.

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