

What Does Theory Become? The Humanities, Politics, and Philosophy (1970–2010): Reflections and Propositions¹

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The questions to be discussed here coincide with some of my earliest interests, but I believe I can also ensure that they have an objective importance in a conjuncture that is critical for the forms of knowledge that are gathered together under the name of “the social sciences and the humanities,” and for the institutions that host them. Of course, this relationship is circular. However, in the title of the conference that brings us together each term—and especially their conjunction—presents a problem. This is why we can begin by considering the reasons adduced in the text that was circulating semi-officially within the university in preparation for this conference, and which, I understand, gave rise to a certain number of reactions—some of them quite lively.² To write the following is to say either too much or too little: “it was long believed that there exists a crisis in the social sciences and the humanities. After 1970, the Marxist or structuralist paradigms crumbled in the face of the reality of the concrete subject they did not manage to explain; and it was thought that other disciplines like economics or biology allowed for a better understanding of the human fact in its two dimensions of generality and singularity . . .” Everything in this passage presents a problem: the singular of each term, the different uses of “or” (inclusive? exclusive?), the comparison of “paradigm” and “discipline,” which could suggest a strong but risky epistemological thesis: the disciplines between which we “distribute” what are sometimes called “the humanities,” sometimes the “social sciences,” are in fact nothing but explanatory, hermeneutical, or pragmatic “paradigms,” or else are entirely supported by such paradigms. So that when the latter falter,³

1 A paper presented at the Seminar of Humanities & Social Sciences, December 16–17, 2010, Université de Paris Ouest.

2 I later learned about the text published in *Liberation* on 16/12/2010 by a “collective of teachers and researchers of Nanterre” entitled “The Conference Taken at Its Word”, which in particular included the following formulations: “**Social sciences and humanities**. Despite the quality of the speakers, this category which long ago provoked so many controversies, and produced so much critical energy, consists here of an eclectic catalogue in which dominate two partisan positions that are presented as unavoidable, as natural as the air we breathe. On the one hand, the old story of “the crumbling of the structuralist and Marxist paradigm” (in the singular), ignoring their rich extensions and their theoretical renewal in the global intellectual space. On the other hand, by way of common ground, of a positivism with a new look, some of the speakers mentioned the “cognitive paradigm”: down with social critique, long live neuroscience and theories of behavior.”

3 They falter for intrinsic but also occasionally for extrinsic reasons: who could say, in this regard, what are the reasons behind the “crumbling” of the Marxist paradigm (if we can even speak of such a crumbling), of its own theoretical aporias or the attacks it has faced in institutions and in public opinion, and the relation these two have with historical events which involve them? Who can be sure that this evolution is linear or that the same hypotheses won’t reappear in another form, that there won’t be—or perhaps there already is—a “Neo-Marxism” just like there is a “Neo-Keynesianism”?

the discipline itself can be called into question. Witness the history of experimental psychology, sociology, and anthropology in the colonial and post-colonial periods. . . . But it is also possible that the finality of an authentically reflexive paradigm is precisely to question the legitimacy of established rules and programs of disciplinary research. This is what Marxism and psychoanalysis more or less successfully wanted to do, particularly in their “encounter” with the structuralist idea that marked the last half of the century (why is psychoanalysis now absent from this set up, while the debates over its subject are experiencing at this moment a new acuteness?).

In 1995, the year of my arrival at Nanterre, I participated in two daylong conferences of the URA 1394 organized by the CNRS⁴ on the topic of “Norms of Scientificity and the Object of the Social Sciences,” at which I presented a paper entitled “Structuralism: Method or Subversion of the Social Sciences?”⁵ In this paper I developed the following idea: although it seems to be “complete,” the trajectory of structuralism remains the bearer of questions that are important to the humanities, both for extending their field of knowledge and for resisting the liquidation by which they are threatened today de jure and de facto. To support this claim, I characterized structuralism not so much by its exportation of the linguistic model as by its attempts to solve dilemmas inherited from the epistemologies of the 19th century (reductionism vs. hermeneutics or nomology vs. ideography) by constituting “anthropological” domains as autonomous objectivities by means of an axiomatization of the “relations” on which social practice and its historical variations or transformations depend. On this basis, I then tried to show that structuralism—which is not a unified school of thought but a contradictory movement—is evenly divided around what, following Foucault, we could call “points of heresy.” I provisionally identified three such points: the first, concerning the constitution of the subject, opposes its representation as overdetermined individuality to its representation as lack or line of flight; the second, concerning the constitution of objectivity, opposes the idea of an “epistemological break” to that of a “view from afar”; the third, concerning the constitution of the universal, opposes cognitivism to comparativism,

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4 The URA (“Unité de Recherche Associé”) is a French research association funded by the CNRS “Centre national de la recherche scientifique”. (Translator’s note.)

5 This text is now available at <http://cirphes.ens.fr/ciepfrc/publications/etienne-balibar/>.

while leading to two “regulations” of the alterity of cultures. I concluded that structuralism, in a form that is equally distant from both empiricism and speculation (therefore “critique”), had ignored the opposition between philosophy and scientific disciplines (*doxa* and *theory*, according to Milner⁶). In the necessarily narrow limits of my intervention this year, I would like to try to displace and revive these hypotheses in order to take into account of a new conjuncture.

I will do so in two steps. First of all, I will return to the meaning and the function of the term “theory,” as it has been invested during at least a part of the structuralist adventure, in particular when it has been overdetermined through its relation to Marxism, and on the reasons why, even at the cost of profound revisions, I think could not be done completely without harm. Next, I would (quickly) like to examine two questions that today seem to me to be strategic for the capacity of the humanities to intervene in the social reality they take for an “object,” and thus for their eventual disciplinary renewal at the cost of a “theoretical” detour: one concerning the status of the economy as a social science, the other concerning the aporias of the idea of “multiculturalism,” for which the simple development of *cultural studies*, as currently defined, does not seem sufficient. Doubtlessly not by accident, we will see that the superimposition of these two questions implies a certain way to problematize the phenomena of violence that accompany the current developments of globalization and seem to require entering into a different regime of “power-knowledge” than the one under which the social sciences and humanities have worked in the institutional frameworks defined by the national, social, colonial, and secularized state.⁷

Let us begin with a few reflections on the meaning that a reference to “theory” takes on today in the disciplines with which we are concerned. Undoubtedly, we will not escape a differential, or even oppositional, formulation. But I believe it is insufficient to take up again the classical antitheses of theory and practice (or application) and of theoretical construction and inductive or descriptive empirical procedures, which do not have a specific relation to the history of the social sciences and humanities (even if we can make an effort to appropriate them there, which, in my view, precisely concerns

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6 Milner: 2008.

7 On these qualifications, see my recent book: Balibar: 2014.

“theory”).⁸ It seems to me that the discussion has to focus, first of all, on the singular status of *concepts* within the “human” and “social” disciplines. Yet these concepts still have, both internally and externally, a “polemical” status; and this is what also renders them eminently problematic from an epistemological point of view, by raising the suspicion that they are thereby inadequate for objectivity. Among the many terminologies that could be at our disposal here (for this character has been recognized by a great number of “theoreticians”), I propose to retain the one proposed by the English philosopher Walter Bryce Gallie in a famous but already dated article:

The concepts which I propose to examine relate to a number of organized or semi-organized human activities: in academic terms they belong to aesthetics, to political philosophy, to the philosophy of history and the philosophy of religion. My main thought with regard to them is this. We find groups of people disagreeing about the proper use of the concepts (...) When we examine the different uses of these terms and the characteristic arguments in which they figure we soon see that there is no one clearly definable general use of any of them which can be set up as the correct or standard use (...) Now once this variety of functions is disclosed it might well be expected that the disputes in which the above mentioned concepts figure would at once come to an end. But in fact this does not happen (...) each party continues to defend its case with what it claims to be convincing arguments, evidence and other forms of justification.⁹

It is worth noting that the mode of discursivity thus described does not characterise such and such a discipline by providing a means to enclose it but on the contrary defines a transdisciplinarity, what one could call a “porosity” of disciplinary borders, which opens up the social sciences and humanities not only on the side of political theory and history but also on the side of philosophy. On the other hand, we should note that it is not only a question of a characteristic of disciplines or paradigms (as, for example, we can say that, in Kuhn’s perspective, every “paradigm” is sooner or later destined to be “contested”) but also a modality that is characteristic of conceptuality itself. Gallie’s

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⁸ In my 1995 presentation I cited Passeron: 2013, and Wallerstein: 2001. I could cite the “critical” turn initiated by James Clifford and George Marcus in *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, starting with the idea that anthropological research is always a labor of writing whose codes are inscribed within an determinate institutional place.

⁹ Gallie 1955-6: 167-198. See the commentary by Capdevila 2004: 293.

suggestion, then, is that this conflictuality—far from representing a sign of failure for theory and ultimately for knowledge—designates a mode of constitution proper to certain disciplines, or to certain objects, but under a twofold condition: 1) that the contestation does not remain assigned to the partisan, and mutually antagonistic, *uses* of a *pre-existing* theory, but rather that it is truly constitutive of an “antithetics” of reason,” or returns from use to definition;¹⁰ 2) that the contestation includes a *reflexive* dimension, namely, that it leads to the determination of the “standpoint” (the socio-historical situation but also the practical objective of transformation or intervention) being inscribed in the field of knowledge itself, as one of the conditions of possibility for its own “judgments.”

These considerations seem correct to me, but they are still a little too abstract regarding everything the discussions of recent decades. To go a step further, I now propose uses of the term “theory” in relation to two alternatives: on the one hand, that of *science* and *critique*; on the other, that of *object* and *problem*. Moreover, it seems to me that the first inevitably leads to the second. What we call “theory” (sometimes theoreticism) never ceases to oscillate between an ideal of scientificity and an ideal of critical function, whereby the first seems to be privileged by structuralism, while the second is always attributed to Marxism as being an inherent trait within the coupling we propose to discuss here, and of which it should be rightly acknowledged that it belongs to a rather fleeting conjuncture, in a singular place, which must appear provincial to us today (even if it cannot be reduced to “Nanterre madness,” where this conjunction was also not very popular in its own time). But the fact that theory thus occupies an unstable or even untenable position, correctly attests to the paradoxical relations of interdependence between these terms. What is at bottom repeatedly suggested is that scientificity can only advance by means of critique, and, conversely, critique can only advance by means of science or at least conceptualization.¹¹ This unity of opposites is analogous to what can be observed in the field of the

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¹⁰ Gallie refers to the Kantian “antinomies” as if a philosophical procedure for solving conceptual conflicts, but it could be thought that their first characteristic is to turn them into a condition of thought (incompatible with the empirical constitution of the natural sciences and by the same token excluding anthropology from the field of scientificity.)

¹¹ From memory, I reproduce a formula used by the philosopher Georges Canguilhem in his lectures: the notion of “scientificity” is equivocal, since it covers both the model of a formal deduction and an experimental verification-rectification, but the fact is that formalization most often advances through experimentation and experimentation through mathematization.

physical sciences between the mathematical and the experimental, but at the same time it displaces it. It implies that scientificity is established with the objective of underscoring, in a reflexive way, the ideological conditions of its own questions and consequently the historicity of its “subjects.” In this sense, one can take up again the thesis that “all science is the science of ideology”: not the science of the ideology of *others*, but of its *own* ideology.¹² Conversely, critique presupposes not so much a semantics or hermeneutics of subjectivity (as a philosophy of alienation always tends more or less to propose) as a pragmatics or a capacity to intervene in order to bring about the *transformation* of given social situations—particularly conflictual situations—experienced as intolerable by some of their “subjects.” Critique therefore takes on the form of what Foucault calls *parrhèsia*, or “speaking (the) truth” in the face of power or domination, but it can only do so effectively only according to a cognitive modality, by producing an effect not only of mutual “recognition” but also a knowledge, and therefore a detachment regarding experience, identifying tendencies or describable and verifiable relations, revealing determinations equally ignored by the dominant and the dominated. In this respect, in 1995 I tried to compare the theme of the “view from afar” with that of the “epistemological break.”

Thus we are led to reverse the initial situation: the question is not so much to know if “theory” is taken as an explanatory model, a construction of an object of knowledge, or a manifestation of the demand for emancipation and the transformative forces included in a given situation; it is rather about understanding how the “essentially contested” (and therefore contestable) nature of concepts attests to the *position* of theory within the domain with which we are concerned: at the intersection of a critical engagement and a project of scientific knowledge. It is also the condition that includes a dimension that is not accidentally but *intrinsically* self-critical. This can be explained by the fact that in the field of the social sciences and the humanities the idea of a “normal science” in a Kuhnian sense means even less than it does in the field of natural sciences.¹³ We can then directly move on to

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12 Although initially advanced by Macherey in a 1965 article, it was reprised by Althusser in the introductory essay to *Lire le Capital*

13 I once proposed the idea that a “science”, which proceeds essentially by means of the rectification of its presuppositions, following the Bachelardian model, is irreducible to the model proposed by Thomas Kuhn regarding of the succession between the phases of normalization of paradigms and the phases of revolution that put these into question: see Balibar: 1979.

the second opposition under consideration: *the science of objects or the science of problems*. It must be acknowledged here that structuralism, as Milner has explained so well, in a sense represented the triumph of the classical ideal of a “science of objects,” which runs from Aristotle to Kant and Husserl (but also to Bachelard and Lévi-Strauss), constructing the autonomy—indeed, the semantic closure—of its domain by defining a system of laws or axiomatizable relations that we could call *mathèsis*.¹⁴ But from the beginning, there was at work in structuralism a completely new orientation through Marx, Freud, and finally Foucault: what Lacan calls “conjectural science,” Deleuze relates to an intrinsic relation of critique and clinic, and Althusser also tried to introduce into his “theoreticist” conception of Marxism (centered on the correlation between the system of relations and the interplay of tendencies and counter-tendencies), establishing as the criterion of historicity the “concrete analysis of situations” or the subjection of the activities of knowledge to the essentially unpredictable conditions of conjuncture. Let us note that science does not aim here to constitute objects or domains of objectivity but rather to identify *problems* (in the sense of what “presents a problem” for the actors in a certain situation, the subjects of an institution, etc., and thus prohibits them from “remaining in place,” whether a place within discourse or within an institution). A theory that tries at the same time to uphold the two requirements of scientificity and critical engagement cannot be only the science of an *object*, or of a *domain of objectivity* unfolding between the formal generality of causal laws and the singularity of “cases” or figures of individuality, but must also become a practice of *problematization*, which occurs only on the basis of differentials of visibility and invisibility, subjection and revolt, the normalization and subjectivation inscribed within situations and relations of forces. Here pragmatics necessarily carries theory onto semantics, for situations can neither be defined *a priori*, nor simply described, but rather exhibit a characteristic of eventness, urgency, and involvement (what Foucault brought together in the notion of *actuality*). Problematization is the diagnostics of a situation’s urgency. But this presupposes that it arises by means of historical inquiry, or by the interpretation of discourses and lifting their repression in “conditions” that are not as such spontaneously known (and in particular not as

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14 Milner: 1978. Also see Desanti: 1975.

“parts” existing in their institutional arrangement).¹⁵ To problematize is not only to “take a position,” it is to transform the arrangement of positions, the tracing of lines of demarcation, or the “distribution of the sensible,” as Rancière says.

We are not going to amalgamate all discourses existing within the field of humanities onto the relations of scientificity and critique (we could even think that every *invention* or definition of a field of research or of a disciplinary paradigm corresponds precisely to a singular way of articulating them). But we will guard against superficial antitheses. For example, in his recent work *De la critique*,¹⁶ which indicates current reflection on the status of the human sciences, Luc Boltanski characterizes the orientations of a critical theory as a strategic “provocation” intended to interrupt the continuity of social practice, by realizing both an “unveiling” of its own conditions and an “exploitation” of the contradictions inherent in it, symptomatically exhibited by the antithesis of discourses and actors. In this case I don’t see, for my part, an absolute incompatibility with the way in which in a 1976 text dedicated to seeking analogies between the status of Marxism and that of psychoanalysis (but basically generalizable to a broader spectrum of discourse) Althusser proposed a concept of “conflictual science,” always already marked by splits not only in its developments but also in the relationship itself of its bearers to its objects, which *par excellence* constitutes *its problem*.¹⁷ In both cases, it is a question of escaping traditional epistemological dilemmas that oppose “factual judgments” to “value judgments,” by establishing on the basis of “concrete situations” an intrinsic dialectic of knowledge and politics, for which each of these terms is always already present inside the other, but according to changing and transformable modalities.

In the second part of my presentation I will move on to examine, as I have already announced, two strategic situations, always in a programmatic way. The first concerns the significance of current debates regarding the use and conception of “economic theory”

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15 Cf. Foucault 1997:117. It is significant that the example on which Foucault relies here is that of the interaction between psychiatry and criminology, which could be extended to the general question of the status of “anthropological differences” in modern society. See also the entire discussion on the functions of prison developed beginning with *Surveiller et punir* and the activities of the Groupe Information Prison.

16 Boltanski 2004: 151.

17 Althusser 1991: 17-30.

(debates that apply in particular to the organization of its teaching). This controversy, in France as well as in the United States, began by questioning the (political, epistemological) “neutrality” of the criteria of formalization, below which the title of “science” is no longer recognized by the “profession.” Following the outbreak of the 2008 financial crisis, it continues by questioning the adequacy of the “dominant” economic models to reality (whose counterpart is the suspicion that intrinsically “unreal” models carry out an essentially ideological function).¹⁸ By adapting a critical model proposed long ago by J.T. Desanti, that of “three kinds of problems” likely to arise in the history of a science (as is nowadays with mathematics),¹⁹ we could suggest that the conceptual conflictualities in question are here three distinctive and superimposed orders, in such a way that each superior level retains over the previous one that which seemed at first to be independent (what one could call a *polemical ascent*, just as Quine spoke of “semantic ascent”).²⁰

At the first level, there is a questioning of “dominant” paradigms and the reactivation of the divisions between “parties” or “disciplinary orientations” that are directly attached to programs or the taking of positions in matters of economic politics (which quite simply amounts to noting that the economy rediscovers its former name of “political economy” and not only “economics”). This controversy begins with a confrontation between “Neo-classicists” and “Neo-Keynesians” regarding the capacity for self-regulation by financial markets. It continues with a confrontation over the question of knowing if the functioning of these inherently speculative markets arises from the same logic of adjustment between supply and demand and the periodic return to equilibrium between these two, which allows for the modelling of the distribution of goods or the allocation of productive capitals. Finally, it concerns the univocity or the equivocity of what we mean by “market”.²¹

On the second level, there arises another “essential contestation” regarding the notions of *equilibrium*, the *rationality of “agents,”* and consequently the mechanisms of regulation. This contestation leads certain economists to revive questions posed by Keynes regarding the

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18 See the “Manifeste d’économistes atterrés” publié le 01/09/2010 par Philippe Ashkénazy, Thomas Coutrot, André Orléan et Henri Sterdyniak ; and the articles of Krugman : 2009, and et James: 2010.

19 Desanti: 1975.

20 See Laugier-Rabate: 1992.

21 Cf. Aglietta: 2010; Giraud: 2001.

status of uncertainty in matters of economic development or cycles: relative or absolute, accidental or intrinsic, endogenous or exogenous. To conclude, this contestation concerns the fundamental postulate of utilitarianism: that of a direct or indirect *convergence* of economic activities towards a common good or an optimal allocation of economic factors (barring institutional or socio-political *obstacles*). But at the same time, this contestation is confronted with the destabilizing perspective of an intrinsic “divergence” of the financial economy, which could at best be temporarily limited by state controls.²²

Now arises the “third kind” of problem (which Desanti related to the necessity of “breaking up the apparent stability of stationary semantic kernels” on which the very definition of a domain depends): nothing is simple here, for, on the one hand, we see formulated the requirement of reintegrating the economy in its own right into the field of the “social sciences” (a requirement that we could call democratic, since it suggests that the economy can no longer appear within humanities as if it were a “sovereign” discipline, whether it were situated *below* the “social” in a domain of material conditions that are prior to political conflicts, or it were *beyond*, in a purely formal space, having to do in general with logics of action and their mathematical foreseeability). But, on the other hand, we also see a tendency from the perspective of ecology (since ecology is simultaneously present in other domains, particularly anthropology) to call into question the idea of an autonomy of the “social” or the “human” in relation to “nature.” This is the question of *externalities* whose bypassing or neutralization precisely enabled the construction of models of evolution that were *a priori* oriented toward equilibrium or regulation. Yet these externalities are of several types, which we don’t know if they are separable how they can interfere: either *social* (for example, the effect on crises played by inequalities in the standard of living and by exclusions and their aggravation),²³ or *environmental* (themselves to be seen in what is perhaps the biggest paradigm shift underway in the “humanities”: the re-questioning of the nature/culture opposition,²⁴ or even—more restrictive, in my view—the revision of the very idea of *historicity*, which requires the integration into “geological time” of a feedback effect of

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22 Skidelsky: 2009.

23 Giraud: 1996.

24Descola Philippe: 2013.

human activity).²⁵ As a result, the relationship between the history of social and cultural evolutions and the transformations of planetary ecosystems simultaneously appears to be ever more uncertain and ever more restrictive: whence, too, arises its immediately conflictual character, not as a “critical phase” of scientific knowledge but as a permanent condition of its activity without a predictable end. These revolutions underway in the conception of historicity are fully *theoretical*, illustrating the cross-checking of science and critique: they are situated at the very point where epistemological problems are encountered in relation to the internality or externality of socio-political regulations and the predictability or unpredictability of tendencies leading to the transformation of contemporary societies (which obviously also have a “cultural” dimension).

We are tempted to confront these hypotheses with those that could be drawn from a second example about which I shall, for lack of space, be brief. The idea that “multiculturalism has failed” has recently been brought into the forefront in the form of a declaration of German Chancellor Angela Merkel—a declaration behind which lurks the suspicion of political manipulation.²⁶ But behind this apparent “problem of opinion,” is revealed very quickly a fundamental scientific and critical (therefore a theoretical) stake concerning the very notion of culture: its “comprehension” and its “extension.” Just as there have always been several competing concepts of “culture” (which one tended to attribute to traditions themselves that were “culturally different,” which in most cases meant “national,” while—according to a thesis of Lenin that was famous in its time—every culture is intrinsically divided along lines of cleavage that are orthogonal to national differences),²⁷ so too from the start there have been several concepts of “multiculturalism.” It is only by homonymy that we can bring together under the same concept a “multiculturalism” like Charles Taylor’s or Will Kymlicka’s, for whom cultures are totalities external to one another, properties of historical communities to which one belongs by tradition (occasionally by assimilation), and whose co-existence can be promoted by means of a constitutional pluralism, in such a way that for each individual “his or her” communitarian belonging remains in the last instance the

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25 Chakrabarty: 2009.

26 See the reaction by Habermas: 2010.

27 Lenine 1959: 11-45.

vehicle of education and subjectivation; and a “multiculturalism” like Homi Bhabha’s and Stuart Hall’s, whose ultimate historical horizon is an incessant process of interaction between communities, leading to the idea that what makes subjects capable of individualization and historical transformation is their capacity for *translation* and, therefore, of disidentification.²⁸ We also know that over time postcolonial modern nations have been very unequally receptive to either of these conceptions of multiculturalism.

At any rate, the contemporary phenomenon described as the “return of the religious” or of “the sacred” irreversibly upends the debate and determines a crisis of the idea of multiculturalism as a realization of the cosmopolitan ideal.²⁹ Here we touch on a true repressed of the humanities (including in the form of a division into separate disciplines and methodologies, opposing anthropology to the history of religion or to hermeneutics): the incompatibility of the *objects* is precisely the symptom of the *problem*, but it does not yet prescribe the ways of the *problematization*. Perhaps the latter proceeds by means of a “critical” recognition of the element of truth contained in the idea—however tendentious—of the *Clash of Civilizations*, set forth by Samuel Huntington at the moment of the redeployment of the American empire to the Middle East, and since then repeated under different names in the service of disturbing resurgences of nationalism covered by the equivocal notion of “populism.” But above all it is the lesson of *extended comparativism*, which re-questions the protocols of “axiological neutrality,” founded on the postulate of a secularization that would be irreversibly tied to modernization. Within the *double bind* of contemporary conflicts (and their political instrumentalization), “culture” and “religion” are almost never separable (especially not in the form of a “culture of reference” that would underlie the Western institution of *laïcité*). But nor can they be identified using familiar terminology, if it is true that, on the one hand, we are dealing with processes of socialization within which, even in a conflictual manner,

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28 Taylor: 1994; Kymlicka: 2000; Bhabha: 2004; Hall: 2008. Pour un tableau comparatif : Fistetti: 2009.

29 Danièle Hervieu-Leger dates from the 70s the diffusion of the expression “return of the religious” (*La Religion pour mémoire*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1993). The terminology of the “return of the sacred” is used particularly by Ashis Nandy (see “The Return of the Sacred. The Language of Religion and the Fear of Democracy in a Post-Secular World”, *Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture 2007*) (<http://www.soscbaha.org/downloads/Return-of-the-Sacred.pdf>).

hybridization or “creolization” is the rule, forming the very condition of the invention and transformation of forms of life, while, on the other hand, emerge true *points of untranslatability*, which refer back to the irreducible heterogeneity of the symbolic representations of the human (or “anthropological differences”: the role of sex differences, the communication value of bodies, the meaning of life or survival, of illness and death, the hierarchical classification of crimes. . .).

We clearly see today that the projects of the “multicultural constitution” for democratic societies *considerably underestimated* the violence of religious conflicts (or at least religious at root) and above all misrecognizes their nature. In fact, these conflicts are not opposed *particularisms* (in which case the “solution” would consist either in their separation under the aegis of a superior, transcendent universality, or of their integration into a syncretic “spirituality”) but *are incompatible universalisms*. However, this in no way implies that the question can be subsumed under the alternative of either a generalized “war of religions” to be relegated to “private” space by means of the reiteration of the “sovereign moment” of the institution of national public power or else an “ecumenism” or “interreligious dialogue” into which would enter only the voices of those who define themselves as a “community of believers,” subsuming the political determination under their narcissistic self-definition. The truly political level (which in another context can be called the challenge of citizenship) appears wherever social determinations—which are strictly speaking *neither cultural nor religious*—overdetermine every articulation of the different mechanisms of collective identification. Contrary to the dominant media representation, no “religious conflict” in the world today has “causes” that are essentially religious themselves. This is why the “Marxist” category of *ideology*, insofar as it implies, at a minimum, the structural combination of several scenes—each of which is an “absent cause” for the other—can appear anew as an indispensable heuristic framework. Here we are (just as with respect to “externalities” in economy) on the threshold of problems of the third kind, transgressing disciplinary borders, whereas the search for categories with which to think cultural diversity pertains to the first kind, and the incompatibility of “codes” of cultural comparativism and religious comparativism pertains instead to the second.³⁰

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30 Here I am sketching propositions developed in my article “Cosmopolitisme et sécularisme”, an adaptation of the *Anis Makdisi Memorial Lecture* (American University of Beirut, 2009).

At any rate, my objective here was not to “resolve” any problem whatsoever but only to show that a determinate “conjuncture” (the one we vaguely identify by the name of globalization or the *second globalization*: the first having been determined by European expansion and the second by the “provincialization” of Europe) gives rise to the resurgence of conflicts of a new type that in the end probably imply deep questioning of the current status of “disciplinary” forms of knowledge”: not only from the standpoint of their explanatory paradigm but from the standpoint of their “cosmopolitan function,” which is partly responsible for their academic division.³¹ Let us not forget that this revision has at stake the possibility of thinking about the various forms of violence in the contemporary world, if not of actually reducing their uncertainty.³² Such revision needs all at once economists, *political theorists*, and anthropologists of a new type (and therefore formed differently).

Translated by:

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³¹ I am thus not in disagreement, at least in principle, with Wallerstein's thesis: the very definition of the “human sciences” is a function of a certain kind of “world economy” and of the politics that dominates it: this thesis does not lead to any relativism or scepticism but to a new articulation of critical and scientific elements within theory. See Wallerstein: 2006.

³² Balibar: 2010.

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