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What regime of knowledge to confront the worlds' complexities?

Quel régime de connaissance face à la complexité des mondes ?

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What regime of knowledge to confront the worlds' complexities ?

The historical context of a world in mutation justifies more than ever the importance of the SSH and the role they deserve to play. The world's changes have made it both enigmatic and opaque : enigmatic, because most of the main post-war political landmarks, the technical systems, the globalisation of the large corporations, the evolution of the peoples, their migration and their increasing mobility, the development of supranational entities, the regimes of knowledge and innovation have mutated.

Opaque because these transformations cannot be measured with the existing scientific tools. They require new research

configurations in which Social Sciences and Humanities are already involved.

Within this context, there is a need to address a new regime of knowledge for the Social Sciences and Humanities, to underline a triple requirement prior to any commitment in the scientific field, with a medium and short-term program, and all of that in accordance with the ‘challenges’ our societies are confronted with.

This triple requirement consists in a review of (i) the SSH’s own identity, (ii) the requirement for reflexivity that affects their epistemological base and their theoretical developments, (iii) the implication of the SSH in the mobilization of knowledge concerning other sciences in the light of technological and scientific programmes.

A plural identity

The SSH present a rich array of hypotheses, of paradigms, of methods and of pluralistic practices that are its strength. This diversity can be observed in objects, theories and methods envisaged by the various disciplines, such as the constant public reaction that is to be found outside academic circles. Such pluralism is a considerable asset for a society which is precisely aiming at being pluralist and innovative.

This asset is all the more important if it is accepted and valued as such, as a resource for post-industrial democracies and as a tool to help them to define and locate themselves.

The Social Sciences and Humanities are marked from the outset by the transformation of significations experienced in a universe of objective significations. Such a feature makes it interesting to realise the fact that we talk of both Social Sciences AND Humanities. The intent actually consists of reporting as accurately as possible the reality of human action in the world, whilst leaving open the question of being. Philosophy has played and continues to play a pioneering and essential role, thanks to the rigour of the questions it poses. The scientific approach and the interdisciplinary openings it creates amongst the SSH and far beyond, make the SSH appear as the 'natural spokesperson' for the sciences of life or the sciences of matter.

By becoming more and more autonomous one from another (philosophy, sociology, history, linguistics, etc.), the SSH respond to a logic of specialisation while diversifying the intellectual work and developing empirical surveys as well as data treatment methods.

The credit for this diversity is reflected in many ways and only a few will be exposed here :

- Research on artistic, linguistic, cultural practices and activities are linked to the understanding of the evolution/

transformation of our societies and of our cultures throughout the world. This ranges from the study of non-human primates to the cultural diversity throughout the ages, in order to grasp the emergence of our anatomies, our behaviours (locomotion on two feet, feeding habits, cognitives associated to language etc.), our structures, our knowledge.

- The historical sciences are able to bring a chronological depth, wide or narrow, to contemporary phenomena. They remind us that human societies have passed through major evolutionary phases, widely driven by technical and scientific innovations. The methodologies they implement try to objectify the past in order to restore its complexity. They offer the society the means to find a way through the various possible interpretations of the common past.

Social sciences, in a general way, are focussing on the new realities and the new representations of the territories, on the new forms of appropriating the spaces (the world's urbanisation for instance) on the various shapes of life together, with the threats on social cohesion, on new facets of governance and political mobilization, on the interrogations about canonic procedures for establishing democracy and the springs of economic life appearing under Janus's double face : the face of omnipotence and the face of social and political imbalances that it generates...

Far from weakening the SSH, the wide variety of approaches and methods has become a very positive asset since, while emphasizing the singularity of their respective epistemological base, they have reached the point where they are now competing amongst themselves and with other sciences.

Their pluri disciplinary in this task of unheard-of mobilization leads to innovative configurations and concrete responses to the questions asked by current societies, with an indispensable attention to the new demands of the democratic dialogue whereby the citizen is the 'stakeholder' of science.

A demand for reflexivity

The work for identification comes together with a permanent reflexive work on production conditions, on testing the knowledges themselves and on their status in a democratic society. The SSH's new configuration must be marked by the ability to do this reflexive work. Room has to be left for re-orientations and sometimes for the radical re-defining that might result from it for knowledge regimes. This is in order to apprehend the phenomena and complex systems that identify the 'challenges', and to overcome problems thanks to the refining of critical tools – in the scholarly sense – all of which allows us to escape the illusions of an enchanted world, just because it is called that way, or to fall into the easy trap of ideological denunciation.

One of the contributions of the SSH is the demonstration that the economic phenomenon cannot be confused with the thinking patterns of the eponymous discipline. One has to clearly distinguish the economic phenomenon from the models that one calls ‘economic’.

This operation goes far beyond the traditional distinction between economic and social sciences. The division tends to keep the strict correspondence between phenomenon and model, whereas one has to accept that there are social models of the economic phenomenon as much as there are economic models of social phenomena.

For instance the phenomenon of financial ‘securitisation’, one of the amplifying mechanisms to the sub-primes banking crash, is not understandable if one simply wonders whether the titles were ‘well or badly evaluated’ by an economic model. It is as important to understand how the many actors and stakeholders, the listing of which is in itself a research object, could generate management rules, on a planetary scale, which made the ‘securitisation’ possible in spite of its disastrous effects. Only when this analysis is done can the question of ‘well or badly’ evaluated be asked and put into perspective according to the various protagonists in the phenomenon.

The epistemological mutation at stake is of the same order as the birth of chemistry for the study of matter. This has led to making a clear distinction between the phenomenon of ‘matter’ and the physician’s analytical models.

The mutation also explains with hindsight why the many attempts in widening the scope of economic sciences by adding other disciplines have not altered this discipline's central hypotheses. It is more scientifically relevant to assess that the economic phenomenon falls within several economic modelisations coming from economy, sociology, management sciences or other disciplines such as philosophy. The mutation particularly highlights two fields which are two major challenges for our societies : the corporate crisis and the mechanisms for innovation.

The implication

Intellectual innovation, the intelligibility our societies have of themselves, diachronically and synchronically, the construction and the development of democratic communities which are open and able to integrate the past into the present without forgetting the social constraints, are the decisive result of research within the SSH. And it is this social usefulness that founded the place of the SSH in the 18th and 19th Centuries, in the wake of the Age of Enlightenment and was continued when the modern disciplines were born.

In that way, the supposedly 'applied' research in the SSH is more of an 'implied' research. The categories and the hypotheses must be tested on historical and social situations and on interactions between humans. The latter then re-appropriate the categories and hypotheses, which in turn

become parts of the social life. In the final analysis, these implication abilities for making hypotheses on social life guarantee the research validity.

Even in the most formalised theories (economics for instance) the test-bench of the theoretical bases remains of this type. The “fundamental” research cannot pretend to be a simple ‘application’, which would be ancillary. The supposedly ‘applied’ research to this or that issue of society is only fertile if it is an ‘implied’ research, which would also allow for a review of the base of the problems.

To take an example, innovation demands : a) to think about how revealing such a test can be if using implicated research. b) without letting social prejudice hinder the creativity of the innovative processes since, c) innovation comes from society as often as from the researchers, who must therefore be mindful of the alterations in the constraints that these shoots of social innovation can bring with them.

Creativity implies what some people have called ‘free research’. Indeed if research hypotheses are modelled according to the current representation of the social issues, their conformity to social situations will bring no validation as it will have been preconditioned rather than allowing for a free trial.