

PRECARIOUSNESS AND SOVEREIGNTY.

A philosophy of everyday life in the digital society

SUMMARY OF THE HABILITATION THESIS

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At the end of 1999, I was finishing a PhD thesis that I worked on at that time for almost seven years, devoted to hermeneutics and phenomenology of everydayness. In the more than 450 pages of the thesis, I treated the everydayness as one of the major concepts of contemporary philosophy, in the precise sense in which it can be a faithful barometer of the transformations of philosophical thought, but also of the contemporary world itself. In fact, the entire doctoral research was animated by this preoccupation: how to follow the dynamics of philosophical reflection in resonance, in harmony or in rhythm with the dynamics of the world in which it is born or continues to happen. That's because, on the one hand, I share the belief that we never think outside of space and time we are, that we are determined in the form, tonality, and direction of our thinking by the socio-cultural configurations of the world in which we live. On the other hand, however, the accelerated transformations of the planet require increasing efforts to discern between what is lost in the infinite flow of ephemerality, being the object of journalism hungry for sensations, and what turns into a tendency announcing dimensions of the future.

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After this PhD thesis, my research developed in three major directions, namely two main directions and one transverse direction.

1. Theories of public and private spaces

The first direction continued a promise made at the end of the last chapter of the doctoral thesis, dedicated to the analysis of the daily space. It had to develop the study of space in its social, cultural, and political dimensions. The fulfilment of such a promise and what followed were the subject of extensive further research and have now allowed the realization of the first part of this work.

I announced then that the project that continues the doctoral research must develop the general problem of the social space, and this for several reasons.

The first reason was found in Michel Foucault's idea, after which "the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time. Time probably appears to us only as one of the various distributive operations that are possible for the elements that are spread out in space"¹. The gain of time being already a constant of the present world, after modernity imposed it as the supreme norm and value, the battle is being fought today not so much around the gain of space, itself known in all its planetary and increasingly interplanetary extension, but of the

¹ Michel Foucault, „Des espaces autres”, in *Dits et écrits*, vol. IV, Gallimard, 1994, p. 754 („On Other Spaces”, *Diacritics*, spring 1986, p. 23).

production of spaces: social spaces, individual spaces, public and private spaces, work and loisir spaces, real spaces and virtual spaces, production and consumer spaces, economic spaces and political spaces, all in stratifications that make the distinction between them impossible, and in which the victory belongs to the one who knows how to manage this ever-new and always unpredictable mixture and to extract from it profit (primarily economically, but also politically, culturally, academically, etc.).

Secondly, space seems to be the unfinished work of modernity, the unfinished project of a world that has long fed from its own utopias, from the projection in an ideal space without place, or in a place of all places, from which the very residues of the products of existing society (inequalities, deprivations, marginalities, etc.) are purged. It is also an unfinished work through the gap with the global project of desacralization of modernity; at least in Foucault's view, shared by numerous other contemporary theorists, space remains the main repository of the remnants of sacred elements in individual and collective existence in today's societies.

Thirdly, we have seen a convergence, or rather a similarity of concerns, of the different disciplines for a new discussion about the space within the great cultural and scientific nowadays discourses. Finally, the fourth motivation of the research project concerned the need for an applied study of the daily space which must take as its object the society in which we live, in this case the post-communist society. The changes that have affected this society in recent years, as well as the possibility to understand its evolution in the years to come, can also be addressed by exploring to the spaces that (and in which it is) articulate(d) this society.

These reasons indicated both the directions and the internal structure of subsequent philosophical preoccupations. The first direction was the very study of the battles that are being fought today around space, especially around public space, and its borders. I tried to explore the birth, transformations, and definitions of the public space and, correlatively, of the private space, but also to understand the public space, more and more, as a stake of the cultural, political, economic, media battles. In other words, like a power stake. Although power was not a preoccupation of doctoral research, I quickly understood that we could not practically debate about the major transformations, visible or invisible, of our world, unless we introduce the variable of power as a force of transformation and control, as one of the major criteria that introduce separations and demarcations into our individual and collective existence, between majorities and minorities, between normal and abnormal, between domineers and subjects, etc. And many of these demarcations are themselves spatial, materialized, built in the places we practice every day, in our cities, in our monuments, streets and squares, in the shape and arrangement of our houses.

2. The condition of life beyond the everydayness

The second direction of research that developed from the doctoral thesis concerned the condition of social life beyond the daily life, between the possible exits from this everyday life. If human existence is fixed in the stability of everyday life (through anonymous, repetitive practices, through work or by assigning modest but safe meanings), this stabilization always remains fragile, provisional: on the one hand, it is always threatened by events (biological, natural, social, economic, political, etc.) that bring it into the proximity of death; on the other hand, a human existence reduced to dailyness is often felt as insufficient. Its meaning is lived as deficient, repetition wears out, anonymity challenges the certainty of existence, work exhausts physically and mentally, and the security of the minimum

meaning acquires in time the form of a lack of meaning. Hence then the need, the impulse to find a sovereignty of existence, as a possibility to access, even momentarily or temporarily, a higher meaning.

In other words, sovereignty and precariousness constitute the extremes of human life, those extremes where life enters into an absolute tension with the right, more precisely with two rights, which are the absolute limits of any system of law: according to classical definitions, *sovereignty* is the attribute of that person or court that enjoys a *right of life* (and death) over its subjects. At the other extreme, we can define *precariousness* as the place (or moment) of human existence in which it claims its most elementary right: *the right to life*.

A direction that has therefore also developed through the reflection on the unfinished project of modernity and on the political dimensions of sovereignty and precariousness, in relation to the question of power and the other major concepts that articulate around it. It was the assumption from which I started when I spent a good part of the working time of those years to the study of biopower and security, to the study of fundamental rights and, above all, of the right to life, sovereignty, authority, legitimacy, as many themes that allowed me to develop not only individual research, but also ambitious collaborative projects under the generous auspices of the academic Francophonie.

3. Contemporary philosophy: figures, concepts, becomings

The third work direction, a transversal one, followed the wanderings of philosophy itself and the research on its major contemporary texts, with its guiding name, vocabulary, and its renewed syntax. Therefore, research on the history of philosophy, especially on its recent history, has been constantly accompanied by repeated translation exercises. For the study of philosophy is inseparable – especially in a transition society like the Romanian society – of caring for the renewal of the philosophical language and of bringing into Romanian language not only new questions, but also ways of answering, of stirring up dialogues, of creating ideas to introduce them into the philosophical conversations of our time.

If I were to briefly summarize this series of philosophical events that testified in the written texts, I would say that it unfolded three intertwined interrogations, never completely distinct, but still never perfectly coincidental.

The first interrogation concerns the *authors*: what are the names and contemporary figures that I can summon to inspire and guide me in exploring the philosophical landscapes of today's world? How did authors like Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy impose themselves in such a dense landscape of twentieth-century philosophy, and what is the legacy they have passed on to us?

The second interrogation concerns concepts: what are the tools that these authors, or others, invented or adapted – creating new concepts like "engineers" or crafting old concepts like "*bricoleurs*", as Claude Lévi-Strauss would say – to describe the transformations of the current world? How can the vocabulary of a philosophy with a universalist vocation, but which is still written in national languages, be approached and how do these languages communicate with each other? Where is the Romanian in terms of its linguistic and stylistic ability to renew itself according to the recent developments of our societies, sciences, and discourses? And how does it communicate with the great philosophical

languages, how does it adapt to the new conceptual challenges and to the new vocabularies, to the new styles of speaking and writing that are circulating in the world today?

Finally, the last series of questions concerns the realities themselves: how do these authors and their refined tools help us to understand the becomings, to accompany them without cramming them into metaphysical or speculative schemes, to capture them as becomings, not under the species of any moment, of any imposed or enticing configuration, but as streams of meanings circulating freely between provisional states?

4. Perspectives: for a social philosophy in the digital age

The last chapter of this work announces the perspectives of the development of my research in the coming period. They will draw their lifeblood from the cultural experiences of the years spent in European and extra-European multicultural environments, as well as from the profound transformations of our world in terms of social thinking, communication, and digital interaction.

And here too, three will be the work plans in the coming years:

a) **the study of multiple modernities**, of different versions of interpretation of the past, present and future in various geopolitical and cultural horizons, after the fall of communism, after the end of colonialism and apartheid. The experience of the stay in Africa and the long collaboration with African colleagues have allowed the formation of a sensibility to address some of the major themes of extra-European, African thought, which I seek to concretize by discussing not only the specifics of this thinking, but also the relevance of its themes to the whole world. Terms like “brutalism”, “frontièrization” or “universal hospitality” will surely return to the debates of future years

b) **the study of digital ontophany**, thereby understanding the increasingly important presence of artificial intelligence, digital objects, and algorithms in the existence of contemporary societies. Such research must identify the political dimension of AI development, the ethical and social dimensions. Politically, we will ask ourselves, how do we jointly decide our future in which artificial intelligence will play a major role? What are the public policies by which we will ensure that A.I. does not contravene the elementary political and legal norms of living together? From an ethical point of view, does the debate open to the identification of those values that can determine individual and collective sensibilities so as to protect human dignity and avoid the suffering of others? Finally, in its social dimension, AI must not create additional inequalities, discrimination, exclusions, or ruptures between members of a community. Will I then try to research in the least way is the transition from private life as a space of protection to private as a fulfilment of individual freedom, as a space of possibilities to control what must be made public and entrusted to others? Where do the borders of the private life move? What about the intimacy? What else deserves to be hidden and how much do we choose to show from who we are? How much has the space of intimacy narrowed and what is it that pushes us to expose ourselves to strangers the most intimate experiences and moments of our existence?

What finally becomes relevant to us, in the specificity of philosophical analysis, is the relationship between digital individuality and digital sociality (or sociability). I will look precisely at the possibility of an ecology of attention, through which this vital dimension of the human psyche can be extracted

from the circuits of the digital flow and cultivated, protected to allow the human being to develop in a balanced and creative way as a social being. In other words, how can we interrupt the permanent flows and impulses, the notifications, to free the sensorial cortex from the pressure of external stimuli and allow the human psyche to regain its fundamental functions?

c) **the project of a social philosophy** that is about to be elaborated constitutes the transversal research project in the nearest future. I will develop a work plan in which interrogation refers to the human being as a social being whose (good) life does not depend nor on the personal qualities cultivated with a *coach* or thanks to a manual with magical solutions, or on the political, legal, and economic principles that govern a society. In other words, there is space between the state and the individual (between politics and ethics) for social and sociality. And this place was described (in not always positive terms) by Hannah Arendt in her monumental work *The Human Condition*, but also by other great philosophers, such as John Dewey, Axel Honneth or Francis Fischbach.

I will adopt two perspectives in this project: the first regards the human being as a vulnerable being and a being capable of suffering, especially suffering coming from society. What are the concepts of social philosophy that allow us to understand this vulnerability having vital and social origins? The second perspective assumes the Kantian hypothesis of the necessary exit from the state of minority by overcoming fear, laziness, and cowardice. When does the social person become a major man (or woman)? And what are the implications for the quality of social and civic life having the courage to become a major person?