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Deleuze bashing.

Par Hervé Regnauld. Le 28 avril 2015

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About ten years ago (in 2004 exactly), one of the last paper issues of *EspacesTemps, Les Cahiers* focused on the epistemology of social sciences. Many articles dealt with anthropology, sociology, geography and history. A few others adressed transdisciplinary problems, such as scale, and some explored interdisciplinary methods : objectivity, qualitative science, analysis…

At the end of the issue, a general bibliography referred to Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Bouveresse, Bas van Fraassen, Hilary Putnam, Michel de Certeau, Jürgen Habermas, Bruno Latour and others who can be considered important for thinking a wide and open concept of « social sciences ». However, this bibliography also included specialists of the epistemology of one science only : Paul Claval for geography, Antoine Prost for history, Maurice Lagueux for economy…

Interestingly, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Félix Guattari, Willard van Orman Quine, John Dewey, Paul Feyerabend and Peter Sloterdijk do not appear. Was it possible to think social sciences in 2004 without concepts such as « territorialisation », « epistémé », « différance », « empirism », « ecosophy », « change of paradigm », « foam, bubbles and spheres » ?

Today, Deleuze is everywhere. Almost any theoretical paper in social sciences quotes an extract from one of his many books (or from the ones he wrote with Guattari). However, one sentence never appears : « Ni Guattari ni moi ne sommes très attachés à la poursuite ni même à la cohérence de ce que nous écrivons » (Deleuze 2002, p. 387).

This sentence points to the main epistemological issue in social sciences. Thinking social phenomena is not equivalent to being coherent in explaining them. Social sciences are not sciences that are determined by laws, but sciences that (among many other aims) have an original and specific goal. They aim at producing a result that has some value for the studied object, the social system. When an ecologist writes a paper about sea birds, no sea bird will ever read it. When a social scientist writes a paper about peri-urbanisation, some people living in the suburbs will read it. Even when an historian writes something about the Roman Empire, present readers will eventually think anew their own relation to heritage or today's politics.

What Deleuze means is that the first quality of contemporary social sciences is to be convincing and to open space for criticism and discussion. A coherent thought is a closed thought, a closed system, a solid paradigm, that — as everyone knows — will one day be left behind and replaced. Conversely, an interesting idea must be able to help people to « produce subjectivity ». Therefore, an interesting idea for social sciences is an idea that opens debate, not a theory that encloses society into a model, a law, a system, a territory or a certain behaviour.

Nonetheless, Deleuze is also a great lover of paradoxes, so when he says that social sciences should be like this and not like that, he also adds :

When philosophy compares itself to science it sometimes puts forward a simplistic image of the later which make scientists laugh. However even if philosophy has the right to offer an image of science (through concepts) that has no scientific value, it has nothing to gain by attributing limits to science that scientists continually go beyond in their most elementary procedures. (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 154)

Deleuze and Guattari perfectly assume an important fact : the relation between philosophy and science is not comparable to the relation between two sciences. Philosophy thinks about sciences as sciences are one among many tools to create knowledge, but whatever philosophy thinks, it does not have a top-down effect on the sciences.

Thus, if social sciences do not *need* (according to Deleuze) to be coherent, they still may find it *useful* to be coherent sometimes. They do not have to follow a theory that would have been elaborated by philosophers. And so we are left with an interesting challenge : as social scientists, we may think of our work with or without Deleuze. In this sense, could we also think of our practice with or without Latour, Habermas, Putnam, or Bourdieu ? Who are, today, the important thinkers of social sciences ? Or, more politically, why should there be important thinkers ? Why not only a multiplicity of scientists and no leaders ? This is the question *EspacesTemps.net* wants to ask.

Bibliographie

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