We Have Never Been Modern (Enough)

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Abstract

This article offers a philosophical-political commentary of Jason Ā. Josephson Storm's *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* **(2021). We welcome Josephson Storm's integrated interdisciplinary distillation and ambitious ethico-political perspective, but we also point out the necessity to go further in the cross-disciplinary theoretical effort to rebuild a** *post-* **postmodernist academia. In particular, on the basis of a historical-epistemological approach we identify the very modern/postmodern dialectic as problematic, and we contend that a materialist philosophy able to rethink politics and non-human agency through** *all* **the sciences would better serve the project. We also highlight how the metamodernist project might benefit from the adoption of a Simondonian approach insofar as the conceptualisation of both biology and technology is concerned. Finally, we end with a plea for an ongoing vigilance of the material conditions of possibility that support cutting-edge inter- and cross-disciplinary research, for they are fragile and need institutional and societal support.**

Keywords

Gilbert Simondon; Gaston Bachelard; political philosophy; modernism, postmodernism, and metamodernism; historical epistemology; materialism

Introduction

Jason Ā. Josephson Storm's ambitious new book, entitled *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*, aims at a *critique* of modernity through and beyond its post-modern *clinic* ("a philosophical therapeutics" performed dialectically, in a sense). Its focus is a very welcome methodological reflection on the epistemology of the social sciences (Josephson Storm 2021: 18). Its timing – despite the Author's own complaint about the proliferation of "turns" (3)[1] – is dictated by an urgent and shared need of methodological awareness when huge amounts of data are being collected, tracked and elaborated, reality mocks the outdated categories we vainly use to make sense of it We recognise the urgency and

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[1] Unspecified in-bracket referencing is from Josephson Storm (2021).

endorse the volume's goals entirely, which makes of us co-workers rather than competitors in what we believe can only be a collective enterprise.

The book indeed is systematic in the best (modern) philosophical sense: it has theoretical ambition ("metamodernism aims to provide a new grand synthesis"; 8) and it carries an ideological fight that names friends and foes ("draws on and allies itself with current works of feminist theory, critical Black studies, postcolonial theory, science studies, queer theory, and environmental studies"; 7). Such broad philosophical and political agenda takes on board both the analytical and continental traditions, but the A.'s starting point and interlocutors are mainly analytical philosophers or anglophone students of French theory. Hence our sometimes perhaps too continental "objections" that will follow. They are meant to touch and reflect upon – and hopefully contribute to – most of the topics covered by the A.: the modern/postmodern framework, ontology, epistemology and semiotics, process social ontology and axiology.

Modernism and Postmodernism Inside Out

The category "postmodern" is less the description of a philosophical tradition than the mark of an Anglophone incorporation of some aspects of continental thought. In this sense, within the very philosophical tradition that Anglophone academia names "postmodern" there is no such a thing as a "postmodern" philosophy. In fact, from a continental perspective the label is usually rather dismissive of a naive Anglophone misunderstanding and oversimplification of continental philosophy as such. From such prejudiced (continental) perspective, the book may look like an attempt to overcome an impasse that only ever existed in the (Anglophone) eyes of the beholder. Resisting this prejudice, we would like to take the categories "modern" and "postmodern" as useful insofar as they define two – apparently opposed – forms of one single ideological attitude that has been hegemonic throughout what we see as subsequent waves of modernity.[2] What this hegemonic posture is invariably missing is the complex reality whose ripples are cancelled on a flat homogenising plan, whether made of one grand narrative or an infinite multiplicity of small narratives. For this reason, rather than seeking a "meta" modernity beyond modernity and postmodernity, we believe it more radical to analyse both as imagined *macro* categories that are part and parcel of said ideologically homogenising layer. Under this flat and reassuring layer, some studies have instead tried – and still try – to detect the moving line that marks the difference between science and ideology. This obstinate and rigorous carving of a line in the sand that keeps changing, we will aim to endorse and name here – with a very snobbish continental gesture – *philosophy*.

From such philosophical perspective, the modern-postmodern dialectics should be described in the present tense. "Modernity" stands for what is not (enough) an emancipation from the theological worldview, because it substitutes a God-ruled universe with the construction of ponderous theoretical infrastructures providing once-and-for-all a complete, capital- S Scientific representation (*epistemology*) of a "reality", itself reduced to the immutable laws and structures of nature (*ontology*). "Postmodernity" stands for what works – and we think the A. would agree – as an antidote to modernity via the emancipation from the myth of Science (with a capital S) as the neutral mirror of nature. But the antidote itself operates a similar reduction of reality to its imagination and symbolisation, although of a different kind: this time, we have to deal with an undifferentiated flux of discourses that will only be judged in relation to their effects, and never in terms of their representational content. Thus, following

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[2] We have described what we name "(hyper-)modern posture" in Bardin and Ferrari (2022).

our interpretation, *postmodern* "reality" is merely a linguistic game that performs the same ideological function of *modern* "reality" with other means. Modernity and postmodernity, which correspond respectively to the construction and destruction of the myth of Science as the "mirror of nature", both mark the cancellation of reality in its actual complexity, therefore sanctioning the loss of an opportunity to cope more effectively with it. If modern science did indeed disclose an infinite universe and canvassed the horizon for an indefinite development of knowledge, its long-term ideological effect has been the reduction of reality to its mathematical formalisation and of scientific knowledge to a metaphysically disembodied gaze. The postmodern critical attack on the metaphysical foundations of science, however, does not give us back the complexity of reality, but rather a complementary mystification of it. Both the modern and the postmodern approach hinder a clear understanding of the conjoined and seamless natural and historical processes (in fact, a natural-historical loop) our species is embedded in – including its cognitive performances, and science itself. In this sense, we claim we have never been modern (enough).

As it should be evident at this point, what the A. formulates as "metamodernism" works for us not as a dialectical overcoming of modernity and post-modernity, but rather as a gesture, the repetition of a very classical dialectic operation – closer to the Hegel of the *Phenomenology* than to the Hegel of textbooks, if Hegel needs be evoked – and topologically internal/external (or *extime* for Lacanians)[3] to both modernity and postmodernity. This philosophical gesture looks back into the past and is oriented by the present. It looks for the shining traces of a "dialectics of rationalist activity" under the opaque ideological narrative of a "continuity of the rational function" (Canguilhem 2000: 44). It is oriented by scientific research without the presumption of founding it. Therefore, our invitation is to become (actually) modern, exercising philosophy *throughout* the sciences. This is our version of an "exit" from both modernity and postmodernity which is in fact a commitment to repeat in our present a gesture embedded in the philosophical tradition. This loose method differs from many of those imagined in the 20th century. It does not mark the threshold of a new episteme/historical a-priori (Foucault), a new epoch of human thinking/spirit (Koyré), or a new paradigm (Kuhn). Many genuine philosophical attempts of the 20th century did stumble on the same imaginative act which resulted in a definitive, yet merely symbolic, solution to real problems that they had inherited from modernity, just changing its *Maître-mots*, in Jean-Claude Milner's words (Milner 1983). It is perhaps time to be *scientific* without believing in capital-S Science, to be systematic without sanctifying or sacralising a philosophical system, to choose and act "rationally" in this very limited yet realistic sense, that is, to finally become enough modern. And – make no mistakes – this can only be a collective enterprise.

Beyond Realism/Anti-realism, Hylosemiotics

It is with this purpose in mind that we would like to tackle the *vexata quaestio* of the relation between realism and antirealism the A. engages with when he tries to demonstrate that the "objects" of the human sciences are "mind-dependent/socially constructed" and, at the same time, "real" (Josephson Storm 2021: 40). Let us start by clearing the field from any sort of naïve empiricism or idealism. It is not by knocking on the table or asking the philosopher to deduce the existence of their pen, as Mr Krug famously provoked Hegel to do, that one can solve the realism/anti-realism conundrum. That a world "out there" – a mind-independent reality – does exist, is something even the bishop Berkeley would concede, as the A. himself reminds. When we label such outside reality as "material", we aim to oppose

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[3] A brief explanation of Lacan's concept is offered in Miller (1994).

any naïve idealism, but we also clearly differentiate our materialism from matter-of-fact empiricism, i.e., naïve materialism. A minimal materialist postulate is only granted when we talk about a mind-independent reality without assuming it as an empirical fact. Of course a reality is "there" independently of us humans, yet this is not the point. If philosophy is set to avoid spiralling into self-referential thinking, whether realist or anti-realist, it should first of all take into account what the sciences are also meant to do, that is, assuming the existence of a mind-independent reality without making of the empirical content of such assumption a mere matter of fact. Conceptualising this operation, yet at the same time avoiding the sterile never-ending deconstruction of the materiality involved in it, is precisely what a materialist philosophy capable of thinking *throughout* the sciences does.

If "realism" assumes reality as matter of fact, philosophical "anti-realism" – as a matter of fact – does the same: they each saddle us with their version of reality "as such". Anti-realism denies any meaning to the idea of a reality independent of representation, but eventually turns representation into reality as such. Realism denies the very existence of a gap between reality and representation, and fancies an immediate intimacy, possibly lost, pre-conscious, capable of accessing reality as such. The apparent realism/anti-realism dualism has kept philosophers busy for centuries and at the same time allowed them to quietly experience reality "as such" through the common-sense "immediate satisfaction" of the "immediate adherence to a concrete object, which is held like a possession and used like a value" (Bachelard 2002: 38, 238) and which fills the daily life of our existences. But this is precisely how ideology operates behind the scenes of the apparent opposition between anti-realism and realism, something which has little to do with science.

The failure of this common-sense experience (and of the realism/anti-realism dualism) is indeed the starting point for science. According to Gaston Bachelard, the experience of failure is transformed by science into a problem whose solution will generate the conceptualisation of a scientific "object" beyond the common-sense perception of it. Famously, no accurate knowledge of the law of refraction can prevent us from perceiving a broken stick in the water. Science can just provide an explanation of how that failure happens, and such conceptual explanation is part of the real process itself, which is the object of science. Science thus substitutes a passively *given* reality with an actively *realised* reality. Science does not invent an ideal world beyond that of real experience, but rather critically includes experience within the conceptual process that explains it. And this scientific critique, of course, can be applied to the concepts of science themselves when they settle into mere common-sense representations of reality and therefore become ideology. This is how we read the A.'s "immanent critique" of concepts (Josephson Storm 2021: 66-69) at the core of a "zetetic" knowledge characterising science in opposition to both (modern) absolute knowledge and (post-modern) purely deconstructive scepticism (209-235). What marks the moving threshold between ideology and science is the intrinsic work of the latter towards a *reinvention* of "reality" against the constant attempt of the former to *preserve* its common-sense representation of it. Scientific problems can always be solved, and their solution entails the institution of a rational-real order in which new problems emerge, and so on. In this sense, science grows out of ideology, and ideology is only recognised as such by science, but science is always involved in an ideological battle in which reality is at stake.

Because reality is everywhere in this conception of the practice of science, we believe the object of the sciences cannot be described in terms of the apparent dualism mind-independent/mind-dependent, which only works at the level of common-sense experience. The objects of the sciences are always "real" and, at the same time, "constructed" – and not only "socially", but also "scientifically" – insofar as they depend on the process of their construction in which natural, cultural and technical factors are so entangled that any opposition of these terms barely makes sense anymore. That is why we cannot

accept the A.'s distinction between a realm of nature or mind-independence and a realm of culture or mind-dependence (40), but we fully endorse his "naturalistic" and "non-anthropocentric" decentration of semiotics as "hylosemiotics". The A. shows how far hylosemiotics can make good use of the *linguistic turn* and move beyond it in a direction that also skips the *impasse* of "much of" New Materialism's critique to "typical accounts of agency" (23-24). What the A. presents as a new theory of sign and meaning different from classic structural linguistics, is a "theory of how things, living and non-living, act on each other – not merely in their material effects, but in how they take on meaning" (162-163). This idea has implications that deserve – and hopefully will find – space for further discussion, because it aims for a broadening of the concept of language that we believe is a crucial epistemological task of philosophy *after* the linguistic turn. We will limit ourselves to a provocation here.

What if it were precisely the *de*-humanising practice of science what allows a fresh and *non*-anthropocentric gaze on the world? What is more *un*human (this should be taken as a compliment here) than science? What allows for the experience of a world without (human) subjects more than the – anonymous and impersonal – scientific construction of reality? As early as the late 1960s, French philosopher Alain Badiou provocatively wrote: "There is no subject of science. Infinitely stratified, regulating its passages, science is pure space, without inverse or mark or place of that which it excludes. […] universal by right, shared delirium, one has only to maintain oneself within it in order to be no-one, anonymously dispersed in the hierarchy of orders. Science is the Outside without a blind-spot" (Badiou 2012: 172). Why not endorsing this provocation, and assume that only the radical de-humanisation of 'language' carried on by scientific formalisation may open to the experience of a world shared by all sorts of acting and communicating processes and emerging subjectivities, human and non-human, that is the world we actually live in? This would not be a "broadening" of just the concept of language. It would be, more radically, its subversion. It will be less about translations between languages, than about translating within a language subverted by science. How would the A.'s "hylosemiotics" stand to this challenge without finding its own allies past, present and future? Not only there are a few precursors whose processual ontology and epistemology will help support this project (some of which will be named below). We also believe all the sciences should be recruited in this fight, human and not.

Process (Social) Ontology, Epistemology, and Politics

On this basis, we welcome the A.'s invitation to "scholars in disciplines who have been working to fend off criticisms of their central categories (I'm looking at you, political science)" (22), and entirely subscribe to his plan for a critique and rethinking of *mainstream* (political) concepts. If the most striking ideological misstep of modernity was probably the reduction of reality and its knowledge to a series of stable structures, it is because the latter would tend to reproduce and perpetuate themselves at the ontological as well as at the epistemological level by colonising the political sphere. Hence the project for a political alternative that would emerge from and be committed to a different kind of ontology and epistemology. It is in this light that the *process social ontology* to which the A. devotes the second section is, for political philosophers like us, the core of the book, and also helps make sense of the more explicitly ethical and political implications sketched in the conclusions. Such project counts noteworthy precursors.

Next to the A.'s reference to Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, our canon to bolster this purpose would definitely include Gilbert Simondon's *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information* (G. Simondon 2020; for a short bio see N. Simondon s.d.). Simondon's effort to set out the conditions for a science of individuals through the processes they emerge from and contribute to – rather than a knowledge of such processes as a result of individual interactions – was inscribed in a vast ontological

and epistemological horizon. Simondon's project for a new foundation of the human sciences (especially psychology, sociology, and anthropology) was not only related to "borderline" sciences like ethology and palaeoanthropology, it was triggered by and based on a broader reflection on the ontological and epistemological status of the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology, etc.) (G. Simondon 2020: 674-699). The adoption of a Simondonian approach would highlight the clear proximity the A. stresses between biological and social categories (Josephson Storm 2021: 93), but it would also go so far as to show the close connection between social categories and the categories of physics, which the A. often seems to rush to put into a reductionist and mechanistic box. In the conceptual framework we are trying to sketch here, a process social ontology should not define any alleged singularity of the human sciences, thus surreptitiously reinstating some sort of metaphysical exceptionality of human beings within nature. However, it should not even support amateurish attempts to draw fanciful analogies and random connections that would solicit inferences supposed to enlighten one field of research through half-digested truths drawn from another one. A process *not-only-social* ontology is rather an opportunity to frame the categories of *each* science with care and precision, with particular attention to their ontological relations.

Indeed, ontological proximity entails no epistemological identity. Only a careful philosophical reflection on the rigorous work of all the sciences – which makes the A.'s work especially noteworthy as far as the human sciences are concerned – can lead to a conceptual invention capable of mapping the characterising elements of singularity in each scientific practice, including "political" science. A political concept will never be the purely arbitrary elaboration of one or another scientific concept in this scenario. The millenary discussion on the collective "body politic", for instance, will only be part of the history of ideology (theological as well as biological), and definitely ruled out for science. Far from us the idea of denying the significance of the history of political thought (thus undermining our own job!) in determining the intricate ideological *and* scientific genealogies of these concepts. But the philosophical gesture we are advocating is one of invention: based on genealogy, it goes beyond that.

It is from this philosophical political perspective that we believe one should engage with the elements of ethics and politics the A. develops in the last part of the book. We entirely agree with the A.'s call for a conjoint consideration of the epistemological and ethico-political level, but we would even raise the stakes. The non-separability of the epistemological and political level implies more than recognising and regulating the political factors intrinsic to all reflections on science, and even more than drawing a lesson for the political issues such reflections carry forward (236-75). The call for a connection between the epistemological and ethical-political levels marks for us the necessity of – finally, and against most political science – thinking politics *scientifically*.

Let us clarify. Thinking politics *scientifically* is not at all what most political science does. It does not mean reducing politics to the technocratic application of science, any science, and especially it does not mean reducing politics to economic science in its neoliberal form (Foucault 2008). Thinking politics scientifically requires the gesture of re-invention we mentioned above, a recurring questioning of scientific problems by the sciences themselves leading to the conceptual-practical production of a new reality, instead of a "realist" preservation of an allegedly given state of things cemented by "matters of fact". In this light, political science is ideological, and its categories are in fact ideological notions, because they miss precisely the singular and ever recurring operation of invention of reality that alone saves scientific practice from immediately crystallising as ideology. Most political science rather patches a generic reality with its imagination of "matters of fact" and just pretends it works. And it does indeed very often work for short-term political purposes.

The kind of "surveillance" of the scientific invention of reality Bachelard (1969) invoked is, strictly speaking, philosophical. Such surveillance is pedagogically necessary – and politically, in a certain (*militant-in-theory*) sense; however, it rejects the idea of control over scientific practice. Its aim is to help prevent science from metamorphosizing into ideology. In that sense, we believe philosophy and political science *together* can indeed inform a scientific practice capable of inventing its own purposes. This "together", however, should be open to chance and oriented toward the invention of a new reality, and not based on certainty and performing ideological "control" over the existing state of things. From this perspective we may well read many recurring diagnoses of the crisis of democratic institutions and the pathologies of neoliberal governance as symptoms of the emergence of a reality whose understanding escapes the very (ideological) notions that are built to reassure us of its unpredictability. What we need is rather the invention of new concepts and a new reality by a – modern enough – political science.

Conclusion

Given that we are not the ones writing a book here, we shall keep our conclusion short and somewhat banal: science is good because and if – thanks to technology – it stays in touch with reality and does not become a self-referential symbolic system like organised religions tend to do. Philosophy can help the relationship between science and reality work, by keeping ideology under control. This does not mean that most of what has ever gone under the label "philosophy" or "science" has not, in fact, very often worked as ideology. Indeed, "modernism" and "post-modernism" have been used here to name two failed philosophical attempts, but also to suggest that an alternative philosophical gesture has run through both. The A.'s "metamodernism" is a warning not to repeat the same mistakes, to which we will add our warning that includes a rehabilitation of the modern and post-modern attempts to do so, as well as a critique of the (meta)modern hybris. This may help save metamodernism from one more re-appropriation of a genuine philosophical gesture by ideological symbolism. But, to be fair, saving metamodernism is not our purpose. What we want to save is a philosophical gesture that is always new but cannot be original, because it can only be an historically determined and collective enterprise.

From our perspective what is to be saved – that is ethically and politically reproduced – are the material conditions of possibility of the philosophical gesture this book also performs. These emerged once, and may disappear (cf. McCauley 2011: esp. 280-286). They will not persist thanks to a human essence, nor under the umbrella of imagined super-human entities, but through the material construction of a variety of ways of being human within nature, and consequently of thinking while embedded in a physical, biological, technical, and social reality that is the root of the subjectivity that "builds" nature as an object of science. The material conditions of possibility of philosophical thinking to which this book testifies should be taken care of against those who struggle to eliminate them, and especially against the suicidal drive of a philosophy eager to detach itself from science and politics because it has been disembodied in the first place. An academic discipline without a real subject becomes soon without object and without purpose. If the sleep of reason produces monsters and its persistent wake causes hallucinations, may philosophy help reason take a refreshing nap and then each time wake up in its best shape: rigorous yet unpretentious, sharp yet empathetic.

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