**Relearning The Art of Paying Attention: A Conversation**

**Martin Savransky & Isabelle Stengers**

1. **Philosophy as a Provocation of Thought**

**Martin Savransky (MS*)****: The first question I wanted to ask you has to do with the manner in which you do philosophy, in the sense that the concepts that you create, develop and experiment with, always resist the temptation to tell others what to do. In fact, at the very beginning of your “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” (994) you begin with a question that I think resonates with this. You write: “how can we present a proposal intended not to say what is, or what ought to be, but to provoke thought?” So what I wanted to ask you is, how would you characterise the importance of this challenge of creating concepts that provoke thought, rather than instruct others on how to think?*

**Isabelle Stengers (IS)**: Well, probably you never know why you do what you do as you do it. I mean, it may be that others are better placed to answer this. But to me this cannot be disentangled from the reason I did become something called “a philosopher.” In fact, at the beginning, I did not even know about philosophy. When I left chemistry, I knew that in chemistry there were “good questions,” concerned with advancing knowledge, and any other question would not be considered serious. And to me philosophy was just the place where I could learn to craft my own questioning path, a place where nobody could tell me “but this is not philosophy!” just as I had been told “but this is not science!”

Now, the wish to craft your own path may be very dangerous if you entertain the ambition to instruct others! It is all the more dangerous if, as an ex-scientist, you feel that you have a “mission,” that what you are to craft is what is lacking either to scientists or to philosophers, or even to both. Happily, I rather felt as a “refugee” having to learn what my new country enabled me to become. And it is when I discovered the texts of Deleuze, first, and then of Whitehead, that I experienced questions that provoke thought rather than demand answers; or, in other words, that I experienced philosophy as an adventure that I did not know existed. It was no longer a matter of asking “my questions” but of engaging with questions that *get me.* [Laugh]. And my loyalty as a philosopher is to such questions.

So, if I dislike it when the concepts I create end up being used with a kind of authority that makes them an answer without the insistence of a thought-provoking question, it’s simply because the reason I became a philosopher was precisely to resist that! [Laugh]. This is also the reason why I don’t usually spend a lot of my time criticising others, because that is still to engage in a certain kind of authoritative gesture. You cannot criticise such ways of doing philosophy without in fact entering into the same kind of game. For me, it is better to just avoid them. Or else, to attack, but then it is because you feel something ugly is entering the world and you need to put this threatening ugliness into words. For instance, I feel that there is something ugly in the current Anthropocene fashion, when suddenly the trouble with the climate is turned into an academic opportunity.

But mostly, I try to never separate a proposition from the problematic path from which it resulted, situating it in an open-ended story, not concluding it. In a way, I am continuing an experience I had when I was very young. I always felt stories were too short, or too poor. What happens then? The first response was to feel sad, alone in an environment that was too easily satisfied. But now I ask: who is killing those stories? How do they kill them? In this way, you may criticise the operation of authority but from the point of view of what it is *doing.* So, it is a pragmatics of making stories more risky, interesting, shareable, of producing effects which you cannot dominate but you can learn with and learn from. Very strangely, the term “learning,” learning with or from, is not so common in philosophy. I would never say I’ve read Kant in such a way that I can state this with any authority, but I don’t think “learning” is a word he uses a lot. [Laugh]

Thus, an instruction is always a story cut too short. The kinds of concepts I learned from Deleuze or Whitehead are not a matter of instruction. They cannot be cut in the format of a discursive argument you have to master. Learning in this case means being provoked into thinking, and if this is not what you experience, it is better to leave them alone. Maybe you will encounter them again later. In this sense, I loved Donna Haraway’s idea of “cat-cradling,” which means that you are activated by someone or something into intervening, and produce a motif that is a bit different– even if you do not necessarily wish it to be different– because if you were just repeating the same points then you would not be activated, you would just be satisfied. Cat-cradling is for instance what I have been doing with Bruno [Latour] for a long time, and what Haraway has taught me to name. I think it is the kind of “working together” which is adequate to philosophy, and which is also deeply different from science or any other practice, because there is no referee that can intervene in that game without also cat-cradling with it! [Laugh] Whitehead wrote that Western philosophy may understood as a series of footnotes to Plato. An ongoing set of footnotes upon footnotes, indifferent to the will of some philosophers to close the series. The only way to close it is to kill it, to try and fix the metamorphic aptitude of concepts which are ongoingly transformed by the feeling and thinking they themselves transform.

**II. Cat-Cradling with Truths, or The Speculative Gesture**

**MS***: It occurs to me that one of the threads through which you have pursued this metamorphic ability of concepts relates to the particular way in which you address the question of truth. For instance, you wrote recently that to cultivate a “humor of truth” is to come to terms with the sense that “if it is not in our power to access the truth of our reasons, it is also not in our power to condemn as a mere artifice the efficacy that supposes and simultaneously intensifies the capacity that, for Leibniz, makes us into rational souls– the capacity to expose our reasons, to put them to the test of that from which they have been abstracted.”* (Stengers, “L’insistance” 10) Would you say that it is perhaps here, with this humour of truth, that the question “What is philosophy?” might connect with the pragmatic question of effects, a kind of cat-cradling with consequences?

**IS**: In one way or another, philosophy is embarked with the question of truth. Or more precisely, it has to respond for unleashing this question, a question I do not think we can put back into the bottle, but only try to civilize. Post-modernism and post-humanism are not the ways to do it, nor is any other “post,” again and again bringing with it a very classical “we now know better, and too bad for the naïve, backward people who still ‘believe’ in….” This is the consequence of most academic “turns,” the cheapest kind of truth, just good for the academic market. The humor of truth is not cheap because it means caring not to add to the devastation that comes with the idea of an equivalence between truth and the defeat of illusion. It is the lesson I learned on the occasion of the so-called science wars, and the devastating avalanche of aggressive stupidities it triggered. The humour of truth is a situated art, an art of the artifice, which cannot but frustrate truth-warriors. Its ancestor is indeed Leibniz, who was accused by his countrymen of not really believing in anything (“*Herr Leibniz glaubt nichts*”). The compass of Leibniz, which is also James’ and Whitehead’s compass, is the trust that wars mobilizing in the name of truth demand the kind of simplifications which arm contradictions. Demobilizing truth has nothing “post” about it. It rather calls for adding to the issue a dimension which will not bring peace but will disentangle a conflict from its relation with truth-claims. As Haraway would say, we have to side with some ways of living and dying and not others. This may well be the case today more than ever. , But we do not need to turn this engagement into a crusade, thereby keeping the issue simplified, which means also to prosecute as traitors those who would complicate it. So, indeed, what I resist is those sad generalities where you are always right, and each time you’re right, the world is poorer. In this sense, it is a pragmatic, and it is a pragmatic of what we demand from what we call “truth.”

**MS***: Yes, a pragmatic of truth, and perhaps also an intervention in the cat-cradling that truths themselves weave together with the present. This is also at the core of what you understand by “speculation,” is it not?*

**IS**: Exactly! The weaving together of truths with the present is a beautiful way of saying that if you are able to add a dimension to a situation, it is because you are not the author of the addition. The motif you weave is what the present enables you to add to the truths you intervene upon. While cat-cradling with Haraway in a French context, she added “*Soin des Ficelles”* (care for the threads) to her SF series (science fiction, speculative fabulation, scientific fact, string figures, speculative feminism…). To me it means “do not cut the threads”– honor the way you are indebted in order to escape the triumphalist ring of truth. We do not need to judge away the past as if what we are adding to it would somehow be what it was missing. We have to inherit it together with the possible it conveyed, to make it denser and more indeterminate in order to inhabit a thicker, ongoing present. One of the worst academic habits is the remark that somebody else has already produced something similar to what you are proposing. Well, one would hope so! But instead of stopping at the triumphant effect of recognition, what would be more interesting is to comment (in the sense of thinking-with) on the insistence of what is trying again to become audible – the changing accent it has acquired, the present-day situation it connects with. For instance, nothing is more stupid than all those philosophers who “recognize” the current proposition by Bruno Latour about modes of existence and their instauration as the return of Wittgenstein all over again. This is to not take care of the thread, because it does not lead to enriching Wittgenstein, to problematizing him. What if instead you were to imagine Wittgenstein reading Etienne Souriau, the philosopher of instauration?

As for speculation, I indeed take the word as related to a way of thinking which challenges business-as-usual explanatory frameworks. I take it, that is, as a mode of thought which endeavours to activate what might be possible against the safety of probability. Speculation comes from Latin, speculators were spies, or scouts, or guards on a watchtower; not a contemplative activity but one of the lookout, of resisting reassuring appearances, not in order to go “beyond appearances”, or to escape illusion, but because such appearances rely on the confidence that what has mattered will go on mattering in the same way, which is what makes probability calculus possible.

**MS***: So this indeed suggests that what you associate with speculation bears little resemblance to what often goes by that name today, right? I mean, there is surely a common enemy in Kant, but that doesn’t make you partners.*

IS: Not at all. I am not haunted by the need to overcome, one way or another, Kant’s subject/object division, or his philosophy of finitude. I rather inherited Whitehead’s speculative proposition as an exercise for the imagination, an exercise actively separating what seems to be given from any explanation or definition which would give it a supplementary stability or authority. For instance, at the beginning of *Thinking with Whitehead*, I associate speculative thought with the story of the 12th camel, which makes peace possible when war between brothers seems the logical outcome of the father’s last will. The camel added to the eleven ones to be shared will not itself be shared but it makes the sharing operation possible. This operation had an implicit undetermined dimension which, if taken for granted, would have led to war. In the same way, conceptual wars are fought between objective causality and free subjectivity (including alienated one because alienation means the possibility of freedom), but causality has an undetermined dimension too, which belongs to the question “how does a cause *cause*?”. Whitehead speculation gives to the “how” a pivotal role all the way down – any coming into existence has to determine how it will have been caused. Thus, the double powers of sovereign freedom and causal determination crumble together. So, what I learned from Whitehead was not some speculative vision, but rather a speculative *gesture* demanding not to stay with a problem as it is usually formulated, but as calling for the addition of relevant dimensions. The camels’ story may be misleading here. The point is not to solve the problem, but to make it more interesting. To produce a new appetite for what may be possible. Now the call for “speculating” after and in spite of Kant is all over the place, and I don’t feel connected at all with this. I’ve learned from Whitehead how to let Kant rest in peace, and instead remember that it was during the eighteenth century that the first “speculative bubbles” exploded. When Kant says that it is better to have a hundred Thalers in your pocket than to have the idea of them, perhaps he was also thinking also about such crashes. Thus, to claim speculation for philosophy is to claim it as something whose relation with truth is complicated, non-innocent, with nothing natural about it. Just like the relation between speculation and making a living in an honest way, with an honest wage, is complicated. To me it matters that philosophy not be confused with moral, honest, correct thought. To try and think with the consequences is to accept non-innocence, all the more so as claiming innocence comes to ratify the silencing of those who will bear the consequences.

**MS***: This is also perhaps another dimension of associating philosophy with a “craft,” in the sense that it is no longer a matter of stepping back and contemplating from without, but about situating it– philosophy has to go out and play in the mud.*

**IS**: Yes indeed. At least you cannot just dream of innocent truths! I mean, *we* cannot. There are many epochs and meanings of philosophy, the meaning for Plato, for medieval theology, and so on– each time it is a new throw of the dice. So, each time there are new threads connecting and complicating the game. But I think that modern philosophy, being contemporary to colonization, to witch-hunting, to so many eradications, cannot dream of innocent truths. Philosophers may be tempted, but I would say we cannot afford that any longer. We need what Haraway would call “response-ability.” We cannot play the innocent and produce conceptual ideals warranting our innocence. Accepting that we are in the mud means that living is dangerous, and thinking is dangerous. So, indeed, speculation may be dangerous! [Laugh]

**III. Relearning the Art of Paying Attention**

***MS****: And is this where the importance of the art of paying attention comes in? In your In Catastrophic Times you suggest that “[w]hat we have been ordered to forget is not the capacity to pay attention, but the art of paying attention. If there is an art, and not just a capacity, this is because it is a matter of learning and cultivating, that is to say, making ourselves pay attention [faire attention].” (62) Doing a bit of cat-cradling with this myself I was struck by the fact that there seems to be a very interesting thread connecting “paying attention,” or “heeding,” and its etymological association with “providing shelter.” As if it was indeed, perhaps, an art of constructing shelters where the logic of stability and scalability would allow for none…*

**IS**: Yes, yes, it is all the more relevant if one takes into account Anna Tsing’s –to whom I owe the scalability idea– pointing to the destruction of ecological refuges as what may contrast the Holocene with this damned Anthropocene. After devastations, refuges were the starting point for regeneration, or resurgence, not coming back to the past but connecting threads again. Today the world is full of refugees, but there are no longer any refuges. To come back to my case, I would not find a refuge in a philosophy department. “You intend to learn? But what do you think! You have to arm yourself for the competition with your colleagues about subjects liable to be published international journals.” It is everywhere the same, a general mobilization for the war of all against all. Thus refugees become a burden we can no longer afford.

The art of paying attention also connects with something Whitehead (16) takes from unnamed sources, that is, the Cromwell cry: “My brethren, by the bowels of Christ I beseech you, bethink you that you may be mistaken.” The cry is probably echoed by the Whitehead who read William James, and it communicates with an immanent art, because there is no answer to the question “to what should we pay attention? And with what consequences? What are the dangers?” Paying attention means slowing down and accepting that intrusive interstices open up even in the midst of an urgency. For Whitehead, life itself lurks in the interstices of our reasons. Sheltering what lurks is not claiming that the reasons are bad, this is not what Cromwell cries. Rather, it is wondering that maybe something has been muted, that we need a suspension to entertain the possibility to throw the dice again. I call it an art because it needs a ritual in order to foster this possibility. And this is very interesting when we do it well and with joy. This is not about being critical or reflexive, this is not about looking for an imperfection, about playing with arguments. It is just creating the occasion – a rather Quaker art, to “bethink,” to pay attention to what may lurk.

To me it is important that it be an art, and not the manifestation of an imperfection. Perhaps the initial idea or reasons were indeed quite good, but maybe there is something more important! [Laugh] This does not mean that everything will ever be taken into account, that attention should be paid to *everything.* There is also no guarantee that what will be obtained will be better. It is a matter of a cultivation of our reasons, of feeling together both what they do to the situation and the fact that they do not demand our submission. I remember an occasion, when I was the president of a commission asked to award a price to the best science documentary film, and we proceeded as usual, each listing our own appreciations individually and then summing them up to produce the list of winners. I then asked the others, “are you satisfied?” Nobody was satisfied! [Laugh] So we shredded the pieces of paper and I said, “now we can talk!” But I could not have said it before people had understood, as did I together with them, that the list resulting from the summing up was meaningless. It was neither bad nor good, it was meaningless. Talking together had to happen as a second step, or people would have rejected it. But when we did talk together, a strange and joyful trust had been obtained, and we agreed on a list which made sense for all of us. This was improvised but it points to the need for rituals. Talking together is not “normal,” it must be achieved.

**IV. Problematic Trajectories**

 *MS: Speaking of cultivating reasons and developing problems, how would you characterize the development of the problems that your own work has opened up? How do you see your own work transitioning?*

IS: I think that there may have been a double, but coupled, transition. One of the transitions was probably marked by the unleashing in the media of the Science Wars. In fact, at the very beginning of *The Invention of Modern Science*, which I wrote in 1993, I anticipated the possibility of such a confrontation. If only the critics had proposed that science was a practice *among* others! It would have opened the question of what is proper to each practice. But no, they had to claim that it is a practice *like* any other, which implied that they already knew how to define a practice. I discussed this issue a lot with Bruno Latour, but he did not see the point. He would answer “no, no, scientists are on our side. It’s only epistemologists who are the problem.” Indeed, he never wished to insult scientists. For him metaphors or constructions were positive –not critical– characterizations. But what I knew was that for experimenters the very point is to be able to claim that what they propose is *not only* a metaphor. Bruno privileged terms like enrolling, or recruiting, because it could be used both for humans and for non-humans. The issue is that, for those experimenters, recruiting humans is easy, while *experimentally* recruiting microorganisms is an event! So, one of the themes of *The Invention of Modern Science* is the theme of the event as opposed to the general epistemological question. It happens that in a lab a non-human may be enrolled as a “reliable witness” in an argument. But this reliability is a matter of collective concern – this is what Latour now proposes and could be endorsed by scientists! The event which makes for the specificity of experimental practices is the possibility to claim that no competent colleague’s objection has succeeded in defeating the claim, in proposing alternatives showing that the so-called witness may betray its role.

But when the Science Wars really happened, the level of stupidity and nastiness was overwhelming. I remember that one of the papers I wrote was concerned with the question: “What about peace?” What I attempted was to address this question in terms of a peace that was not just a levelling of differences, but a matter of creation. The point was no longer science as such but what I called “practices” in a speculative sense. Because no peace was possible if practitioners did not accept presenting themselves together with what matters for their practice. This is speculation indeed because it supposes that practitioners accept letting go of any general reference, like rationality or objectivity or human progress, which indeed makes them stupid and arrogant, that they present the very specific and demanding character of what matters for them, of what they count as an achievement. This is the very gist of the idea of an ecology of practices. In turn, what I call a practice is not a matter-of-fact socio-epistemological category. Many so-called sciences are unable to give up such references. Thus, together with the concept of practice, what I was envisaging was the possibility of different alliances between critics and scientists who would openly refuse the opposition between “objective science” and “subjective opinion.” Not a frontal clash, rather an acid attack dissolving amalgams. I would say that I don’t know *what* difference such alliances can make but I *think* they would make a difference. They may make a difference, for example, regarding those who would judge the destruction of scientific practices as ‘well deserved’ because they understand sciences as a mere tool for industrial development and the state.

And this may be my second transition. Because of some students of mine, I was recruited to an anti-GMO demonstration which ended up in court. A bit like the actual Sciences Wars, it activated my imagination about consequences– here the consequence of what is called the “knowledge economy.” Practices, as I defined them, may be destroyed, and the knowledge economy means the systematic, ongoing destruction of practices. I had to resist the acceptance by some of these activists that sciences are, by definition, serving capitalism, because accepting it would mean that the enslaving of sciences by the knowledge economy was in fact not destroying anything, just dispelling an illusion – that sciences were always slaves. I came to insist that we should never accept any destruction by capitalism as well deserved. So, what are the consequences this makes? Again, I cannot define them. But it means resisting Marxism when it claims that such destructions open the way to socialism. Here I set out to engage with Félix Guattari’s *The Three Ecologies*, and began to try and learn to think to re-situate the question of peace, but from the point of view of devastation. Ours is a devastated world. About the same time, I also read the neo-pagan witch Starhawk. So when we wrote *Capitalist Sorcery*, it was really about that, I mean, the need to learn how to collectively protect ourselves from this devastating machine.

There are then two steps – the notion of “practice” was related to this peace to be created, and then this connected to the sense that in capitalist times, peace could hardly be thought. It was also the beginning of the time when activists claiming that another world is possible reclaimed the struggle that so many militants had deserted. For me it was important to think with activists, while I had kept my distances from militants, for whom my way of thinking was rather the enemy, a “petit bourgeois” demobilizing approach. The very definition of mobilization, be it military or militant, is to pay no attention, to classify what may slow down as an obstacle. Activists, by contrast, were interested in transversal alliances. To propose an escape from the general denunciation of objectivity could open the possibility of such alliances. In that sense, the GMO event was very important because there were scientists who were siding with activists, adding their own charges against GMOs to the others without hierarchy. If I speak of an event it is because all protagonists became more intelligent because of the others, together with others, all actively learning about the kind of world we live in. This is one of the reasons why it made experts hesitate and stammer. They were unable to claim that those resisting GMOs were simply resisting progress. And the event is not over. Now I would say that I feel that I am curiously thinking together with many others, sharing a common sense of what might be possible and the need for what Haraway calls new narratives corroding the ones which divided us. I would say that as a philosopher I now present myself in a double way– as a child of Seattle, connected with the witches, and a child of the GMO event!

**V. We Have Been Devoured! On Civilizing Modern Practices**

**MS***: Would you say this is the milieu out of which your proposition to civilize modern practices emerges?*

**IS**: I would rather say that the proposition of civilizing modern practices has now acquired new resonances. First, with this idea that you cannot civilize a dead practice! [Laugh] It connects with themes like resurgence, regeneration, but also mourning– themes which belong to our epoch, the time of what is called the sixth extinction. But second, we now inhabit new intellectual and affective landscapes where one cannot simply take “civilization” for granted, as Whitehead, for instance, did, even if it was the decline of this civilization that haunted him. It is a bit like Bruno Latour’s *Inquiry into Modes of Existence:* he speculates about the possibility of civilizing our attachments, that is, of leaving room for others; something we never could do– we just “tolerated” them. And he trusts that maybe others will accept us as protagonists if we come speaking well of what we are attached to. I understand that because I do not think we can do anything else. We cannot know better than the others what they need, and so on. We can only try to understand how stupid and arrogant we have been! But I also think we have to go a bit further. The story we have to learn to tell about ourselves is not only a story which could satisfy *us*, but a story that might have a chance of interesting *them*. And this is what I have tried to learn from Tobie Nathan, as well as from Whitehead. Whitehead wrote about the power of ideas to animate our souls as Plato’s great gift; we could even say, as the gift that made us human. What if we accepted to take it literally, as Nathan would propose, and recognized that what, since Plato, we call ideas, were indeed beings, and beings of a new kind? What if the notion that “we are all humans” was indeed such an idea, making us a people among others, the “people of ideas?” The point then would be that, if I follow Nathan, other peoples know that those beings that make you a people ought to be honored, “fed,” or else they will devour you. Taking ideas as something “cognitive,” we instead honored ourselves as capable of explaining and judging what matters to others, and allowed ourselves the power to authenticate our ideas as true and rational! Perhaps to say “We have been devoured!” might be of interest to others. We have been devoured, not because we are who we are, but rather because the kinds of beings who made us who we are particularly dangerous beings, able to have us forget them, or take them for granted. Whitehead also remarked that after Plato wrote *The Symposium*, where he tells about ideas’ power to inspire us, he should have written another piece, *The Furies*, about what is unleashed when Ideas are not well-received. In this sense, “cosmopolitics” was already haunted by the danger of our goodwill, of our trust that if we get civilized, the others will accept our invitation to think together. The figure of the diplomat was born from this danger. The point is not to feel guilty but to keep remembering that we need to “humor” our ideas, to foster and nurture them, but never to blindly trust them. Which is also to say, we need to learn fright concerning what they may induce us into accepting.

**MS***: This recognition of having been devoured, and of relearning how to share, with others, the fright that those modern ideas and explanations induce, is where your work also makes interesting connections with current debates among anthropologists like Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Philipe Descola. How do you situate yourself in relation to those debates?*

**IS**: Well, Viveiros de Castro’s idea that the task of anthropology is to decolonize thought is a good way of relating to the choice that contemporary witches created for me – do I accept the lineage of the witch-hunter or that of the witches? This plays out not in historical terms but in those of today– learning to recognize the effect of the witch-hunter, learning to recognize the censorship, that in this world where thinkers seem to benefit from a universal right to critique, it is only on condition that they play the game of critique. This a dangerous place when you may be accused of being a dupe – then, as Starhawk writes, you can feel the smoke of the burning times in your nostrils. Obviously witch hunters are part of the past, but we, academics, know very well the strict conditions of our so-called freedom. We are allowed to critique whatever we feel like, as long as we conform to the “they believe/we know” master contrast. This is why Viveiros de Castro’s proposition about taking seriously animism exposes him to academic malevolence, while I do not think Descola’s quadri-partitioning puts him at risk. Certainly “naturalism,” that is, the way “we moderns” are thinking, is only one subset, but, as he himself recognizes, only a naturalist could propose such a partitioning. So we are safe - naturalism defining the whole landscape! We are still the ones whose problem is to define the others. Our historical position is preserved.

I am not an anthropologist. My problem, as a philosopher, is to detoxify our tradition; feeling the smoke is learning to pay attention to the way ideas get us. In this sense, I would say that I really love *What Is Philosophy?* by Deleuze and Guattari because the power of ideas is characterized in a quasi-ethological way, and so is the metamorphosis of thought they cause and the danger associated with this metamorphosis. This power is what made me a philosopher, and therefore I can understand how strange the effects are, and not be astonished that other peoples also cultivate strange adventures. I have absolutely no appetite to produce a philosophy of shamanism, but I am happy that shamans cultivate shamanism and I would wish philosophy learned to cultivate ideas in a way that also matters. It is about understanding ourselves in a manner where we are as strange as others. [Laugh]

**VI. The Condition of Diplomacy**

**MS***: What role does the question of diplomacy play in relation to what you’ve just said?*

**IS**: I think that there is one condition for diplomacy. This is, as Bruno Latour proposed, the difference between peace and pacification. This is really the test for the diplomat: not to dream of pacification, not to dream of the possibility of going beyond what divides, and of arriving at a place where we can finally remember that we are all humans. In a way, a mathematician at work is as strange as a shaman at work, and the fact that both are humans tells us nothing about the metamorphic power of the beings they associate with. This is why the relationship between a physicist and a mathematician can be very complicated, and the idea that they are all scientists or that they are all using mathematics will not just solve it. But the complication will become toxic if they do not learn to honor what makes them diverge from the pacifying norm. Diplomats, in the cosmopolitical sense, are those who do not address humans in general but humans as attached, as diverging, and they need to have protagonists presenting themselves together with these attachments. As such, they may also be agents of detoxification, dispelling the dream of pacification.

**MS***: It is interesting you would use this example because I remember you once telling me that one of the first instances when you started thinking about the idea of diplomacy was precisely in relation to the work that you had been doing with Ilya Prigogine…*

**IS**: Yes! But it was a retroactive realization. At that time my problem was to situate myself among Prigogine’s co-workers (and not be considered as Prigogine’s creature!). And for that I had to not dream that they would be better scientists if they knew a bit of philosophy. It was me who had to learn how philosophy could be relevant in relation to scientists, and I did not see them as lacking anything that philosophy as usual might bring them. So, indeed, being interested in what matters to them, and not looking for something that should matter to all of us, was a key. It was indeed a learning experience about boundaries and about how to exchange *through* boundaries. Not to cross the boundary, not to overcome boundaries but, given the boundary, to explore what could be exchanged. Tobie Nathan defines boundaries as zones of exchange. For him the Cairo of his youth was the very example of civilization, because of its constitutive multiplicity, implying the need to pay attention everywhere, never to take for granted that something should matter to all. No argumentation but careful negotiation– this leads us back to the pragmatic care for a non-devouring truth.

**VII. Thinking Together through Boundaries**

**MS***: That contrasts very interestingly with many current discourses on inter- or transdisciplinarity, where it would seem that what is pursued is indeed the dream of a pacification across disciplines, of an erasure of boundaries rather than an exchange through them.*

**IS**: Yes. This erasure can be the ground for a new kind of paradigm, not a Kuhnian one at all, which in fact corresponds to experimental selective achievements, but rather an encompassing one which institutes a deliberate, mandatory blindness with regards to the specific demands of relevance proper to the encompassed fields. What matters is an “it works” which corresponds to showcases, “look what it can perform,” together with speculative promises of technoscientific profitable innovations.

As many modern enterprises, the sciences as practices have now learned that the kind of achievement they aimed at is not needed if speculative promises are what matters. But it is important not to depict them as innocent victims. I would characterize the achievements we associate with modern sciences as cases where it seemed possible to have your cake and eat it, to claim that to do science was to understand, to “advance” knowledge, and to create new possibilities of aligning what was understood with what was called a development of productive forces. What is now part of the past is the old Baconian motto “obey and master.” Knowledge economy is about impatience, not depending on the making of the cake. Whatever Kant thought, a speculative cake will do if the point is to extract profit from the world. Scientists who try to resist to the destruction of their practices may wish to return to the making of honest cakes. But they often forget that the advancement of knowledge as they understand it cannot be disentangled from the devastation of the world. When addressing scientists about a slowing down of science, I fight against any nostalgia for the past. I even put into question the relation between knowledge and advancement as a toxic.

What does advancement demand and what is then explained away? Reading Anna Tsing’s *The Mushroom at the End of the World,*  I encountered this word which I have quoted earlier and which must have intrigued some readers of this conversation – “scalability.” She uses it to think, for example, about the colonial mode of production of monoculture plantations invented by the Portuguese in Brazil, which has meant eradicating local inhabitants, human and non-human, and importing in this “clean” environment both slaves and sugarcanes, which are both deprived of the possibility of doing anything other than what they are meant to do. They have created the first “scalable” enterprise, an enterprise proceeding in a way that can be reproduced at all scales, its extension making no relevant difference. Scalability for Tsing is the aim of any enterprise that aims at working definitions impervious to encounters, contingency, conjunctures, that deals with beings which “do not tell stories.” But to me this is also the very definition presupposed by the idea of an “advancement of knowledge:” the knowledge produced must keep its relevance whatever the circumstances in order to make a clean contrast between before and after. The privilege of scalable questions, able to escape the messiness of situations, has different consequences in the experimental sciences and in the social sciences, but everywhere it concurs to the devastation of the world. Even critical thinkers contribute, when they consider that “theory” allows them to take the wider view, impervious to people’s dubious commitments.

But this privilege also directly communicates with the ways sciences align their way of understanding with other institutions that also privilege scalability, namely the industry and the state. From that point of view, scientific knowledge is all but politically neutral; it can even be said that it is an anti-democratic knowledge *par excellence*, which normalizes situations demanding that people conform to roles that are already set for them. I’ve met this alignment so very often when a proposition, in medicine or education or whatever, is refused because it could open the door to something dangerous and not controllable. They will say “it would be a good idea but it is not a realistic one because we cannot” make the consequences of the proposition scalable, independent of the way people engage the situation. This to me adds a new dimension to an older theme, that of *la bêtise.* There is no word to translateit in English, but in my use, it refers to the active, nasty way in which those who feel responsible define a situation, saying “if only everybody was like you and me, but they’re not like that, thus we must…”

Mobilizing for the advancement of knowledge has been the very formula of the modern academic institution, which opposes not only always backward and dangerous opinion, but also the adventure of empiricism, what Tsing calls the “art of noticing.” Noticing is indulging in the observation of anecdotal features, if what is noticed does not open the road to a scalable interpretation (see the famous “serendipity”). The education of scientists perfectly reflects the inculcated phobic ignorance of a “messy” world which would demobilize researchers, have them “wasting their time” on questions which will not result in an “advance” of their discipline. And no amount of academic trans- or interdisciplinary formation can regenerate what education, selection, and evaluation have destroyed.

While putting into question the “core business” of science as an institution, I have chosen to keep the word “practices” as designating commitments which may be radically non-innocent but should not be defined as guilty, deserving destruction. Instead I associate modern practices with an unknown – we do not know to what a practice may enable its practitioners. What we do know is that, if there is a possibility of avoiding the coming nightmare, we do not need guilty, opportunist or repentant practitioners, but practitioners who have actively learned that, trying to overcome the mess, to produce scalability, their practices are liable, even prone, to add to the mess. We need practitioners who have learned what embracing the messiness of the world demands. To me a slowing down of science thus means another science, betraying its constitutive connection with the constellation of “advance-growth-development-progress” order-words, which parasites and poisons the demands of an effective democracy, not a pastoral art of guiding a turbulent herd. In other words, decolonizing thought, as Viveiros de Castro proposes, is needed not only with regards to “others” but also to our own institutions, and it demands what Whitehead associated philosophy with: the welding of common sense and imagination, the resurgence of commoning practices which give to an always particular –non-scalable– situation the power to have all those for whom this situation matters in diverging ways, thinking together.

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