Sławomir Magala

Jagiellonian University Cracow/Erasmus University Rotterdam (em.)

Cultural Twists & Turns (A Comment on Beilharz & Bartmański)

As Beilharz nicely put it, the fuss about culture boils down to the collective feeling that culture “allows us to obtain some sense of purchase on the practices of everyday life” (Bartmański).

Neither Beilharz in Australia nor Bartmański in Europe need to feel any restraint in praising the linguistic and the cultural turn in contemporary social sciences and the humanities. Their long lists of allies and academic strongholds is superfluous — we believe in the cultural turn even without evoking Jeffrey Alexander and Raymond Williams. This much is obvious: the essentialist materialists who believe in the iron laws of history written by the forces of production and their neo-Darwinian allies who believe that evolution unwraps the genetic codes and throws them against random but ultimately natural selections are in deep trouble, while transcendental idealists thrive. They thrive in academic research communities, among leftist public intellectuals and at the top of the literary hierarchies of the most creative story-tellers, the masters of our literary arts. Charles Taylor, who belongs to the top academic performers in the humanities, has recently written *The Language Animal*, in which he convinces us that language is at the heart of cultural creativity, which in turn is at the heart of both the sources of the self and of the secular age. Ernesto Laclau, one of the top cardinals of the left progressive church of neo-Marxian populists (let us add, intellectually superior to Agambens, Žižeks and Badiou), wrote *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, where he basically claims that no political mobilization is automatically determined by forces of production and property relations, since rhetorical construction of reality opens a playing field where everything is possible, especially weird class alliances with unpredictable outcomes: “Metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche (and especially catechresis as their common denominator) are not categories de-

scribing adornments of language, as classical philosophy had it, but ontological categories describing the constitution of objectivity as such”¹.

To close this triad of top academics, public intellectuals and novelists, let us quote Tom Wolfe, who, in his latest philosophical pamphlet *The Kingdom of Speech* trashes Darwin and Chomsky and ends up praising the creatively formatted word: “In short, only speech, and only speech, has enabled us, we human beasts, to conquer every square inch of land in the world, subjugate every creature big enough to lay eyes on, and eat up half the population of the sea”².

After which he delivers the final blow to this flawed story-teller, and an intriguing plagiarist of much poorer Alfred Russel Wallace, namely Charles Darwin: “Speech! To say that animals evolved into man is like saying that Carrara marble evolved in to Michaelangelo’s *David*. Speech is what man pays homage to in every moment he can imagine”³.

Viewed in this context, proposals of Beilharz are too narrowly academic, and critique of Bartmański, though basically sound, does not go far enough. To suggest that culture should be seen as *explanans* rather than *explanandum* (the rhetoric of social communications is ontologically active and more sovereign than Marxians and neo-Marxians will ever admit) should be acknowledged and duly praised. But to claim that “Human life is meaningful, and culture is the repository of meaning” (Bartmański) does not go far enough. The danger is not that culture will become everything (which means that it will be nothing specific to study) and that it will thus be a “messy” subject to investigate. The danger is that by failing to acknowledge that culture is both *explanans* and *explanandum*, we can forget about the ongoing negotiation of cognitive strategies (of which the unjustly ridiculed medieval scholastic argument about universals was a case in point). The danger is that we fail to notice that our lives are meaningful not because we simply have access to a variety of languages as if we had access to a cheap credit in a bank of values, but they become meaningful if and only if we invest in interactional and communicative action. If and only if we participate in a successful project of forging our own identity, if we network and act in complex social interactions and communications, which are frequently simply called “society” and “culture”, but which are bunches of intertwined huge streams of processes composed of events, the smallest building-blocks of a Whiteheadian “eventist” ontology. Hence the new need to counter the growing feudal partitioning of the academic research projects between cultural anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, methodologists, historians, etc. The final breakdown of the neoliberal hegemonic story-telling in global media — mass media, social media and the emergent volatile networks — offers a temporary window of opportunity to forge

¹ E. Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, London and New York 2014, p. 205.

² T. Wolfe, *The Kingdom of Speech*, London 2016, p. 165.

³ Ibid., p. 169.

the future of world exchange system as a less predatory generator of inequalities and bonfires of vanities.

Rotterdam, September 27, 2016

Bibliography

Laclau E., *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society*, London and New York: Verso 2014.
Wolfe T., *The Kingdom of Speech*, London: Jonathan Cape 2016.