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Language and History in the Pragmatism of Giulio Preti

GIOVANNI MARI

I

THE THEME OF HISTORY IS PRESENT THROUGHOUT *PRAXIS ED EMPIRISMO*, Giulio Preti's main work and the one I will consider in this article.¹ A long and important chapter of the book is devoted to "historical knowledge." There is also a constant attention throughout the work to the various dimensions of history, making history an absolutely necessary horizon for any interpretative analysis of it. History as a theoretical and cultural problem, as the condition and sense of human actions, is one of the major issues of *Praxis ed empirismo*, and provides the framework of meanings for all the main reflections contained in the book. In turn, this horizon places clearly in view the unitary meaning offered by the weakening of the differences and theoretical oppositions employed by Preti, whose purpose and absence of prejudice—were they not viewed from a perspective of fundamental principles—might seem merely eclectic. By placing the question of history—its presuppositions and intersubjective aspects—in the foreground, this weakening proves to be

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theoretically more justified. In fact, the intersubjective dimension just mentioned consists, first of all, of that common sense and language that tradition keeps alive and that, according to Preti, every theoretical discourse must ultimately be referred and in terms of which verified.

I would also like to specify—if for no other reason than to justify the thematic approach of the present contribution—that in my view certain theses, observations, and theoretical openings on the question of history (found in pages of Preti not directly devoted to historical knowledge) seem to be particularly interesting. I am referring in particular to chapter 6 in *Praxis ed empirismo*, “Individuo e società,” which stimulates and proposes philosophical arguments capable of raising issues and plans of reflection that are highly useful in the current discussions on a problem—that of history—whose importance is clear to all, but on which it is not easy to find useful or significant theoretical proposals.

II

It is appropriate to begin, however, even in a schematic way, with chapter 7, “La conoscenza storica.” I will do so both for reasons of completeness and because the themes and reflections contained in these pages are indispensable premises for an in-depth consideration of Preti’s thought, which of course goes beyond the concept of “historical knowledge.”

If we are to compare Preti’s research to what is generally recognized as the highest level of discussion on the question of historical knowledge taking place between the 1940s and 1950s, then we must consider the analytical philosophy or criticism of Anglo-Saxon history. Or, we may refer to the discussions, particularly French and Italian, on historical materialism and historicism (which are based on the writings of Popper); and to those catalyzed—and not only in Germany—by the writings of Karl Löwith dealing with the concept of secularization. We thus see clearly that the position of the Italian philosopher is notably original. With respect to the debate in North America and England, which began with the publication in 1942 of Hempel’s influential essay on the function of general laws in historical discourse and concentrated almost entirely on the question of the model of historical explanation, in Preti we find sensitivities and theoretical interests that are much broader and less formalistic, bringing philosophy into the difficult and dangerous terrain of developing an idea of history. In the continental debate—which certainly had not neglected that idea—after the crisis of the metaphysics of history there began to be talk of the “end of history” (I am thinking in particular of structuralism and

poststructuralism). Preti, however, used the experience and numerous results of the analysis of scientific languages gained in the sphere of logical empiricism to propose a double program: on the one hand, construction of a historical discourse formally founded and scientifically oriented, and, on the other, the redescription of a concept of history in which the safeguarding of the principles of humanism and praxis was combined with the rejection of all meta-physical teleology.

As is known, Preti was to attempt to fulfil this dual agenda starting from a positive evaluation of historical materialism, whose importance for historical knowledge he equates with that of Newtonian dynamics for classical physics (1975, 172–73). Marxism, in fact, at least in its original Marxian inspiration, appears to Preti as the only science of history available. He believes he cannot in any way leave it out of consideration, and attempts to construct a “regional ontology” of this knowledge in chapter 7 of *Praxis ed empirismo*.

III

How does Preti propose the construction of a “regional ontology” of history? What are the themes, difficulties, and qualifying aspects of this project of “analysis-construction of historical discourse as a scientific discourse” that should overcome the “anxieties of positivism and the dangers of rhetoric or nonsense of historicism”? And, above all, what is the comprehensive judgment to be formulated from our research?

I begin with the last question. The originality of Preti’s approach was not followed by equally original results and investigations. His unmistakable capacity for discovering and establishing connections and interactions between apparently distant or unrelated positions did not lead to a new, autonomous, and general theoretical formulation. Each of the different historical discourses that he brings into play tends to remain in its own sphere, and, considered in its own specificity, sometimes even overlaps itself (as in the case of the concept of “structure”). The linkages and theoretical familiarities determined in this way do not result in an appreciable in-depth analysis of the questions under consideration, even if they lead to an enrichment of perspectives that in turn are connected to a greater cultural pluralism and to a weakening of the differences achieved. Yet none of this appears to be capable of opening up original theoretical levels and perspectives.

The chapter, “La conoscenza storica,” can be divided into three parts. In the first part, Preti shows how “knowledge of the past” does not imply structures

entirely different from knowledge in general. In particular, he indicates “philological experience” as a possibility of “factual verification” of the formulations of historical knowledge. He also clarifies the conditions of use, in this knowledge, of categories such as “cause,” “prediction,” “necessity,” and “explanation.”

In the second part he dwells on the “pragmatic moment” of historical knowledge and on the notion of “process.” This moment is unavoidable, as is also the case in the natural sciences, where “causal connections are always and only sought with a view to what you wish to predict.” Valuation and intrinsic interest, therefore, do not lead to a “subjectivization” of historical knowledge. As for the “concept” of process, the use of which determines a “fundamental character of the regional ontology of history,” Preti explicitly credits the Idealists (he is thinking especially of Hegel) with having established that historical knowledge constitutes its own object, not as a *factum* but as a *fieri*. “A ‘process’ is therefore something that is thought (formulated, described, systematized) through a ‘concept’: a series of events that are not only successive but are systematized as *moments* within the unity of the concept itself” (170). The ideas of unity and process evoke the idea of “end.” Preti does not reject this idea, even if it is interpreted pragmatically as a “unitary concept for the description of a process.”

In the third part of this chapter, Preti presents an interpretation of historical materialism understood as a “humanism” in which “history comes to coincide with the self-production of the human being, and historical discourse with the discourse around this self-production of man.” This is a humanism in which “man” is the subject/object of historical discourse. Preti also intends to defend the most controversial aspect of this conception of history, *economismo*. In fact, he notes that this “‘making itself as a genre’ would be a mythology like any other” if it did not mean, first of all, the activity of satisfying its own needs through a work that, in certain relationships of “collaboration and cohabitation,” transforms the ecological conditions to this end. Nevertheless, notes Preti, we could call this “economism” simply “human experience,” *Erlebnis* in German (177), or the “global and fundamental life of the spheres of human intersubjectivity” (183). Something that somehow constitutes “undiversified basic experience”: the “intersubjective world in which we say that humanity is fundamentally and originally placed” (180) and from which its “historical situation” arises.

At the same time, it is necessary to emphasize two aspects of the above. The first is that the “economic” is the form or plane on which this passage from the undiversified to the determined historical is essentially realized. Indeed, in this

regard Preti defends the Marxist dialectic between “structure” and “superstructure.” In his own words, the conventionality and historicity of the “various universes of discourses” into which the world of culture is articulated must be explained with the “dependence” of those discourses “upon a vaster whole, which is the economic” (184). The second, which is presented as a full-blown philosophy of history, concerns the dialectic between forms and those contents into which the circular relationship between culture and life is articulated in time. The forms in which culture responds to the demands that life places on it in order to satisfy the development and the organization of the contents that are “anticipated and predisposed” in life are historical and transitory. In this framework of the philosophy of the history of life, historical materialism—and therefore the economic—is interpreted as that “regional ontology” that allows us to grasp those passages from needs to the realization of those needs that mark the transition from the undiversified to the organized in which consists the humanism of the achieved “historical situation.” Or, as Preti writes, “the economic is not a ‘factor’ or a ‘moment,’ an experience (in a limited sense) that awaits transposition into the forms of the intellect.” It is instead “the very global and fundamental life of human intersubjectivity whence emerge the methods, techniques, and schema in which the contents that life requires for its own development and organization are anticipated and predisposed” (183).

In this vision of things, characterized by the idea of a decisive weight of the “economic” and by a vaguely Spencerian reasoning, language is only one of the constitutive elements—albeit one of “fundamental” value—of the undiversified and original intersubjective plane. This plane is designated by Preti, as we have seen, as “experience,” “life,” “structure,” “common sense and language,” and as “tradition,” “purposes,” “values,” “emotional experience,” “institutions,” and so on. And while Preti—in keeping with twentieth-century linguistic developments—does not fail to point out that “language, far from *expressing* an experience, places, constitutes, and enters into that experience as a fundamental factor” (180), he also limits himself to recognizing the importance of language as a constituent element of intersubjectivity, particularly suited to interpreting and favoring the dialectic between continuity and renewal in which the “living tradition” consists.

IV

Regarding this type of reflection, as developed by Preti, whose point of departure was the problem of “historical knowledge,” what stands out is the

significance of the reasoning that he presents in the chapter “Individuo e società.” Here the philosopher does not remain within the confines of the question of the “subject of knowledge.” In sum, I would say that in this chapter Preti presents the outline of a very interesting *linguistic theory (or philosophy) of historical change*, which easily distinguishable from the idea of history contained in other parts of *Praxis ed empirismo*, particularly those presented in the chapter that we have considered on historical knowledge.

The fundamental passages, all included in chapter 6, that must be kept in mind for the purposes of our discussion, are the following:

1. That complex representation that for civil subjects of a given civilization is a “real objective world” is constructed through forms, categories, meanings, etc. that [. . .] are the “spiritual” patrimony of that society—a collective patrimony from which individuals draw, and must draw—in order to make a work valid or “successful.” (148)
2. In general, new ideas arise because they are formulated by one or a few individuals [. . .]. The Hero is not only a romantic myth: he is an ineluctable historical category [. . .]. The Hero feels and launches an “appeal” that leads to a breaking of the old frameworks and the creation of new ones [. . .]. Also the great “mass” movements, such as Christianity or Communism, came about through the “appeal” of one individual or a few individuals [. . .]. Hegel rightly thinks that being heroic is an objective, historical fact, not a subjective one [. . .] but the movement always happens through the way in which the objective spiritual situation is present, that is, perceived and handled, in individual operators. (144–47)
3. It is essential to repeat the methodological principle *that research and enunciations have different linguistic levels* [. . .]. Society constructs the “real world” through the forms of its discourse (or its discourses); one of these discourses, let us call it “philosophical discourse” [. . .], constructs the notion of “society,” understood as “a present subject of knowledge” [. . .]. Knowledge thus typically proves to be circular: every discourse (every “science”) presupposes a “given,” rather certain “givens”; but these are in turn “constructs” for another science, which in turn operates upon certain “givens.” Nor can it be said that with this you reach infinity [. . .]. (149)

I would like to highlight the *linguistic circularity* of the first citation. Here Preti thinks of the construction of the “real and objective world.” From the second, the *linguistic act*, that is, the “appeal of the hero,” Preti develops elements

of innovation and creativity that open up to change and historical advancement that can be introduced into the linguistic circularity. In the third, the diversity constituted by the “different linguistic levels” that come into play in discourses on knowledge causes a *plurality of worlds* that corresponds to the “complex representations” of every “real and objective world” constructed by intersubjective linguistic circles and innovated—this is important to note—by the linguistic acts of the “Hero.” In other words, the *circle and the linguistic appeal renew and reproduce the “spiritual patrimony” of a society, multiplying the worlds admissible by those representations that constitute its “living tradition.”* This obviously poses the question of the conditions and the modalities—also linguistic—in which this multiplication can occur, and, above all, the question of the unity of sense of this plurality of worlds and linguistic levels.

V

The three groups of questions posed by the above quotations are closely related to each other and represent the core of what we may refer to as Preti’s *linguistic humanism*. The first two quotations do not seem to raise particular theoretical difficulties. Yet, as we will see, with the third quotation, undoubtedly the most interesting and innovative, the discourse is more complex. In any event, in all three a precise idea of history is affirmed and articulated that is only partly, as already mentioned, reconcilable with that contained in chapter 7, “La conoscenza storica.”

In the first quotation we can identify a consideration of the historical and social, intersubjective moment, within the terms of a linguistic circularity. The representative construction of the “real world” gains its own objectivity on the same plane and through those same presuppositions that open up to the “validity” and “success” of “doing,” that is to the action of “individuals.” These presuppositions comprise the “spiritual patrimony” and the linguistic tradition of society: collective planes that individuals cannot neglect and in which they “obtain” the instruments (“forms, categories, meanings, etc.”) for the construction of the “real world” while, because of this constructing, an intersubjective value of their representing and doing is thus acquired. In other words, intersubjectivity, understood as tradition and spiritual patrimony, overdetermines the representations and actions of individuals aimed at reproducing and renewing this same intersubjectivity, in a circularity entirely represented and permitted by a certain use of the language that renews the “world” by reconnecting with the tradition in which countless other “real worlds” are deposited.

In the second group of questions the individual moment of the creation of “new ideas,” which typically are first “formulated by one or a few individuals” who break the “old frameworks,” is cast in relief. “Heroicness” is the historicity of this innovation, in the sense that the “call” set forth because of these new ideas is heroic when it possesses an objective meaning. The “Hero,” writes Preti, “is an ineluctable historical category.” The call he directs in the name of the new ideas for the purpose of a historical change that can be inserted into the circle of the construction of the “real world” with this linguistic act is indeed inevitable. The “Hero” is equal to the heroism to which the Hero aspires when the linguistic act, which calls for a new representation of the real world, is welcomed by the “masses” who verify the call’s intersubjectivity and historicity, thus contributing to the practical construction of a new world.

VI

The first two quotations therefore concern the question of the nexus between language and the process of history from the point of view of society, and from that of the individual as “Hero.” The third quotation in one sense presupposes the first two, and in another sense broadens their scope, seeking to identify a formal ontology of the mode of discourse of knowledge that might explain the pluralistic effects caused by the way in which the different forms of knowledge relate to each other reciprocally. If “civil men” construct their “real and objective world” through forms, categories, and meanings belonging to the “spiritual patrimony” of a given society, and if “Heroes” introduce new ideas into a legacy that breaks the “old frameworks” and produces changes in that world, then the methodological principle whereby the “discourse that analyzes a discourse is not the same discourse that is analyzed” has that construction and reconstruction of the world conjugated in the *plural*. At the same time, I want to stress that this methodological principal does not lead to the loss of a unitary sense for the pluralism of the worlds thus constructed. It does not matter whether the “validity” and “success” of such a construction are founded historically upon the tradition to which language and its meanings belong, or if they are subsequent to it because the linguistic innovations introduced by the “Hero” are accepted and come to belong to the “spiritual patrimony.” The fact remains that the various discourses in which the diverse worlds are formulated, represented, and constructed have the formal sense of the linguistic principle that regulates their pluralism.

As is known, this (methodological) principle establishes that “research and enunciations have different linguistic levels.” In other words, the “various discourses” of sciences are always placed in a given, even if not unique, relationship depending on whether a discourse is placed as an object or as a metadiscourse with respect to another discourse. The fact that this relationship is not established once and for all, but is *contingent*—its order and the sense exist, but the order of reduction and translatability is not given forever (in this case inevitably in a universal metadiscourse would reduce differences to transitory moments to be taken away)—ensures that the (methodological) linguistic principle guarantees a *plurality* together with an *order*, along with a respect for *differences*, also empirical, and the possibility of a *unitary* even if *contingent* (or, as Preti says, “circular”) sense. The *contingency* and *precariousness* of the order of discourses and knowledges increases the points of view of linguistic constructions and “real worlds” in a multiplicity of possible worlds and unitary senses. This capacity to see difference and unity together, starting with respect for the multiple and the need for sense, is probably one of the most enduring contributions of Giulio Preti.

The fact that the world is that which is opened by discourse makes the world dependent upon the principle of different linguistic levels. This, in turn, makes the world all the real, objective, and valid worlds that are opened by the various discourses required by this principle. This, in turn, presupposes object discourses and subject discourses: “givens” that are “constructs” for another discourse that operates on the “givens” constructed by still other discourses. But this pluralism is not without form: Preti refers to at least three: “pyramid,” “cascade,” and “circular” (149). The real world and all the discourses on which it depends acquire the sense of the possible forms in which the various linguistic levels are arranged.

But beyond the form, the sense appears identifiable if we assume, even if contingently (that is, not for fundamental reasons, but for pragmatic and historical ones), that a given discourse, the point of view of one world—for example, writes Preti, the philosophical one—is decisive. Even if this sense is a “construct” from the point of view of society and history, or, as Marx thought, determined by the economic, it can in turn construct history by assuming that society is a “given”: a point of view, I would say (and this is precisely what I have intended to stress from the outset of this article), in which the relationship between language and history is not simply established in terms of a “validity” or a “success” founded upon the “legacy” of the “living tradition,” but above all obtained through the free and creative,

“heroic,” ability of language to respond to the needs of the present in terms of representation, formulation, and construction of a new “real and objective” future world.

NOTES

1. Preti (1911–72) was one of the most significant figures in Italian philosophy in the period around the Second World War and for some years afterward. His works include: *Fenomenologia del valore* (1942); *Idealismo e positivismo* (1943); *Il cristianesimo universale di Leibniz* (1953); *Alle origini dell'etica contemporanea: A. Smith* (1957); *Storia del pensiero scientifico* (1957); and *Retorica e logica: Le due culture* (1968). See Pier Luigi Lecis, *Filosofia, scienza, valori: Il trascendentalismo critico di Giulio Preti* (1989).

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