

# The political significance of small things

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In this paper I would like to pay attention to two items:

- **First, to how I understand complexity, expressing some ideas through eight theses that summarize this understanding.**
- **Second, hardly touching the surface of human-social complexity, to do it from the perspective of that part of reality that we call Third World, and drawing near to it from the disciplinary problematic of the social sciences, specially political science. To consider complexity from the human-social standpoint means, first of all, to see ourselves - researchers - as people who participate in social life in a context, and not as transcendental subject owners of a privileged and neutral epistemological position that endows us with a definitive knowledge.**

## Understanding complexity

I want to summarize in eight theses some elements which I consider unavoidable when thinking about complexity from my position as a philosopher and citizen. I do not pretend that these theses point to how we are bound to think about complexity, but to present clearly a way to understand it; at least the way to which I feel myself committed. I hope that these ideas contribute to the shared thinking of the paper's audience.

1. We are immersed in a scientific revolution that has a public face. It is identified with the advances in knowledge in many sciences, but above all in three of them: in microworld physics, in biotechnology and in cybernetics.
2. This revolution includes, affects and transforms science, technology and the everyday life of human beings.
3. Besides its public face, the scientific revolution has another more intimate face, or, if you prefer, a private, underground, basic one: The change in the way in which reality is comprehended, in the notions of knowledge, objectivity, determination, prediction, and certainty. In a word, the ideals of science are changing.
4. I position the ideas concerning complexity as taking part in the core of that change in our ideal of rationality, side by side with other theoretical manifestations of no less importance. To me then, the ideas of complexity are part of a greater context

of ideas. Ideals are changing along with the ideas about complexity, but not only along with them.

5. At the present time, in my judgement, a new scientific rationality is breaking its way through in, at least, four directions that share concerns, ideas, desires and new ideals of Knowledge. The lines of rupture that I have been able to identify, although I suspect that they are not the only ones, are environmental holism, the Bioethics founded by Van Rensselaert Potter, the debates that arose from inside epistemology and, of course, the world of ideas that are invoked under the name of complexity.
6. The new, nonclassical rationality stems, on an equal basis, from the theoretical debates that took place inside science and epistemology and from outside, from the concerns and careful work of men of science and of citizens; stemming thus from both science and from life. If the new ideal of rationality is presented to us by the studies of complexity and by epistemology (as stemming from the theory of knowledge), Potter's bioethics and environmental holism have provided an outline from the practical side of life. This new ideal thus includes, as its sources and constituents, the theory of knowledge and the practice of knowledge. The scientific revolution is not a matter only of specialists, but has its place in homes, in the education of our children, in the forms of communication and life; we eat it and drink it, we embody it in our flesh and our bones, it accompanies us during our sleep and wakefulness. As specialists, many responsibilities attain us, but none of them are on bad terms with our condition as persons included in the social fabric, where we can communicate as equals. The condition of specialists is only one of the forms of our social connectivity, to which we dedicate most of our time and effort - true - but it is not the only one that links us to science and to the scientific revolution. Unfortunately, we often feel ourselves so committed with our professional viewpoints that we are not capable of a dialogue with other specialists and claim the privileged possession of truth; and, above all, we are not capable of dialoguing with everyone else, with the common man, who certainly is not a specialist, but has something to tell us, because he is totally involved in the scientific revolution. I do not refer to something abstract. I know specialists from a particular discipline who are uncomfortable, and even disgusted, because of the intrusion of a spe-

cialist from another discipline; it even seemed to me more than once that I heard Newton's ghost whispering: "Physics, beware of metaphysics".

The new scientific rationality does not correspond only to scientific concerns and interests. As such, the scientific dialogue has to open itself to human beings, it cannot continue showing them its back.

7. Among the most important ideas that share those lines of rupture I find the following five:
  - a. The questioning of, and the rupture with, the Cartesian ideal of an absolute separation between the subject and the object of knowledge. The opening of multiple ways to express knowledge in terms of relation, construction, design, and modeling.
  - b. The outline of a new notion of reality, conceived as a process that reveals itself and not as a final entity, 'done', 'finished', 'given'.
  - c. The reconsideration of determinism, causality and prediction; the change in the form and in the ideal of what these notions presuppose and in that to which they oblige us.
  - d. The recognition of values as components of human cognition and of its result: Knowledge; the deliberate intention of overcoming that absolute separation between knowledge and values. The understanding of knowledge as value.
  - e. As a consequence of the previous ideas, the demand for responsibility as a constitutive element of the production of scientific knowledges - epistemological responsibility as subjects, social and ethical responsibility as professionals - and with it, the reassessment and reconsideration of the place of ethics in science as an activity and in knowledge as its result.
8. I would like to summarize the notion of complexity in this eighth thesis. Complexity is not one; there are several complexities. And I find necessary to distinguish three approximations to complexity. First, complexity as science: the study of self-regulated dynamical systems - of their dynamics - from the most diverse disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. Second, complexity as method: the attempt to extract ideas that favor the construction of a method of thought and education inspired by the advances of what has become known to us through the particular research on nonlinear dynamics, self-organization and emergence. Third, complexity as worldview: the attempt for a new look at the world and at its relations, at man

and at its place in society, in life and in the world. Although all three approximations are, to my judgement, absolutely legitimate, necessary and complementary, I believe that to make no distinction in their different degree of generality produces more than one misunderstanding.

So much for my thesis.

### **'The small' in political thinking**

I entitled my paper "The political significance of small things" to call to the attention of the reader a peculiar item that is taking place in political science, although I recognize that it occurs also in social science thinking as a whole. I am referring to the privilege that is granted in research: 1) to approaches that pay attention to the realities of the industrialized North and, 2) to macro-phenomena and macro-processes; that is, to those that display themselves as decisive in the unleashing of historical events and political changes. In this view, small processes and phenomena - those that each day and over the long term contribute to political changes - are too often overlooked, as if they did not exist and did not have an effective significance.

You can refer in various ways to 'the small' in political thinking. One of them, obviously, has to do with what seems 'small' in comparison, due to its low frequency or relative importance. Another way, which particularly interests us here, refers to what is underrated, to that not deserving attention, because it is considered insignificant, casual or marginal; 'the small' as that which stays in the shadow, which is hidden, invisible, not seen, that which does not exist for social science.

The Third World is something politically small for a large part of social and political theories. In the dominant approaches, the complex reality of the non-industrialized world has been forgotten many times and at times caricaturized. Peripheral concepts, such as Third World, South, underdevelopment - often used as synonyms by political analysts - can be thought of as equivalent in political or analytical discourse precisely because they carry a negative burden that identifies them in conceptual proposals. They are what ought not to exist and as such are conceptualized and understood from this negative dimension, where the possibilities for something to emerge by itself as an alternative do not have room; because, for that type of scientific and political discourse they are a marginal and not fertile state of affairs - a flat negativity from which it is not possible to expect anything but disorder and disintegration, unless by the deeds of a sort of magical mystery.

Undoubtedly, the reality of inequalities, discrimination, marginalization, deficit and shortages,

social and economic wrongdoings that hides behind those concepts is undesirable and immediately motivates the aim to be overcome. The ideological tints of the specific proposals bring life and a face of their own to the different ways of overcoming that reality, which include the fascist extermination of the population in the new wars of conquest of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century, all sorts of reform, the ‘mermaid song’ of promised development that never comes and the proposal of social revolution, today postponed, but always latent, mobilizing, evoking and radical.

The conceptual distortions of approaches unable to apprehend the diversity of this Third World have even reached the point of constructing stereotypes, following which underdevelopment, the Third World, the South, the undesirable and that which can be done without, that which ought to be transformed, developed, modernized, democratized, liberalized and so forth, would be situated in that part of the political geography that lays outside of the territory of the metropolis. However, we all know that the phenomenal reality of this third-world-negativity can be found also in the internal peripheries of the territory of the centers of power. Identified there by the ruthless, immigrants, marginal groups, minorities, persons placed below ‘decent minimums’ and below ‘acceptable’ poverty indexes. In addition, the underdeveloped periphery of the system, the political-geographical Third World shows its spots of development, its pockets of First World, in the ‘industrialized’ and ‘developed’ megalopolis, as caricatures of what is possibly or supposedly attainable by all the periphery.

### Political science and political diversity

An alternative political science is urgently needed that distinguishes itself from the current fashionable political science. But when this pretended scientific and ideological aim is formulated as a cognitive and practical demand about a new political science, two obstacles immediately show themselves: Are we going to renounce the *universality* and *objectivity* of political and social knowledge? Political science ought to be thought of as one, universal and objective. Thus, political science seems positioned at an antinomic crossroads: to continue being a universal and objective science that does not recognize the vitality and diversity of the South, or to restrain its generalizations in the face of the inherent diversity of the realities researched.

Are objectivity and universality possible here? Or more precisely, if we would not wish to get rid of these terms, because of the epistemological affects that they arouse, what degree of objectivity and universality is possible in political science?

Are we really in the presence of a universal knowledge of politics? Or, have we considered as universal knowledge (resulting from the rationalization of a certain political statutes) a certain *status quo*, raised to the category of a transcendental cognitive universal? Since Machiavelli, political science has put before itself the challenge of avoiding the temptation of becoming a rationalization of power, or, like the power of one person or one group, a historical context or a specific society. However, the effort that has been made seems to have forgotten that the power of a certain *historical type* of society can be rationalized, and I fear that this is what has happened.

To avoid turning political science into a rationalization of politics and power - into a justification of the *status quo* - it is not enough to make an appeal to a transcendental cognitive universality, or to escape from adopting the ideological interests and compromises of the involved subjects. In my judgement, we should do just the opposite. That is, renounce a transcendental cognitive universality and consider the interests and the involved social subjectivity in terms of a limit; in a word, to consider in an effective way the diversity of the political world.

I say “in terms of a limit” because interests are usually considered from the viewpoint of what they make possible, of what they give an impulse to, of what they condition and foster. However, to take them into account epistemologically means, above all, to consider that those interests do not only induce political action and direct thought, but also encourage certain directions through the presupposing of ends and the delimitation of tasks. In doing so, they also establish limits to those possible actions and thoughts. All social theories seem excellent and exact as long as we do not consider them from their own limits.

Since Modernity, the ideas of objectivity, universality and science have gone hand in hand, and so to question them implies the posing of the primordial epistemological question: Is a science of politics possible? Long ago it was known that ‘the social’ distinguishes itself by its variability and by the permanent presence of human will and intentionality. It was known that links do exist between knowledge and future events - that events and thought are multidirectionally linked. But the gleam of complexity that is present in those ideas was suppressed time and time again by the aim of a scientific expression that commonly dilutes the specificity in the generality, and suppresses diversity through unity.

Both specificity and diversity tend to disappear in the shadow of objective, universal and true knowledge[1]. As such, many social theories have reduced

the constituent elements of political complexity - human intentionality and the relational and processual character of 'the political', the sociopolitical diversity of men - to a basic simplifying scheme. But as far as social knowledge is part of the social fabric, and as far as they participate in the creation of reality, what has been thought and modeled in science and in politics has become in reality the unification of the practical, material, economic, political, social and cultural aspects of men - partially what we today call globalization - in which the Third World belongs to a peripheral destiny of what ought not to exist.

Social science's commitment to the classical ideal of rationality led it, and still leads it, to undercut social and political diversity, because Knowledge production is governed by the conception of a separate, uninvolved subject and by the instrumental modeling of political and social reality that stems from that separation. We have formulated the primordial epistemological question not in order to find a transcendental objectivity and universality fundament that would make political science possible, but with the aim to establish clearly the conditions for scientific reflection of this type as a rupture with the classical ideal of rationality.

If a characteristic or distinctive trait could be formulated for the intellectual production of Western political science committed to the classical ideal of rationality, that trait would be the blindness or incapacity to deal with diversity. Small things are lost for Western political science because they take part in diversity, and for classical rationality man's political diversity is a phenomenological and ontological impossibility. To it, a unique political reality must exist, an essential political order, and a unique political thinking, adequate to that order. Diversity, it appears, does not exist. If it does show itself, in the form of Third World underdevelopment for example, it is seen as something temporary that must be overcome.

This problem of the stubbornness of certain phenomena that insist on existing in spite being prohibited by some theories has been revealed by complexity thinking in the domains of physics and biology by authors like Prigogine and Kauffman. In a similar fashion, and much to the dislike of what the ideal of simplification demands and proposes that should exist, the Third World is not only a political negativity. It also insists on existing and does exist. Taking a good look at it, there is in it a fairly diverse world, culturally and politically rich, about which it also could be said to be absurd and chaotic.

Who knows if poets and writers have gone farther than philosophers and scientists in compre-

hending this stable and changing diversity, because undoubtedly our living realities have much of Macondo[2], and our scientific elaborations often coincide with Esteban's - the carpentierian[3] character's - way of thinking, who, in spite "of a sun that got into and through the eyes, enhancing the exotisms" of "that bizarre, picturesque in appearance world", only had before himself a world "sad, burdened, where everything seemed to dilute itself in shadows of etching".

If anything characterizes the production of the prevailing theories in today's world of political science, it is its incapacity to distinguish and deal with diversity, that is constantly suppressed as smallness. Let us, thus, focus on the study of the epistemological nature of this intellectual blindness.

### The role of instruments

In my view 'instruments' are the key to understanding the gap between the sciences of Nature and the sciences that study society. I invite you to think about instruments.

Something has taken place with instruments during the XX<sup>th</sup> century that has triggered a noticeable difference in the social world, in production and in knowledge. Many philosophers throughout history have considered the crucial importance of instruments. Aristotle, Bacon, Descartes, Marx, Whitehead and Heidegger are among the most outstanding of them, when considered in terms of methodology, the delimitation of societies, the advance of the imagination and thinking, and the production of scientific theories.

When thinking about the role of instruments it is convenient to distinguish:

1. the *physical* aspect. Instruments as material agents used by man in experience to know and transform - knowledge and transformation that become united by those same instruments;
2. the *methodological* aspect. The affect on the ways of thinking when employing different instruments; and
3. the *place* of instruments in the structure of scientific thought.

This last item is crucial to our analysis about the relative delay of social knowledge.

There is no better science than Astronomy to deal with the idea of instruments. It is the science of astronomy in which the viewpoint about object/observer separation could be supposed to be maintained. The astronomer cannot manipulate astronomical objects; they are sufficiently far away that the implemen-

tation of any effective action upon them is impossible. Is knowledge as pure observation obtained here? Not, by a far cry. Observational and constructive models for astronomical knowledge also turn out to be idealized schemes of the practices that the researcher brings to the world, and with which he conditions (filters and interprets) observations and what is observed. The astronomical object is thus involved and conditioned by human practice, by the conceptual models as well as by the instruments that man uses to make the observation of the 'object' feasible. To this significant observation about the practical substance of astronomical models we must add another one about the change in the instruments. Astronomy, for a long time, did not have anything else to rely upon but the well trained human eye's perceptual capacity. Afterwards, through the mediation of an instrument - the telescope - the universe as perceived by the human eye widened and became more dynamic. But the major part of radiation is not light, and it stayed outside the reach of astronomy until new instruments were created.

The new astronomy of the last years of the XX<sup>th</sup> century revolutionized our concept of the Universe. As the authors of the book *The New Astronomy* assert: "To make an analogy with sound, the traditional astronomy was an effort to understand the symphony of the Universe with ears which could hear only middle C and the two notes immediately adjacent"[4].

The imperceptible was made perceptible. Today we admire the perceptible images of imperceptible astronomical objects. This is interesting. We see images of what we cannot directly perceive. This is achieved thanks to a process in which instruments transform - and the word 'transform' is quite important - and translate the emission patterns into perceptible (to our senses) images.

This translation is the transformation of a phenomenon into a legible (by us) image. Nothing resembles a hermeneutical process more; the only thing is that we are here confronted with a material hermeneutical process. Being perceptible, images make feasible the use of our capacity to capture patterns. We thus produce knowledge on the basis of an interpretation that is presented to us and with which we interact. This is what Philosophy calls a phenomenological hermeneutics. The result is that, in place of a bodily immersion of the observers, the present imagenology produces a new way of bringing into view something which is distant in space and in time.

Are astronomical images unreal or subjective? They are not by far; instruments function by detecting a certain emission. But at the same time, there is no doubt that we are confronted with a process of construction

and intervention which is deliberate and designed.

Am I proposing, in any case, that we invent radiotelescopes and aim them in the direction of alleged social emissions? I hope that at this stage you will not think so unfairly of me. But there is something instructive in this story. What has occurred in Astronomy is not simply that an instrument got in the way between observer and the observed, but that an instrument fulfils its hermeneutical and phenomenological function that makes the observer change by changing his position in the cognitive process. This has a crucial importance for social sciences and politics.

Our instruments for the study of 'the social' - excluding exceptions - are not material measuring and registering devices, nor do they translate emissions received into perceptible images, but they do make certain social realities perceptible, or invisible, to researchers. What we see and what we do not see depend largely upon the place in which the instruments we use position us. We are not distant and pure observers, nor do we apply social theories as binoculars that intervene between us and reality; our theories, used as instruments, produce a double hermeneutic behind which is social reality.

In social and political sciences the issue of instruments does not reduce itself to the artifacts or procedures that allow us to confirm and to measure variables in an empirical environment. It refers, in the first place, to the conceptual models with which we determine which empirical realities we will research and the political reality that we consider as having existence. These conceptual models resemble themselves to, and act as, instruments that make the many fragments of social reality small or invisible.

It is a universe of instrument-based theoretical mediations that generate 'images', the readings of which are dependent upon the place that our instruments position us. This means that, generally, when the explanation of 'the social' indicates a unique future we can be sure that the hermeneutics of the instruments has done all the work for us. We can do without those instruments. It is not hard to suppose that behind the certainties that they offer us, enormous omissions hide themselves; spaces of silence, social invisibles. That is why the euphoria of unipolarity in which we live makes me think about how wrong we are.

Theory acts by itself. From its presuppositions it both constrains and enables; allows and, at the same time, hinders our 'sight'. This concerns the interior of scientific reflection, but also concerns what is outside of it, when it is embodied in the fabric of 'the social'. With this I mean that, not only do theories hinder or

allow science to see certain things, but that theories embodied into social life through the circulation of ideas, their spreading around, etc., hinder or allow persons to see. A good example is how theories, societies and persons coincide in not seeing beggars, in mistaking the needy for the indigenous, and in banning the existence of diversity. These objectivated instruments present themselves as genuine nonhuman social and political actors.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, I believe that the way of non-classical rationality demands from social researchers: 1) to pay attention to everyday life, searching in it the germs of novelty and the correlate of our elaborations; 2) to consider interests and subjectivity more as limits which constrain the unwrapping of 'the social', than as active elements in its production; 3) to identify the place that instruments - used by the researcher to do his inquiries - position him; 4) to unveil the autonomous functioning of those instruments as agents, when they are embodied into the cognitive and sociopolitical fabric.

## NOTES

[1] This assertion should be proved through more specific argumentations, because the two dominant tendencies in social thinking and in political science since the middle of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, Marxism and Positivism, have tried, in their argumentative philosophical discourse, to distance themselves from the dominant ideals of natural scientific knowledge, and are, besides, very different philosophical conceptions in their philosophical-epistemological viewpoints and in their political calling. Thus, let's for the moment take that assertion as an initial reflexive, hypothetical and debatable viewpoint, that requires further argumentation.

[2] The famous town in Marquez, M. G. *Cien Años de Soledad*.

[3] Carpentier, Alejo. *El Siglo de las Luces*.

[4] For a more detailed analysis of astronomical and imagenological epistemological items see: "Imaging Technologies: A Technoscience Revolution," paper presented by Don Ihde, Professor at Stony Brook University, at the XXI World Philosophical Congress, Istanbul, Turkey, August 10<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>, 2003 (<http://www.wcp2003.org/>). The quote has been taken from that Paper and corresponds to the book by Henbest, N. y M. Maden (1996) *The New Astronomy*, Cambridge University Press, p.6.

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