Interstices
Center for Transversal Thinking

Alain Daniélou Foundation

KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION AND WAYS OF LIVING

Venue: *The Labyrinth*, Alain Daniélou Foundation
Colle Labirinto 24, Zagarolo (Rome), Italy.

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WORKSHOP CONCEPTION

The socio-cultural paradox at the heart of globalization encapsulates both the crisis of late modernity and local attempts to counter-weigh it, stemming from or inspired by non-Western ways of living or digressive attempts in the West. Globalization fosters a self-complexifying network of interconnections. Goods, people, fashions, customs, and beliefs flow across territorial boundaries, and different modes of individual behavior, group relations, and institutional exchange emerge as a result. The system's encompassing connectivity implies nonetheless an underlying "unicity" dictated by economic processes upon every cultural phenomenon worldwide. Socio-cultural practices are no longer understood as a set of different and relatively self-contained local phenomena but rather as variations within a broader logic dictated by the economic affairs of powerful nation-states and transnational enterprises. The ideological tendency to fuse "modernization" and "Westernization" standardizes lifestyles worldwide with the prescription of (social) progress and (individual) freedom. This can be seen as the most successful form of neo-colonialism. Western science dictates its universally valid explanation of the world, and technology carries out a subsequent modification of reality to increase human domination and control over other forms of life and socialization. However, both the idea of "human" and the notion of "world" behind those processes is symptomatically selective. Despite

undeniable historical setbacks, this model has been "naturalized", and to a great extent it is still taken for granted as an inevitable condition for development and progress in almost every field of institutional activity and in any part of the (urbanized) world, even in a period where the resulting ecological crisis has acquired planetary proportions.

There are significant pitfalls in the world-wide process of "Westernization" that call for a critical reaction and a change of perspective. In the first place, the effects inherent to the culture that produces them, such as a replacement of critique by technocratic thinking, a transition from intellectual to financial elites, and the destruction of all forms of life and sociality that do not fit into the scheme of economic growth. But even more significant, modernization implies the imposition of the Western model on other cultures whose knowledge parameters and ways of living are alien to the dominant logic. Many Western scholars are (actively or passively, consciously or unconsciously) still involved in forms of neo-colonialism that hinder an effective symmetrization of cultures. They reject an increasing exercise of symmetrization lest "scientific objectivity" be infringed, reaffirming thus the ultimate superiority of Western logocentrism. This is a central point in the debate around the "ontological turn", triggered by anthropologists in the second half of last century and quickly extended to other human sciences. If anthropology aims at "understanding" (rather than "conquering") *the other(s)*, it should not merely describe that "otherness" from an objective standpoint but rather be permeated by the processes that constitute the other's own embodiment. This leads to questioning the discipline's presuppositions with the risk of renouncing the deep-rooted conviction that characterizes modernity, namely the belief that objective knowledge shows "reality" in its neutral or true state as opposed to ethnic forms of knowledge which are always the victim of religious, superstitious, cognitive errors, or psychological projections.

To what extent are scholars capable of questioning their own convictions owing to a transcultural learning process? What if that exercise of self-critique

leads to a modification not only of their methods of inquiry but also of their way of living? Would that change mean the collapse of their own values? What are the alternative ways of knowing and living that may grow on the basis of Western culture through a transformative exchange with other world-configurations? Can a substantial remainder of the modern European heritage (from classical humanism and Enlightenment to the Marxist, existentialist, and post-modern reappraisal of subjectivation processes) be preserved (and otherwise elaborated) once the epistemological and ontological foundations of the Western world have acknowledged their intrinsic link with the colonial past?

This workshop of the *Interstices* Center will set out to explore modalities of knowledge transmission and ways of living that differ from the mainstream discourse of the West. For this purpose, we underline two main levels of discussion that should unfold during the exchange:

1. The first level of discussion concerns Western "human sciences" in which researchers became not only acquainted but also deeply involved with "the knowledge of the others" to the point of seeing their own epistemological and even ontological convictions collapse under the weight of a transformative (learning) process. The main factor of change in such cases is no longer the unifying power of capitalist globalization but the experience of different localized practices with their own epistemological parameters and ontological effects.

2. The second level of discussion focuses on religious, artistic, and transcultural practices stemming from different cultural settings in which the actors are engaged in differential modalities of knowledge transmission and/or ways of living beyond the parameters of mainstream Western culture. It is the aim of the workshop to bring the two levels of interaction to a common ground and search transversal resonances to enhance a reciprocal enrichment.

The debate will focus on spaces of interaction that cannot be easily standardized by the logic of globalized Westernization, and which show other (socially and ecologically relevant) processes of – human and non-human – subjectivation. The idea is not only to bring various disciplines of knowledge to a

fruitful dialogue on the motivations and effects of specific cultural practices, but to explore the subjects' engagement in such practices, opening a space for social actors to show their contribution to a micropolitical transformation of the Western paradigm for the sake of a "pluriverse".