

## COMMENT ON JOHN SHOTTER'S 'PERSONS: POINTS OF CONDENSATION IN A SEA OF LIVING INTERACTIONS'

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It is a pleasure for me to comment the very interesting and suggestive paper of Prof. Shotter which reflects on human persons from the background of their spontaneous embedding in daily life's world, following the philosophical orientations of Wittgenstein, Vygotsky, Gadamer, Bakhtin and others.

The argumentation has as much a critical dimension as a positive one. Regarding the first one, it puts under question the person's view as 'subjectum' which has dominated the whole first phase of the modern world from Descartes and Kant until their questioning by phenomenology, structuralism and hermeneutics. Shotter characterizes this position pointing out that it 'emphasizes the central role of our deliberately intended activities as self-contained individuals in our knowledge-seeking activities... In this view, the important processes of reason occur inside the heads of individuals and have the character of "inner symbolic representations" of outer states of affairs - where our outer states of affairs are thought of as occurring merely in the empty and neutral space and time of the physicists', what allows to conceive them as 'unrestrictedly open to our mastery and possession, to our every manipulation'.

Instead, Shotter develops an approach on the human experience as a living dialogical meeting among people which happens on the basis of its own corporal reality that makes them participate of an emergent reality, unpredictable and incalculable beforehand. This dialogical meeting allows them to be open to prospective development to each other 'within the active, expressive, responsive relations' following their radical embedding in a dynamic world of interactions that includes speaking, thinking, acting, perceiving, etc., characteristic of human life. Toward the end of his paper, and after having explained the corresponding premises, he opposes the form of living which he denominates very suggestively the 'witness'-being from the merely entitative form of an 'aboutness'-being. 'While in "about-

ness-being", in which we try to understand others only cognitively, by "explaining" them to ourselves in terms of a theoretical framework, we stand over against them, and view them as if from a distance'; "witness-being" is a dynamic form of reflective interaction that involves our coming into living contact with an other's living being, with their utterances, with their bodily expressions, their words, their "works". His conclusion is that 'only in this kind of spontaneously responsive being, in which we are related bodily to those around us, is it possible to be "in touch with" or "struck by" the *uniqueness* of the others and othernesses around us; and only in this kind of being is it possible to be "moved by" another's words, and for us to carry them "on our shoulder", so to speak, to "remind" us of how to relate ourselves to the circumstances before us'.

This interesting approach has so much metaphysical as psychological and sociological implications as well, and it is for me very difficult to embrace all them in a brief comment. Without seeking to make justice to all the depth suggested by the argumentation, I would like to remark some aspects of his proposal, which has the undoubted merit of not being trapped in a given person's concept to explore instead the constituent reality of the person itself. In this sense, I believe that he is faithful to the ideal traced by phenomenology of 'returning to things themselves' just as they happen in the finite world of life, which we don't inhabit as an outer reality to us, but in which we are embedded as in a 'sea lot of living interactions', as it is expressed in the title of the paper.

I would like first to point out, that I fully agree with his critic to the Cartesian view of individual as 'subjectum', as foundation of itself, which identifies it, simply, with the certainty achieved by the cognitive self-reference of its conscience. Great contemporary thinkers as Heidegger or Gadamer, and also the philosopher Karol Wojtyła, have incorporated to their thought this same critic, and they have looked for to overcome the dualism between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* outlining the worldliness and temporariness of the world as the main constituent of the finite human experience which is not other than that of being-in-the-world and being-in-history. To this regard, I would like to quote Heidegger who denounces the limitless pretence of human being in the Cartesian tradition: 'If man becomes the first and authentic subjectum, this means that he becomes that entity on which all entity is based, concerning its way of being and its truth. Man becomes the central reference of the entity like such'. Such a pretence can only be sustained at the cost of Being's forgetfulness, not occasional or distracted, but systematic, from which he wanted to liberate ontology.

Gadamer, on the other hand, points out that the 'idea of an absolute reason is not a possibility open for historical humankind. Reason only exists for us as real and historical, that means, that reason is not owner of itself but rather it is always referred to that already given in the realm in which it is exercised... In fact it is not the history the one that belongs us, but rather we are those that belong to it. A lot before we understand ourselves to ourselves through reflection, we are already understanding ourselves in a self-evident way through the family, the society and the state in that we live. The lens of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. Individual's self-reflection is not more than a spark in the closed current of historical life'.

From sociology's point of view, it is also evident that the development of modern functional differentiated society which coordinates its activities by means of information's mass-media has nothing to do with the person's idea of subjectum, since it does not exist any observation point in society from which a singular person could observe in real time all the information which is produced at a given time. Therefore Niklas Luhmann points out that the 'subjectum is, in strict and paradoxical sense, the "utopia" of modern society, the place that is not in any place'. And he hurries to add that, nevertheless the sophisticated reflection of philosophers about this cognitive capacity of synthesis of the diversity that they denominate subjectum, this great modern utopia has been innocuous for the social evolution itself and has had no incidence in it. 'What the subjectum makes clear to modern society, is its inability to describe itself as a unit'.

It seems reasonable, therefore, to look for a new perspective to understand human person from its embedding in the world and in history, from its bodily activity, from its dialogical dynamic attitude to other people and from the description of this encounter experience. I believe that the contribution of Prof. Shotter is, to this respect, very creative. However, a sociologist cannot be totally satisfied with a perspective that, for its very nature, must be fixed in the realm of face-to-face relationships of individuals embedding in living interactions. The novelty of the complex social reality in that we are embedded at present time, is the emergency of a world society, governed by information and which can only approach to an unitary description of itself with the help of mass-media.

Communication that makes possible this new scale of society has also the characteristic, analysed by Prof. Shotter at the level of face-to-face experience, of being highly dynamic and contingent, as well as, obtaining their reasons and topics from the circumstances rather than from the narration of any singular and reflexive conscience that exposes orderly and logically

the arguments that move it to see the world in the way in which it does. However, this contingency is not spontaneously ordered starting from the encounter experience among people in daily life's world, but for the selectivity with which it is forced to produce a differential of complexity between communication and its context. Luhmann states that 'the necessary distance for the introduction and maintenance of universalists orientations, presupposes a sequential gradation of the multiple functional differentiations and, with it, a reinforcement of the selectivity that would be inconceivable inside the immediacy of the world of life. The particular environments that become functionally differentiated, as social environments already ordered, are the condition of possibility for further differentiations'. Without this pressure to selectivity and without its reinforcement which end achievement is the adoption of specialized codes of communication for the different subsystems of society, communication would be impossible, as beautifully describes Borges in his story of the emperor's map, where the cartographers receive the task to make a map of its Kingdom on a real scale.

Certainly, it makes a lot of sense to distinguish between 'whitness-being' and 'aboutness-being'. But it arises me the doubt if they are at all two alternative and excluding ways of being, which someone should choose anyone of them. Are they not rather two necessary moments of human living which presuppose each other and enforce each other? In his analysis of testimony, Ricoeur also approaches, as Prof. Shoter, to the witness's pre-narrative experience that he denominates the 'immediacy of the absolute', without which there would not be anything to testify. For the judge, however, or for anyone that faces the discernment of recognizing a witness like witness, such an immediacy of the absolute from the part of the witness is necessarily mediated through the narration of his/her testimony, which should be interpreted and reconstructed inside of an hermeneutic circle. So, 'whitness-being' and 'aboutness-being' are mutually needed so much to the witness's self conscience as to the possibility that his/her testimony can serve as evidence in the context of litigation.

To a relatively equivalent conclusion arrives also Heidegger when he is forced to distinguish between the authentic language that allows the *Dasein*, attentive to Being's call, to appropriate each time his own existence, and the 'gossips' and utterances said with an impersonal pronoun ('it is said', 'someone says', etc.) which so well describes the way of functioning of our mass-media. Without the last one it could not be recognized the first one. Only for the experience of getting lost in the inauthenticity of impersonal language, says Heidegger, it is possible to recover the authenticity of language in personal pronoun.

It may be wondered anyway, in what measure the pre-coded language of social mass-media affects the experience of people's encounter nowadays and their embedding in a sea of living and dynamic interactions. Practically all what people have for real today comes from the information transmitted by mass-media. Television has already completely blurred the old frontier among public and private or it has reduced it to a mere legal fiction. It has also finished, in many cases, with the temporal limit between happening and deferred reproduction, approaching public and private communication to 'real time'. The transmission of images and voice, from cameras or telephones have also shortened the bodily distances and enabled the perception of gestural language, projecting their scope far beyond the space-time limits of bodily interactions. Could it suffice under the current social conditions to understand this new situation with the categories of 'show' or of 'simulation', suggesting that it is a mere appearance, from which it could be distinguished a true and finally incommunicable experience?

I don't want to suggest, evidently that these frontiers have disappeared completely or that they became senseless. What demands us rather is a new frontier concept that allows us to represent the unit of the difference and not only the option between being located at one or another side of it. Social communication is not certainly a sum of individual experiences of communication, since the contexts where they operate and their respective selection criteria are very different. But neither is it a sort of parallel communication that let indifferent to the face to face communication. Although the selection criteria are very different, they have in common that they are selection criteria which regulate contingency and that they can be stabilized with help of memory and of the record of communication, especially when they have succeeded.

People as much as social systems are certainly prospective realities, in permanent becoming. The reason that Shotter adduces is 'because as living, growing, and developing beings, able both to accumulate and to embody to shared (and sharable) cultural history, there is not end to what we as persons are and can be'. The sociological question, however, is how it is possible that such interactions and relationships could be ordered, sufficiently predictable, protected from the high probability of deception. The tension between the actual and the possible, configures for individuals sets of expectations that vary according to the multiples systemic references which can respecify them in each case. Therefore there are limits to the possible, at least, sense limits according the diverse referential frameworks. For this same reason, in the level of social communication, expectations are not

only formed from the shared experiences but also from the attributions and imputations which involving actors or outsiders can make to specify what is possible for them. We usually speak of persons, for instance, when the expectations referred to social communication include a high probability of individual's successfully inclusion in the respective reference function. When the probability favours the exclusion, on the contrary, we don't speak of persons but of categories: the poor, the unemployed, the criminals, etc... Therefore, it seems that not all the condensation points in the sea of living interactions correspond to persons, but only some of them. I leave then open the question regarding which selection criteria are those that can refer the expectations specified through a communication situation to persons, and also the even more complex question, if these selection criteria are transverse at all to the different function subsystems or they became rather specified in a different and even contradictory way between them.

In the realm of philosophical anthropology, Julián Marías has also outlined a similar problem. He affirms that all human beings are persons, but it doesn't imply that all their acts are personal. Personal are only those which we consider significant as to include them in our biography. In a similar sense to Prof. Shotter, he points out that the 'person is never given, is not there, but rather coming' and for this same reason he points out, negatively, that 'the bigger danger for the personal character of love is the temptation to give for supposed the other person, to believe that it is already known who it is, loosing the essential dramatism of coexistence'. The argumental sense of personal being, characteristic of the construction of a biography, supposes the capacity to differentiate personal being from others forms of non personal being, so that the map of personal world doesn't fall in the already mentioned paradox of Borges. Therefore he recognizes that 'the human world of coexistence presents three levels: the properly social one, the psychic one, that of interindividual treatment without effective intimacy and the personal in strict sense. The portion that each one of them acquires in each form of life, is a decisive factor in their configuration and sense'. Without the capacity to introduce these differences it could not be properly a personal life. In other words, the 'Witness-being' and the 'Aboutness-being' are needed reciprocally to become possible.

I would like to thank very much Prof. Shotter for the stimulating depth of his reflection that allows us to advance in the complex questions addressed in this meeting.