

THE CHALLENGE OF CREATIVITY: A DIAGNOSIS OF OUR TIMES

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Abstract

This article analyzes the idea of creativity due to its relevance in our habits and lifestyles. Until recent times the creativity was only a skill of artist, but now it has become in a normal activity for the rest of society. We must be creative. This is the new creative ethos.

The core of article insist on the axial origin of this idea. And it intends to remember the reasons that explain its emergence and to re-think the outcomes of the axial revolutions, specially, the ideas of creativity and transcendence without the help of myth of secularization. The Thought of second degree will occupy a central place in this article in order to explain the importance of axial cultures for the future of the human history

The appearance of the axial cultures in the second half of the 1st century BC brought about far-reaching changes in the history of humanity, and at the same time introduced new, never-before-seen elements into the way in which the world was depicted: transcendence and creativity. Up to that time, the monism of pre-axial cultures was the principle around which collective life was organised. Myths and rites concerning the renewing mystery of nature make up the bases of a form of social organisation in which the interlocutors are Mother Nature and the social community. The imaginary reference point for social behaviour is the ritual contribution of the group to the renewal of the natural event on which its own collective subsistence depends. Such societies are dominated by a holistic view of experience in which the cosmos (objectivity), society (inter-subjectivity) and the individual (subjectivity) make up a single, consistent whole.

The axial civilisations introduced a radical change into organisational and social representation structures. The mark of transcendence and creativity implies that the world is split into two levels and that man discovers himself to be an agent capable of acting on himself and on his surroundings. From the outset of the axial period salvation beyond this world and human action, moral orientation and the awareness of freedom, often criss-crossed with and integrated into social acts themselves, expressed that transformation of the representation of the world, seen as a point of no return in the course of history. Cracks appeared in the monist unity of pre-axial societies and the first signs of

a distinction between the logic of the cosmos, of society and of the individual could be glimpsed. That distinction has accompanied social development ever since. *Differentiation* became an eternal companion of the societies that came after, driven by a historical tendency towards the universalisation of thought and the increasing complexity of institutions.

Until recently creativity has not attracted the attention of the academic world, or indeed of the general public. Its importance has been neglected in the field of social science. Studies of the axial cultures have taken the notion of transcendence as a reference point, and have examined its influence on the historical dynamics of those cultures. The orientation of the individual in the present world as a response to the ethical question of salvation and the axial cultural and civilisational contexts through which the question of salvation is channelled have until recently defined the hard core of the theory of society. Such distinguished authors as Max & Alfred Weber, Benjamin I. Schwartz and Erich Voeglin all take this direction. Schwartz¹ himself defines the awakening of the axial cultures as the *age of transcendence*. However in the past 20 years creativity – the other pole of the axial legacy – has been attracting more attention. In recent research studies such as those of Johan Arnason, Björn Wittrock, Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas, conducted under the auspices of the works of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, the image of the axial cultures and their influence on contemporary societies has been analysed in the light of the centrality of this notion. Thus, these more recent contributions to the field assert that in the axial period social creativity emerged with a force never before seen in human history².

This change in the way in which events are read is associated with events in our own historical present, basically with the *weakening of transcendence* in our way of life. This does not mean that transcendence has disappeared but rather that its presence has been redefined in the context of the *secular age*, to use Charles Taylor's³ term, in which it no longer occupies a central position on the public agenda. The links between transcendence and creativity have been a cause for tension and clashes throughout the axial cultures and in contemporary society. In the axial civilisations a closed, ahistorical, vertical view of transcendence predominated which could be represented in the affairs of the present world only by the religious clergy (or the secular clergy in the case of

1 Schwartz B. I., 1975. "The Age of Transcendence", *Daedalus*, 104(2), 5

2 Arnason, J.P, Eisenstadt, S.N. and Wittrock, B., eds., 2004. "General Introduction", in *Axial Civilizations and World History*, edited by J.P.Arnason, S.N.Eisenstadt and B. Wittrock, Leiden: Brill, 7

3 Taylor, C., 2007. *A Secular Age*, Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

Confucianism), which was conducive to unequal relationships and conflicts between the charismatic core and the answer-seeking periphery. Although the exclusive representation of divine will by charismatic power could indirectly have encouraged creativity, conflicts and the search for alternative institutional orders, throughout human history there has been little or no recognition of the transforming power of agents, largely because of the dominant, doctrinal will of the charismatic core.

I have set out here to examine the emergence of creativity as one of the recent mutations in the framework of beliefs and values of contemporary societies. A thread of continuity can be seen leading from the axial legacy but awakening the *buried pole* of its cultural heritage. In this look back at axial period I seek to recover the trace of *indeterminacy* inherent in social action times that started to open up a path for itself at that time and that subsequently went through multiple periods of concealment and subordination before emerging into the light in our time. Between that initial period and the present there has been no immanent logic in history, no chronological continuity evolving through different episodes and no kind of universal convergence towards a distinct, complex, secular form of society. Silently and unnoticed, human history has recorded experiences of conflict, tension and renewal that strip continuationist, linear discourses of all explanatory power. In this essay I seek to link the setting up of creativity as a core category of our time with the axial tradition in which an embryonic notion of creative self-awareness emerged.

To that end, (1) I make a number of observations concerning the current rise of the idea of creativity; (2) I consider the axial precedents in which the idea of social creativity emerged and matured; (3) I look at some recent contributions to the field that call into question the assumption of secularisation that is so predominant in sociological readings of the axial age and so contrary to renewing actions by agents; and (4) I examine the current legacy of the axial heritage in our creative way of life.

I. The institutionalisation and mainstreaming of creativity

One of the many recent changes in contemporary societies is directly linked to the concept of creativity, which has shifted into the nerve centre of the social narrative in many areas. As a result of what Charles Taylor⁴ calls *the expression-*

4 Taylor, C., 1989. *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 456

ist turn in contemporary culture observed in recent years, agents are claiming individual self-realisation and affective self-expression as essential markers of their acts on all levels of their biographies. In science, politics, education and of course art itself it is the presence of creativity that is the focus of attention of individual agents and social institutions. Notions such as quality, talent, ability, originality and novelty to mention but a few contribute to the formation of a social atmosphere that defines the enthusiasms, projections and urgencies of the present time. The particular character of the historic present is that the presence of creativity has never been so clearly manifested in the organisation of the form of society as it is at present. To some extent it has been mainstreamed and turned into routine, to the point where it is a stand-out factor in the design and dynamics of contemporary institutions. This means that, as stated by A. Reckwitz⁵, a creative imperative is imposed in the fact that both individuals and institutions are expected to offer elasticity and plasticity as conditions that guarantee innovative, original decisions in a context dominated by immediacy (M. Castells) and acceleration (H. Rosa). In line with Reckwitz, the drive of creativity is expressed on the day-to-day agenda at two levels. On the one hand artists have become models for action, because since the avant-garde age they have been seen as social figures who express themselves in their works and endow them with affectiveness. On the other hand, creativity translates into an overwhelming need for contemporary aesthetic capitalism to integrate into its structure the “blind spot” of Calvinist capitalism, i.e. affectiveness and emotion.

However, over the last 40 years the idea of creativity has gradually acquired more importance and has been dealt with by various social theoreticians from perspectives very different from that mentioned above. It has been examined in terms of the ontology of creative imaginary (C. Castoriadis)⁶, the civilisational awakening of human creativity (S.N. Eisenstadt)⁷, the creativity of action (H. Joas)⁸ and the creativity of aesthetic capitalism (as mentioned above) (A.Reckwitz)⁹. Without going into details, suffice to say that all these theoretical references refer to different levels of experience that come together in the idea of creativity: the ontological, the historical/civilisational, the inter-subjective and the institutional. The first three are instituting and the fourth

5 Reckwitz, A, 2012. *Die Entdeckung der Kreativität*, Francfort am Main: Suhrkamp

6 Castoriadis, C., 1997. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press

7 Eisenstadt, S.N. (ed.), 1986. *The Origins and Diversity of axial Age Civilizations*, New York: State University of New York

8 Joas, H., 1992. *Die Kreativität des Handelns*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp

9 Reckwitz, A, Op. cit., 2012

is instituted. At each level particular, specific visions of creativity can be seen, though in social events in contemporary social life those levels, or several of them, may come together and overlap in multiple ways.

The ontology of creative imaginary drawn up by C. Castoriadis looks at a notion of being that is defined by indeterminacy and by a capacity for semantic self-alteration that generates social orders. Unlike the deterministic, closed vision of reality proposed by Hegelian and Marxist philosophy, Castoriadis sees the imaginary as a constantly boiling magma whose fertility consists of the creation of images laden with value (gods, totems, flags) and collective representativeness. In a different direction, the works of S.N. Eisenstadt stress the historical and civilisational conditions under which the human condition discovers itself as a creative agent endowed with the ability to intervene in its social surroundings. The axial revolutions are seen as an episode in history in which human beings incorporated their practical ability for second-degree thinking, in which they meditated on the conditions of thought itself. For his part, H. Joas reflects on the renewing dimension of all models of action and on the possibility of factual intervention by agents in modern social environments impregnated with the idea of autonomy and susceptible to unregulated social change. Models of moral and economic-teleological action have predominated in sociological reflection, but Joas stresses that what has yet to be thought in sociological reflection is what makes all models of awareness and social order possible. Finally, A. Reckwitz investigates the presence of creativity as a symbolic core for organising social structures and individual biographies, destined inexorably in both cases to experience the new creative imperative with ambivalence. In our days the idea of creativity as a faculty within reach of all agents has come true, but that does not mean that a model of society exists that is free from contradictions and inequalities.

This list of proposals for analysis is intended to highlight the currency of the concept and the confusion that exists about it, as various semantic references overlap in it. Distinctions need to be drawn between those references in conceptual terms. One of the most striking aspects of the current state of affairs as regards creativity may be the fact that, for the first time in history, it may appear as a real obstacle to social change if there is no study of and research into the conditions of possibility that make the creative way of life something created and not the product of historical destiny or the colossal power of a macroinstitution such as the church or the state. A society in which creativity is no longer a privilege open to a select few but a requirement demanded of all individuals, who must show originality in all their activities (occupational, academic, family, affective, etc.) may be conducive to centred narratives and

practices in which novelty and innovation become routine or commonplace. In that sense we may find ourselves with a multiplicity of creative individuals eager to produce originality in their jobs and their domestic lives, but the inter-subjective, co-operative side of creativity that drives social change may be overshadowed. On the other hand, however much that creativity may have become demystified, mainstreamed and banal as regards expectations for individual originality the conditions are generated for new forms of inequality, because not all individuals manage to have their work recognised as original. The new creative imperative doles out recognition and approval unevenly among the output of individuals by provoking different readings which, in many cases, are unforeseeable by the general public. There is therefore a need to look more deeply at other semantic layers of the idea of creativity to dispute the attempts by the current concept to exhaust its meaning. A look at the axial tradition facilitates the task of rescuing the drive of social creativity in the form of the indeterminacy inherent in social interaction.

However, as stated above, creativity has not been one of the central categories of sociological reflection. Nor has modern philosophical thinking stopped to consider it. In both these academic areas knowledge has been considered as mastery and control of experience. The cognitive side of social action in the form of both the Cartesian *res cogitans* and the Calvinist means/ends rationality has occupied centre stage in the academic debate. The creative dimension has been pushed out of the nerve centre of modern life, which is the historical centrality of teleological rationality. In the beginnings of the modernist era, the role of artistic creativity was that of affective and motivational compensation, provided by the creative genius of artists without, however, affecting the providentialist course of history in any way. It is striking that, as stated by W. Knöbl¹⁰, in the type of models of action proposed by Max Weber a creative model of action does not appear and is not explained (even by its absence). This evidences the epistemological assumptions applied by classical sociology to social reality.

The support in the form of imaginary for these proposals is given by the scientific and normative currency of classical modernisation theory. This paradigm of thought is presented as a tool for scientific analysis, and at the same time as a normative proposal. The axis around which its structure has been built is secularisation. With its arrival history is taken unilaterally towards differentiated, off-centre, immanent models of society in which the sacred-religious

10 Knöbl, W. 2011. "Makrotheorie zwischen Historismus und Pragmatismus", in *Handlung und Erfahrung*, edited by Bettina Hollstein, Matthias Jung and Wolfgang Knöbl, Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 289

core of traditional societies fades. Under the hegemony of these paradigms of thought social modernisation is seen as a process of rationalisation in which the guidelines by which society is organised are based on frameworks with the technical domination of experience in which the core role of transcendence as an organiser of the subjective and intersubjective agenda is weakened. The evolutionary framework that runs from Spencer to Luhmann, via Parsons and religious sociologists such as P. Berger and T. Luckmann, affects the automatism of differentiation and social structures as a guideline and the historical destination with which increases in complexity can be reduced. In most social reflection, the concepts of secularisation, rationalisation and modernisation go hand-in-hand. The irreversible break with myth in the axial civilisations referred to by Jaspers coincided with the process of secularisation that was to expand throughout history, imposing a single model of social development based on technical domination of the world. In this approach to sociological theory, which was hegemonic up to the 1970s, “modernisation” refers, in the words of G. Preyer, to “a process which is determined by place and time and has to be understood as a unique evolutionary direction which leads to a modern cultural and societal innovation. This process is characterized by a long-lasting structural tendency. Classical sociology has systematized this structural change as a differentiation of action systems, structural differentiation and the emergence of a global world system which itself emerged from evolutionary universals”¹¹.

In this sense, three points need to be considered. First, the evolutionary path of increasing differentiation is defined as an unquestionable driving force. It explains without being explained. It is taken as given, and constitutes the starting point from which social reflection as explained social facts. It is an axiom that brings together approaches which are as sociologically opposed as functionalism and Marxism. Even though in its most elaborate version, e.g. in systems theory, evolutionary deployment may accept the appearance of contingencies in its historical progress, the only thing that is not contingent in the said approach is evolution itself.

On the other hand, that axiom serves to tell the history of societies as a process of one-directional, irreversible secularisation. Although sociologists such as Peter Berger¹² identify this process with the pluralistic architecture of contemporary societies, the authors who gave the concept its shape, such as Max Weber among others, see it as the inexorable destiny of the course of history, in which

11 Preyer, G. 2007 “Introduction: The Paradigm of Multiple Modernities”, *Protosociology* 24, 7-8

12 Berger, P.L., 2014 *The Many Altars of Modernity*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter

the rationalisation of the world undermines the spaces of transcendence of agents. The teleological automatism of the immanentisation of other-worldly salvation takes the form of a historical deployment that is headed unilaterally towards the erosion of human decision-making spaces and the closing of the margins of the possible and of novelty.

Ultimately, it is precisely these deterministic guidelines that make social creativity dispensable. In the modern era agents came to experience their surroundings as a natural foregone conclusion filled with necessity and divorced from any kind of social response. Providentialism deactivated the ideas of autonomy and initiative that were so deeply rooted in the modern way of life. Any explanation of social change was attributed to the meta-social forces of evolution, thus robbing the intervention of agents themselves of any central role.

2. The awakening of creativity: the legacy of the axial revolutions

The experience of the axial period brought with it the first inkling of an incontrovertible fact which marked a breaking point in the history of humanity: the discovery of human creativity. Together with the notion of transcendence, which forces agents to look beyond immediate reality on the basis of a dichotomy (transcendence/immanence), the axial revolutions turned social and political order into a problem, since the appearance of second-order thinking takes nothing as definitive. At the same time there was a far reaching transformation in the structure of society, with the abandonment of relatively closed units based on kinship and territoriality and the design of more universal, abstract forms of political organisation (e.g. early forms of statehood). In the words of Eisenstadt, “the social recognition of the basic tension between the transcendental order, and the associated attempts to re-order the world, influence the entire pattern of social interaction and give rise to new modes of institutional creativity”¹³. In the historical period that ran from 800 to 200 BC, the axial cultures and civilisations encouraged a radical innovation by awakening the ability of human beings to wonder about man’s place in the cosmos (Scheler). Up to that time, archaic societies had held a compact world-view¹⁴ based on cosmic determinism into which renewing natural force was integrated, with social life focused on the group and the ubiquitous imposition of the community over and above individual actions. Natural destiny and the destiny of society were

13 Eisenstadt, S.N. ed., 1986. Op.cit., 12

14 Voegelin, E., 2000. *The Political Religions*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press

seen as one and the same, which resulted in a monist form of organisation in which time was conceived as circular, based on adscriptive order and backed up by penal law (Durkheim). But the time of ritual, which imbued the day-to-day rhythm of existence with renewing effervescence, ceased to be the core of society. From then on, “ritual was transformed into the story of ritual – into myth, in a way”¹⁵. This marked the appearance of the universal religions, also known as “book religions”.

By contrast, via the transformation of “orgy into sacrament”¹⁶, in the words of Max Weber, the axial cultures contributed to a radical change in the human condition and the condition of the universe in that they opened the door to human abilities and faculties that were to influence a concept of openness and opening up of reality. As mentioned above, the renewing role of transcendence, under which agents were obliged to organise their social practices around the salvation of the soul, linked to this innovation, gave rise to the experience of freedom and autonomy, in which agents can design their own ways of responding to the challenge of ethics. Agents began to feel the difference between the rhythm of nature, the rhythm of society and the rhythm of individuals. The three-part whole posited began to show its first cracks. Individuals gained ground on the surrounding world and discovered that it was possible to imagine responses and actions. It began to be realised that “reality is not only, as has been repeated since Dilthey, “that which resists”; it is just as much, and indissociably, that which can be transformed, that which permits *making* (and *teukhein*) as making be something other than that which exists or making be in some other way that which exists in a particular way”¹⁷. This marked the appearance in history of the problem of indeterminacy. In it lies the embryo of what we now call contingency, a concept which Luhmann defines as that which is “neither necessary nor impossible”¹⁸. To some extent, as stated by Gerhard Preyer, from that time on “social structure and culture were no longer autonomous”¹⁹, but were rather networks and organisations that could be explained on the basis of aggregates and individual communications.

Landmarks such as writing, urban settlements, advanced metalworking technology, certain forms of international diplomacy and, especially, the intellectual organisations formed by Buddhist mystics, Jewish prophets, Chinese literati,

15 Stroumsa, G.G., 2009. *The End of sacrifice*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 67

16 Weber, M., 1946. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H.H.Gerth and C.Wright Mills, New York: Oxford University Press, 278

17 Castoriadis, C., 1997. *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 262

18 Luhmann, N., 1992. *Beobachtungen der Moderne*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 86

19 Preyer, G., 2011. *Zur Aktualität von Shmuel Eisenstadt*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 31

Greek philosophers, etc.²⁰, gave form to that change in society's understanding of itself through which cognitive notions and ideas had effects on courses of action and social organisation. From that time onwards, the charismatic centre embodied by a monarch as the maximum expression of transcendence in the inner world gave that monarch authority, by which he regulated and organised the ethical behaviour of individuals. In many cases the monarch was seen as a quasi-divine figure and became the dense core of society. His direct link with transcendence turned him into an exceptional, supra-human figure. From then on the tensions between the centre and the periphery typical of axial cultures arose. The struggle for the symbolic appropriation of transcendent reality in the dimension of the inner world explains the many conflicts between groups and collectives, which gave rise to a wide range of cultural and civilisational dynamics and narratives. In the words of Eisenstadt, "the problem of resolving the tension between mundane and transcendental orders is inherently irresolvable. But the persistent quest for a resolution results in reorganized institutions, new levels of conflict, new process of social change, as well as a transformation of the relations between societies and civilizations"²¹.

Karl Jaspers states that in the axial period there was a struggle of everybody against everybody, and more specifically between small, recently formed states, which "created the possibility for the emergence of itinerant intellectuals not functioning within centralized priesthoods or bureaucracies, and therefore more structurally capable of the criticism that Momigliano found central to axial age"²². The role of intellectual bodies was to foster ideas, notions and visions that did not fit into the closed, unilateral world-views imposed by the charismatic centres of society. Although those centres were presented as the worldly incarnation of transcendent power, their ideas and concepts propitiated alternative forms of expressing the immediate life experiences of agents in society. They drew up the *theodicies* that, endowed with redeeming, rationalising power, sought the answer to the origin of human suffering²³. Intellectual elites activated the ability to question authority concerning the origin of the experiences of suffering that were so widespread in many areas of society. In these cases, intellectuals sought to turn pain into liberation and fate into possibility, or more specifically into a questioning of the social legitimacy of politi-

20 Bellah, R.N., 2005. "What is Axial about the Axial Age?", *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, 46: 72

21 S.Eisenstadt, Op. Cit., 1986,12

22 Bellah,R.N., 2012.*Religion in Human Evolution*, Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 269

23 Weber, M., 1946, *Op.cit.*,274

cal power. It was not in vain that agents sought to learn the causes of injustice and inequality. In this context, tensions multiplied in the axial cultures as the antagonism between the centre and the periphery intensified.

The embryo of human creativity lies in this situation. An abstract vision of algebra in the Babylonian culture and geometrical thinking in pre-Socratic Greece existed before the axial revolutions. Human beings can be said to have produced bodies of knowledge and explanations of world events even earlier. However, the axial period took things a step further, a step that marked a change with incomparable effects: *second-degree thinking*. It was at this point that *thinking about thinking* emerged, and, in political terms, that the legitimacy of power began to be questioned. The conditions for thinking began to become the centre for reflection in human knowledge. Thus, indeterminacy was found to exist at the foundations of the institutional webs of society, including the charismatic institutions of the authorities, because their foundations and their structures (which were supposedly transcendent in origin) were also the result of human decisions. Indeterminacy should not be seen negatively as a lack of determination. In the words of Castoriadis, it should rather be seen positively as the possibility of other determinations. For all these reasons, creativity came to play a stand-out role because, following the axial revolutions, it was “the textual articulation of an increasing human reflexivity and reflexive consciousness, the ability to use reason to transcend the immediately given”²⁴.

This was an irreversible step in the history of human beings. From that time onwards social life entailed investigating reality, but especially the conditions *for the knowledge of that reality*. For that reason human creativity, together with the notion of transcendence, came to the fore in the axial period, announcing the basic, structural indeterminacy that underlies any social experience. The creative intervention of society was reflected in the set of items of knowledge and know-how which, however, the political authorities strove to keep out of social circulation by asserting that they were the expression of divine will, which those authorities represented in the domain of the present world. As Joas puts it “creativity, here, it seems to me, replaces the assumption of a divine revelation of truth without any further discussion”²⁵. This marked the establishment of the tensions that have accompanied the course of history ever since

24 Wittrock, B., 2012. “The Axial Age in Global History: Cultural Crystallizations and Societal Transformations”, in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, edited by R.N.Bellah and H.Joas, Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 108

25 Joas, H., 2012, “The Axial Age Debate as Religious Discourse”, in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, edited by R.N.Bellah and H.Joas, Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 12

the axial revolutions. Whereas transcendence implied a “beyond” from which the charismatic political centre governed the whole of society by prescribing forms and guidelines for social action as doctrine, creativity sought to question and renew the compact nature of those edifices of knowledge, focusing on the contingent, indeterminate nature of all social outputs. This led to the emergence of what Eisenstadt calls “human reflexivity”, which provided the foundations for what Momigliano calls *criticism* as the characteristic of an axial age that questioned everything and everybody. It seems that in most of the historical developments based on axial civilisations there is either *transcendence without creativity*, so that the former takes the shape of unquestionable doctrine, or, as in our own time, *creativity without transcendence*, in which creativity that does not promote anything beyond the current state of things become standard.

3. Revisions and re-readings of the axial: the contributions of Marlin Donald

In Jaspers’ exposition on the axial there is an important element that fits into and feeds into the *a priori* of secularisation that is so present in modern philosophy and sociology. The emergence of (Socratic) reason meant *ipso facto* the death of myth and of the set of narratives and accounts that gave meaning to the lives of men in the universe through metaphorical images and religious and artistic symbols. Jaspers, Weber and, more recently, Taylor, see the crisis of the axial age as the irreversible commencement of a drive towards secularisation in the subsequent course of history where, supported by evolutionary automatism, the dominant models of social organisation were to be rational models based on functional differentiation, technical specialisation, representative democracy and the loss of spiritual content. In the words of Jaspers, “The *Mythical Age*, with its tranquillity and self-evidence, was at an end. The Greek, Indian and Chinese philosophers were unmythical in their decisive insights, as were the prophets in their ideas of God. Rationality and rationally clarified experience launched a struggle against the myth (*logos* against *mythos*); a further struggle developed for the transcendence of the One God against non-existent demons, and finally an ethical rebellion took place against the unreal figures of the gods. Religion was rendered ethical, and the majesty of the deity thereby increased. The myth, on the other hand, became the material of a language which expressed by it something very different from what it had originally

signified: it was turned into parable”²⁶. For his part Weber speaks of the secularising influence sparked by rationalisation in Greek philosophy and the Jewish prophecies in the course of Western history. In much more conclusive terms, Taylor asserts that “the Great Disembedding, as I propose to call it, implicit in the Axial revolution, reaches its logical conclusion”²⁷.

This being so, until very recently it has been taken as an unquestionable axiom that the history of humanity began with that axial break, and that up to that time humanity had been dominated by superstition and magic in forms of knowledge based on oral transmission and on the absence of a stable memory, since writing did not yet exist. Accordingly, human history as related here was born as a secularised history, or a history destined for secularisation, and specifically as a history endowed with the universal continuity of immanent potential, concentrated in our secularised, disenchanted modern age. Its potential as history and as secularised history entails the death of myth, which is subsumed by an evolutionary process driven by the increasing complexity of civilisation and culture that leads logically, in the words of Taylor, to Western modernism.

However, this prevailing reading of the axial age, and therefore of the subsequent course of human history, has recently been called into question by new interpretations. Among them is the contribution made by US psychologist Merlin Donald²⁸. From a theory of evolution of human consciousness based on the psychology of cognitive and evolutionary development, Donald looks at the characteristic features of the different levels of human culture from its commencement to the present day.

He states that first there was an “episodic culture”, in which humans learned as higher mammals to understand and respond to stimuli immediately, but had no ability to form longer chains based on causes and effects.

Then, he says, came a period of “mimetic culture” which began perhaps 2 million years ago. This culture was pre-linguistic but not pre-vocal, and in it the body was used imaginatively to link events and to communicate with others through gestures and expressions.

Then came “mythic culture”, which, around 100,000 years ago and in the wake of the development of language, showed itself as a collectively unified system of explanatory metaphors which enabled universal situations found in the human condition to be understood through hermeneutic similarity. By this time the human mind had reached out beyond the episodic perception of

26 Jaspers, K., 1953. *The Origin and Goal of History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2

27 Taylor, Ch., 2007, Op.cit., 146

28 Donald, M., 1991, *Origins of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

events and the mimetic reconstruction of episodes to form a more comprehensive model of the human world as a whole.

Finally, around the fifth century BC came the “theoretic culture”, which appeared during the axial revolutions and led to the historical and cultural implementation of reflection and self-criticism. Although theory implied a break with the dominance of oral speech and narrative styles of thinking, it did not necessarily mean the definitive abandonment of the earlier forms of cognitive experience. The appearance of the theoretic culture has three characteristic features: (1) the invention of writing, which helped make society literate; (2) external memory based on the stabilisation of knowledge with the appearance of writing; and (3) reflexivity in the sense of the ability to think analytically rather than normatively and to build up theories susceptible to logical, empirical criticism.

What Robert Bellah highlights in Donald’s approach is the fact that “nothing is ever lost”²⁹: this extends to the creative, instituting heritage bequeathed by the axial experience. In the transition between the mimetic and the ritual, via the mythic and narrative to the theoretic and analytical “from” and “to” here do not denote a process of the replacement of one thing by another”³⁰. Pre-theoretic cultural strata remain alive and operational in the deepest recesses of human awareness, and permit contemporary agents to view the world analytically without ceasing to view it episodically, mimetically and mythically. To quote José Casanova, one of the most authoritative scholars of contemporary religious facts, “it is not that theoretic culture triumphed over and superseded “ritual” and “myth”, but rather that a new sphere of theoretic culture emerged and that this led to various reformulations of mimetic and narrative culture”³¹. In the words of Bellah, “Humans are still episodic, mimetic and mythic creatures, although, as in earlier transitions, the emergence of a new form of cultural cognition eventually involves reorganisation of the earlier forms”³². To put it another way, the fact that we have become theoretic does not mean that we have ceased to be episodic, mimetic and mythic. The earlier cultural forms continue to be operational, though their effects are filtered and corrected by analytical thinking. In this regard, Randall Collins writes that everyday life consists basically of “interaction ritual chains”, to the extent that any attempt to

29 Bellah, R. 2005. Op.cit., 72

30 Joas, H., 2011. “Robert Bellah: Religiöse Evolution und symbolischer Realismus”, in *Kultur. Theorien der Gegenwart*, edited by S.Moebius and D.Quadflieg, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 89

31 Casanova, J. 2012. “Religion, The Axial Age, and Secular Modernity in Bellah’s Theory of Religious Evolution”, in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, edited by R.Bellah and H.Joas, Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 202

32 Bellah, R., 2005. Op.cit., 78

be anti-ritualistic fails as that position itself becomes ritualised. Just as mimetic and mythic structures endure in spite of the efforts of theory to cover and exhaust human knowledge because, as in the case of great literature, it “speaks to the deepest level of our humanity; it helps us better understand who we are”³³.

4. The paradoxes of the creative ethos

As stated at the beginning of this study, creativity has become the core concept of the current model of society. Mastery of its semantics is the basis for the social imaginary (to use Castoriadis’ term) of our time, which impregnates and coins our current institutions and values. Its presence translates into behaviour and projects centred on the inexorable search for originality, which is no longer a scant asset but is now above all an imperative. Until recently a monopoly on creativity was held by a select minority of artists, but today it has become a mainstream requirement for behaviour and projects. Somehow the paradigm of the artist, so disdained in society due to the hegemony of the figure of the rational agent in the Calvinist ascetic mould, has come to make up the creative ethos that invades all areas of the social agenda.

However this notion of the mainstreaming of creativity has generated a theoretical debate, because although current society may “democratise” this social skill, that does not mean that it is free once and for all or that it has attained a definitive, previously unknown degree of freedom in the upward course of history. On the contrary, the imposition of this idea results in new forms of social dominance. If the current meaning of creativity sought to exhaust the semantic potential of the concept it might seem that the dimensions of creativity as an element for transforming social environments discovered during the axial period would be silenced. In other words, without the clarifying, correcting work done by social criticism the current notion of creativity may turn into a mechanism for social paralysis, as its impulses drive agents to seek novelty within the current mode of society without attaining their own model, through the models of organisation of others. Individual creativity may be dealt a fatal blow if its ability to transform social facts is reduced. In this sense, if theoretical reflection approaches the concept in a merely descriptive fashion it can favour the stabilisation and naturalisation of a state of affairs which is, paradoxically, creative. The new forms of inequality that are arising can be redressed only if

33 Ibid. 86

there is a critical rethinking of the possibility of communicating with the other semantic levels of the concept mentioned in the first few pages of this study, which reveal the contingency of society itself.

This is where the importance of the legacy of the axial period lies: its mimetic-narrative legacy remains with us in the reflexivity of technological civilisation. That is why this civilisation recalls the new forms of power of which creativity instituted as a model for society is the product. It is neither eternal nor a product of historical logic. On the contrary, it is the result, like everything else, of the instituting creativity that has been enabling humanity to rethink the conditions of possibility for social representation for 25 centuries. The creative ethos that defines our time is not the be-all-and-end-all of history: creativity is a prerequisite that is always updatable in history.

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