The Conservative Seventies
Memoir of an Epistemological Moment

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What I may contribute to this book and in which direction my answers to Pedro Dolabela's questions will go is quite easily explained. I was twenty-five years old back in 1973 and worked as [the German equivalent of] an Assistant Professor at the newly founded University of Konstanz. So I lived through, from a specific angle of course, the epistemology of that time. I was one of its countless embodiments. More specifically, my memories of the early Seventies refer to some of the positions, debates, and developments that were shaping the Humanities and Arts during those years [of course under the particular German conditions to which the name of Geisteswissenschaften alludes]. Altogether, the picture that I can see today, against the blurring effect of so many years passed, strikes me as heterogeneous and multi-vectorial -- but at least one type of observation, one peculiar complaint that was current in the present of forty years ago, came back over and again. It was the then so often reiterated impression that certain expectations, expectations based on an attitude that intellectuals, somehow pretentiously, used to call "philosophy of history," had not been fulfilled yet. History, after what had been hailed as a promising spurt of "progress" during the late 1960s, now seemed to slow down within "the conservative Seventies" -- and so it became the obvious obligation for whoever wanted to be "progressive" to re-ignite the rhythm of History in order to ultimately reach what it had

promised. To most of us the thought was still remote, if not unconceivable, that "History," in today's words: the construction of time that had emerged around 1800, could be historical itself. Rather, "Time" and "History" continued to look like one stable framework, valid for all times and cultures, and if any present did not seem to fulfill its pre-assigned function within these coordinates, we were tempted to react as if it made sense to accuse the present of a conspiracy against History.

From today, this mood may look more than slightly absurd, but I indeed remember it as central for my professional world around 1973. I am not claiming of course that the critique against the "conservative Seventies" was predominant everywhere or, at least, predominant in the international academic world of the Humanities. Even within the Western German university scene, there were, among other positions, more straightforwardly and more aggressively Marxist language games in Frankfurt, for example, or in Berlin. My memories thus clearly depend on where and who I was then, and this is why, to begin, I need to talk about my more or less "private" self from 1973 [as briefly as possible] before I return to a level of more strictly academic and epistemological recollection.

1973 was five years after my graduation from the Gymnasium [of whose final year I had spent a large portion in Paris, attending the deservedly prestigious and quite ceremonial Lycée Henri IV]. Intellectually and academically, the end of high school and the beginning of my Muenchen university time, from October 1967 on, showed hardly any impact of the "revolutionary" spirit [of the spirit of a youth revolt] that we now associate so much with that time. After only a few weeks and normally prone to enthusiasm, I began to find my professors largely disappointing, with the one brilliant exception of Hugo Kuhn, a specialist in German medieval literature whose philosophical mind [it was from him that I heard the name "Wittgenstein" -- and the names of many other important philosophers -- for the first time], whose philosophical mind, independently from contemporary trends, had an unusual elegance and power, and with the mild exception of a professor of French and Italian literature who embodied a cautious attitude of progress by describing his position as that of a "structuralist medievalist." Even then, the combination of being a medievalist and being a structuralist did not sound convincing to me -- but at least it was a sign of
intellectual openness. After only three semesters, I changed to Regensburg, another new university where a younger generation of professors had come together, among them Joseph Ratzinger. Chomskyan grammar and some vague talking of "programming computers" were the latest symptoms of intellectual modernity for they had the aura of a more "scientific" future for the Humanities. But while I was eager to hide this reaction, the new rigor of Linguistics, too, failed to attract me, and so I used the opportunity, offered by a fellowship, to spend a year in Spain, at the University of Salamanca. Going to a country that had been, for more than thirty years, and still was under military dictatorship implied a profuse obligation of apologies for the member of the Socialist Students Association that I was -- and the tension seemed to get only worse to the extent that I discovered how much the new language, its literature, and a culture that was old-fashioned and very different fascinated me.

In reality, however, the problem was much less intense. For in reality my brief moment of quasi-religious faith in Marxism had already vanished, while the student protest in Spain offered ample opportunities to maintain the appearance of remaining "progressive," much more "progressive" than I actually was. What I found truly exciting, by contrast, was the new proposal, within literary studies in Germany, to shift scholarly attention from the structures of texts to the readers' activities and their "social" consequences [everything had to be "social" then] -- so that the offer I received upon my return from Spain to take over the position of a research assistant at the University of Konstanz, where "reception theory" was practiced, felt like a dream come true. And while I hardly ever dared to express any of my existing doubts about Marxist orthodoxy, the hope was emerging that, both intellectually and politically, a heartfelt commitment to progress was compatible with a not explicitly Marxist horizon.

This was the German moment of Willy Brandt, the first Social Democratic Kanzler, who had spent the Nazi years abroad and in resistance, and of the architecture, the colors, and the discourse of the 1972 Olympic Games in Muenchen which for my generation, for the first time, looked like the promise of a fatherland that was distant enough from our fathers' past. Then, on September 5, 1972, the Palestinian terror commando "Black September" killed eleven athletes and coaches of the Israeli Olympic team, instead of leaving the worst episode of the national past behind, decisively, this very past, many of us believed, had
returned to the German soil and had broken, for ever perhaps, the hope for progress and redemption that the first days of the Olympics had inspired.

The academic profession, too, constantly measured both everyday and specific events by the two-sided pattern of "progress" and "conservativism," by the difference between distancing and being locked into the past. As if they had not mostly been part of that past, the advisors and academic superiors at Konstanz made us youngsters childishly proud by saying that we were chosen for our vocation to become part of a new type of Literary Criticism [berufen fuer eine neue Literaturwissenschaft]. In 1969, Carl Hanser-Verlag had published a yellow softcover volume under the title "Ansichten einer neuen Germanistik," edited by Juergen Kolbe, which became obligatory reading for friends and foes of academic innovation and was therefore followed, four years later, by "Neue Ansichten einer neuen Germanistik". Seen from today, the difference in content between the two books and the contrast between the remarkable success of the first and the disappointing sales numbers of the second give their sequence an emblematic value. The 1969 volume was a blend of self-flagellating revisions of the discipline's history with an over-confident recycling of recipes from the Marxist tradition, whereas its follow-up from 1973 gave preference to approaches that were eager to be "progressive" and free of orthodoxy. A contribution to "Neue Ansichten" under the title "Sociology and Aesthetics and Reception" became the ninth item of my publication list. With a heavy feeling of responsibility for playing the role of the representative of our academic "school," I tried to tackle two unsurprising problems: how could one describe and explain the different readings given to identical texts by different types of readers [including readers without a literary education]? And how would such different readings have an impact on the readers' social behavior? There was a "political" trade-off implied between the Marxist legacy that I silently abandoned and the "leftist" commitment to readers without academic education.

When I recently reread this text, the sobering impression prevailed that I had not gotten far beyond the spelling out of my questions, of my very good intentions and of some basic concepts from phenomenological sociology. Only two years later, already a young senior professor and thus less constrained by the programmatic claims of our "school," I
published a text in a refereed journal arguing that answers to the question of how literary texts influenced their readers' behavior were anybody's guess and could therefore never fulfill the academic requirements of intellectual rigor. Compared to the initial intellectual appeal of Reception theory, this realization meant that my paradigm of choice had been deprived of its most valuable "political" promise, which produced the obligation to find yet another trade-off. If the tacit decision to take distance from Marxism had been balanced by a new openness towards popular culture and its consumers, I replaced this openness, in my next manuscript and book [originally written for the Habilitation], by focusing on Parliamentary Rhetoric in the French Revolution, that is by the choice of a historical moment as my subject matter that had long been regarded to be foundational for any politics of progress.

I do not remember when exactly I lost the necessary patience to obey to the rules of this politico-epistemological cat-and-mouse game. Altogether, I believe that the horizon of philosophical options [and a certain sequence within this horizon] that fascinated me between the late 1970s and my departure for the United States in 1989 was not uncommon among my generation of humanists in West Germany: we went from sociology of knowledge [and its inherent temptation of "constructivism"] to the Wittgenstein of "Philosophical Investigations" [and speech act theory], and this basis prepared us for Niklas Luhmann's "Systems Theory" as it combined phenomenological premises with a provocative boldness in its definitions and claims. Subscribing to Luhmann [whom more faithfully left wing colleagues still tried to stigmatize as "conservative"] meant that we had definitively escaped the long shadow of our ideological adolescence.

Now, comparing this individual professional trajectory to the motifs that Pedro Dolabela had identified and described as a working hypothesis for our symposium "Around 1973" I arrived at the astonishing result of an almost flawless convergence. "A shift towards the popular," in the first place, was indeed crucial for Reception theory during those Konstanz years, less perhaps due to questioning inherited concepts of "Art" and its autonomous status than, as I mentioned, by claiming that a new attention given to "the reader" would transform literary criticism into a more "democratic" operation. While this
commitment did not last for long, part of its Konstanz expression was, during the 1970s at least, a compulsory disinterest to be exhibited towards what our superiors dubbed as "conversations on the crest of the canon" \([\textit{Hoehenkammgespräche}]\), which turned into a strange, in some extreme versions: even an absurd bias against any intellectual exchanges and interactions among famous authors. "Systems Theory," secondly, as it fascinated so many German academics, was an obvious case of a paradigm that favored "concepts of self-causation," in particular during the intermediate stage of Luhmann's philosophical trajectory when [after focusing on the distinction "system / environment" and before concentrating on the position of the "observer"] the ideas of "autopoeiesis" and "self-organization," imported from biology, had become central for him. Finally, I have already tried to show how the continued attempt of denying any symptoms of "a crisis of historicism," i.e. of a construction of time based on the future as an open horizon of possibilities and on the capacity to leave the past behind, I have tried to show how denying a "crisis of historicism" was probably the main intellectual obsession within our "school" during the early 1970s [and thus, evidence of how widespread and palpable the crisis really was]. In this context, I find interesting the retrospective discovery that even Reinhart Koselleck who, more probably than any other scholar of his time, had contributed to the historicization of historicism [and thereby to the possibility of its replacement], never clearly asked the question whether there were signs to be found for a new, a different construction of time.

Likewise, the multiple innovative ways of thinking and writing about the past that we were trying out, always and exclusively appeared to facilitate a higher degree of sophistication within the well-established traditional paradigm. As the one dominant concern in thinking the past had been, since the days of Hegel, to "understand" it as a complex texture and sequence of human actions and human behavior [this is the basic attitude to which the name of "Hermeneutics" refers], experiments with "synchronic historiography," for example [largely inspired by Marc Bloch's epoch-making description of \(\textit{La société féodale}\) from 1939/1940], received praise for making change more visible and for doing this in a more economic way than narrative historiography [needless to say that narrative historiography soon acquired the negative label of being "conservative"]'). The emphasis of Hayden White's 1973 book "Metahistory, which largely converged with the
main line of consensus in a collective volume published by the "Forschergruppe Poetik und Hermeneutik" under the title "Geschichte und Geschichten" during the same year, White's insistence on the narrative and even literary constitution of the past through discourses seemed to offer a better way of coordinating the relationship between understanding the past and representing it. Nobody was asking, however, what a similar "literary turn" in representing the past could mean for the respective ontological and epistemological status of different ways of dealing with the past.

There is only one motif from Pedro Dolabela's vision of 1973 for which I do not see an equivalent within my view of the contemporary German Humanities: we were not ready to experience or interpret that moment as a threshold or as a watershed. What prevailed, by contrast, was the fear that History's pace might have slowed down, which rather implied a threat of less thresholds or watersheds. This certainly was how most Germans reacted to the so-called "oil crisis" in late 1973 and the shocking ban of using private cars during several winter weekends that it triggered. On the other hand and as I said, we were simply not able to think, not even to imagine, that such a "slowing down" of History could be part of a more complex and, so to speak, a more "profound" kind of threshold than those produced by the expected "historical" change. At the same time, the emergence of a different construction of time and, with it, the constitution of a more profound threshold was well under way in 1973 -- but we did not [want to] see this development.

The clearer the contours of this German epistemological moment are becoming in my memory, the more I realize how -- in today's view -- a defense of "History," as a political, social, and existential framework of orientation, provided the point of convergence for our multi-layered academic activities. As a consequence, intellectual positions and suggestions for which the dimension of "History" did not offer a place found only occasional, mostly uninspired resonance. Roland Barthes' distinction between "plaisir du texte" and "jouissance du texte," if I remember correctly, was but briefly mentioned in our colloquia [just as a gesture of being "well informed" about international academic trends] for we had no use for concepts highlighting a sensual relationship to the social and material world without providing an explicit mediation between aesthetic experience and rationality. Another
explanation was the traditional lack of Freudian thought in the German intellectual scene. For the same reason, I believe, the influence of Paul Zumthor's work within literary and cultural theory remained limited to a few enthusiastic readers who were familiar with the ongoing debates in French language and their specific horizons of reference.

During the early 1970s and due to his specific interests in medieval forms of communication, Zumthor had begun to propose perspectives and concepts that gave attention, for the first time in the history of literary scholarship, to the human voice as a medium and as an object of aesthetic experience. Ten years later, within a changed paradigmatic situation and thanks to several book publications that elaborated, on a phenomenological basis, a complex contrast between "letter" and "voice," Zumthor received a certain degree of attention within the earliest stages of "media studies" that emerged with astonishing success in Germany [Friedrich Kittler's foundational "Aufschreibesysteme" appeared in 1985]. But while the intensity and the intellectual focus of this moment were, so to speak, "around the corner" during the early 1970s, nobody expected, let alone predicted such a shift.

"Film studies" and, with rare exceptions, even films themselves were not considered worth of serious intellectual attention in the narrow academic world that I inhabited, where the solid prejudice against "Hollywood" was still established. And yet, the films that impressed me and that I talked about with my students and my same-age colleagues, mostly and obsessively from a historical angle, were all Hollywood productions. Launched as a Broadway musical in 1966 and as a film six years later, "Cabaret" inscribed itself into the predominant pattern of post-War history: it evoked the stage glamor, the demi monde, and the cosmopolitanism of Berlin's "Roaring Twenties" and their demise after 1933 -- and it did so under the palpable premise that "by now" things were back on track. "American Graffiti," from 1973, made present teenage life in a small Northern Californian town during the late 1950s -- only to finish with an account of each protagonist's fate after high school graduation. Many of them had died in the Vietnam War - which was thus staged as lethal threshold in American history, a threshold that had abruptly ended the naive and lively happiness of the post-War decades for an uncertain future. Finally, the first part of Coppola's "Godfather," also from 1973, was a New York-Italian epic of the earliest post-War moment [the initial sequence of images and scenes referred to the summer of 1945], of a
moment that would become the basis for the Corleone family's project of acquiring legality. Seventeen years later, in the final part of the trilogy, a tragic meaning of the entire work came through: there was no way for the Corleones to break the cycle of crime, wealth, power, and back to crime. Even in popular films, as we can see, linear conceptions of historical progress and development were no longer dominant. But while time may have been out of joint around 1973, there was no way for us to think this change in a productive way, to think it other than through the distinction between "conservative" and "progressive."

As I said at the beginning of this epistemological memoir, it was my intention to concentrate on a specific historical situation, on a fragment indeed within the larger picture of 1973. Therefore I found it all the more impressive how my deliberately constrained view was able to confirm -- and to give culturally specific confirmation and concretization - to most of the hypotheses that were framing our colloquium. I will now finish this exercise in recollection by offering a more complex view, a view in which the specific epistemological profile remembered -- and perhaps multiple other intellectual and cultural configurations -- might find their place. Very clearly and as materialized in multiple symptoms, there was a consensual perception of an epistemological crisis in my small academic world to which we reacted with tenacious efforts of bringing back to a level of smooth functioning the historicist chronotope and its epistemological implications. Seen from today, however, the most important symptom was the impression that linear "progress," still promised by History, did not unfold according to expectation. Too many experiences and institutional configurations that we thought should have become part of the past, were still on our mind and of concern [in a different context, I have described this feeling as "latency"], and they seemed to slow down -- or even bring to a still stand -- the movement towards a glorious future that we felt entitled to expect. It was in the middle of this tension that using the concepts "conservative" and "progressive" had become so addictive. But what we experienced [and still described at colloquium on 1973] as a "crisis of historicism," was, from the mid-twentieth century on, the emergence of a new chronotope, of a chronotope that
we can only now distinctively see and explain, although it continues to be far from being an institutionalized structure of knowledge.

In the everyday of industrialized nations today the future does no longer present itself as an open horizon of possibilities to choose from but, rather, as a future filled with threats [ecological threats, demographic threats, economic threats -- regardless of whether our corresponding fears are empirically justified or not]. At the same time, we no longer feel that we are naturally leaving the past behind ourselves, as we are moving through time; rather, we are inundated with pastness [think only of all the memorial days and commemorative events in our present, think of how electronic technology makes it impossible to forget anything]. Between that new future filled with threats and this new past that will not fade, our present is no longer an "imperceptibly short moment of transition," as Charles Baudelaire wrote in "Peintre de la vie moderne," a short moment of transition within and through which time seemed to "accelerate," but an ever broadening present of simultaneities [they accumulate due to our new incapacity to leave any past behind ourselves]. Now, if the short present of the historicist chronotope had become an epistemological habitat where we humans thought of ourselves as "Subjects," as pure consciousness excluding the somatic dimension of our existence, then it becomes plausible why today, in a different, broader present we are so tenaciously trying to bring back "the body," "the senses," and "space" as their phenomenological environment into the picture that we have of ourselves. In such a new chronotope, finally, stagnation, oscillation, and any kind of deviation from a linear flaw of time become thinkable again.

From this angle, I see the early 1970s as an intermediate stage between two overlapping chronotopes, as a heterogeneous and multivectorial dimension of intersection between their different structures and effects. Several elements and symptoms that belong to the new chronotope were already in place around 1973: the historicist flow of time had become intermittent [hence the reiterated identification of "conservative" tendencies and the eagerness to find ever new confirmations for the cointinuity of "progress"]; the agency attributed to the Subject was beginning to look surprisingly frail [hence the impression that "History was no longer under control"]; By contrast and at least in the German context I have been trying to describe, the somatic, sensual, spatial, and thereby aesthetic
dimensions of human existence were not yet in the foreground of attention [hence the lack of interest in positions like those of Roland Barthes or Paul Zumthor].

If we are interested at all in concentrating on an individual threshold year within this intermediary stage, 1973 is certainly a plausible candidate. On the other hand, the complexity produced by the overlapping of two different chronotopes [a complexity that we still need to fully describe and understand] may be a reason against any attempt to condensate our observations in the historiographical form of a year as a “turning point.” For this would be too close to the conception of an “event,” as it was central for the narrative representation of “History.” But for a different reason it may not be necessary at all to make a decision between one or the other form of describing the moment of the early 1970s: if our new “broad present” is a present of simultaneities, a present in which nothing gets lost and everything can be preserved and juxtaposed, this structure must also apply to former conceptions of representing the past. Therefore, a historicist and a post-historicist culture of thinking and writing the past can well coexist in a post-historicist present.

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