Chapter Nine

BIOGRAPHICAL SELF-MONITORING AS A CONDITION OF
REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

TOWARDS PRACTICAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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The editor of the present collection, while providing the future authors with a draft of a joint reflection on the 'professional' and 'non-professional' dimensions of humanistic experiences, raised an extremely important issue, he namely suggested a relationship between the practice of the profession and the biography of a humanist. We may well wonder whether the wording used by Marcin Kafar is adequate and if it brings us closer to new knowledge on the associations occurring between creative activity and its effects on the one hand, and the subjects causing them on the other. It is impossible, however, to negate the fact that at the time of the prevailing doubts concerning not only the sense of following the author and his/her work, but also the heuristic potential of the humanities, addressing the issue of coexistence of the 'author' and 'his/her work' is extremely important.

The task placed before us seems to be difficult, even due to the multiplicity and diversity of the emerging questions and concerns. Since, however, according to Pierre Bourdieu (1998), in no field of knowledge, which particularly refers to the social sciences, the progress of knowledge is attainable without taking into account the mechanisms governing the circumstances of cognition, the attempt aimed at showing the real position and function of the author in science certainly justifies the effort. And this is the goal, and also the starting point, of these deliberations. Immediately, I hasten to explain that my ambitions are rather contributory, than analytical.

Therefore, in the next sections, I will only briefly draw the attention of the scholars representing the disciplines included in the scope covered by the humanities and dealing with human communities (I mainly refer here to anthropology and sociology, which is also suggested by the title of this chapter), to a few autobiographical aspects of the knowledge generated by them. The basis of my argument will be the proposals outlined by various known and respected representatives of the contemporary humanities: Umberto Eco (born in 1932) and Michel Foucault (1926-1984).

For Eco (2002, p. 81) "The text is there" and "the private life of the empirical authors is in a certain respect more unfathomable than their texts" (ibid., p. 88). These terse assertions—uttered in a single breath by the author, who, as we know very well, has repeatedly manifested his uncommon skills that distinguish him in both the field of science and art—should be sufficient for all humanists as the validation of their reluctance towards (auto)biographical studies. However, the matter is not as simple as it looks at the first glance. The author of *Name of the Rose* eventually comes to the conclusion that the relationship between the text and the author does matter after all, and it is because of the subtle sensitization of the reader-recipient that follows it, which prepares him/her for making interpretations within a particular culture. The skillful use of the biographical signature in the text ensures the opportunity to counteract many unjustified interpretations, thanks to it the author is able to prevent the emergence of allusions that are going too far from his original intent. In such a case— even though we do not always know the exact set of meanings prepared by the author for his works (for whose reception he is rarely, if ever, able to take full responsibility)—we can define the basic text attributes, such as its recipients, the purpose of the statement, its style, etc. The creators of literature have few worries concerning it. As if by definition they do not need to bother about how the meanings package that they send to the anonymous recipient will be read—works seen from such angle resemble more the text that "is put in the bottle," mentioned by Eco (p. 67), which is sent to an unknown destination, than a 'brick' sited in the solid building of knowledge. Does the same refer to the texts contained in the area of the humanities? Who is the author in them and what are his role and responsibilities?

This question was answered by Michel Foucault in a short, but very frequently quoted text entitled *What is an Author?* (1969) and—indirectly—in the popular *The Order of Things* (2005 [1966]). In the second of these works, the French philosopher briefly presented the history of the human sciences, referring in this context to their contemporary state, conditioned by specific epistemological disposition. It is based on the fact that the

humanities were not offered any finished concept of man from the outside, and they did not find themselves within the already defined epistemological field. This was not caused by any discovery, ideology, or any political option. According to Foucault, the existing state of affairs is the result of the crisis of representation, which caused a redistribution of the *episteme*, unaccompanied by providing the access to the relevant body of knowledge, or even the ready set of discourses about man. The archaeology of knowledge reveals as well that, even assuming the perspective of the prehistory of the humanities, man himself, *a fortiori* authorizes any reflection on himself. In the opinion of Foucault, in the history of humanities there was not a single founding act, establishing the rules of a new set of discourses. A situation in which the humanities are a side effect of the inner workings of the whole area of knowledge does not bring about any reasons for isolation, or for the autonomy and autotelicity, but it radically and clearly shows the available cognitive relationship. It is man—a given, historical, multi-dimensional character that is responsible for initiating the discourses and for the selection of specific epistemological strategies (e.g. making an alliance between the humanities and the mathematical sciences or deriving from a particular philosophical tradition). In the analysis of the knowledge order advanced by the author of *The History of Sexuality*, man as a living being, working, talking and consuming became, at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the subject of thought and knowledge, as well as the initial point for reflection establishing the thinking and knowledge about him—man as something that is equal to the thinking and knowledge of the celestial bodies, cells or languages (cf. Foucault, 2005 [1966], pp. 206-212).

What kind of man-author is Foucault talking about? Who is the subject of cognition in [A]nthropology for the philosopher, who largely contributed to the revolutionization of his traditional, substantial image? In the essay *What is an Author?* Foucault (1984 [1969], p. 111) presents the following, contained within the scope of literary criticism, definition: "the author provides the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social position, and the revelation of his basic design." This approach saturated with textuality, leads to highlighting the "author functions" (meaning the author as a function of discourse) entailing the reduction of the writer/creator/scientist to the role of the 'common denominator' of all his/her texts; the differences arising here should be abolished through the principles of evolution, influence, or maturation. Using such methodical strategy, Foucault dismembers the author of any discursive statement into three parts, or, better to say, three modal "selves." They are not, though, fictional

duplications: the first is the "I" speaking in the course of a demonstration; the second—the "self" providing a glimpse backstage of the effect of the work performed by the first "I"; the third is the "self" that tells about the achieved results and the problems emerging from the sum of the work performed by its predecessors. It should be emphasized that none of the separate "selves" refers in a simple way to the *real* author, and they only produce a kind of what we would call the 'speaking selves' (ibid., pp. 110-113).

The well-known concept in the theory of literature of the impersonal and biased subject, following the linguistic and autobiographical turns is also gradually absorbed by the social sciences. My statement is trying to fill a gap in the usage, on the part of the humanities, of the abundant benefits of the 'archaeological' discoveries of the French thinker.[1]

Staying for a moment within the diagnoses set by Foucault, I should also mention that modern *episteme* does not envisage any specific place for the social sciences taken in general, and for the humanities in particular. "The three faces of knowledge" do not include an object that could be dealt with by today's humanities, while maintaining by it at least relative autonomy from the philosophical reflection, as well as mathematical sciences and empirical sciences. The everyday life of humanities is turned inside out with a chronic, nebulous apportionment, moreover, it lacks a fixed, in-rooted location; it is an everyday life that remains in constant danger of extreme fragmentation. What does it mean? No less, no more, but the necessity to speedily put aside the old and in practice unresolved disputes (as to whether the humanities are/are not a science, and in what form (?); whether, and if so, to what extent do they require commitment (?); do they have the right to interfere in the society (?); do they require legitimacy (?); whether and to what extent are they literature (?); do they depend on politics (?), etc.), to reach an agreement as for the expectations with regard to the cognitive foundation, namely the paradox of anthropology (Sojak, 2004, pp. 110-116).

If the hitherto carefully concealed subjectivity of a subject were to become, even if only partially, something objectivized—I am still drawing inspiration from Foucault's conclusions—the components of identity of a subject and any activities related to them would have to be decoded in

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[1] The dissonance between the saturation of the humanities with Foucault's works and actual taking into account the recommendations arising from them in the research and writing practice is all the more striking, the more strongly we realize not only how often the name 'Foucault' is invoked upon the occasion of various kinds of *excursus*, diagnoses and research, but also the importance of Foucauldian theorems for several weighty concepts currently valid in the social sciences, such as the critical theory, constructivism, Actor-Network Theory. Indeed, it is hard to find an area of the humanities or a humanist not admitting (consciously or unconsciously) to have intellectual relations to or inspirations from the author of *The Order of Things* (cf. Chapter Five in this book).

advance by splitting the 'author function.' This will make it possible to 'successfully' develop stories about the social world; as a result it will protect us 'from' instead of bringing us 'to' the absurdity. Reaching each time for the multiple selves that correspond to each particular discourse (whose modality will be marked in our awareness), we will make the consecutive steps on the way to, as it seems, *literaturization* that is necessary for the current human sciences. In this way, we can prove that this or that research decision is not only a strategy used in the game for new knowledge, but it actively establishes both the object and the subject of cognition. Locating the 'authors' of texts undoubtedly raises the chance to reach this dimension of the humanities, which is deposited in the 'folds' and 'crevices' of modern *episteme*. To be able to take full advantage of this, it is important— in addition to the meticulous fulfillment of Foucauldian recommendations as for clarifying which 'self' *tells*, which *reveals the inside story* (here we can recognize the undeniably useful function of introductions, prefaces, notes on plates, acknowledgments, etc.), and which 'self' *formulates comments and synthesizes the achievements* (afterword, possible continuations, diagnoses, recommendations)—to lead constant discernment in the changing positions across the field of social generation of knowledge. This active participation of humanists in constructing the metalevel of the first or higher degree for the disciplines they represent would prevent as well the sociologism that freely forces itself upon us ('everything depends on the context'), which, for anyone who wants to consciously practice humanities, is often the first and the last instance. It is a truism to repeat, but even Foucault, reluctant towards sociology, refreshes our memory in this regard saying that "the author function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses" (Foucault, 1984 [1969], p. 113).

The operation of decoding the author function requires huge amount of analytical work—and it is inseparable from the need to identify the dominant tracks, picking out root metaphors, reflecting upon the language *usus*, forms of narratives and arguments, the nature of the most basic unit of things, namely statements (*énoncé* in the wording of Foucault), etc. However, only the undertaking of this scale gives a lively hope for the fulfillment of the project of Foucault's humanities 'without an author.' An author, in the process of writing, would create a space in which he would be gone, disappearing in a maze of thoughts and words (cf. Foucault, 1984 [1969]; 1972 [1969]). The process indicated here most probably will force the daredevils willing to give in to the spirit of change to face the necessity to rethink some, too tender, ideas concerning the humanities, but in return it will provide the humanities with the opportunity to leisurely drift in the trihedron of modern epistemology.

I will come back now to the starting point of my discussion quoting a sentence said by Beckett and cited by Foucault: "'What does it matter who is speaking,' someone said, 'what does it matter who is speaking'" (Foucault 1984 [1969], p. 101). The message in this, let's admit it, slightly fickle phrase—when applied to the current dilemmas of the humanities—reveals an apparent indifference to the sources of speaking/writing. This is not because the modern human sciences, following the example of literature and art, will soon lead to the 'death' of the author, but since this apparent indifference is—through the use of certain practices of academic writing and professed professional ethics—a rule of the social world of humanists. A question placed in such subsoil concerning the weightiness of a scientific ('professional') biography is a crucial question from the point of view of the future of humanistic sciences. Since we accept the bipolar tangle of the object and subject of cognition, it is impossible to deny one of the parties this 'epistemological equation' (through systematic 'forgetting,' 'who' is speaking) without the visible depletion of the effects of the research work. At this point, I can already attempt to explicitly state my main postulate: **Let's practice self-reflection, selecting for it the most natural means available— an escape from narcissism, practiced in parallel with refraining from the complete removal of ourselves from our own scientific work**.

It seems that very often humanists do not realize that the basic cognitive situation they have to face is *epistemocentrism* understood not only as a form of scholastic mistake, but also as an inevitable consequence of the specific position of a scholar. Pierre Bourdieu (1998), in order to face this situation so embarrassing for social sciences, suggested that a researcher should apply a three-stage "principle of objectivity." The first stage of the 'constant looking in the mirror' means taking into account the impact of our social position: the available values, attitudes, disposition; the second comprises an analysis of one's own location within the academic space, where the so-called participant objectivization occurs—henceforth constructing one's own statements at the level of uncommitted metareflection is out of the question; here also follows the attempt to control one's pre-assumptions, limitations and conditions; the third stage consists of the discovery of a significant characteristic of the researcher, i.e. his/her taking up social practices as an object of observation and analysis. Theory, and therefore also the theoretical approach, is combined with social distance which must be recognized and grasped.

The consequence resulting from the above is the need to provide for each report of the study—a report on the report, which brings together all the necessary information that is used by the recipient to establish the biographical and social location of the author—the only *real* author of the research report.

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The *real* author of the text, in order to reveal his 'authorial self,' should present at the end of the paper some information about his 'professional' biography. As a graduate of archeology and ethnology (studies at the turn of the twentieth and the twenty-first century) he experienced both the traditional and the postmodern variants of these disciplines with all the rewards and disadvantages resulting from it, that—becoming too impeding for him—were then all too easily invalidated in the era of a return to empiricism. The fact that the author got closer to sociology (about 8 years ago) embeds him in a more 'scientistic' and less 'literary' model of understanding human societies. An important empirical inspiration in this area has been provided by studies of the history of science, showing, *inter alia*, a complex discursive entanglement of scientists.

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