Quaderni di Teoria Sociale 2.2024
ISSN (online) 2724-0991 | DOI: 10.57611/qts.v4i2.482
www.riviste.morlacchilibri.com/index.php/quaderniditeoriasociale

Massimo Cerulo

Marco Santoro, Barbara Grüning, *Cultura e società. Concetti, modelli, questioni*, Carocci, Roma, 2024, pp. 391.

Di cosa parliamo quando parliamo di Cultural Studies? Come mai questo termine genera ancora dibattito, a volte confusione, di certo prese di posizione in ambito accademico? E perché gli studi sulla cultura possono rivelarsi fondamentali, oggi, nella comprensione della realtà sociale? A queste e molte altre domande prova a rispondere l'ultimo libro di Marco Santoro e Barbara Grüning: *Cultura e società. Concetti, modelli, questioni,* pubblicato dai tipi di Carocci nella collana *Frontiere della sociologia* (diretta dallo stesso Santoro).

Ritorniamo sul titolo: come insegna la fenomenologia, se la congiunzione tra le parole «cultura» e «società» diventasse copula, il risultato non cambierebbe, in quanto, in base ai modi in cui si decide di costruire, simbolicamente, i prodotti culturali quotidiani, allo stesso modo si «fa» società, ossia si stabiliscono delle norme di interazione e vivere in comune che andranno a caratterizzare la nostra appartenenza in un determinato contesto. Posta in tal modo, la questione sembrerebbe di semplice lettura. Tuttavia, come ben chiariscono i due autori, il discorso prodotto sugli e dagli studi sulla cultura – ossia i *Cultural Studies* – è ben lungi dall'essere chiaro e chiarito in forme e categorie definitive. In effetti, cosa questi studi siano è oggetto di discussione e fonte di controversie, proprio come il loro oggetto di studio. Questo libro, proposto in forma di manuale, contribuisce allora alla comprensione degli studi culturali, ponendosi un duplice obiettivo: da una parte, mostrare le connessioni genealogiche e sistematiche tra questi e le scienze sociali (la sociologia in particolare); dall'altra, illustrare il ruolo che gioca la cultura nella vita di ogni giorno, dando centralità tanto al linguaggio quanto al corpo nella costruzione di sistemi di significato e di reti e spazi sociali.

Per perseguire tale duplice obiettivo, i due autori – sociologi accademici all'Università di Bologna (Santoro) e alla Bicocca di Milano (Grüning) – costruiscono, scandagliano e discutono quattro aree tematiche: le disuguaglianze culturali di classe, di genere, di etnia; la comunicazione e i media, ovvero la produzione, la trasmissione e la ricezione dei significati sociali; i processi subculturali di

produzione della devianza; l'economia culturale, ovvero il rapporto fra industrie creative, vita quotidiana, comunità di gusto e pratiche di consumo.

La prima area – capitolo 3: «Dopo la classe. Culture, differenze, identità» – approfondisce concetti in apparenza marxiani, ma che hanno subito diverse trasformazioni nel corso dei decenni. Dalla classe alla cultura di classe, dall'identità all'etnicità, fino alla decostruzione di temi ancora oggi scottanti nell'ambito delle scienze sociali quali «razza» e razzismo. Tale percorso viene sviluppato sia attraverso la presentazione e il commento di specifiche correnti culturali (come la *Popular Culture*), sia attraverso l'analisi di studi di genere, *Queer Theory*, lavori sociologici che si focalizzano sul corpo e la sessualità.

La seconda area tematica – capitolo 4: «Dal testo all'audience: lo studio dei media» – mi sembra che renda omaggio alla scuola di Birmingham e al *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies*, concentrandosi su tematiche fondanti le pionieristiche teorie di Stuart Hall e Raymond Williams. Si parte con la presentazione dello storico modello *encoding/decoding* per dimostrare come l'audience e la comunicazione facciano cultura: non soltanto attraverso lo strumento del televisore e la politica editoriale delle televisioni, ma anche svolgendo un interessante aggiornamento del modello sia rispetto ai media digitali sia rispetto ai *Fandom Studies.*

La terza area tematica – capitolo 5: «Chicago, Birmingham e oltre: devianza, subcultura e politica» – guida lettrici e lettori nella disamina di alcuni concetti classici della sociologia: oltre a quelli appena citati, vi è da segnalare l'apertura da parte dei due autori a processi emotivi che non possono essere ignorati nell'analisi della costruzione culturale della società (panico, trauma, dolore, lutto, ecc.).

La quarta e ultima area tematica, infine – capitolo 6: «Produzione/consumo: economia, cultura, vita quotidiana» – ha il profumo delle teorie bourdieusiane sui campi di produzione di oggetti e pratiche culturali. Non a caso, il grande sociologo francese fa più volte capolino nei paragrafi del capitolo in quanto metro di paragone nello sviluppo del discorso prodotto dai due autori (Santoro è uno tra i più noti conoscitori del pensiero di Bourdieu in ambito europeo). In tal senso, il volume si chiude con la messa alla prova de *La distinzione* nei confronti dell'attuale sociologia del consumo e con quella tendenza che viene definita – un po' alla DiMaggio – onnivorismo della nuova élite.

Uno dei pregi del volume consiste nella presenza dei primi due capitoli, che hanno il merito di presentare i rapporti tra sociologia e *Cultural Studies* in maniera biunivoca: come la prima abbia generato i secondi (dal materialismo culturale alle promesse dello strutturalismo, fino al postmodernismo) e come, d'altro canto, i secondi abbiano profondamente influenzato la prima (dall'interazionismo simbolico alla sociologia cognitiva, fino agli studi recenti sui media digitali).

Il volume, che si rivolge principalmente a studentesse e studenti di corsi di laurea triennali e magistrali, ma anche di master e scuole di specializzazione, risulta chiaro, approfondito, articolato e innovativo nelle sue analisi. Sarebbe forse stato opportuno pensare a un breve capitolo finale nel quale tirare le somme di quanto discusso a proposito delle quattro aree tematiche, per focalizzarsi sul futuro degli studi culturali, alle prese con le sfide digitali e «artificiali» che caratterizzeranno gli anni a venire. Mi sembra un buon suggerimento e un augurio per le nuove edizioni del libro.

Matteo Santarelli

Gabriel Abend, *Words and Distinctions for the Common Good: Practical Reason in the Logic of Social Science*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2023, pp. 384.

It is not easy to write a conventional book review of Gabriel Abend's latest book. The reason for this difficulty, it is that *Words and Distinctions for the Common Good* is one of those books that makes it quite difficult to add anything to it. But then I opened the book again and saw that it contained an invitation to contribute to a common discussion about words and distinctions for the common good. So I'm going to accept the author's invitation in a very specific way. I will present some ideas that might be perceived as a potential critique of Abend's project, and I will use them *precisely* to contribute to Abend's project.

Abend points to a central problem of our societies: how do we use concepts?[1] How should we use concepts? Can we develop collective criteria for improving our concepts?

Vagueness

Let me start with an example – this is inspired by real events, but I have changed some aspects for narrative purposes. Your friend and colleague applies for a rich ERC grant. She submits a project on the relevance of Plato's theory of language to contemporary studies of populist rhetoric. She makes it through to the final interview. Member 1 of the final panel thinks that her project is groundbreaking, because it opens up new, unexpected avenues of interdisciplinary research on populism. Member 2 thinks that the project is not groundbreaking because it does not add much to the study of Plato – on the contrary, it is a pretextual use of Plato to address contemporary issues in political and communication studies.

1. I am sticking to *concepts* rather than *words*, but I don't think that has any consequences for what I am going to say).

Note two things. First, there is no way that someone can get the grant if their project is not defined as groundbreaking. If a panel member suggests that the project is not ground-breaking, that's tantamount to saying it won't get the money. Secondly, the members of the two parties on the panel are not acting out of self-interest. They are using the concept in a particular way only because they have been taught to use the concept in that way. As young academics, they were judged on their use of the concept. As established scholars, they are using the concept in a somehow fair way, even if that use means going against their interests and the interests of people in their research group[2].

So how do we deal with this disagreement between members of the evaluation panel? First option: Let's treat "groundbreaking" as an essentially contested concept. People will always disagree about how to use it because they have different interpretations of themselves, their social roles, the values associated with those roles, and so on. If you don't like that label, you can follow Dworkin and more soberly call it an "interpretive concept", i.e. a concept whose use and definition are the subject of genuine disagreement. But after reading Abend's book, we agree with him that this is no solution. A more procedural and practical step is needed. For example, you organize a collective letter asking people in the humanities to provide clearer guidelines and rules on how to use this concept in a non-controversial way. If the concept is left open to debate and interpretation, the risk that the most powerful – albeit disinterested – group will win the conceptual battle is real, to say the least.

I confess that before reading Abend's book, I was a fervent adept of the Church of Vagueness. I tended to think that an excessive need for procedures was a symptom of some kind of *horror vagi*. I believed that vagueness opens more possibilities than it closes, and that many procedural determinations of a word/concept are only a temporary result that people are likely to challenge in the future by reclaiming the inherent vagueness of the term – this happens in processes of politicization and conceptual revision[3]. By the way: by vagueness I do

2. Yes, it is a rather generous hypothesis. But let's avoid taking cynical political realism as the default starting hypothesis.

3. I am indebted to the ideas on vagueness explored by my colleagues Tullio Viola, Claudia Mazzuca, Francesco Bellucci and Anna Borghi. However, I take full responsibility for the way in which I have articulated them in the present context.

not mean borderline vagueness (for example, "how many hairs must a man have on his head before you can call him bald?"). Rather, I follow Peirce's idea that a predicate (a concept, a word) is vague if it is partially indeterminate, and if it has different coexisting multiple senses.

Now, *can I accept Abend's invitation to make words and concepts more precise without compromising my commitment to the epistemic and moral value of vagueness?*

My weakness for vagueness seems to fit in with some of the nine reasons for declining Abend's invitation that the author himself lists and discusses in the book. However, I don't want to use vagueness to stop the conversation that Abend's book has started. I want to use it to open up spaces for that conversation.

My sketchy idea is as follows. Sometimes you need to acknowledge a kind of *preliminary* (and perhaps temporary) *vagueness* to get conversations going, to open up the possibility of other senses of the word/concepts that are worth discussing[4].

Let's go back to my ERC example. Members of the social science community are beginning to agree that the definition of "groundbreaking" is too controversial and that its consequences need to be controlled – again, in a pragmatic sense. But the conversation cannot begin if people are not aware that the word "groundbreaking" is used in different ways and thus has potentially different meanings. Before finding the best ways of using the word, a conversation about it presupposes the possibility of different competing and/or cooperating senses. Acknowledging preliminary vagueness does not commit the discussants to the best solution being to keep the word "groundbreaking" vague. I call it preliminary vagueness because it allows for discussion that might lead to the articulation of a very precise use of the word. But this step is necessary if we are to collectively weigh and consider the pros and cons of different uses of the same word. If we assume that we are talking about completely different words, rather than different uses and meanings of the same vague word, then why discuss it at all?

4. I will not discuss here the more radical idea that sometimes we have good reason to keep a concept vague for some specific purposes.

A final comment on the public

Throughout his book, Abend makes extensive use of the word *community*. The best use of words/concepts and distinctions should be determined from the standpoint of community and the common good, and preferably by members of the community through democratic practices. While I see Abend's point, I still think that *community* is a slippery term. So here's my suggestion: Let's think of community as a kind of public. Dewey famously defined the public as the group that forms around a shared concern about the indirect consequences of something happening in society. This Deweyan perspective might offer an intriguing way of rephrasing Abend's main concern. What Abend is asking for in his book is the proliferation of different publics concerned with the use of words/concepts and distinctions. The invitation of his book is tantamount to saying: please don't keep these issues private. Please don't leave them in the hands of a few powerful individuals or groups and power struggles. In this sense, *Words and Distinctions for the Common Good* could be seen as a necessary and strategic playbook for all those who accept Abend's invitation or who are already working in this direction from different perspectives in the social sciences and philosophy.

Marco Tognini

Enrico Campo, Yves Citton (eds.), *The Politics of Curiosity. Alternatives to the Attention Economy*, Routledge, London and New York, 2024, pp. 238.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that in an age of smartphones and tablets attention is in danger. Concerns and laments arise from various quarters – pedagogues, literary scholars, and beyond – in both academic and everyday discourse. It is often noted that the human mind in the digital age seems to be 'everywhere and nowhere'. In today's media landscape, there is a tendency to avoid prolonged engagement, which hinders our ability to fully understand the environment and fosters a restlessness driven by a constant desire for novelty.

A reader of Heidegger might recognize that the last two sentences closely resemble those found in paragraph 36 of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger addresses the phenomenon he calls 'curiosity'. Long before the digital revolution, Heidegger identified a link between curiosity and distraction, contrasting them with the notion of authentic attention. Despite the differences, Heidegger's view aligns with a broader Christian tradition – though more generally Western – that has historically discredited curiosity, starting from the *Genesis* and with Pascal as a prominent example. In this tradition, curiosity is seen as the pursuit of knowledge unworthy of consideration, distracting from more significant matters. The ongoing debate over the 'crisis of attention' suggests that our perception of curiosity remains structured along this Pascalian and Heideggerian line.

With *The Politics of Curiosity. Alternatives to the Attention Economy* (2024), published by Routledge in the series *Critiques and Alternatives to Capitalism*, Enrico Campo and Yves Citton aim to rethink this line of thought and reframe the contemporary debate on attention. The editors are engaged in a long-term project to overcome the binary opposition of good attention versus bad distraction, as well as the dominant framework of the attention economy. Following their earlier works, *Attention and Its Crisis in Digital Society* and *The Ecology of Attention*, Campo and Citton offer a new contribution that brings together lead-

ing voices in the field of 'critical attention studies'. The work is not just a *summa* of the field but represents a relevant step forward. The dichotomous approach is transcended by introducing curiosity as a crucial element, "to reframe the problems within a triangulation involving attention, distraction, and curiosity as three complementary dimensions". Moreover, the book's "second displacement" involves reconsidering those three elements "not mainly in the individualistic perspective of psychological issues, nor even solely as sociologically determined phenomena, but within the larger perspective of mental infrastructures" (1). In this context, the vertices of the triangulation "are externally affected and conditioned by multilayered mental infrastructures, whose effects can be observed in terms of inner dispositions and recurrent behaviours" (3). One of the main objectives of the book is not only to observe and dismantle current mental infrastructures but also to propose a *remantlement* of new infrastructures that integrate curiosity. In this sense, we can indeed speak of a *politicization* of curiosity.

The volume contains 15 chapters, along with an introduction by the editors and a postlude consisting of a practical exercise of curiosity. The chapters are divided into four sections, each devoted to a detailed exploration of key concepts: *1. Critical Views of Attention*; *2. Digital Mental Infrastructures; 3. Praises of Distraction*; *4. Promises of Curiosities*. The editors have successfully fostered interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and intertextual academic curiosity by assembling contributors from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, intellectual, and cultural traditions. The variety of perspectives enriches the volume, making it a demanding yet rewarding read. Its intellectual breadth presents a stimulating challenge for any reviewer, as its ambition resists easy summarization. In this review, I identify and highlight recurring themes and significant patterns that emerge, challenging established notions of common sense within the debate on attention.

Throughout the book, the historical and social dimensions of the concepts are emphasized, in contrast to universalistic, naturalistic, and individualistic approaches. The historical perspective is particularly relevant in the historical semantics chapter by David Roulier, where he argues that attention is not an ahistorical notion, but rather a term that emerged "as the grouping, progressively operated during early modernity, under the category of attention, of a set of abilities of the mind" (63). By tracing the word's origin in early modern French,

Roulier shows that attention has consistently been criticized for its inadequacies, and that the crisis surrounding it is as old as the term itself. Furthermore, as Brekhus and Sabetta's contribution, along with many others, make clear, attention and inattention are always socially constructed, based on attentional norms that can perpetuate existing asymmetries of power.

As previously noted, the entire paradigm of the 'crisis' is being reconsidered. In section 1 and 3, the core idea of the digital ecosystem as an ecosystem of distraction is radically challenged. In Kenneth Rogers' essay, we read that we are witnessing "the creation of a mosaic of rapidfire of quick bites that together compose a deep, unified, and sustained attentional state" (46). This phenomenon more closely resembles a state of flow than the traditional concept of digital distraction. Alessandra Aloisi, already an advocate for distraction in her book *The Power of Distraction*, argues that our problem lies "in the continuous, instantaneous, and predetermined management of our attention, which prevents any distraction at all" (155). While distraction has an emancipatory potential (as explored in Part III), today's mental infrastructures are designed to counteract and suppress its liberating power.

If "mental infrastructures are powerfully overdetermined by the deployment of digital technologies" (2), it becomes essential to understand the nature of these platforms and the style of attention they promote. Dominique Boullier demonstrates how *regimes of attention* are reshaped by technological shifts. Through a brief historical analysis, he observes how the web has moved from fostering free exploration to implementing algorithms that provide a form of *programmed serendipity*, guiding users along predetermined attention pathways. While platforms like Wikipedia allow users to explore content through links, ChatGPT or modern search engines focus on the immediate extraction of information. These digital technologies affect our mental patterns and behaviours, which is why Rogers refers the emergence of a *TikTok brain* and, contrary to expectations, a state of *disinformation overload*. However, the contributors avoid falling into technological determinism, acknowledging the influence of changes in economic models on the web's evolution.

In the context of attention management, curiosity emerges as a political issue: it is not merely an endogenous force but requires external devices and institutions

to nurture and sustain it. Historically, curiosity has been seen as "the complement of attention" (73), its "reverse side" (71), and has often been blamed for being insubordinate and disrespectful of authority. The book consistently highlights the exploratory and emancipatory value of curiosity. It is presented as a force that opens up possibilities, enabling us to resist consumerist dynamics and escape the channels through which capitalism attempts to direct our attention (Borghi, ch. 6). Curiosity allows us to perceive social norms with non-disciplined eyes, thereby expanding our understanding of reality (Brekhus, Sabetta, ch. 2). Furthermore, the volume elucidates another key aspect of curiosity, rooted in its etymology: the concept of care, one of the four building blocks necessary for a mental infrastructure of curiosity. In working on this book, the authors, like Bergson's painters, act as "agent*s* of curiosity" (157).

The Politics of Curiosity contributes to the development of an "alternative culture of curiosity" (26). It not only challenges our understanding of attention in the digital age but also opens new avenues for exploring how curiosity can shape more equitable and engaged mental infrastructures. This outstanding book is poised to serve as a catalyst for the "revenge of the curious" (136) in a world dominated by predetermined forms of attention.