

AMBIGUOUS EXPERIENCE: A CONTRIBUTION TO UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCE AS DISCOURSE

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The main concern of this article is to sketch a discursive history of the term experience. The paper commences with a cultural ecology of the contemporary usage of the concept and proceeds with a brief overview of the history of the concepts of experience and subjectivity, intricately connected with discourse on experience in humanities. Lastly, the paper offers some reflections on the academic debates that have spun the 'web of significance' surrounding this much contested term.

Keywords: *experience, discourse, subjectivity, culture of experience*

CULTURE OF EXPERIENCE

'Be yourself', 'express yourself', 'experience your life', 'enjoy': these shibboleths of our time are flying over our personalities demanding our own unique experiences, expecting from us articulations of our own apprehensions of reality. Experience today is the currency of our identity. It is a guarantee of our uniqueness, evidence of our authority. It is something that we can hold on to, that can never be expropriated or consumed by the other. Experience has become private capital, a personal treasure box, with potential to become converted to some material ends; for today, in a media culture hungry for 'reality shows', it is by our own experience that we can even become superstars. Nowadays, we also talk about collective experiences. We experience our belonging to groups like nations; we experience our social activity and consider those experiences the foundations of our attitudes and behaviour. In this sense, the ecology of our experiences is spun by cultural and natural factors.

In their book *Experience Economy*, Pine and Gilmore write about experientization of goods (1999:14) to explain the condition in the present

economy in which experiences have become a “distinct economic offering” (ibid. x). In his work *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (“The Experience Society”), the German sociologist Gerhard Schulze explains how a purpose of a product no longer depletes itself in some aim, but in the product itself (Schulze 1993:13). In their analysis of indicators of the US economy over the past century, Pine and Gilmore (1999:14) have concluded that “people are valuing experiences over goods, commodities and services more highly”.

It has become a rule that companies no longer advertise their goods and services like books, wastebaskets, drawers, travel arrangements and parking places, but rather reading, wastebasketing, drawerling, travelling and parking experience (Pine and Gilmore 1999:14). As many marketing specialists know, people don’t buy things, but the stories wrapped around them. These stories have become scripts for staging experience through commercial actions like ‘event marketing’ which additionally stimulates potential buyers by suggesting surrogate contexts for achieving experience. This has become particularly obvious in the entertainment sector, such as in the context of amusement parks like Disneyworld where people are offered “lifelike interactive experiences” (a chairman of one company cited in Pine and Gilmore 1999:3). Baudrillard (1994:9) calls Disneyland “a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real”. These are just some examples of the commodification of experience.¹

To have and to share an experience has become an influential motivational force in our lives clearly articulated in many aspects of our culture. Assuming this viewpoint, we could say that we live in a culture of experience. It is clear how some sociologists like Schulze have even theorized society from the standpoint of this hunger for experience; as he rightly notices: “taking pleasure, delighting, enjoyment has become a job, a work” (Schulze 1993:38). Appadurai (1996:80), evoking Baudrillard, refers to this same point as the “hypertime of leisure” where “vacation indeed becomes a form of work”. Schulze further defines experience society

¹ It should be clarified here that no one can buy or sell experience. Experience is something that happens in the interiority of the embodied person. The precise thing to say would be that commodities and environments have become means or settings for an experience and settings for experience have become a commodity.

as a society “strongly affected by life conceptions directed toward interior” (Schulze 1993:53). Such society is pervaded by “experience rationality” characterized by the “functionalization of exterior conditions” to facilitate inner life (Schulze 1993:34).

IMAGINED NOSTALGIA OF LATE MODERNITY

In Anthony Giddens’s book *Modernity and Self Identity* (1991), the author paints an apocalyptic landscape of postmodernity or high modernity with his insightful analysis of Western culture.² He calls the age we live in apocalyptic not because we are experiencing the end of days but because we can no longer rely on our past experiences in order to predict the future. In his work *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard (1994:1) describes the present situation as “the era of simulation” that is “inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials”. Therefore, if we are to meet yet another day on the planet we constantly have to take into account new risks fed to us by material progress that is incessantly changing our everyday life (Giddens 1991:4). Schulze (1993:33) calls this a “deterioration of firm biographical patterns”, which are pressuring us to figure out by ourselves what it means to be a subject in every new conditions. Stress from unsheltered exposure to the calamities of nature has been superseded by stress of making the right choice in order to “colonize the future” (Giddens 1991:111). Ever new but unreliable, tomorrow is being secured by a self-perpetuating neoliberal economy and technological progress. The former promotes the rise of individualism whereas the latter is continuously reorganizing our conceptions of time and space.

Movement from production to consumption is the central flywheel of free market economy. Freedom of choice is its central axis. It secures freedom of contract and mobility of workforce and goods as well as individual desires which fuel the turning of the production-consumption

² In his book *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990:45–52) Giddens delivered a convincing line of argument on why high modernity is a better term to use. Since this is no place to expound on these matters, I simply want to say that here the term postmodernity will be used interchangeably with terms like the late or high modernity.

wheel (ibid. 197). In addition, technological advancements, beginning with the printing press, allowed for the evolution of media, and media gave us mediated experiences (ibid. 24). The possibility of vicarious experiences produced this secondary culture, where, according to Baudrillard, the real and imagined have merged into the hyperreal; where any perception of ontological difference is a simulation. Due to this fact, we are all living in an imagined world disembedded from our local surroundings. The appearance of events and objects, as appropriated by the media, bear more reality for us than the events and objects themselves (ibid. 27).

The state of such disjointment of space from place and time together with economy-driven individualism profoundly affects our sense of self. Emancipation and a turning inwards or “the reflexive project of the self” (ibid. 9) has been the most important tectonic shift in the reorganization of our subjectivity. However, the aim of the free market economy is to use reflexivity to secure a production-consumption cycle and not to support the development of the self. To increase the market means to increase the number of consumers and the best way to do this is to proclaim each individual human being as a unit of consumption, declaring its inalienable right to be free, which in practice really means to consume that which is supplied. Schulze sees this reflexive turn as a corollary of the “project of the comfortable life” (*schönes Leben*) (Schulze 1993:34) which for him is the prevailing life conception in present society. Reflexivity in Schulze’s view makes the subject insecure, and consequently more susceptible to making a purchase in the lifestyle supermarket furnished by the consumer economy.

Previous analysis brings to surface two main aspects of how post-modernity conditions the subject to crave for experiences. The first is the stimulation of a pleasure-seeking tendency that is almost completely colonized by the consumerist economy through the media. This is marked by a desire for the experience of having, of possessing. The other aspect has to do with the idea of progress within the project of the reflexive self which strives for self actualization and development. As Giddens (1991:202) explains, this project ultimately demands the neglect of answers to existential questions and seeks to rebel against estrangement and to overthrow the repression of the consumerist dogma. It is the desire for the experience of being. Thus, our culture of experience may be seen as a

tendency that is at the same time promoted by demands inflicted upon us by free market enterprise and technology, and our reaction to them.

‘Having’ and ‘being’ as two “fundamental modes of experience” were discussed extensively by Erich Fromm (1995:51), a German sociologist and psychologist of the Frankfurt school. He explains how these two modes are the main two orientations in respect to how we see ourselves and the world around us (ibid. 53). He sees ‘having’ as the immediate expression of survival instinct (ibid. 52) and does not hold it in high regard, because the relationship between the possessor and the possessed is, as he directly puts it, “dead” (ibid. 54). In addition, the ‘having mode’ assumes that the subject and its possessions are permanent which is contrary to reality. The ‘being mode’ according to Fromm is quite the opposite: “It means to renew oneself. To grow, to flow out, to love, to transcend the prison of one’s isolated ego, to be interested...” (ibid. 62). In fact, in some of his passages he will equate the term experience only with the ‘being mode’: “*Having* refers to things and things are fixed and describable. *Being* refers to experience, and human experience is in principle not describable” (ibid. 61, my italics).

There is a resonance of this line of thinking in the work of Jacques Lacan who also noticed this polarity in the human appetite for experience. One aspect is the search for pleasure and the other is the notion of *jouissance* “as an excessive quantity of excitation which the pleasure principle attempts to prevent” (Evans 1996:150). The notion thus goes beyond the economics of Freud’s pleasure principle and it is sometimes translated as enjoyment. However, being transgressive, *jouissance* can be at the same time painful and pleasurable and thus goes beyond mere enjoyment. Yet Lacan has expounded on another concept that might be helpful in elucidating the longing for experience of postmodernity. It is his notion of desire. Desire, according to Lacan, is unconscious; it is not something directed toward any object. As he explains, “desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need” (Lacan 1977:167). In other words, through the linguistic articulation of need into demand, we are left with desire. We cannot desire something that we possess; therefore this desire is always a “desire for something else” (ibid. 175). It is continuously deferred because this desire is ultimately the desire for that elusive other whose reflection is proliferated in the mirror stage of our subconscious.

Within such an architecture of the interior, we are left with unappeased desire, a self-generating action potential that continuously stirs movements in our psyche. It is an individual energy cell that can be ultimately harnessed by the power plants of the free market economy whose production-consumption turbines produce more material goods and fictive values. In Baudrillard's hyperreal world that bears eerie resemblance to Lacan's mirror stage of the unconscious, Baudrillard (1994:180) explains: "What society seeks through production, and overproduction, is the restoration of the real which escapes it". It is due to this undulating desire that the subject oscillates between 'having' and 'being', pleasure and enjoyment, consumption and self development, conformism and rebellion. With the imposition of conditions that caused the reflexive turn in the subjectivity of late modernity, this hankering desire produced a nostalgic or rebellious subject. This may be an explanation for the findings of Hutcheon's (1998) evaluation of the western media in which she states that "irony and nostalgia are both seen as key components of contemporary culture today".

Yet, as Arjun Appadurai points out in his *Modernity at Large* (1996), nostalgia has different linkages in this postmodern landscape. Nostalgia is not just a hankering for the past as exemplified in the works of Marcel Proust. Nostalgia for the past can be appropriated and dovetailed to the 'desire for the new' of younger generations or of societies that never took part in that past (Appadurai 1996:30–31,77). Nostalgia becomes divorced from memory and affiliated with imagination. It becomes an imagined nostalgia of late modernity. Appadurai also calls it "ersatz" or "armchair" nostalgia (ibid. 77).

What is particular about this consumption experience is that in regard to production, it has become work not only to produce the commodities but also to produce conditions in which such consumption experience can occur (ibid. 83). This is in line with Schulze's observation mentioned above, that nowadays, enjoyment has become job (Schulze 1993:38). It is the work of linking fantasy and nostalgia to desire for new commodities. Therefore Paul McCartney's success in selling The Beatles to young teenagers, who have no memories of the flower power years, lies in his ability to hitch "his oblique nostalgia to their desire for the new that smacks of the old" (Appadurai 1996:33).

Thus, the consumers in this picture are driven by a desire for pleasure that arises from a tension between fantasy and nostalgia divorced from memory (ibid. 81). Instead of aesthetics of duration, the stimulation of desire for the experience of pleasure produces aesthetics of ephemerality or “pleasure of the gaze” (ibid. 84). Pleasure of the senses is linked with ephemerality of the goods (ibid. 85). Such a state creates practices that involve a new relationship between desire, memory, being and buying (ibid. 84).

This “turn to pleasure” (ibid. 83) allows us to see the hunger for experience of our postmodern times as a desire for ephemeral pleasures. The commodification of experience, particularly as discussed by Pine and Gilmore (1999) and Schulze (1993), is one of the economic adaptations to such shifts in the ecology of cultural experience. The self in this, rather reduced and with an outlook perhaps too bleak, either roams the cultural supermarket leviathan looking for yet another novel product to possess, or the reflexive self rebels, which simply serves as a potentiality for the appearance of yet another new item on the shelf. Nostalgia and yearning for experience are thus ingrained in the detraditionalised sociocultural milieu of our times, supported by an implacable desire for pleasure.

If, as Schulze maintains, a subject depends on experiences (1993:48), then reflexivity of the postmodern subject becomes the driving force that brings the subject to yearn for new experiences. An expansion of reflexivity is sustained by the influx of new experiences. Similarly to Appadurai, Schulze (1993:14) clarifies how this directedness toward experience is the most immediate expression of the search for happiness in the social environment, where instant gratification and short term goals are valued more over those that are long term. On a more global scale, the recent economic disasters experienced by affluent countries are a good example of this short-term centeredness.

THE SELF AND EXPERIENCE

The purpose of the foregoing passages was to delineate the broader context in which, in Western societies, any human experiencing takes place; to point out the importance that experience plays in our culture and our daily life, and finally to offer some explanations to the effect of such positioning of the experience. The intention was to provide insight into how

the ideology of neoliberal capitalism shapes the way we view ourselves, which in turn shapes our experiences, polarizing them in two distinct modes of “having” and “being”. As a conclusion, it should have become evident that any theorizing about experience necessarily implies theorizing about the subject.

Academic articulations on the nature of the self have a long tradition in Western thought. A review that would do any justice to the almost inexhaustible number of efforts dealing with this ardent issue, lies far beyond the scope of this text or the competences of the author. However, a necessary sketch of the main historical shifts in the way academic thought has conceptualized the self must be presented because it is against these stirrings in the notions of the self that all our understanding of experience takes place.

Comparing ‘technologies of the self’, as tools used by governments to rule the ‘selves’ of the world of pre-modern Christianity and of modern times respectively, Foucault reveals an important distinction between the two. He sees the self of the past as defined through self-sacrifice, whereas the contemporary self is based on strictly positivistic and pragmatic ground (Foucault 1999:180). The pre-modern self, as Carrette (2007:142) clarifies, is defined in relation to “non-empirical metaphysical ordering”, or God. With this in mind, we can start tracing the trajectory of what today is called the postmodern self, from the particular period in history when the self desired to explore ways of seeing itself other than merely in its relationship with eternity. Undoubtedly, one of the very first important stations on this journey was the ‘Cartesian theatre’ and the division of the self from its body and environment. With Descartes, our propensity to think became a proof of our existence which furthered the ontological particularity and atomised our society into rational units no longer defined by, but only engaged with their surroundings. The mind became the throne of the self from which the self sought to dominate nature using the sceptre of scepticism. Scientific method demanded from the transcendental God to abdicate and to completely withdraw from the sense of self. Instead, the idea of material progress trickled in, kindled by the onset of technology. Nourished by encyclopaedias of the Enlightenment, the self solidified in modernity and became the immovable reference point in the universe, ready to colonize the stars and any ‘ultimate other’. But something was lost and “tribulations

of the self” (Giddens 1991:181) ensued. Without the ‘axis mundi’ the big ‘why’ questions lingered unanswered. All that was left were theories and probabilities in the particular and ever diversifying causality of the scientific endeavour. The self rebelled against itself questioning the very nature of reality. Strained by the ‘linguistic turn’, the cemented self cracked along lurking solipsistic sutures and the rift of particularism opened up. The subject, as it was, plummeted in. Partly resurrected as a more fluid concept, as ‘a particle and a wave’ at the same time, the self of recent academic conceptualizations has become more amenable to assume itself, relative to the issues of context, power and bias.

Subjected and sacrificed to the higher order of things the self of pre-Cartesian world, “was a condition for the opening of the self as a field of indefinite interpretation” (Foucault 1999:180). Although the self of pre-modern era was also subordinated to all sorts of restrictions, the dominating paradigm was ideologically open, the model of the self had a built in correction, a ‘way out’, even though it could only be found on the other, metaphysical side. As opposed to that, the modern notion of the self is based on a positive view of human being or what Foucault calls “permanent anthropologism of the Western thought” (ibid. 180). Without metaphysical exit, the pre-modern “limit of the Limitless” is replaced by “limitless reign of the Limit” (Foucault 1980:32). Thus according to Carrette (2007:142) the main difference from the previous modelling of the self is that the “self imagining itself” today, is caught in “the self-reflexive ideology of its own imagination”, that does not provide any ideological possibilities for overcoming this “self-illusion”.

Giddens explains how development of the self as a project of postmodern reflexivity requires clarity on existential and moral issues and that, in turn, calls for an ideology. On the other hand, oppressive ideologies in the form of religious states or totalitarian systems of government, have been proven as detrimental to free enterprise capitalism.³ Therefore, existential questions are well out of focus in the Western world societies. All situations

³ That is, of course, except for ideology of free-market economy itself. As Marx shouts to us through Debord (1994:151) “The spectacle is the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life.”

which might trigger those questions, especially around “fateful moments” (Giddens 1991:202) like sickness, death or madness, are conveniently “sequestered” (ibid. 8), and pushed beyond the purview of every day’s existence. In addition to that, secularization trends have relieved the religious institutions, as moral pillars of society, of their mundane power. All this resulted in a situation where we are left with reflexively stimulated self in a “technologically competent but morally arid” (ibid. 201) social world, where mastery is valued over morality (ibid. 202). We are pressured to be different, authentic but only within the range of options set up by the standardized moulds of the conveyor belts of mass production lifestyle factories. The existence of abstract capital makes the system so foolproof, that it is even capable of commodifying ideas that oppose it.

Any system of conceptions about the self is an ideology. Ideology is giving us the metaphors for introspection which are in turn moulded by the power interests of the dominant policies in society. In his explanation on reproduction of the relations of production in capitalist economies, Althusser explains how “reproduction of submission to the rules of the established order” or the “ruling ideology” (Althusser 1972:132), is achieved through the action of ideological state apparatuses (religious, cultural, political etc.) (ibid. 143). In this process, the subject is actually constituted by ideology (ibid. 171), where ideology is “the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group” (ibid. 158, 168). Ideology, according to Althusser hails or interpellates individuals as subjects, as illustrated by the example of a police officer addressing or hailing a particular member of the public (ibid. 170–174). Therefore, if any operation of the notion of the subject is subjected to the dominating conception of the subject (ideology), then we can say that experience, as the subject’s function, is a “process of the ongoing imagining and re-imagining of ourselves and the world”, within the dominating system of “knowledge economy” (Carrette 2007:1).

The current system of production is constantly financing myopic sciences to come up with new ways of modelling and controlling the self, in order to attain the capitalistic dream – efficiency (ibid. 183). Reductionist fallacies of such modelling are relentless in their attempt to thwart the agency of the subject, inside the standard deviations of economic

predictability curves. In this way, terminology of the self becomes the technology of the self, used by governments and corporations *to mould* their subjects *by the moulds of* the subject (ibid. 174) provided to them by the sciences. Popularity of computer as a model of the mind is a good example.

For more and more consumers, individuality driven by economic hunger, was the hand holding the scalpel which made an analytic incision that separated individual and social in humanistic disciplines like psychology. According to Carrette, this cut is the most important wound that still gapes open, and is preventing modelling of the self as an interplay of both individual and social forces (ibid. 77). The corporations like simple, static or ‘codified’ models which do not take into account what they have neglected in their reduction in the first place. Whereas that kind of attitude may be convenient for the structuring of technological processes, the exclusion of human agency from humanistic explanations of human behaviour is, according to Carrette, always problematic and potentially totalitarian. Human agency will always be the unknown factor among many other unpredictable variables in every equation of human behaviour, but factories producing commodities cannot work with the unknown. This is why scientists in their theorizing about the subject must adopt the ‘ethics of not-knowing’ (ibid. 209), and account for that which is out of the purview of their designs and analytical incisions, because, as Carrette (ibid. 170) concludes:

“The desire to know limits us to the measurable and prevents us from realising that we are always more than we imagine, more than we can measure, more than we can capture in our languages and patterns of evaluation.”

AMBIGUITY OF EXPERIENCE – OPPOSITES AND PARADOXES

In his *Songs of experience* Martin Jay (2006) traces the polysemic ripening of the concept of experience through its, mainly continental, intellectual history. His project demonstrates how experience is linked to vicissitudes of Western intellectual notions of the self. Jay points out how it is exactly in its epistemological modality that the experience was introduced first in the writings of European intellectuals of the Age

of Reason and Enlightenment, like Bacon, Descartes and Kant (Jay 2006:40–77). As the industrialization and age of science took their toll on the religious issues, German thinkers like Schleiermacher and Otto sought refuge for religion in the experience, as that numinous interiority of every human being. With the onset of modernity the experience became a proof of authenticity. Like the rigid subject of the times, experience in the form of nationhoods, womanhoods and other similar concrete constructions and ‘deep structures’, was particularly used (and abused) in political and historical discourses. As the acidic deconstructive waters started to dissolve the fabric of reality, a tendency arose to defenestrate experience, together with a decapitated subject, all under paroles of essentialism, metaphysical presence and the similar *j'accuse* proclamations of poststructuralists and postmodernists. However, the experience prevailed and adapted to the new views on the subject.

Before I continue with the attempt to demarcate the extent of meaning the experience encompasses, a brief walk down the etymological lane of the term is in order. The first station of “sedimented meanings” (Jay 2005:10) point to the Latin word *experientia*, meaning trial, proof or experiment (Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology 1996). The noun is derived from the verb *experiri* which means to try or to test. Interestingly, the verb has the same root as the word *periculum* or “danger, trial or peril”, which implies a process of gaining knowledge that involves certain risks or encounters with danger. The Latin *experiri* corresponds to the Greek *empeira*, with equal meaning, which is the predecessor of the English word empirical. According to Indo-Germanic etymological Dictionary by Julius Pokorny, the experience can be further traced down to the Indo-European root **per-*, which is connected with the following meanings: to try, to dare, to risk to fear, but also to carry or go over and to fare. Trial, risk and knowledge are the main three shards excavated from etymological antiquity of experience. They signify a certain adventurous undergoing, in the form of immediate engagement with dubious outcome, due to an unknown obstacle or danger. This is one of the reasons why experience results in a memorable knowledge. As Turner (1982:18) comments in his own etymological analysis of the experience: “By means of experience, we ‘fare’ ‘fearfully’ through ‘perils’, taking ‘experimental’ steps.” Consequently, at this point of the analysis of the etymology of experience, we encounter the oldest

ambiguity in the meaning of the term: experience is both a momentous event and the memory or knowledge gained from it. It is the immediacy of engagement with exteriority and the reflected result saved in interiority.

Another opposition subsumed under the term experience has already been encountered in earlier sections on experience and reflexivity. It has been demonstrated how the hyperreal habitat of high modernity shapes the nostalgic self, with experiences polarized into two distinct modes: that of possessiveness and pleasure seeking and the other of self actualization and giving. One mode, individual, closed and directed toward self, and the other, social and open to the world.

Thus far, we have been faced with two dimensions of antithetical meanings of experience, the etymologically oldest one, that of immediacy and reflection, and, a more recent one, that of most modern creation – of social, as opposed to individual. There are many other nuances those dividing lines within this signifier can assume. Experience is a word that is both a verb and a noun. It is thus both action and a result of that action. Another frequently discussed opposition is ‘experience *of*’ and ‘experience *in*’. For example: we can have experience *of* swimming but we can also be experienced *in* swimming. The former being one particular instance whereas the other indicates the accumulated knowledge or skill that has been attained by repetitive experiencing. Similarly, Jay (2006:403) points out the usage of the term in its subjective or objective genitive case. To illustrate, one could claim to have had aesthetic experience or the experience of art. Whereas with the former, subjective genitive is positioned within the interiority of the subject; with the latter it is placed outside, defined by the object as much as by the subject itself. According to the presented examples the experience is obviously an ambiguous concept that signifies the connection between the self and its intended object and the contents of that connection, that the self retains as memory. However, there is another meaning to the word experience. It is also used to denote a story or knowledge communicated to others, as for example, when we share our experiences from the last summer or when we exchange our experiences with particular software. As Jay duly points out, the term experience is paradoxical in nature for it strives to express that which “exceeds concepts and even language itself” (2006:5).

ERLEBNIS AND ERFAHRUNG

Presumably the most famous dialogue on the contrasting ends within the term experience, belongs to the German philosophical tradition that distinguishes between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. Those two German words can only be translated as experience, because English has no adequate pair of words that would account for the entailed difference. *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* signify particular polarity in experience discussed in previous paragraphs. Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy defines *Erlebnis* as a term that “in post-Romantic German philosophy...took on the connotation of ‘lived’, non-conceptualized, and sometimes ineffable experience” and is contrasted to “*Erfahrung*, which denotes more ordinary perception of interpreted fact” (Blackburn 2008).

According to Jay’s reading of German philosophers, *Erlebnis* usually denotes “primitive unity prior to any differentiation or objectification” (2006:11). Since it comes from the German word for life (*Leben*), it is sometimes translated as ‘lived experience’, but directed to particular object. In contrast with *Erfahrung*, *Erlebnis* is understood as „more immediate, pre-reflective, and personal variant of experience”. *Erfahrung*, as Jay notes, is a “dialectical notion of experience” that implies cognitive processing of experiencing and its link with memory and expression in narration. *Erfahrung* draws its etymological roots from the German words for journey (*Fahrt*) and danger (*Gefahr*) which imply certain ex-temporal reflection and accumulation of particular moments of experiencing, which are then shaped into a particular experience. It is similar to a learning process that brings about wisdom or skill. In that sense, *Erfahrung* is a communicable and public form of experience.

Jay’s rendition of the history of experience can be seen as a dialogue between different understandings of the notions of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* through various modalities of experience: religious, aesthetic, historical and epistemological. However, as Jay notices (2006:12), a meaning previously designated to one of those terms, can sometimes be evoked in another, by a different thinker. Contrary to the *Erfahrung* that was already used by Kant solely in empirical sense (Jay 2006:66), *Erlebnis*, as we can learn from Gadamer (1975:54), came into usage in the 19th century through the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey, expressing something that was

earlier conceptualized by the Romanticists and in the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher. In the atmosphere of the ordered mechanical universe of the Enlightenment rationalism, the Romanticists, as Gadamer (1975:56) explains, felt “alienation from the world of history” and “hunger for experience”, which is, on a certain level, similar to the atmosphere of the present-day experience society. Intuition and individual experience were especially brought to the surface in Dilthey’s life philosophy. *Erlebnis*, as Gadamer points out, was for Dilthey an “ultimate unit of consciousness” (ibid. 57).

Based on the exhaustive report given to us by Jay’s *Songs of Experience* (2006), we could summarize that after Dilthey’s enunciation of *Erlebnis* there were roughly two directions followed in the subsequent discussions on experience. The first can be demarcated by German thinkers like Martin Buber, Rudolf Otto and the phenomenological tradition stemming from Edmund Husserl. The other direction can be delineated by critical theorists of the Frankfurt school, in particular Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. Parallel to German modernist thought, the French intellectual tradition, heralded by the names like Derrida, Bourdieu, Barthes, Lyotard and Foucault, was greatly responsible for taking on the discussion on the self and the experience into postmodern realm. If we read Jay’s epic on experience, through the optics of *Erlebnis – Erfahrung* opposition, it is obvious that the infatuation with *Erlebnis* in Romanticism gradually subsided and German thinkers of the modern orientation (Benjamin, Adorno, Gadamer), increasingly preferred the term *Erfahrung*. In general, *Erfahrung* represents a notion of processed and interpreted experience, open to the cultural construction and intersubjectivity. Hence it is clear how the tide of linguistic turn made thinkers cautious about the existence of pre-conceptual experience as that irrevocable, autonomous interior from which all other conceptualizations are formed and how they were more prone to take refuge in the idea of *Erfahrung* as a basis for critical method.

Anticipated by the works of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, the ideas of the decentred self have pervaded the Modernist thought of the first half of the 20th century, especially that of the Frankfurt school. As Jay points out, phenomenologists also attempted to deal with the problem of solitary Cartesian subject. Husserlian ‘lifeworld’, Heideggerian ‘Dasein’ or

Merleau Ponty's 'being-in-the-world' are all influential concepts that were used to weaken the idea of transcendental ego, make it susceptible to the context and explain how intersubjectivity was possible. Phenomenology thus steered into hermeneutical direction which will especially become prominent in the writings of Gadamer. With the undermined position of the self as a coherent centre of consciousness, the modernist experience, devoid of its proprietor, the subject, became a paradoxical "experience without a subject" (Jay 2006:265). For the modernity, subjective experience was a territory won over from the domination of cold absolutistic rationalism of the Enlightenment, and was not to be questioned, despite the weakened self. Moreover, the modernity lamented over the loss of 'true experience' under the rapid transformation of living conditions and rise of mediated experience, all provided by galloping technological progress. As Jay (2006:359) demonstrates, what Adorno was looking for in his search of authentic experience, is not innocence of precategory immediacy of *Erlebnis*, but an experience where subject encounters, rather than dominates, the intended object. This is why for both Adorno and Benjamin it was *Erfahrung* that became a refuge from domination, instead of the Romantic *Erlebnis*, although as Jay (2006:349) points out they both resisted reduction of *Erfahrung* to purely Kantian empirical category.

Gadamer was the most recent influential philosopher who discussed *Erlebnis – Erfahrung* distinction with a clear preference of *Erfahrung* over *Erlebnis*. The main principle in Gadamer's hermeneutics, as explained in *Truth and Method*, is to reach an understanding through the "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 1975:390), between the reader and the history of the text. In that context, *Erlebnis* for Gadamer is something that one possesses, that belongs to the subject, as it "constitutes itself in memory" and as "its meaning remains fused with the whole movement of life" (ibid. 58). It is "something unforgettable and irreplaceable, something whose meaning cannot be exhausted by conceptual determination" (ibid.). On the other hand, *Erfahrung* is something that a person undergoes. In Gadamer's view, *Erfahrung* includes critical and cognitive aspects and, in that sense, is more profound than *Erlebnis*. It is a process and not a thing to possess (ibid. 347). *Erfahrung* is integrative and interactive because its "paradigm is not the discovery of facts but the peculiar fusion of memory and expectation into a whole" (ibid. 217). Under the umbrella of those connotations, Gadamer

discusses *Erfahrung* as dialectics of “historically affected consciousness” that “knows about the otherness of the other, about the past in its otherness” (ibid. 354). Considering the above, we could see that Gadamer does not deny the existence of the precognitive experience, but just stresses its other interpretational counterpart as more important in our intersubjective life. In that way he deflects the questions of essentiality by focusing on dialogue and historicity of the experience.

POSTMODERN EXPERIENCE

Entailed in the discussion on subject, saga on experience will get its latest and most disputed chapter by poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers. The analysis of the concept of experience through the opposites which this term can unite but to which it can also collapse, brings us, historically, to the central question that lingers behind all discussions of experience. The question is whether there is an essential, ‘pure experience’, in the form of precategorical perception that can be accessed and emulated by systematic categorical imagination of academic endeavour and used as reliable knowledge.

In some ways even asking a question like that entails a conception of experience that presupposes a “dialectical rationality”, “metaphysics of presence”, “pervasiveness of meaning” and “centred subject”, all of which are accusations made by late modern thinkers and usually fired at phenomenologists (Jay 2006:364). Derrida, as Jay explains (ibid.), considered experience as the concept that belonged to the past and was suspicious of Gadamer’s *Erfahrung*, which he saw as metaphysical.

One of the most significant examples of (de)constructivists’ reckoning with the essential experience, is surely the famous article by Joan W. Scott (1991) “Evidence of Experience”. In this article, Scott criticized the usage of experience by the feminist theorists of the 1960ies, to establish an epistemological stance to the philosophy as dominated by male white Europeans.

Scott was attacking modernist conception of historical experience that drew its roots from Diltheyan infatuation with *Erlebnis*. Dilthey

conceived historical experience as “lived reality in the past that could be re-experienced in the present by empathetic historian.” (Jay 2005:250). The attempt of the feminists in the sixties, to seek a ground for their resistance in the idea of experience, was, in some sense, analogous to the modernists seeking refuge in *Erlebnis* from the colonizing rationality of the Enlightenment. Following the trend in historical sciences at the time, to move from key actors in history to ordinary experiences of the masses, personal reports of individual experiences have become self-evident narratives, where no attention was paid to the fact that those narratives themselves were a product of circumstance.

Despite accusations of ‘linguistic transcendentalism’ that pervades her writing, Scott’s article is a milestone in a history of experience. In her criticism she clearly points to the rhetoric of experience rather than to the concept itself. For it is through the imprecise usage of the term experience, that the authority arising from immediacy and uniqueness of private experiencing, can spill over unnoticed into the other, public end of the denotational spectrum of the term. Thus, the specific, subjective authority is transferred to general and intersubjective, without proper examination of the process of this transfer. Failure to pay attention to the process of mirroring of this authority in the academic discussions is the reason why experience was often (mis)used to “essentialize identity and reify the subject” (Scott 1991:797). In that sense, Scott’s call to redefine the term, examine its discursiveness and “politics of its construction” (Scott 1991:797) is more than justified. Although hesitant to abandon the term, Scott realizes that experience is a “word we cannot do without” (Scott 1991:797). She adds: “Experience is, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain” (Scott 1991:797).

EXPERIENCE – ESSENTIAL VS. CONSTRUCTED

Ambiguous concepts like experience do not allow themselves to be exhausted by some definition, they usually fluctuate between the contradicting poles bestraddled by the term. Through optics of Cartesian dualism experience is seen as that what subject gets when it apprehends the object, modernity regards experience as an encounter between the subject

and the object, whereas postmodernists tend to merge subject and object with the experience. Subject is thus no more than an omnipresent hovering observer, who sometimes forgets itself. The sense of self becomes a dynamic field of activities constituted by the embodied expression through symbolic communication. However, as much as Derridian shibboleth “there is nothing outside the text” sounds appealing in the light of relativist worldview, there is, at least in my own case, certain uneasiness about it that rebels against reduction of myself to a mere patchwork. Therefore, I’d like to argue that such an approach is also myopic and falls short in its aim to explain away the human experience.

First of all, I would like to follow reasoning of Heelas (2005) in his article on postmodernism and religion where he demonstrates how such claims about the primacy of the text, are ontological statements, and thus just as problematic as claiming the existence of transcendental self. If, as Nagel (1986) maintains, “view from nowhere” does not exist, the question is where exactly do we have to stand in order to make that observation? Absolute statements like that are always self-defeating and, to evoke Carrette, it seems that they are the product of our knowledge economy that does not tolerate the “unknown”. If our sense of self is always contextual and immersed that does not mean that we do not have an ability to exercise bracketing as much as we can, providing that we leave the widow for error open.

Another perspective on the uncanny image of the pastiched self compels me to think how constructivism should be practiced more as a method than as ontology. It seems that by revolutionary overthrow of the centred subject and experience, the language has become essentialised in the particularists’ rhetoric. Thus the epistemological troubles with intersubjectivity were abandoned for a flood of contexts in intertextuality. Such theoretical discourse still obscures meaning making and disallows comparison. In addition, if meaning lies in that which is not the signifier and if there is no reliable point of reference for interpretation, then it is extremely difficult to pass any ethical judgement. This whole constructivist project then resembles a futile attempt to lift ourselves up in the air by means of our own hands. We can lift a hand or a leg, or even a trunk of the body but we can’t really lift the whole of our body without using some kind of fixed point outside of us. That fixed point, or point of reference, in postmodern

discourses on the subjectivity, is always an ideology, but even that claim, together with the nihilistic claim on the non-existence of that reference, is also always an ideology, always constructed and always in danger to be abused in games of power. Therefore there must be 'something' whereupon we agree, whereby we are able to agree. The fact that 'something' is not possible to be incarnated in the language or quite fully grasped, does not mean that it does not exist.

As far as the existence of pre-linguistic and pre-conceptual experience is concerned, it is obvious that language is only part of experiencing and that our interiors are more than just an ebb and flow of symbolic tide. We do not think just in sentences. We think in pictures, sometimes in melodies, sometimes in feelings and embodied sensations. Since we swim through our memory which does not have a signifier attached to everything we attend to, how can we expect to fully account for a whirl of sensations from the outside world? In the same sense, we could ask if Hellen Keller had some notion of the wet thing in a glass before someone spelled it out for her on her palm? We are, as Geertz (1973:5) paraphrases Weber: "animals suspended in the web of significance", but, as Carette warns us, we are always much more than we can possibly spin in our attempts to explain it.

Experience is a term that is capable of uniting the opposites, of traversing that which is often hard to express. By using experience we are explicating something that is inherently inexplicable. This is exactly the reason why we need a concept like experience, especially when we are on a quest to understand how humans make meaning of themselves and society. Experience allows us to go beyond categories of positivistic reductionism which can never account for human irrationality and agency. However, as postmodernists warn us, we should always be mindful of the issues that motivate (or fund) our particular experiments and especially how they shape what we see and what we theorize. As Jay (2006:406) remarks: "the question always has to be asked: experience in the service to what end?" If we make ourselves and our readers aware of the fact that experience, like many other loaded terms in the humanities, such as culture, religion, belief etc., has its discursive history channelled along the interests of power, and if we attempt to disclose those workings within the scope of our research, then our analysis may allow us to relish the explanatory power of the experience.

As I have proposed before, I believe that we can do justice to experience by being aware of the multidimensionality of polarities that demarcate the meaning of the term. That means studying the web of polarities into which the meaning of experience is suspended; polarities that do not have clear-cut boundaries between them but are permeable according to the issues of context and even ready to disappear if the circumstance requires so. One could charge such approach by accusation of Cartesian conditioning that results in blind spot unable to see beyond these opposites. Nonetheless, I believe that there is no way to avoid dualism in any analysis. There are some fundamental polarities that constitute even our postmodern understanding of the self. Overemphasizing monistic self is contrary to that notion of embodied self-experiencing being, for that being has two legs, two arms, two brain hemispheres. That being clearly distinguishes that which is inside (like thoughts, feelings, memories) from that which is outside (like uttered speech, physical activity etc.). We are quite certain about that which is new or already familiar to us. We also know which thoughts belong to the past and which are just wishful projections of our future. We exist oscillating between the opposites, not in union with them. As Jay (2006:403) affirms: “it is precisely the tension between subject and object that makes experience possible”.

The problem with dualism, as Scott reveals in her article, is not in the fact that it doesn't exist but in the way we are applying it. It usually comes down to our inability to see connections instead of borders, continuum instead of poles. In other words, there are *Erlebnise* as a part of every *Erfahrung* and every *Erlebnis* is shaped by previous *Erfahrungen*. If used carefully, experience can allow us to traffic this paradoxality, this ‘in-betweenness’ through the convoluted roads of symbolic interaction. Juggling with experience in awareness of its complex and dynamic properties forces us to be more mindful and cautious in our discourse so we do not succumb to commodificational reductionism that just wants to invent yet another ‘technology of the self’ for population control.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

The moment we turn our senses to any object in our surroundings and intend them the process of interpretation begins. First filter that shapes our intending of the outside world is our biology, like the (in)ability to see colours, a possible scar on our finger that makes that piece of skin insensitive to cold etc. From this point of view, a view from the ‘outside’, everything is a construction. From this exterior view we cannot see how ‘meaning’ assumes its shape from the patchwork of hyletic data which are interpreted from the moment the signals from the outside touch our receptors. This view is a view of an analyst dissecting its subject. But there is another view of this process and this is a view from the inside. This view assumes internal observer which oscillates between participation and observation, dissolution and centeredness, which can apparently maintain certain distance from what is being intended in interiority, but can be also completely lost in the immediacy of the flowing content. Can we ever hope to make peace with these two views?

Attending to the polysemic complexity of experience has been quite an undertaking for anybody who has ever dared to venture into such an enterprise. Experience is a demanding discourse with rich history intricately related with how we conceive and rule ourselves. As entry in the *Vocabulary of Culture and Society* reads: “Experience is one of the most compelling and elusive words in the language” (Berube 2005:121). The subject of experience is indeed a subject that no article can do justice. It is a multifaceted term that can be approached as a concept from various fields: psychology, sociology, philosophy, history, religion, politics, economy and the media. This is the reason why information given in the first, introductory part of this article may have been somewhat scattered. My intention was to point out some specificities linked to the term. Those specificities, I believe, illustrate the complexity of the involved factors, when one tries to theorize experience. I have focused on the economic aspect of cultural experience because I believe it is exactly this aspect that glosses out perhaps a neglected force in cultural economy: human desire for pleasure. We are more likely to keep experiencing something we like. Desirable experiences are usually high in value. Some experiences are only possible through collaboration of individuals with various motivations. Commercial motivations are crucial

in organizing our landscape ‘of and for’ cultural experience which possesses various facets of “cultural flows” (Appadurai 1996:33). Our culture rests on economy with all of its ecological implications, just as our experiences.

In this theoretical exploration into the concept of experience the steps are unavoidably traced by the author, more so because of the complex nature of this concept. Reduction and selection are unavoidable. Because of that, some authors like Reinhardt Koselleck and reader reception theorists, Pierre Bourdieu, Paul Ricoeur, etc., have been omitted despite the fact that they have provided important insights on the architecture of cultural experience.⁴ In addition, this article also does not discuss reverberations of discussions on experience in anthropology.⁵ However, I have attempted to understand experience not just as a movie in Cartesian cinema, but also a site for various precultural and natural factors.

I believe that ‘experience’ as a term forces academic thinking and discourse to tackle an ambiguity so deeply ingrained into this concept, which reflects the paradoxality of human experience *in toto*, stretched across polarisations like self and the other, individual and society, solipsism and interaction, nature and culture, essential or constructed. The term requires that we deal with those polarities. This is why many authors see experience as evasive, yet unavoidable term. But indeterminacy is a part of the nature of social reality. In that sense experience may be one of the terms, like Bourdiean habitus, which strives to encompass what is often divided in academic discussions. Therefore, the intention of this article is to establish ambiguity that oscillates at the heart of the discourse around this term, with a special focus on the patterns in experience’s symbolic, historical and academic modalities.

In my own review of experience as discourse, I have tried to present the short overview of the history of the concept, give the most general cultural context of the present day usage of the concept, and superficially attend to the experience’s ‘web of significance’. Since the discussion on the experience is dominated by polarizations, especially along the essentialist-constructivist trench, I would like to conclude with a story that is a derivative

⁴ See: Koselleck 1985; Bourdieu 1977; Ricoeur 1985.

⁵ See: Turner and Bruner 1986; Csordas 2000; Throop 2003.

of the Zenon's famous aporia on Achilles and the tortoise, which I think is a good analogy for this argument.

If we throw a stone towards a tree we could describe the trajectory of the stone in the following way: The stone traversed half of the distance and it has another half to go. Then the stone flies through the half of that half and still has a quarter of the total distance to go. Then half of that quarter, then half of the eights and so on. In this description the stone never reaches the tree because the distance, no matter how small, could always be split into halves. But as we know, from experience, the stone, if we aimed well, hits the tree.

Except for being rational and tangible, our own nature is just as much irrational and ephemeral. Such are our experiences, too. Paradoxality of this situation brings rational modelling of human nature always in a dead end. However, our attempts are not futile, they are another slide down the asymptote of that immediate presence that will forever magnetize our ruminations on experience, but could never be quite grasped by them.

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Hrvoje Čargonja

DVOSMISLENO ISKUSTVO:
PRILOG RAZUMIJEVANJU ISKUSTVA KAO DISKURSA

Članak prikazuje diskurzivne povijesti pojma iskustvo. Rad započinje s kulturnom ekologijom suvremene uporabe pojma iskustvo te nastavlja s kratkim pregledom povijesti pojmova iskustvo i subjektivitet, usko povezanog s humanističkim znanstvenim diskursom o iskustvu. Članak također donosi promišljanja o znanstvenim raspravama koje su isplele "mrežu značenja" ovoga prijepornog pojma.

Ključne riječi: iskustvo, diskurs, subjektivitet, kultura iskustva

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