

Nadežda Čaćinovič

University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ivana Lučića 3, HR-10000 Zagreb
ncacinov@ffzg.hr

“Mainstreaming” Vico
Some Remarks from a Non-Specialist

Abstract

The paper considers different ways of referring to Vico in the context of the so-called “cultural turn” and its predecessors. It is shown that the most important aim of the “cultural turn” – to make explicit forms of thought that have already formed us – has its beginnings in Vico’s works and has profoundly influenced the contemporary development of humanities.

Keywords

Giambattista Vico, cultural turn, language, evolution, history, space

The following is a non-specialist, non-vichian reflection on the importance of Vico for contemporary humanities – and to a certain extent a critical re-assessment of the so-called *cultural turn*, the ease of the process of transformation in the last decades whereby a number of conventional departments in the humanities re-fashioned themselves into so-called cultural studies departments. I foreground the inter-disciplinary aspect, though do not want to ignore the philosophical “take”, the grand narrative, the battle royal of Vico-versus-Descartes, of Vico against the Enlightenment.

It should go without saying that the various manifestations of cultural theory, cultural history etc. are honor bound to be aware of their own cultural history, of the way they came to be of the *verum et factum convertuntur* aspect, that is constructing a genealogy of truth and the ways truth is produced. It is fairly usual to mention Vico but the reference is usually just a courteous bow not a continuous engagement with the still pertinent problems of Vico’s truly momentous introduction of a new science.

In general, non-specialist terms (and outside Italy, of course) the discovery of Vico can be summarized in different ways. The mainstream, inter-disciplinary approach can start with the impact of Edmund Wilson’s *To the Finland Station* that firmly aligns Vico with the history of revolutionary change: in the very first sentence: “One day in the January of 1824, a young French professor, who was teaching philosophy and history, found the name of Giovanni Vico (sic) in a translator’s note in a book he was reading. The reference to Vico interested him so much that he immediately set out to learn Italian”, the professor being Michelet.¹

It is the very idea of mankind gaining control over its destiny that attracted Karl Marx to Vico, as famously documented in a letter to Lassalle (on the

1

Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station*, Doubleday, New York 1940, p. 1.

28th of April 1862) and made him proclaim that Vico had moments of genius as a writer on social evolution. I am taking the quotation from Isaiah Berlin.² But he himself wants Vico’s help in developing a liberal criticism of the Enlightenment. In a very simplified definition: Berlin looks for a stand against revolutionary upheaval and other programmatic interventions as opposed to a detached and easy plurality as the only way to improve the lot of mankind.

Mark Lilla states in his *Vico* that most of the secondary literature (especially outside Italy) on Vico is promotional, not analytical, that is, engaged in promoting his claims, the unique features of his thought, not the problems he introduced as problems.³ Lilla’s own analysis stresses the anti-modern aspects of Vico: not only as a correction of the possibly excessive claims of enlightenment but as a refutation.

My question, not a new one, is: *can we conceive of a science, new or not, starting with a limited claim?* Can (or should) cultural relativism of cultural studies be seen only as a rejection of the presumption of universal knowledge and emphatically not as the rejection of truth as truthfulness, the intention of finding out about the truth?

I will go on by examining some widespread ways of referring to Vico. First of all the idea of *poetry as the first language of mankind*. There is of course a bewildering variety of ideas repeating this claim. The Vico of the Romantics, but let us not forget the theological aspects, concerning Adam and the adamitic language, the naming and the forgetting, the wilderness and the fear that produced gods and myths instead all way to speculations about evolution and Steven Mithen’s *Singing Neanderthals*.⁴

Let us accept a state prior to conceptual thinking. Anyway, thinking has thought us to allow for the pre-reflexive and the ante-predicative and to consider pure presence as an unattainable goal, even if it appears to be the simplest of all demands. The body escapes our thought. We neither are bodies nor have them: we are displaced. Cultures are always the product of an In Between, a transmission so successful that it is forgotten. In an older vocabulary it raises the question of objectivity: the question Vico presented in a new light.⁵ There are some obvious and some not so obvious points. The first is one almost generally accepted, that there are different cultures with different rules and games, so you have to know about the whole of a culture if you want to understand, for instance, a work of art. We know as well that things happen, cultures disappear or deteriorate, even if we do not accept the idea of an inescapable movement towards decline; we know we can change our cultural environment and we know we use culture to conquer, to manipulate. But we also know there is a radical objectivity, as stated by Bernard Williams: if one actually succeeds in viewing the interests and concerns of all agents, including oneself, from a genuinely detached perspective, there seems to be no motivation left for acting in any particular way at all. So is the choice between being trapped in one’s own culture or losing any fixed point?

In Vico, of course, providence remains at work. Vico’s theory of divine providence holds that people themselves constructed a world according to a divine plan of which they are not aware – Providence has made the civil institutions out of passions of men each bent on his private advantage. Gramsci commented on Vico’s “ruses of nature”: a social impulse tending toward one thing brings about the opposite. Naturalizing, the process of representing the cultural and historical as natural, was the result of ideological discourses, a major force in the maintenance of hegemony.⁶

In Derrida’s *Grammatology*, following almost immediately after the famous sentence “there is nothing outside of the text”, our theme is exposed as follows:

“for we have, in the text, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like ‘real mother’ name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence (...) What does Rousseau say without saying, see without seeing? That substitution has always already begun; that imitation, principle of art, has always already interrupted natural plenitude; that, having to be a discourse, it has always already broached presence in difference; that in Nature it is always that which supplies Nature’s lack, a voice that is substituted for the voice of Nature”.⁷

The final vocabulary of science does not change the fact that nature in general can function as a foil to any ideal and a source of ideals. “Natural” may denote simplicity, regularity, harmony in one century and then with the Romantics irregularity and wildness, it can be contrasted with the deformed, grotesque, supernatural, statistically uncommon, rational, intelligent, artificial, conventional etc. There is a wealth of topics for cultural theory. John Searle’s, a philosopher’s conclusions, are more or less as follows: the traditional opposition between biology and culture is misguided, culture is the form biology takes:

“There could not be an opposition between culture and biology, because if there were, biology would always win. Different cultures are different forms that an underlying biological substructure can be manifested in.”⁸

Searle counts on the biological capacity to make something symbolize, without any need for a radical break. Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialectics of Enlightenment* tells about the price we pay for the mind as a tool of survival and about the chasm between signs and picture. Reality may be by definition the unattainable, but producing, constructing and even predicting are possible. The possibility may even depend on an ongoing non-instrumental acts. So to get back to the point: what is the most important aim of the cultural turn and it is starting with Vico – *to make explicit forms of thought that have already formed us*.

Anthropology became the founding discipline of social sciences and the whole field of humanities. Only a limited number of academics in this field opt for pure scientific data obtained without some reference to the history of their research and history in general. We investigate the evolution of symbolic systems, an exteriorization always already there, totally and absolutely.

The historical awareness is not unopposed. Foucault’s remarks about the “history of space” are used to make the point, partly because they come from someone so immersed into genealogy:

“The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and of cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past,

2
Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, Knopf, New York 1991, p. 62.

3
Mark Lilla, *G. B. Vico. The Making of an Anti-Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1993, pp. 2–5.

4
Steven Mithen, *Singing Neanderthals*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2006.

5
For much of the following I owe a debt to Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time. The History of Earth and the History of Nations*, trans. L. G. Cochrane, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984 (orig. 1979).

6
Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from Cultural Writings*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1991.

7
The translation of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for the American edition, *Of Grammatology*, 1976 (orig. 1967) Vico is liberally sprinkled over a number of pages and footnotes.

8
John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, Free Press, New York, p. 227.

9
Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces”, in: Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Essential Works of Foucault II*, The New Press, New York, 1954–1984, p. 175.

with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world... The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed... One could perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendants of time and the determined inhabitants of space.”⁹

Of course it is necessary for us to develop a sensibility to the spatiality of social life. We know that place is fundamental in any form of communal life, in any exercise of power. However, Vico remains a patron saint not only for the “pious descendants of time” but for anyone reflecting on the human condition.

Nadežda Čačinović

Vico za *mainstream*

Sažetak

U članku se promatra načine pozivanja na Vica u kontekstu tzv. »kulturnoga obrata« odnosno njegovih prethodnika. Pokazuje se kako je najvažniji cilj »kulturnoga obrata« – učiniti eksplicitnima forme misli koje su nas već oblikovale – započeo s Vicom te duboko utjecao na suvremeni razvoj humanističkih znanosti.

Ključne riječi

Giambattista Vico, kulturni obrat, jezik, evolucija, povijest, prostor

Nadežda Čačinović

„Mainstreaming“ Vicos

Zusammenfassung

Das Paper zieht unterschiedliche Arten der Berufung auf Vico in Betracht, und zwar im Kontext der sog. „kulturellen Wende“ bzw. ihrer Vorläufer. Es wird gezeigt, dass das bedeutendste Ziel der „kulturellen Wende“ – Denkformen, die uns bereits geformt haben, explizit zu machen – mit Vicos Werken seinen Anfang genommen und die zeitgenössische Entwicklung der Geisteswissenschaften zutiefst beeinflusst hat.

Schlüsselwörter

Giambattista Vico, kulturelle Wende, Sprache, Evolution, Geschichte, Raum

Nadežda Čačinović

Vico comme *mainstream*

Résumé

Cet article considère les différentes manières possibles de se référer à Vico dans le contexte que l'on appelle « tournant culturel », à savoir le contexte de ses prédécesseurs. Il montre que le but premier du « tournant culturel » – rendre explicite les formes de pensée qui nous ont déjà formées – a son point de départ dans le travail de Vico et que cela a profondément influencé le développement des sciences humaines.

Mots-clés

Giambattista Vico, tournant culturel, langue, évolution, histoire, espace