

INTRODUCTION

This volume emerged from concerns regarding theoretical and institutional changes, from our interest in the debates that marked the conduct and shaped the purpose of human sciences, as well as the recent shifts in Higher Education and the politics of knowledge production.

This particular socio-historical moment seemed ripe for such an endeavour, since the multiple significations and aspects of crisis – crisis of universities, economic crisis, crisis of disciplines, crisis of the West – are not only part of a specific temporality and governmentality, but also perhaps an opportunity for reflection and for carving out possibilities through dialogue. This is why we had decided at the time that our main avenue of investigation would be interviews, or better, conversations around areas of common interest, such as: the transformation of the university, the politics of knowledge production and the discourses of political responsibility, the critique of the West by those thus far excluded and marginalised, the (re)emergence of religious sensibilities, the challenges faced by academics qua intellectuals in the twentieth-first century, via a focus on each interlocutor's work.

Our own concerns were themselves partially the result of conversations: they were formed in the university seminar room, they are the product of the continuous exchange between teachers and students in the effort to engage with the difficult, yet intriguing, questions that the examination of the politics of knowledge production has bequeathed us.

We are mostly interested in productive tensions and real dialogue rather than representing a 'position', we wish to – and we hope we do – offer a plurality of approaches, stances and orientations, as they emerge from our conversations with thinkers that we consider original voices in the debates about the nature and future of human sciences. We do not seek to produce an answer but mostly to open up to a series of, perhaps unresolvable, yet fascinating and absolutely central questions. Possible tensions may arise amongst the narratives of our interlocutors. We leave these, though, open to the conversation and its possibilities rather than steer towards a pre-decided direction.

Eleni Andriakaina and Rosa Vasilaki introduce the endeavor by taking as a starting point for *Conversations* the conversations arisen in the classroom,

the discussions stimulated by the teaching-learning practice. The teaching of major shifts in historiography and social sciences and their aftermath was the starting point for engaging in this project and addressing some of the much discussed tensions and contradictions inherent in radical theorizing, in standpoint theories and in the debate about situated knowledge. The introductory paper reflects on the current discourses about the crisis in humanities and social sciences and the concomitant calls to *close the gap* between academic theory and political practice while it attempts to historicize the relation between modern intellectuals and their various agents and multiple audiences.

John Tosh's work, and especially *Why History Matters*, is a special contribution to the illumination of the problems and the questions raised in the classroom discussions regarding the utility of history and the public uses of the past. Apart from a critical reflection on 'identity history' and on how academics could intervene in public discussions about the past and its meaning for the present without, however, falling prey to the pitfalls of 'presentism', Tosh's work takes pains to clarify the presuppositions of historical inquiry. He argues for historiography as a distinctive mode of thinking and defends its autonomy from other modes of understanding the world. Without falling short of the standards of scholarship, Tosh sets as the objective of his project the empowerment of critical citizenship and the dissemination of historical research to a wider audience in contemporary multicultural societies. Tosh's version of public history does not seek to dictate public opinion but to enable citizens to formulate opinion and to cultivate their faculty of judgment. In the same line of thought, in *Conversations* Tosh reflects on the important differences between the British style of public history and the US public history movement.

John Holmwood's work problematizes the agenda of partisan organic sociology and the notion of the public opting for a more pragmatic understanding, questions the hierarchization of the four different types of knowledge - critical, professional, applied and public - and argues for corporate political neutrality as a precondition of any sociology to have a voice and for public university to have a future. However, Holmwood's cautionary stance towards the project of public sociology does not lead to disengagement; on the contrary, his contribution in *Conversations*, if anything, underlines the necessity of defending the idea of the Public University in these difficult times. His contribution in the volume also reflects on the main challenges

marking the recent institutional shifts in the University, most notably the retreat of the ethos characterising curiosity-driven research, the quality of relations of apprenticeship between students and teachers and relations of collegiality which make university a special place as well the abandonment of the commitment to equality.

Suman Gupta's insights provide a map of the tensions and dilemmas which marked the *longue durée* history of modern intellectuals, in general, and Left intellectuals in particular, and which are still relevant today. Is there a place beyond the dilemmas posed by the two key theoretical trends regarding the role and the responsibility of academics qua intellectuals, a place which would allow us take into consideration the arguments and counter-arguments of the two camps and to move beyond ivory towers and philosopher-kings? How could we approach the split of words and deeds and to rethink the unity of theory and practice *in theory* and the divergence between theory and practice *in practice*? The above questions stimulated our conversation with Gupta's work. Of special importance for *Conversations* is Gupta's critical approach to the institutionalization of identity politics in the 1980s, and its effects on the everyday life of literary studies, such as the self-announcements of academics as critics-insiders or as representatives of oppressed social groups. Gupta highlights some of the problems and lacunas of theory wars and attempts to move beyond the social constructionist versus essentialist debate.

Nicos Mouzelis's work in the field of theory intervenes in the growing polarization of debates regarding the crisis of social theory and the controversies following the postmodern rejection of grand narratives as essentialist and teleological. Mouzelis's contribution to *Conversations* lies firstly in his 'modest strategy', the specific manner of intervention in theoretical polemics, which is neither a grandiose overall synthesis nor a postmodern juxtaposition. Instead of heralding a rupture between obsolete approaches and rising challengers, Mouzelis pays merit to sociological traditions and so he makes room for theoretical and methodological pluralism. Opting for a 'decentralized federation of paradigms' relating to each other via 'translating' concepts, Mouzelis warns against the reification tendencies of abstract theorizing and stresses the heuristic utility of theoretical frameworks and their capacity to explain the richly textured and multidimensional nature of the social world. Of special interest for *Conversations* is Mouzelis's analysis of the internal and external causes of the Greek crisis combining the forces of neoliberal globalisation with a *longue durée* historical approach of Greek

modernity. He also provides *Conversations* with a critique of the linearity of the strong secularization thesis and emphasises the continuous dialectic between secularization and desecularization.

Gregor McLennan's work engages with one of the most significant epistemological issues of recent years: the postsecular turn in social theory. Whilst recognizing the importance of 'post' challenges to Eurocentrism, McLennan scrutinizes the political and theoretical conditions that enable the emergence of postcolonial and postsecular critique and highlights their secular intellectual lineage. In *Conversations*, McLennan questions the analytical assumptions of epistemologies seeking to engage with the 'Other' in their own terms. Whilst recognising the political legitimacy, the need even to be sensitive to other ways of thinking about the social world, he insists on the indispensability of systematic thought as formed by the basic concepts, distinctions, binaries and analytical categories that make sociology a science. His work cautions against moralism and the tendency to consider modern scientific thinking as a Western, imperialist product only. Whilst distancing himself from militant atheism and dissociating rationality in thinking from hostility to religion, McLennan explains why methodological atheism, or methodological naturalism, remains the most coherent position for the conduct of social sciences.

Gurminder K Bhambra's work questions modernity's foundational myths and the deeply-rooted assumption that modernity is a Western construct only. Demonstrating the interconnectedness of the world, Bhambra's engagement with modernity points towards the erasure of the non-Western world's crucial contribution to Western or European modernity. Colonialism and slavery emerge, consequently, as constitutive of modernity rather than a contingent aspect or its dark side. She also takes issue with concepts such as multiple modernities and lays bare the deeply embedded hierarchies underlining even those attempts seeking to accommodate the Others' contributions to and experiences of the emergence of the modern, global world. She points, thus, towards the compelling necessity to radically reconsider dominant ideologies about the European exception and to rewrite the history of modernity and the grammar of core sociological concepts. Of particular significance for *Conversations* are Bhambra's thoughts on the challenges presented in the process of introducing new pedagogies for the teaching of core concepts, such as modernity, in a way that includes the colonial moment and the postcolonial legacy.