

Two Takes On ‘New Age’

By Guido Mina di Sospiro on May 14, 2013

Introduction

In 1928 a brilliant philosopher/logician from Vienna, Rudolf Carnap, published *Der logische Aufbau der Welt*, The Logical Structure of the World. Ten years before, Ludwig Wittgenstein had conceived his highly cryptic *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, “the last philosophical book.” Carnap—and other exponents of the Vienna Circle—elaborated on Wittgenstein’s message. Toward the conclusion of his mentioned work (183.*Rationalism?*) he inserted:



REFERENCES. Wittgenstein has clearly formulated the proud thesis of omnipotence of rational science as well as the humble insight relative to its importance for practical life: “For an answer that cannot be expressed, the question too cannot be expressed. *The riddle* does not exist. If a question can be put at all, then it *can* also be answered... (...)” Wittgenstein summarizes the import of his treatise in the following words: “What can be said at all, can be said clearly, and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”

That famous aphorism, which concludes the treatise, ought to have been interpreted as a confession of Gnostic humility, not as a “proud thesis of omnipotence of rational science.” All it takes is heeding *all* the implications of the opus. Just two aphorisms before the conclusive one, Wittgenstein states:

There really is ineffability. It *shows* itself, it is the mystic. (6.522)

All of the above almost a century ago. Why should we care anymore? Because the implications of rationalism, positivism, determinism, reductionism, mechanicism, have invaded the globe like a plague. Wittgenstein is not to be blamed; he transcended his epoch, though he also epitomized it by using and developing its newly-rediscovered and perfected tools—those of logics. (One noticeable objection to his *Tractatus* is the use of aphorisms and a highly subjective ordering criterion in lieu of a more systematically structured text. Why should logic be disemboweled, as it were, through an assortment of cryptic aphorisms?) His less gifted followers, through their historical misunderstanding,

went off the (wrong) tangent. And that just in the field of logics. In all branches of knowledge, determinism came and went, or rather, ought to have gone, but has not—it has persisted, and has permeated the world, aided by the amplification of its staunchest ally, economic “progress.”

There follows a disrespectfully succinct summary of some of the “blows” that ought to have done away with determinism, mechanism, reductionism, Darwinism, etc. Those of you who are familiar with these scientific developments, need not read this section. Those who are not, may use it as an invitation for further reading into the works of the quoted scientists.

Euclidean geometry was superseded by non-Euclidean geometry, whose chief figures were: Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevski (1793-1856); János Bolyai (1802-1860); and Bernhard Riemann (1826-1866). If Lobachevski’s and Bolyai’s recognition is posthumous, acceptance of non-Euclidean geometry occurred under the influence of Riemann’s ideas, in 1866, Eugenio Beltrami’s in 1868, and Felix Klein’s in 1871.

In 1927 Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) published his indeterminacy, or uncertainty, principle. His radical reinterpretation of the largely Newtonian basic concepts of mechanics as applied to atomic particles in the context of quantum theory should have dealt the *coup de grâce* to Newton’s mechanics. (It did, as a matter of fact. Yet, the notion of time as mere “duration” is still cardinal to, for instance, the financial world, with repercussions of global proportions.)

Logical positivism was wounded at its core—its true/false coercion and ensuing tacit adherence to the principle of bivalence—by Jan Lukasiewicz’s (1878-1956) discovery of three-valued logic as early as in 1917, *nota bene*: *before* Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Many-valued logic (and multivalued calculi) were to follow, aided by the flourishing of the Warsaw school of logic, for the inception of which Lukasiewicz is to be credited.

As for natural selection and the Darwinian world-view, coupled by the modern conventional molecular biological approach, which insists that when the DNA sequence of any organism be known, then all would be evident, and indeed all the reductionism and mechanisms it reeks of, it is becoming apparent, as Brian Goodwin and Gunther Stent, among others, suggest, that morphogenesis and development can be viewed as a dynamic system.

The theory of complexity is just coming out of the closet, gradually gaining ground among biologists, mathematicians, and philosophers alike.

In sum, all the mentioned developments in different but ever more interrelated branches of knowledge point to the fact that the world, life, and the very essence of being—ontology—must be reinterpreted and re-investigated through an entirely new (or entirely revivalist, in a sense) approach. Organisms are not merely collections of parts, such as genes, molecules and the various components of their organs. And what is more, they are *alive*.

The prodigious proliferation of tarmac, concrete blocks, buildings and skyscrapers the world over; the ongoing, unprecedented process of global deforestation and outright desertification; the cultural homogenization the world has undergone, for the sake of a global one-size-fit-all subculture by which to supplant the previous, manifold endemic cultures; all of this seems to be an unstoppable process of appalling destructive magnitude.

Over a century and a half ago Karl Marx had predicted, in true oracular tradition albeit in the disguise of a “modern scientist of history”, that the world would move, in a dialectical spasm, towards a global international proletariat. The current century, according to his predictions, was to herald and confirm the birth of a classless, international, transnational and supranational worldwide proletariat. But Communism has failed bombastically, despite the tenacious and forceful efforts the various regimes exerted to keep it alive. Mankind has “regressed” to god-worshipping, and, what is worse, if there is one single, overriding trend in the twentieth century, that is the one of unbridled *nationalism*. Marx has been proven completely wrong, and his historical determinism, flawed to cultivate the art of euphemism.

But hundreds of millions, from the Soviet Union to China, from Cuba to Vietnam, have partaken, willy-nilly, in this colossal experiment of “forget your property (if any)-your religion-your customs-your instincts...” Possibly as a reaction, we are witnessing the reemergence of long-forgotten tribal instincts, as nightmarish scenarios reemerge from the shadow side of humanity—ethnic cleansing, religious wars, etc.

Androcratic, free-market, consumerist societies, with the US leading and inspiring the pack, have succeeded in making the world look the same by applying broad-sweeping concepts that are apparently at home everywhere, as they appeal to a component of the human psyche that most of us do not seem to be able to renounce—greed. An extraterrestrial observer, after a thorough evaluation of the world at the end of the twentieth century, could comment that it appears to be a Freudian and Adlerian delight—a turmoil of base instincts engendered by sex and power drives.

Caught in between these major and, although different, equally destructive forces, is a peculiar class of human beings: New Agers. How can they be characterized?

New Age (a sympathetic view)

Nowadays the Abrahamic religions are concerned with very un-Hermetic matters, while Freemasonry is no more than another fraternal order. In a way, this has been to the advantage of the Hermetic Tradition, which now no longer hangs on the fringes of other institutions. In fact, it has become its own church, developing its most exoteric side as the New Age movement. A backward glance at history confirms the diagnosis.

Like the Renaissance Hermetism that hoped to restore peace to Christendom and sanity to warring mankind, the New Age movement is ecumenical, undogmatic and pacifist. Like the alchemists, who believed that all matter is on its way to becoming gold, New Agers

are dedicated to personal transformation and the realization of the latent potential in everyone. The occult sciences flourish, admittedly in their shallower modes, in divination systems (Tarot, Runes, I Ching), astrology, the science of plants (herbal medicine) and stones (crystals). Just as Paracelsus tramped through Europe chatting with woodsmen and wise women, the New Agers seek out and value the wisdom of indigenous peoples.

Like all exoteric manifestations, the New Age has its unfortunate aspects. But at its worst it is silly rather than vicious, and to our extraterrestrial observer it would seem the most humanistic and earth-friendly of all our religions. In addition, it offers doorways that are not sealed by dogma or religious authority, through which a self-selected few may pass to learn a deeper wisdom.

New Age (an unsympathetic view)

If New Age is all about awakening, why is it that it puts me to sleep? Those glossy book-covers with kitschy drawings; that recycled elevator music with pompous titles; and particularly those prophets or enlightened ones or whatever they are with their brand new catechism—they put me to sleep.

With all good faith I go to a “workshop”, that’s how it is called. So here is the enlightened one chatting away. The first impression to assail me is one of great torpor. But I can’t fall asleep, it would be impolite. So I listen. And what do I hear? A stupendous amount of conspicuous nonsense. Come to think of it, it is no small deed to amass so much nonsense in so little time. That’s noteworthy in itself, even if not necessarily praiseworthy.

I learn that we reincarnate 84,000,000 times; that I’ve got black ectoplasm pouring out of my mouth; that some of us are about to see ultraviolet lights; that extra-terrestrial beings with a third eye are watching (I wonder with which eye?), etc., etc. Although suspension of disbelief is a *conditio sine qua non*, there’s a curious infusion of pseudoscience too, so that terms are borrowed freely from physics, chemistry, biology, etc. They do make for a good mouthful. Stock phrases abound I suppose because there’s no grammar check to alert the enlightened one with “Stock phrase — use sparingly.” *Logos* is confused with *Logorrhea*.

Sentimentality of the basest kind thrives too, and that’s too bad, because there would seem to be room for humor. For example, from a catalogue of New Age books, here is a great title: *Blame it on your Past Lives*. Such a book actually exists. It should be a best-seller among losers, and I can already think of its sequel: *Stake It All On Your Next Life!*

Is that what it is? Am I surrounded by losers? As I was sitting among them Beck’s song kept revolving in my mind with its wicked refrain: “I’m a loser, baby, so why don’t you kill me?” Are all New Agers in dire need of therapy? Are they all seeking a psychic, emotional rescue? Should that be the case, then, out of compassion, I am bound to respect their misguided endeavors and say no more.

Indeed, New Agers, kitschy though they may be, are among the best representatives of the Western human race. For at least they sense that *something* is amiss. Unfortunately, they seem to do so only when something in their lives goes awry. Then they seek a remedy and, having rejected the Catholic confession, if they are Catholic; the gypsy tarot or palm reader; and the psychiatrist, they flock to this new breed of quacks, i.e., people who dispense reshuffled stock phrases in the guise of transcendental wisdom. How, why do they get away with it? They get away with it because those who attend their workshops and read their books are in most cases desperate people willing to believe and embrace anything.

We've all been there in our lives, helpless in the clutches of a depression. That's when just about anything goes. Any painkiller capable of relieving us of our pain, we will welcome. In such a state of dire dejection, not only is suspension of disbelief automatically achieved, but the would-be enlightened will believe more than can be believed. And yet the Otherness is possessed of a sense of humor and, if you approach it so disarmingly, then you'll probably never be able to sell it life insurance. The Otherness *needs* us, too, but has no interest in those who, having renounced a critical attitude, are willing to believe anything. The Otherness will snub such people altogether.

Those of you who have not read any typical New Age book must buy a few and see what I mean for yourselves. Usually the preface hastily informs the reader that the Author has been uncannily guided by such and such (a spirit, a reincarnation, a divine voice...) and that (s)he has a message to impart, nay, *the* message. Then commences a long litany of rules. They're listed in the most canonical causal order, i.e., from A follows B; from B, C, and so on. Apparently, the Revelation, the Message consists of a grocery list. Only, in lieu of carrots, bread and parsley, the list is made up of stock phrases borrowed from a half-digested potpourri of comparative religion/pseudoscience compiled by second-class book browsers.

On the other hand, those whose life is in apparent order—rich in familiar and professional satisfaction—those who are “normal and healthy” seldom feel a need to approach that which, in fact, is deeply buried within us all. And then there are the masses, those who watch five hours of TV a day, and are bombarded by unceasing commercial advertisements—an average of 21,000 of them in a year, in the US; those who have gone brain-dead and, although still psychophysically functional, have in effect become clockwork dummies.

Until, one day, one of such dummies is found, bound and gagged, strangled in a closet, or a basement. Eventually, the “normal and healthy” relatives, exceptionally stirred from their lifelong lethargy, learn from the police that their beloved was not murdered, but rather died of autoerotic death.