

Matters of method

María Pía López*

SUMMARY

This paper examines the traditional division between science and the essay, discussing the validity of such division within the sphere of the social sciences. The divide that is usually made in the name of objectivity would amount to foregoing the possibility of inquiring into the ways in which knowledge can be committed to truth. Such an inquiry, in turn, leads to locating knowledge in the dramatics of the body, of experience, and of thought, since the essay is not a matter of style or form but, at the core, it is a matter of method. It does not detract from research –it is not less committed to empirical research or factual verification-; on the contrary, it endows both instances with a moment of self-reflection expressed in writing. The essay as method means viewing writing as one moment along the line of research: basically, as the moment for self-research.

The excommunicated and the founders

In the sphere of the social and human sciences, the essay has been synonymous with a long-standing dilemma. The extreme tension exerted on the act of knowing, deprived from the shelter provided by a set of rules –a method- and unable to resort to neutrality as a protective device, calls into question not only the inherent capacity of moving toward truth but also the same capacity as assumed by such fields of knowledge that declare that they possess both the method and the neutrality. The arguments aroused by this issue (does it still arouse them?) do not seem to be due to the fact that they consciously remove themselves from the field of scientific normativity, but to the fact that their preference to stand aloof have caused a crisis in the very logic of the field.

This is not a recent situation and neither is it confined to the narrow limits of the social sciences. The rude response from the philological Academia to Friedrich Nietzsche's *El nacimiento de la tragedia* was triggered by the boldness of the attack contained in his analysis. He had had the cheek to make use of philology, sounding the Greek world, in order to destroy the rules of art of the discipline and thus demand that knowledge account for a new landscape, devoid of myth. He did so by inaugurating a manner of expression whose outcomes have persisted to this day. His philosophical style turned phrases into dramatic scenes and arguments into illuminating images. It is unquestionable that *Así habló Zaratustra*, poetic and theatrical though it may be, is above all accurate and philosophical, just as *Ecce homo* is the inscription of the theatre of knowledge on the body as well as a forceful methodological reflection.

The essay has evolved from the roads traversed by knowledge in its inveterate demands for the here and now, for a body that seeks for truth, and for an unwonted experience of language. How were philologists supposed to celebrate such a setback? They condemned Nietzsche, without realizing –or perhaps without noticing how badly they were impairing their

* Docente de la materia Teoría Social Latinoamericana de la carrera de Sociología de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad de Buenos Aires. Miembro del grupo editor de la revista *El Ojo Mocho*.

field –that they were penalizing an author that would have a long lineage of readers, critics, and commentators, while philology became an academic hindrance.

It could be held that the strength of the essay lies in the risk it has taken on opting for an uncertain destiny. It is true that it dealt Nietzsche some hard blows (the interpretations that placed his work on the side of ignominious political regimes), but it also gave him lasting endurance. Unsheltered, untimely thought risks contemporary condemnation in an attempt to envisage the future of its words. There is no telling what will result from waiting. Perhaps no reader, present or future, will appreciate its fair value. Perhaps the fair value given to many essays will be translated into oblivion.

The foundational stages of Argentinean scientific sociology did not escape this discussion. It is understandable that Gino Germani deemed it necessary to radically sever the new ways of thinking from the ones that, so far, had produced social knowledge in our country, where the essay had occupied a prominent place. The border was set at the works by Ezequiel Martínez Estrada. Still, Germani himself, after whom the Research Institute at the School of Social Sciences was named, did not refrain from bringing Wright Mills' *La imaginación sociológica* into the Argentinean sociological debate. In this work, the American thinker maintained that the social sciences had to be rebuilt on the bases of the great questions of the classic tradition, so as to find innovative paths that had been lost when confronted with the modes of interpretation posed by the arts. Sociological thought drew on movies and literature to stimulate its progress, and the arts were no longer viewed as what had to be rejected in defense of scientific tenets.

Through Germani's decision, he and Martínez Estrada became mutually exclusive alternatives: sociology versus the essay. In the course of the confrontation, sociology gathered impulse to join technical and cultural modernization. At times, the essay waned into some sort of ritual existence, derived from withered languages; at times, it shrunk to the fickleness that the new audiences seemed to want. In the past few decades, there seems to have been a reversal of these positions: sociology has gradually stopped to seek foothold on scientific purity or the rigor of the presentation –so much like a death mask; or evoking *rigor mortis*–while the essay has been gaining ground as the place where social thought is unfolded. Sometimes it adopts the shape of an exposition; others, it appears as the very method of research, one that assumes the risk of interrogating itself about its own not-knowing, turning the act of knowing into a vital experience.

It is not out of indifference to the rules of the sociological method that in his *Investigaciones políticas* Emilio de Ípola states the following: “[...] although I have tried to be as reasonably rigorous and accurate as possible, I do realize that, on the whole speaking, such works seem to belong into a genre that I would call “scientific essays”. Broadly speaking, the genre involves a particular manner of broaching situations, events, and processes defined by a twofold feature. On the one hand, and mostly because of their cultural proximity, they are well known to the researcher, who is thus directly affected by them. Then, whether he likes it or not, he feels committed to them regarding their situation, avatars, development, and fate. To approach these objects of research calls for a special effort, the harder to bear when the researcher is aware that the challenge does not lie in circumventing commitment for the sake of ‘neutrality’, but in remaining committed without losing objectivity.” Ípola adds: “at least, it is characteristic of the less controversial achievements of the social sciences to have always complied with this double demand.”

In the above quotation, the essay is seen as accepting a subjective commitment that persists no matter how careful the conceptual elaboration may have been. We are before the old, basic dilemma of objectivity, in whose pursuit sociology has permanently attempted different procedures, such as the essential modes of proof and verification, which often end up by masking the obstacles and limitations resulting from the procedures and rules themselves. The methodological problem is the very core of knowing –just as Sartre (whom I invoke in the title of this paper) was aware of in his *Crítica de la razón dialéctica*; it is the ultimate, necessary question as well as that which haunts us. This is why research should entail an exploration of its own conditions of existence and account for its constraints and possibilities as far as method is concerned.

Along those lines, method –unavoidable in whatever form of research –is called upon in such a way that it loses its problematic nature, and its enunciation adheres to a set of certainties that stand out from the vast territory of the social sciences. A central requirement to all requirements, like the purloined letter, it lies in full sight to avoid spotting. This is how, in sociological works, method often succeeds in avoiding being perceived as a query. However, the essay cannot shed its evident methodological fragility, since it cannot take refuge in pre-existing rules external to it. It needs to account for and produce its own possibilities to unfold as a mode of knowledge.

Seen thus, the essay appears in sociological pieces of research with a right to participate of the tradition, starting from Max Weber's fundamental writings and going all the way to Richard Sennett's contemporary works, which extend to themselves the demand for an explanation of their possibility. In his historicization of sociology, Horacio González wrote that the essay is "the inner way in which each text contributes to the radical uncertainty that gives rise to it." Still, what is the fate of a text that dispenses with this notion, a text that blocks its evident uncertainty in the name of the certainty provided by a science that has already been constituted? Can we speak of research when the conditions of research itself are not questioned, when the question about whom or what is being discussed is obliterated?

In short, the question is whether sociology and the rest of the social sciences can yield contemporary fruits without revisiting the assumptions and legality that gave them the status of scientific disciplines delimited by academic rules. In addition, whether the task of mistrust and creation can be performed without falling back on the tradition from which these sciences were severed at the moment of their foundation. Once again, Emilio de Ipola comes to our aid. In *Metáforas de la política*, he stated that the impending destiny is 'understandable impotence' "if, in the light of the new questions posed by the present times, sociology does not take a step toward undertaking serious reflection upon itself, which involves a process of self-transformation. The ultimate outcome may be some sort of post-sociology, an instance beyond sociology that we cannot yet sense, although I'm positive that we must pluck up the courage to follow that path." Perhaps the works of Martínez Estrada, with their words interwoven with moral principles, naturalist impulses, and a poetic calling, still have something to say about the fate of a science that was constituted on the foundations of his exclusion.

If contemporary societies go through the profound mutations that have been highlighted by philosophy and the social sciences, it is not easy to assume that they can be known without sinking in the resulting quagmire while keeping what signals them out as products of an autonomous field with its own legal status. In her latest interventions, Josefina Ludmer has insisted on paying heed to the need to consider the end of literature as an autonomous realm in order to comprehend it on the level of social imaginaries. Without literature, understood in the traditional sense of art, there is no literary criticism, but cultural criticism, or thought about discourses. The road leading to the dissolution of the borders that used to divide the various fields of knowledge, not without tracing boundaries and separations regarding the phenomena involved, is the same road that cultural studies have been walking for decades. This is not necessarily the fate that should befall the social and human sciences –we would certainly not desire it were so. Nevertheless, it would be positive to view this as a call to discuss the current fact that the real is being divided into objects of study, with singular approaches depending on each case.

These issues, which could gather into the question about a post-sociology, can hardly be addressed unless we count on the kind of writing liable to be pervaded by questioning, search, and imagination. Walter Benjamin, whose writings are rare pieces, was able to make the difference between information and narration. He wrote that the latter bears the prints of the narrator, like "a clay dish bears the print of the potter." Why, then, should we believe that thought, as a necessary step to knowledge, can erase its own prints?

Languages: Books and questionnaire forms

Academic knowledge, which institutes (or, at least, this is the opinion shared in some fields) the canons that are best accepted, saves a set of rules from the quagmire of doubts. Should it behave differently, it would renounce its own shaping as one of persistence and improvement, and would be condemned to an endless question about its own possibility. By removing a number of issues from the ongoing debate, it can assume its investigative vocation. Nobody would claim that such removal is unnecessary or inane. But suspicion might be aroused when *almost everything* is removed from the discussion. The 'almost' becomes the answer to the boxes included in questionnaire forms, in which only the immediate outcomes of an empirical or bibliographical work are left blank. Suspicions increase when the rules of the method evolve into bureaucratic norms that imply not only a series of search and verification procedures but also a pre-established validity applicable to the manner of exposition and to the creation of an even, neutral language.

A language that fits a time when the cultural circulation of the word is condemned as superfluous by the faculty or by the institutions devoted to research, for it is believed that knowledge exists only if the category involved cannot be changed into anything else and has become estranged from metaphor, play, an rhetoric. In addition –and this is even more serious – it is a symptom of contempt of the public nature of discourses and knowledge, with their face turned to academic circles, to the mutual pledge of belonging rather than to confrontation in the crucial wefts of society crisscrossing possible manners of comprehension. No books, just articles. No public debates, but encounters behind closed doors. At least for the time being, these are not hints of further schemes of a new race of plotters that may make use of confinement in order to organize stealthy interrogations smelling of times gone by. Rather, this type of confinement smells of comfort; the language seems to be a tool; and the objectivity, a masquerade.

The private language of adventure is supposed to be the road followed by objectivity; its smoothness is proposed as the matter that will make possible a neutral display of knowledge. This entails returning to the notion of a suitable relation with the object, a notion that is not derived from positivism and that denies the many and radical searches into which modernity was immersed. The social sciences, art, and philosophy among others had not maintained that objectivity was synonymous with affirming what was given from a glance which, dismissing all questions about underlying forces (that is, the question about their own situation), emphasizes the scope of subjective intentionality. The neutral language of our days assumes the existence of a subject focused on the axis of science; a subject that can account for the world from a categorially built perspective. Yet at the same time this subject is endowed with optional attributes and with 'points of view' that put back in place the subjective dimension while ridding it from whatever problems it could pose. In the past century, the cinema constituted the radical experimentation field of the problem of an objective look, and had discovered the need to reach beyond a focused viewpoint, diving headlong into things and building a new level of perception. Henri Bergson thought that the notion of beyond (that of a previous moment of) perception would also force the need for a language that would not ignore the poetic experience of images and metaphors. More precisely, objectivity would be found in the antipodes of where it is now supposed to stand.

I am not trying to make excuses for the snags and weaknesses of the essay. At some points of its protracted history, we find that it was hindered by prophetic gestures, superfluous elegance, and rhetorical little games as a sign of indifference to the tragedy of truth. But I am indeed trying to draw attention to two issues: one, that the fragility of the essay is always in full sight in its constituent matter, since it is not protected by a resort to authority (rather, the quoted names appear to have been included practically just because, in a rather arbitrary fashion) or by underrating inverted commas (those that, to the language of science, mark a distance between scientific observation and the naivete of everyday language), or by the solidity of the concept at stake (that placid reference is replaced by the elusive opening to metaphor). The second issue is that, as a mode of exposition, it attracts attention toward linguistic matter and its corresponding public echoes.

This seems so much to be the case that there are moments when the opposition that I am trying to establish sounds so anachronistic that it reminds one more of the debates on which

sociology was founded than of the contemporary situation of the social sciences. It looks as if the split came from another source: that of the interlocutors sought by the various styles of writing rather than that which lays emphasis on conveying different degrees of objectivity or profoundness. In this sense, it would seem as if the discussion on ways of writing -or on the essay as a mode of exposition –were already closed. Would the historiographic ability of Tulio Halperín Donghi come under suspicion just because his writing rakes over the words of his choice, leading him to interpretations that rank among the best tradition of essay writing? Is the author of *Revolución y guerra* a worse historian than those who describe the facts in smooth and prudent words? In addition, here I refrain from asking the most relevant question: does a plain, prudent description have some hermeneutic value?

In the world of books, the essay seems to have overcome the controversies of the past, at least regarding the issue of a discursive form. Sociologists, historians, literary critics, and political scientists lure their audiences by constructing languages that are far from despising style, even when they are addressing interpretation of facts. However, such institutions as are dedicated to the production, regulation, and management of the different branches of knowledge (universities and research institutes, for example), foster a change of bureaucratic logic into a universal, single language by offering material incentives to those who are willing to adopt the latter. Incentives and punishment: linguistic deals that do not come to a satisfactory close are threatened with exclusion. The crisis in the relations between the University and the book must be included among the effects of the disparity of languages required in either case. The book, as an object that circulates, should whet the imagination of prospective readers, lure them, include them, make them a part of the experience and of the meaning transmitted. In most of the cases, the University has decided that elaboration on words is business: as Inés Izaguirre wrote in a previous issue of this same journal, an article *is worth more than a book*. And if the article is published in a specialized journal of limited readership, so much the better.

The circumstances being what they are, the essay is a conservative genre. It seeks to preserve threads, forms, and encounters of a cultural world that has undergone a dramatic transformation. To those of us who work at the university, the essay is the memory of the bonds thanks to which the faculty participated in cultural reflection and debate as power plants that generated ideas and a fertile ground for the reception of the problems and dreams circulating in the social tissue.

The method

So far, I have tried to show two aspects of the problem. One was the need for sociology to walk paths that might enable it to achieve greater understanding, and even a reflection about the relevance or irrelevance of its boundaries. The other was related to the essay as a form of writing as opposed to the academic paper and to the language of questionnaire forms. The time has come to introduce a third aspect on which it is best to essay than to aver.

This third aspect is the essay as method. Let me clear the point a little further: it is not only a matter of positing the essay as the hypothetical condition necessary to any undertaking involving knowledge, nor is it my intention to reduce it to the status of a mode of exposition. It is about understanding that the essay is the very path that leads to knowledge. The differences between Michel Foucault's project posited in the first volume of *Historia de la sexualidad* and his change of perspective in the others are widely familiar. The introduction to the second volume, entitled *El uso de los placeres* consists of a forceful reflection about knowledge which is worth mentioning for a better development of the subject of this paper. Foucault wonders: "What would be the point of raging over knowledge if it could only ensure its acquisition rather than –to a certain extent - its loss, as far as this may be possible? [...] Someone may argue that the games that we play with ourselves should remain in the wings or that, in the best of cases, they are a part of such preliminaries as fade of themselves once they have succeeded in their purpose. Still, what is philosophy today –I mean, what is philosophical activity –but critical thought exercised upon itself?"

Do we feel addressed by his question or, focusing our attention on the word 'philosophy', do we think that the paths and troubles of our thoughts move in a different direction? Foucault has been extensively read, quoted, and annotated in the field of the social sciences, but his love of the contemporary and his patience as a historian of opaque processes characterized him as an intellectual model that stood much nearer the social sciences than a traditional philosopher would. Then, Foucault being Foucault, we should say, "here is the rub": he is speaking of us. Why should the social sciences remain alien to that work of thought performed on their own obscurity? Why should they refrain from "knowing whether it is possible to think in a different way"? Why should the social researcher become exempt from the common task that critical work carries out on knowledge?

The author of *Vigilar y castigar* states that the essay is that curious plunge into the unknown, including the thoughts that are born without the possibility of being known by what has already been thought. He defines the essay as "a self-modifying test in the game of truth rather than as oversimplification of the other with the purpose of achieving communication." Thus, the essay is not a discursive element but pertains to the realm of experience: the very experience of knowing that unfolds in the material medium of writing. There is an essay when there is no communication of a result reached at a previous stage, but when the word (its chains, links, and rhythm) generates a void which, in turn, give rise to unpredicted effects.

Within the domain of the essay, writing cannot be viewed as something transparent that follows research, but as a component of research practices. Hence the paradoxical meandering of some essays, their fearful capacity to dodge pedagogical simplification, the elaboration of styles that turn writing into a dramatization or into a handicraft and, I would like add, something that, in my view, lies at the core of the essay: the persistence of a deep respect for the powers of language. Such respect may be ambivalent, even a little distrustful, but it stems from a belief in the fact that the word is not to relinquish its rights to refer to the complexity of the real, even when it is not always successful, or when it does so by resorting to twists, opacity, or negations.

It could then be concluded that the essay presupposes yet another turning or excavation in the field of research, though not out of an intention of suspending or denying it, as seems to be the belief of those who reject the essay as if it were a seductive rhetorical tool capable of casting a veil over the omissions involved in the task of knowing. Quite the contrary; an essay incorporates that which is called research as a moment of the activity. As a moment, not as the totality, for research involves the act of writing, the experience of the written thought which, according to Foucault—a mighty researcher of archives—implies putting into play the writer's own knowledge. To put it in older terms, rhetoric is the exercise of the search for truth.

Why should the social sciences accept the comfort of given languages? Why precisely these sciences which, in their readings, face the problems posed by reading between the lines, by silenced thoughts, together with those queries resulting from the drama stemming from the various disciplines, fetishism, and exploitation? Should texts that once were powerful experiences of thought and writing be turned into administrated knowledge, into harmless tools used for communicating data?

Perhaps the exact sciences, which possess instruments for measurement and exploration and which address causally determined objects, may view the essay as a synonym of lies, idleness, and temptation; this does not seem to be the case with the social sciences. To return to the divide in the name of a would-be objectivity would entail resigning the questioning of the ways in which knowledge can commit itself to the truth. Such questioning would lead to the location of knowledge in the dramatics of the body, of experience, and of thought. To excommunicate the doings of the essay in the name of science is equivalent to condemning the social sciences to renounce methodological, reflexive, and statistical possibilities as well as to ban them from the arena of public debate.

The above argument does not intend to affirm that the essay has resolved the profound problems involved in social knowledge, but it indeed wants to make a point regarding the fact that the essay, through inscribing such problems on the most apparent part of the text, impedes that they be suppressed altogether. The preservation of the dose of boldness required by the essay prevents it from becoming a mere dallying with style or in a shelter from where to avoid commitment. The essay—that old antagonist of the forms assumed by scientific thought—is

doomed to persevere in the questions that its adversary has so far managed to evade: the essay is bound to keep them open rather than deny them. To succeed in this endeavor it should avoid becoming a weakish genre, partly tolerated in the grids that administrate knowledge, a typical resource at a time when it is too difficult to make affirmations. The social sciences require the sap and the adventure of a new essay, one that is not only the form and the breath of a text, but also a method of research and of self-research.

Bibliography

- Eduardo Grüner. *Un género culpable. La práctica del ensayo: entredichos, preferencias e intromisiones*. Homo Sapiens Ediciones, Rosario, 1996.
- Horacio González. *Restos pampeanos. Ciencia, ensayo y política en la cultura argentina del siglo XX*. Editorial Colihue, Buenos Aires, 1999.
- Emilio de Ipola. *Metáforas de la política*. Homo Sapiens Ediciones, Rosario, 2001.
- Nicolás Rosa (editor). *Historia del ensayo argentino. Intervenciones, coaliciones, interferencias*. Editorial Alianza, Buenos Aires, 2003.
- Michel Foucault. *Historia de la sexualidad. El uso de los placeres*. Editorial Siglo XXI, Spain, Madrid, 1993.
- Friedrich Nietzsche. *Ecce Homo*. Editorial Alianza, Madrid, 2003.
- Jean Paul Sartre. *Crítica de la razón dialéctica. Tomo 1. Teoría de los conjuntos prácticos*. Editorial Losada, Buenos Aires, 1963.

Translated by Marta Ines Merajver
Translation from Sociedad, Buenos Aires, no.25, 2006.