



## **A Tribute to Remo Bodei**

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*A Tribute to Remo Bodei*

Professor Remo Bodei died aged 81 on 7 November 2019 in Pisa. Remo Bodei was one of Italy's major philosophical figures. He started his career as professor at *Scuola Normale Superiore* in 1969 and from 1971 taught History of Philosophy and Aesthetics at the University of Pisa. He was visiting professor at many international universities such as Cambridge, Ottawa, New York, Toronto, Girona, and Mexico City. In 2006 he became professor of philosophy at UCLA (Los Angeles), with which he had a close relationship for over 20 years.

He was one of the leading experts on German classic and contemporary philosophy but the range of topics on which he wrote is impressive. His most recent works, which were translated in fifteen countries and often revised during the various reprints and translations, clarify his various interests: *Sistema ed epoca in Hegel* (*System and Epoch in Hegel*), 1975, republished in 2014 with the title *The Owl and the Mole, Hegel e Weber. Egemonia e legittimazione*, together with Franco Cassano (*Hegel and Weber. Hegemony and Legitimation*), 1977; *Multiversum. Tempo e storia in Ernst Bloch* (*Multiversum. Time and History in Ernst Bloch*), 1979, republished in a new, enlarged edition in 1983; *Scomposizioni. Forme dell'individuo moderno* (*Breakdowns: Forms of Modern Individualities*), 1987, republished in enlarged version in 2016; *Hölderlin: la filosofia y lo trágico* (*Hölderlin: Philosophy and the Tragic*), 1990; *Geometria delle passioni* (*Geometry of the Passions*), 1991; *Ordo amoris. Conflitti terreni e felicità celeste* (*The Order of Love: Earthly Conflicts and Heavenly Happiness*), 1991; *Le forme del bello* (*The Forms of the*

*Beautiful*), 1995; *Le prix de la liberté* (*The Price of Freedom*), 1995; *La filosofia nel Novecento* (*The Philosophy of the Twentieth Century*), 1997; *Il noi diviso. Ethos e idee dell'Italia repubblicana* (*We, the Divided. Ethos, Politics and Culture in Post-War Italy, 1943–2006*), 1998; *Le logiche del delirio: Ragione, affetti, follia* (*Logics of Delusion: Reason, Affects, Madness*), 2000; *Destini personali. L'età della colonizzazione delle coscienze* (*Personal Destinies: The Age of the Colonization of Consciousnesses*), 2002; *La sensation del déjà vu* (*The Sensation of the Déjà Vu*), 2006; *Paesaggi sublimi. Gli uomini davanti alla natura selvaggia* (*Sublime Landscapes: Human Beings in front of Wild Nature*), 2008; *La vita delle cose* (*The Life of Things*), 2009; *Ira. La passione furente* (*Anger: Mad Passion*), 2011; *Immaginare altre vite* (*Imagining Other Lives*), 2013; *Generazioni. Età della vita, età delle cose* (*Generations: Ages of Life, Ages of Things*), 2014; *Limite* (*Limit*), 2016; *Dominio e sottomissione. Schiavi, animali, macchine, Intelligenza Artificiale* (*Domination and Subordination. Slaves, Animals, Machines, Artificial Intelligence*), 2019.

Bodei's research interests cover a breath-taking range of topics that are almost impossible to summarize: as one of the leading experts of German Idealism – Hegel in particular – he was convinced that “the whole is the truth” and coherently considered any field of human experience as alien to him. He devoted himself to the theory of passions, the genesis of the modern individual, the paradoxes of time and memory, forms of knowledge, aesthetics, and, more recently, the life of things, generations and the concept of limit.

Hegel was determinant in his formation – it was not by chance that his last, posthumously published book as a sort of philosophical testament is a meditation on the dialectic of master and servant. But taking a closer look we can find many Simmelian topics in Bodei's production. First and foremost, Bodei shared with Simmel – and with his scholars Kracauer and Bloch – the philosophical valorization of the details and the objects of everyday life.

Philosophy should try to think “concrete”, bringing the ideas close to the things, without renouncing the rigour of rationality. Moreover, philosophy is not just the chronological history of heroic thinkers but the attempt to think in terms of problems: Bodei’s book on *La filosofia nel Novecento (The Philosophy of the Twentieth Century)*, 1997 is a clear and successful attempt to grasp the last century mainly by following – more or less explicitly – Simmel’s approach in the *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (1911). The topic of “things” (2009) and the book on the concept of “limit” (2016) can also be considered as two research studies inspired by Simmel. Simmel in fact notoriously dedicated many essays on “objective culture” and considered everyday objects a fundamental component of modern *Lifestyle* in the last chapter of his *Philosophy of Money*; on the other side, “limit” is a concept present in various and decisive ways by Simmel (as *Form, Rahmen, Grenze, soziale Begrenzung*). However, probably the most relevant topic that Bodei shares with Simmel is the problem of individualization and the idea of a rationality not estranged to passions. Bodei also worries about the destiny of individuality in the context of modernity and he dedicated a “trilogy” on this topic (*Breakdowns: Forms of Modern Individualities*, 1987; *Geometry of Passions*, 1991; *Personal Destinies: The Age of the Colonization of Consciousnesses*, 2002). This last book not only has an important chapter dedicated to Simmel but also – on closer inspection – a very Simmelian conception. Bodei’s focus is on the destiny of individuality in the context of the twentieth century, a time when the logic of political and technical apparatuses tends to prevail on the individual consciousness.

Similar to Simmel, Bodei sees personal identity as a problem – or rather, a paradox – that the two philosophers tried to solve in diametrically opposed ways. On one side we find John Locke; on the other side there is Arthur Schopenhauer. Locke is the one who firstly and strongly emphasizes the importance of the continuity of

experience in defining personal identity and the risks of its disappearance. This continuity relies on a consciousness that is actively aware of the connection between the events of the past and present and moves them forward into the future. Through personal identity the individual achieves also intellectual and moral autonomy, creating the basis of what Kant will later call *Enlightenment*. Like private property of economic goods, also the property of the *self* – the freedom of the thinking and acting individual as opposed to slavery and personal dependence on others' will and power – is not hereditary but a result of a hard work of the renovation of psychic life and the maintenance of joy and well-being in this world, in order to reach salvation in the other world. For Locke, however, the control over the individual intellect doesn't extend itself to the body, which is out of reach from the individual as well as from the state. The body belongs only to God: in this way Locke puts a limit to the principle of *Habeas corpus* affirmed during the *Glorious Revolution* – following the principle of canonical law “*nemo dominus est membrorum suorum*” (*Destini personali. L'età della colonizzazione delle coscienze*, 2002: 47), separating body from self-consciousness and making it lose that political importance attributed to it also by Thomas Hobbes.

On the contrary, Schopenhauer is the philosopher who refused the *principium individuationis* and reassessed the dimension of the *body* and all those external appeals to rational subjectivity (dreams, myths, the unconscious), which opened up new perspectives for research in Western thought (from Taine to Nietzsche, from Pirandello to Freud). For Schopenhauer, the ego, the individual, personal identity are only marginal and secondary phenomena of the will to live, that, despite the term, has nothing to do with man's free will and discretion, but rather represents an undifferentiated energy that characterizes every being in the world. All individuality is therefore a deceptive reality and intrinsically void of any value, or rather as he

put in *The World as Will and Representation*, ‘We are like the swirls that the will to live scribbles on the infinite blackboard of space and time’, quickly cancelled to make room for others” (Ibid.). Although men appear differently to one another and are endowed with unique, exclusive individual characteristics, their affairs are actually similar to those of theatrical masks in plays, where the same characters are always present with the same passions and the same destiny.

Schopenhauer’s philosophy had no direct political implications, even if he extended his metaphysical of the body to the State, so identifying monarchy with the sovereign’s body whose power is transmitted biologically by each generation. However, the insistence on body as an alternative principle to consciousness in representing the culmination of human life and the refusal of the *principium individuationis* may encourage the loss of subjective autonomy and – directly or indirectly – to despise the single individuals that can become safe only by renouncing themselves. Bodei openly shares Adorno’s preoccupation on the destiny of individuality in modernity: Schopenhauer’s (and later Nietzsche’s) illusion of willingly breaking the “chains of individuality” would only end in redelivering us defenceless to the omnipotence of political and economic mechanisms. However, Bodei considered that not all the new perspectives opened in Western thought from the critique of the self-sufficiency of *principium individuationis* leading to a political dead-end: first of all is the case of psychoanalysis.

Bodei’s interpretation of Simmel should be seen in this conceptual and interpretative framework. Simmel clearly saw how individuality was becoming increasingly articulated in different spheres as an effect of modernization and division of labour. However, there is something that, for Bodei, distinguished Simmel from most twentieth-century authors and makes him closer to our contemporary “millennial” perspective. In his concerns over the

fate of free and autonomous subjectivity in the world of modern culture, “The question that obsesses Simmel is not, as it would be for Heidegger or Anders, that of guaranteeing modern man’s *survival* in the technical age, but – in a manner of speaking – to suggest strategies for avoiding ‘sub-vival’, that is, getting stuck living below the threshold of the opportunities that paradoxically spring from that which should sap him” (Ibid.: 186). His reflections are therefore not moralistic or solipsistic, but attentive to the *possibilities* for individual development inherent in the changes to consolidated social forms. For Simmel the fullness and meaning of life are to be found in virtual spaces and times, in an elsewhere non-localizable form in the series of places and events in which we are situated daily, like in the art experience, in being stranger, or in adventure. The subtle and not evident analogy between these three different dimensions of existence analysed by Simmel gives another aspect of the originality of Bodei’s interpretation of Simmel.

At the close of the article, we find also a light, ironical criticism of Simmel’s conception of adventure that – see my article on *The Blasé and the Flâneur* in this current issue – was shared also by Benjamin.

Bodei writes: “Can we be satisfied with the ‘ambiguous beauty’ of the adventure described by Simmel, or do we have justifiable need and sufficiently farsighted perspective to continue to prefer, with some success, paths with destinations and destinations with paths?” (*Possible Times and Worlds: Art, Adventure, and the Stranger in Georg Simmel*, republished in this current issue: 35). In this apparently simple question, we can see Bodei’s dialectical rationalism and the realism of Italian historicism. It is as though after indulging with Simmel’s conception, Bodei goes back to consideration of realistic historical conditions and a look back to the notorious Marxian “relationships of productions”. This question would however open up an interesting debate on the relationship between reality,

virtuality and hope that, unfortunately, we would have hoped to discuss with him personally. Last time I had occasion to speak to him, he told me that he was working on the portrait using Simmel's studies on Rembrandt as well, and he would have loved to write something for the Simmel Studies. Unfortunately, this didn't happen.