The canon wars and the decline of the West *by Martino Rossi Monti*

Some etymology:

The work "canon" comes from a Greek word which originally meant an instrument or a measurement tool. But it also became the title of a treatise and a sculptor (now lost) which identified the rules of proportion and symmetry every sculptor must follow when shaping the human body. Example: Statue of Doryphoros.

In the Hellenistic period, it acquired also metaphorical significance of rule, norm. Canon is a lost work by Epicurus, in which it has the meaning of "criterion", in the sense of criterion of truth. Many centuries later, Kant would call "canon" the correct use of the human faculty in general.

More generally, it was used to indicate lists of authors and catalogues regarded as exemplary and authoritative, in connection to cultural transmission and education. "Canonical" are also the books accepted as sacred texts by the Church. "Canon law": Regulation and laws, fixed tax; "canonization": catalogue of saints. In music, a canon is a certain compositional technique that employs a melody with one or more imitations of the melody played after a given duration.

Some recurrent associations from all these:

Regularity, order, measure, "straightness", criterion, selection, exclusion (no privileged insiders without creating outsiders), authenticity/legitimacy, sacredness/orthodoxy (can lead to rigidity, dogma and even intolerance: for every canon, an anti-canon).

Generally related to (the conservation of) memory, tradition & education. Our relationship with the past can be one of emulation, conflict, and even rejection. Aristotle went from proscription to prescription in the University of Paris (and in general) over the Medieval ages. The Renaissance humanists held the present to be an age of decline (the 'Dark Ages') and the Greco-Roman past to be superior. This stimulated translations and discussion of the ancients in the curricula, and their emulation.

By the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century, people rejected 'competing' with the ancients as senseless (and so rejected emulation). They saw themselves as the ones who were wise, as the 'true' ancients. The ancients were indispensable stepping stones, but we have to 'add' to the truths they discovered (and not accept them as eternal dogmatically).

The line between exemplary and non-exemplary is highly dynamic.

A canon can generate both conformity and renewal, stability and change, censorship and free thought. Its emergence was linked to national identity, but globalization has made it totally unstable. Mass culture comes head-to-head with the traditionally elitist function of education.

All this has promoted the disintegration of the difference between "popular" culture and "high" culture. Does being "open" mean surrendering the responsibility to evaluate and select?

The historical pessimist worries that his culture is about to destroy itself. The cultural pessimist says that it deserves to be destroyed. Cultural pessimism has certainly overtaken the West. However, meaninglessness and moral relativism is rising due to this. "We live in an era of pop pessimism." But are intellectuals responsible for this or did they merely articulate it?

Some factors held responsible for the decline of civilization are: Exploitation of nature, capitalism, materialism, progress, individualism, industrialization.

Josh Platzky Miller presents: From *Mythos* to *Logos*? The fraudulent birth certificate of Western philosophy.

The idea: Western philosophy is the philosophy of the Western civilization. People claim that it's all given by the legacy of Greek philosophy.

You can't "separate out" Western philosophy from African philosophy, etc. Their canons must be intertwined.

The idea of a break from myth to reason (mythology/theology to philosophy/science) is deeply embedded in literature, manifested by "the Greek miracle". But this birth certificate is a fraudulent one.

What's wrong with it?

People attempt to justify it by talking about how Western science were created when a few people were "perverse" enough to ignore the Gods and look for natural causes. But to begin with, there are some translation issues around this: Logos doesn't mean science in any modern sense of the word. Nor does mythos exclusively mean unverifiable narratives, etc.

People attempt to say, then, that they just "invented" reasoning. This is absurd because, for example, Aristotle thinks that it's a pretty basic aspect of being human. Maybe they were the first to "discover" it; but it's kind of arrogant and arbitrary to suggest that it was the ancient Greeks who were the first to ever become self-conscious.

"Natural philosophy" was not understood as empirical as we do today; it was very much theological.

Another argument: "They became more secular!" Well, theology and metaphysics are *far* from mutually exclusive.

And Thales had antecedents.

So, there's little precedent for attributing the birth of philosophy to the ancient Greeks. Until the 1700s, the history of philosophy did recognize older non-Greek thought. Linguistic determination which argues that it's true because the word "philosophy" comes from Greek is also obviously flawed.

Why do we have this impression now? A shift originating in Germany about what "counts" as philosophy (and thereby how to detail the history of philosophy); questions about the rise of science, colonialism, European supremacy, etc. all got together. Pre-Greek philosophy seen as "barbarian" philosophy, just a sort of "prelude" to philosophy, not "real" philosophy. The equivocation of science=philosophy=Greek, Thales as the first philosopher. By the end of this period (which involved many key names in making the narrative of the history of philosophy), we have Hegel, who says: "Mythology must remain excluded from our idea of philosophy."

Husserl, Heidegger both arguing that only European, Greek philosophy is "real" philosophy. This whole break crystallized in the 20th century, with Cornford, Nestle **(literal Nazi)** and Snell.