

Call for papers

K. Revue trans-européenne de philosophie et arts

14, 1/2025

The Science of Subtraction

The gesture of Ettore Majorana

In his *Life of Galileo*, Brecht highlights the link between the development of science and the possibility of the final catastrophe of humanity. In the story of Galileo and in the work of the scientist himself (i.e. at the beginning of the so-called 'scientific revolution'), Brecht identifies the historical moment in which this link becomes indissoluble and definitive.

Subsequent editions of the play bear witness to Brecht's progressive awareness-raising. Before the outbreak of the Second World War, when writing *Life of Galileo* in Denmark in 1938, Galileo is for Brecht a positive historical figure who manages to keep his commitment to knowledge alive in spite of significant political pressures. After the war, however, Galileo is presented in a much darker and more pessimistic light. In 1945, when Brecht was writing a new version of his play in California, Galileo was in fact the one who was guilty of an inexplicable sin: he had surrendered to the politico-religious authority; he had constantly sought compromises with power.

Brecht's judgement of Galileo changes so abruptly because, after the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Brecht believes that it is no more possible to get excited when facing the development of scientific knowledge. In this sense, he works to dismantle a certain legend of science, that is, the image of knowledge constructed by the emerging bourgeoisie: the scientist is neither by predestination nor by natural vocation a hero, nor a saint, nor a sage who would be right in all circumstances. His research, which never involves personal initiative, is caught up in the games of domination and power, which constantly distort his orientation.

Nolan's recent film, *Oppenheimer* (2023), shows how the path of science is littered with blind alleys and dead ends, which, in an increasingly strategic alliance with the various powers, eventually lead to a "universal cry of pain".

In Brecht's play Galileo appears fleetingly, a ghostly, unnameable figure who could perhaps represent another parable in the development of science, because he does not step back on the

issue of the philosopher's responsibility and freedom when facing the demands of power. But Giordano Bruno was burnt alive. Only ashes and silence remain.

Indeed, it seems inconceivable that a Brunian *furore* could be repeated. Bruno's Europe is already one of social and cultural discipline, but wanderings, attempts to escape the rational order of things, freer research were perhaps still possible, as some of Carlo Ginzburg's research confirms. Today, the fate of science seems to be sealed. The case of Oppenheimer shows a person, who, in spite of everything, thinks and builds the bomb because he still believes in the autonomy of science in relation to power. Betrayal or pious illusion is of little importance nowadays. For Oppenheimer, the invention of the bomb is also the last, extreme and paradoxical attempt of science to put an end to war, either against the powers or, in Galilean fashion, at their side. But as Nolan's film shows us, can Oppenheimer really become a messenger of peace? Or does his figure, in the atomic age, seal the imprisonment of peace in the logic of war? In an age in which weapons are designed to annihilate the whole of humanity, there is no outside to war (or even peace). The only solution remains disappearing into thin air.

We are living in the 'time of the end', that time which, to borrow the insights of Gunther Anders, cannot be replaced by another time, but only by its end. Within the end, inside of it, this issue of K wants to test a post-human opportunity, that of a radical, unconditional, pure rejection of the connection between science and power.

By choosing Ettore Majorana, we propose to give a name to this refusal. We are following Leonardo Sciascia's hypothesis (The Disappearance of Majorana - *La scomparsa di Majorana*, 1975), according to which Majorana glimpsed what Fermi could not see in 1934: the experiments on radioactivity carried out by the Via Panisperna group could lead to the splitting of the uranium atom. Majorana writes to his sister: «Physics is on the wrong track». Because the age of the bomb is also the age in which, as argued by Anders, «human faculties lose sight of each other», and the actions of production and science are no longer matched by reason and politics capable of ensuring the contemporaneity of the species with regard to its own actions.

In almost similar terms, Hannah Arendt had defined the orbits of Sputnik 1 as the moment from which «the physical, material condition of our thoughts» would no longer be able to follow «what we do». An assaulted and exploited nature cannot be the object of an ecology dissociated from its own rootedness in different historical and social periods, i.e. material, conditions, but, as the inhabitants of Notre-Dame-des-Landes would later note in the prehistory of *Les soulèvements de la Terre*, «we are nature defending itself» against the extractive and productive processes that lead to its desuetude and socially residual character. To such an instance, bourgeois morality has responded insistently by attributing the effects of scientific development to the more or less conscientious

uses that can be made of it, while the economic and institutional frameworks in which research elaborates the prius of nature (which is also us) in the perspective of discovery seem no less fatal. In this sense, Majorana's gesture can certainly be attributed to an «instinct of preservation: for oneself, for the human species», as Sciascia argues, but it is also a movement that, even before opposing the possible scenario of the bomb and extinction, disguises a specific set of social relations and the orientation of science in which they are expressed.

Meanwhile, by disappearing without a trace, Majorana will have made his person the very figure of the status of the real in the probabilistic universe of contemporary physics (Agamben, *What is Real? Che cos'è reale? La scomparsa di Majorana*, 2016). In this way, his disappearance is the decision to take a different path, to vanish, in order to avoid any complicity: his only chance is to abandon the work (the young scientist from Catania, according to Sciascia, «tries to evade the work, the work that ends»).

The hypothesis we want to test is that a non-doing gesture, to the point of self-extinction, is the gesture left to men and women when there is nothing left to do. From this point of view, Majorana's defection is radical and pure precisely because he decides to escape any possible new capture within the system of power and knowledge.

In this general context, the lines of research may thus focus around the following areas of investigation:

- 1) In April 2022, eight students from AgroParisTech, one of the leading agricultural engineering schools in France, caused a scandal when, on the evening of their graduation ceremony in the prestigious "Salle Gaveau" in Paris, they called on their fellow students to "defect" and reject the "opportunities" offered by their school, because the knowledge they were being taught was only leading them to participate in the social and ecological destruction. At the heart of this appeal, there is precisely the willingness of young students to avoid the obvious destructiveness of scientific knowledge. The proposal of a "great resignation" is an interesting "weapon of critique" to theoretically arm oneself against a knowledge that, starting from university education, is definitively subjected to the logic of economic and political forces, but we need to understand if and how this weapon succeeds in transforming itself into a "critique of weapons", that is, if it becomes a "material force". Some movements in France, such as 'Les soulèvements de la Terre', seem to be going in this direction.

2) «Man dissolves and disappears in the same substance as dreams are made on»: Sciascia's Shakespearean reading of Majorana suggests that the reconstruction of radical desertions, such as that of the scientist from Catania, is only possible through the world of images, in particular through cinema.

3) Majorana's disappearance is not a simple erasure of himself, as Mattia Pascal imagines. It also takes the form of an im/possible, in/voluntary challenge to those who continue. Perhaps, then, this disappearance is an attempt at an infinite metamorphic multiplication, an ever-creative destruction of the self, like that of Vitaliano Moscarda (Pirandello, *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*), in order to remain in Sicily. If the horizon is the catastrophic one of the explosion of the world, it is a matter of experimenting with new forms of existence within the end. An *inactive* 'lifestyle', outside the world? To this extent, it is possible to really reactivate a dialogue between science and literature, comparing Majorana's gesture also with those of the various "starvation artists" of the 20th century, such as Marcovaldo, Bartleby or Kafka's Fasting.

4) In the increasingly deafening noise of war, can Majorana's gesture be repeated? And can this repetition have a political power? Is it possible to imagine a struggle against the ongoing wars, affirmed by the non-assertion of the self? And how can shadows put an end to the reality of war?

5) Is science today a new idol, as in Nietzsche? Is it permissible, even ideally, to imagine limits to the workings of science that do not come from science itself? Or must we now give way to an equivalence between technology and science which, as in the case of the atomic bomb, can only lead to catastrophe?

Submit your proposal by 17 November 2024 (max. 2,500 characters)

Send to: krevuecontact@gmail.com

If the proposal is accepted, the paper must be delivered by 19 April 2025.

After this date, the selected paper will be automatically excluded from the journal issue.