K
ISSN : 2609-2484
Éditeur : Université de Lille

14 | 2025
Scienza della sottrazione: il gesto di Ettore Majorana

The Science of Subtraction. The gesture of Ettore Majorana

https://www.peren-revues.fr/revue-k/1523

Référence électronique
« The Science of Subtraction. The gesture of Ettore Majorana », *K* [En ligne], 14 | 2025, mis en ligne le 08 juillet 2025, consulté le 03 juillet 2026. URL : https://www.peren-revues.fr/revue-k/1523

Droits d'auteur
CC-BY

The Science of Subtraction. The gesture of Ettore Majorana

TEXTE

1 In his recent film *Oppenheimer* (2023), Nolan illustrates how the strategic alliance of knowledge, technology and power (the 'Manhattan Project') eventually resulted in a 'universal cry of pain': Hiroshima, Nagasaki...

2 Yet, the tragic end of the Second World War led to a global pact that was established under the control of the victorious nations. Maybe as Oppenheimer also intended, this pact saw the atomic bomb and its nuclear evolution become a kind of guarantee – albeit a paradoxical one – that Hiroshima would not be repeated.

3 No further repetitions of that pact, *plus jamais ça*!..., are in practice valid. The events in the Middle East show that all repetitions, sooner or later, become real. The Bomb is no longer a deterrent, it does not simply imply capturing the peace in the logic of war, as Oppenheimer wanted, but it is the best way, the only way, to impose a new *pax augustea*, a desert, which contemplates genocide and heinous aggressions on peoples and states that allegedly have the whim to evade the forms of neo-colonialism.

4 *Summer* 2025: this war has then, again, the face of science. Those who pursue, strengthen, the "Manhattan projects", dominate. It is a domination that no longer accepts compromise, as demonstrated by the events in Ukraine, where we see the new *smart* inventions of scientific laboratories being tested on the people, as it happens in Gaza.

5 In a period when it would really be out of time, if not purely idiotic, to think of another possible use for science, with this issue of *K* we wish to test a posthuman chance, that of a radical, unconditional, pure rejection of the link between science and the power that gives death. With Ettore Majorana we propose to give a name to this refusal. We have followed the hypothesis – which it would not be a crime to call a *poetic* one- of Leonardo Sciascia (*La scomparsa di Majorana* [*The mystery of Majorana*] 1975), according to which Majorana glimpsed

what Fermi, in 1934, could not see: the experiments on radioactivity carried out by the via Panisperna group could lead to the breaking of the uranium atom. Majorana wrote to his sister: "Physics is on the wrong track". According to Sciascia, this was the reason why the brilliant physicist from Catania, decided to *disappear*.

6 In this respect Majorana's gesture can certainly be traced back 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, disappoints a specific set-up of social relations and the orientation of science in which they are expressed.

7 Meanwhile, by disappearing without leaving 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, *Che cos'è reale? La scomparsa di Majorana* [*What is real*], 2016). In this way, his disappearance is a way to imagine an escape route; i.e. to evade any complicity by vanishing. The only chance left is to *abandon the work*. Sciascia writes:

> In the precocious genius - such as Majorana was - life has an insurmountable measure of time, of work. An assigned, an imprescriptible measure. And as soon as a work has reached its fulfilment, its perfection; as soon as a secret has been fully revealed, as soon as a perfect form has been given, i.e. a revelation to a mystery - in the order of knowledge or, to put it roughly, of beauty: in science or literature or art - as soon as all the above mentioned happen, death comes next. And since he is a "one" with nature, a "one" with life, and nature and life a "one" with the mind, the precocious genius knows this without knowing it. Making is for him imbued with this premonition, this fear. He plays with time, with his years, in deceptions and delays. He attempts to dilate the measure, to shift the boundary. He attempts to evade the work, the work that when it is concluded, it concludes. Which concludes his life.

8 A subtraction to the work, from the work. We call it desertion. If in the *War of the Worlds*, Bruno Pontecorvo, another boy from Via Panisperna, chooses to take sides against western imperialism (but the arms race is perhaps the root of the ruin of so-called real

socialism, as Malevic had guessed), Majorana, on the other hand, shirks, he abandons that knowledge, that whole world. He deserted.

9 In April 2022, eight students from AgroParisTech, one of the leading agricultural engineering schools in France, created a media-political scandal because on the evening of their graduation ceremony in the prestigious "Salle Gaveau" in Paris, they called on their classmates to "defect", rejecting the "opportunities" offered by their school, because the knowledge they had learnt in it only led them to participate in social and ecological destruction. At the heart of the call of the young deserters is precisely their desire to escape the overt destructiveness of scientific knowledge.

10 Majorana's gesture perhaps anticipates this desertion, but above all, for us, it becomes an indication of a *lifestyle*. The desertion from science is also the invention of another way of existence within the catastrophe, within the war, which (does not) come true, which (does not) come to an end, because it decides not to be found any more, not to be caught any more: to disappear like Hamlet or Vitangelo Moscarda.

11 Majorana, as historians of science like to point out, could not have fore-seen the atomic bomb. So, he would not have disappeared for that reason. Above all, he is not against our history, nor is he against the atom bomb. They want to reassure themselves that he is not a starvation scientist. We respond: "It doesn't really matter!" The gesture of *disappearing* calls into question the idea that the Bomb can defend civilisation, because it expresses a rejection of the science of war and the values that sustain it. It allows another way of (not) being in the world within, or alongside, the Bomb. The act of non-doing, to the point of self-deletion, is the gesture that remains for men and women when there is nothing else left to do. Majorana's defection, from this point of view, is radical and pure in the very sense that it shirks any possible new capture within the logic of power and knowledge, of that knowledge and power capable of denying even the principle of reality: the fine-tuning of the final solution to Gaza.

12 If the horizon is the catastrophic one of the war of the worlds, it is about experimenting with new ways of existence within the end. An *inoperative* way of life, outside the world. The issue brought forward

by Majorana's disappearance is above all that of rejection. Majorana may not have fore-seen the bomb, but he disappears because he refuses to continue operating in this world. This gesture of withdrawal, this refusal, cannot be that of a neurotic man, it is rather that of a saint (of a warrior who unties every bond with the violence of war) who renounces everything, who goes to the deserts, and above all wants to live up to the catastrophe we are living.

13 In the current catastrophe, it is better to withdraw one's forces from the game without hoping to improve things a little, since the very characteristic of the atomic age is to tear apart man's very possibility of inhabiting the world. And, after all, for whom to side in a thermonuclear war? Who wins it? Is Israel really winning its war even though it is humiliating and devastating the entire Middle East? What remains of a victory that literally leaves no trace behind?

14 Leave no trace. Majorana's choice makes us think, as we said, and as Sciascia points out, of some literary silhouette of the destitution of the world. His gesture of dissolving himself (in the sea, in a remote countryside, in a convent, on the streets of some small town?) repeats that of various "starving artists", such as Bartleby or Kafka's fasting man. They all let bodies and identities evaporate, they become ghosts, because they feel that these are the new forms of man in capitalism and total war that leaves *nothing* behind, the emptiness of forms. Nuclear painting understands this well, immediately after Hiroshima: 'Forms disintegrate: the new forms of man are those of the atomic universe' (Baj, Dangelo, *Nuclear Art*, 1952).

15 With Majorana the great theme of spectrality, the theme of modernity *par excellence*, penetrates science. What happens when a scientist turns away from his monocle and becomes imperceptible? The bourgeois and the well-meaning say that he is insane and that he has always been strange. Imagine for a moment, if female and male scientists working in the Defence Research and Analysis Institutes in London, Moscow, Tel Aviv or the USA metamorphose themselves into shadows today...

16 Just imagine it... Can we manage it? As Anders said, the problem with atomic warfare is also the lack of imagination. That is why even the Bomb is still the unthought of Western-style democracy.

17 After all, it is also because it is unthinkable that dangerous destroyers of humanity can only ever be the *others*, those who don't even have the Bomb, and who above all have never used it. That is why, faced with the unthinkable, the radical defection of scientists is the only way to truly, ethically, i.e. politically, come to terms with Hiroshima. The only course of action that prevents its *recurrence*. Perhaps the "peace" pact, the creation of the UN in October 1945, was already born as a rotten experience because Hiroshima could only repeat itself, every single day, since that 6 August 1945. The proliferation of nuclear weapons has never been a deterrence, but rather the continuation without continuity of Hiroshima, like a litany of new explosions every day, *en attendant* to a total disintegration.

18 Today we are here, the bomb is approaching, and so we think of Majorana or another boy from via Panisperna, Franco Rasetti, who abandoned physics a subject compromised by death, and began studying geology and botany. They express, for us, the same will to break the science/war combination. They say little and make no manifestos for peace. They flee, they disappear, they commit themselves to studying the Cambrian; yet they are precisely defusing the Bomb, even the mechanism of its *repetition*.

19 Because the Bomb has exploded, and it keeps on exploding, there is no longer a properly human world. The gestures of desertion attempt to create niches within the desert to re-inhabit it poetically, as the communities with no more fear at the end of McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) do. Those characters too have abandoned the world, the roles and functions they had in it, they have disappeared. They too, like Majorana, hid inside the catastrophe not to one day find the old world again - that is no longer possible - but to open the doors of another city.

> Can one defect in Gaza today?

> Up there we build a second city,

> doctors without patients or blood,

> teachers without packed classrooms

> and screaming students,
>
> new families without pain or sadness,
>
> and journalists photographing paradise,
>
> and poets writing about eternal love,
>
> all from Gaza, all.
>
> In paradise there is a new Gaza that is
>
> now being formed, an unbesieged one.
>
> (Hiba Abu Nada, 15/10/2023, in *Il loro grido è la mia voce*, 2024).[1]

NOTES

1 Hiba Abu Nada was born in 1991 in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, to a family of refugees from the Nakba of Bayt Jiria. A poet and novelist, she is also a science student like the boys and girls of AgroParisTech: she holds a bachelor's degree in biochemistry, and a master's degree in nutrition from al-Azhar University in Gaza. On 20 October 2023, she was killed in an Israeli Air Force airstrike that hit her home in Khan Yunis. Ideally and humbly, we dedicate these pages to her with eyes full of tears.