Zofia Rosińska
Faculty of Philosophy
University of Warsaw, Poland

Progress and Reversions:
Movement in the Hermeneutic Circle of Culture

Abstract:

In this essay I present culture as a realm constituted by a circular movement where progress is constantly confronted (and questioned) by different forms of reversions. By progress I mean specifically oriented changes we observe in culture. Many of them are rooted in the development of technology and science, or stem from demographical changes and intercultural influences. Reactions to these changes frequently involve returning to certain forms of behavior or responses that were common in the past but have been later abandoned. I intend to present examples of this phenomenon observed in culture.

Keywords:

culture, progress, reversion, hermeneutic circle, desire for continuity

By progress I mean specifically oriented changes we observe in culture. They can be ideologically grounded but do not necessarily have to be. Many of them are rooted in the development of technology and science, or stem from demographical changes and intercultural influences. Though they can be evaluated, doing so may be difficult to justify and is usually not very fruitful in philosophical terms.

It sometimes happens that these changes meet with active resistance. As Yuval Noah Harari writes, "The sense of disorientation and impending doom is exacerbated by the accelerating pace of technological disruption. The liberal political system … finds it difficult to deal with the ongoing revolutions in information

technology and biotechnology."[1] However, it is also true that these changes can be universally accepted, sometimes even enthusiastically. "Even more importantly," Harari continues, "the twin revolutions in infotech and biotech could restructure not just economies and societies but our very bodies and minds."[2] However, such enthusiasm is often accompanied by skeptical reflection. Since "we don't understand the complexity of our own minds," Harari concludes, "the changes we will make might upset our mental system to such an extent that it too might break down."[3]

It is also worthwhile to mention that reactions to these changes frequently involve returning to certain forms of behavior or responses that were common in the past but have been later abandoned. By these reversions I do not mean the so-called "grand reversions," that is revolutions or deep ideological transformations. I rather wish to draw attention to "small-scale reversions." They are usually not simple repetitions. Embracing elements of discontinued traditions, they reflect subsequent changes and become socio-individual hobbies. My intention is to demonstrate some examples of this phenomenon in culture.

In this sense, my presentation supplements an article I published in 2012 under the title "Pragnienie powrotu, czyli zmęczenie *profanum*" ["The Desire to Return, or the Fatigue with the Profane"].[4] In this text I analyze the desire for some kind of return – a tendency present and expressed in the philosophical reflection of thinkers like Husserl or Freud. I have distinguished six qualities that make it possible to identify this desire in any theory. They include a dissatisfaction with the status quo and the desire to change it, the idealization of a certain unspecified period of time ("*in illo tempore*") and a sense of longing after it, the identification of means of effecting such return, and the conviction that this has been actually achieved.[5] I would like to supplement this list with two items. First, I wish to take into account views specific to the level of *doxa*. Everyday life experiences constitute our "natural lifestyle" and help form "natural interpersonal bonds," in turn shaping our "pre-understandings," to employ a term introduced by Gadamer. Second, I would like to acknowledge the existence of actual reversions in culture, not just instances of longing after them. These real "small-scale reversions" are rarely noted in episteme, or theoretical thinking. Moreover, these matters are not easily grasped in sociological studies, not only due to the mediation of certain methods – especially those of conducting surveys, which delve deep into a narrow scope determined in advance by researchers – but also because of the imprecision of reports. In this way, the object of study may become distorted.

The "reversions" that we observe in contemporary culture, which constitute my present object of analysis,[6] seem to have a different character than the ones that philosophical reflection might long after. This is also markedly different from the longing after some "origin" or "nonconditioned being" that would lend meaning to our empirical experiences.[7] Finally, it is something different than the longing after a certain "immemorial state" or a "condition of not desiring," which were posed as an ideal by Schelling.

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1) Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, 31–32.

2) Ibid.,18.

3) Ibid., 35.

4) Rosińska, "Pragnienie pworotu," 147–69.

5) Ibid., 150.

6) One of the anonymous reviewers for *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* posed the following question: "Do certain 'rituals' and 'reversals' that occur in everyday life express a conservative human desire typical of modernity or an anthropological invariable?" I think that it is rather "an anthropological invariable" and as such is typical for culture in general. However, for many reasons, it is more and more visible in modernity/late modernity.

7) Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, 56.

Do contemporary reversions constitute a different form of satisfying this longing, or do they express and meet some other need? Or some other longing perhaps? Answers to these questions do not come easy, among other reasons because specific cultural forms of behavior can be multifunctional and ambiguous. "Reversions" can express the desire for God, "a nonconditioned being," but they also may express a desire for continuity, "to see the world as constant," namely stable and unchanging. There are subtle differences between all of these terms and it seems almost impossible in this context to meet the methodological requirements laid down by Aristotle, who claimed that "a definition should not only point to the fact itself, as most definitions do, but also provide and elucidate what causes a given state." In order to explain why reversions take place as well as to clarify why they occur and why they need to occur it becomes paramount to refer to general concepts of humanity and culture, which seek such answers.

Let us recall that Kołakowski distinguishes two cores of culture: technological and mythological. The former is rational, scientistic, based on arguments, proofs and conclusions. "Science," Kołakowski writes, "is the extension of civilization's technological core."[8] The latter core gives voice to the desire for meaning and for the existence of forces and powers that would transcend human contingency, lending meaning to the empirical reality. These two cores of culture are also present and operate in every individual. Progress is conditioned by the activity of the technological core and has an imperialistic character. Myth, on the other hand, fulfils the longings and desires that extend beyond science. In this light, reversions could be seen as attempting to restitute myth, or to protest against the technological imperialism of progress.

An analogous line of argumentation can be found in works by Carl Gustav Jung and Mircea Eliade. Jung distinguishes two modes of thinking: directed thinking and fantasy-thinking. The former is linguistic, difficult, and exhausting, while the latter is spontaneous and effortless. Directed thinking tries to make an impact on the world, while fantasy-thinking turns away from external reality and looks inward. It is also unproductive. Today, as Jung argues, "directed thinking is science and the techniques fostered by it."[9]

Eliade adopted and transformed Jung's concept of archetypes, equipping humanity with a "primitive mentality." He argues that this kind of mentality is responsible for the longing after myth and the desire to return to it. This mindset would also make us perceive secularization and the degradation of holy images as a form of "latent mythology." Eliade identifies "the need that man constantly feels to 'realize' archetypes even down to the lowest and most 'impure' levels of his immediate existence" – a "longing for transcendent forms."[10]

Husserl did not long after myths, but was disillusioned with the current state of philosophy, its lost and confused rationalism, which has roots in the Enlightenment. Thus, he developed a method that would guarantee true knowledge, enabling to combine object and intention so as to ensure that "authentic truth is brought forth spiritually."

Freud does not long after myths, too. In fact, he deeply believed in scientific rationality. "The voice of intellect is a soft one," he famously noted, "but it does not rest until it has gained a hearing." However, Freud wished to extend this rationality to the individual psyche in order to foster self-consciousness. The psychoanalytic method was developed as a means of achieving this by way of revisiting early childhood, re-experiencing it and working through some of its aspects.

Stefan Morawski was certainly far from desiring to "restitute myth" or to achieve the "state of not desiring." Instead, he discussed the return to the "fundamental principles" that have been established in the long process of cultural development. In a polemic with Deleuze, who proclaimed the suicide of Ariadne and argued the

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8) Ibid., 1.

9) Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, 21.

10) Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 385.

labyrinth has no exit, Morawski notes that "Ariadne's thread seems indestructible though it remains an open question how to find it and what it might actually be."[11]

Let us now recall Walter Benjamin, who analyzed the consequences of technology encroaching on art. He desired to return to the motherland of aura, which cannot be copied and is lost in processes of technical reproduction in film or graphic design. The "photosensitive resurrection," or the filming of legends, myths, and religious stories would thus be a way of destroying them. What does Benjamin wish to return to? To an approach in which "hands would partake in creation." Accordingly, "relieving our hands" would entail resigning from contacts with objects, materiality, corporeality, and the kind of sensitivity that is deeply related to these dimensions."[12]

Habermas also does not long after reversions. Following in the footsteps of Max Weber, he believes that the project of modernity, specifically its Enlightenment model, can be still completed because it is the best possible project of emancipation, although it remains unfinished.

In philosophical thought, the difference between directly expressed and mediated longing for reversion would boil down not only to the difference between desire and action, but also to the fact that no action can be ever fully repeated. Any repetition is necessarily selective and involves some degree of transformation. The changes that occur in repetition are not the result of conscious and intentional decisions. They are rather the outcome of changeable cultural conditions and other existential experiences. We must then ask what is actually repeated and what determines fidelity to the repeated, "same" action if social and existential experiences have changed. What does this "same" thing consist of?

Reflection on reversions cannot focus only on the return movement but must take into account the values realized in the history of culture and the symbols it creates: the so-called "fundamental principles" invoked by Morawski. Would it mean that philosophical dreams and longings are meaningless? I would follow here the idea expressed by Roger Scruton, who argues that "the capacity to imaginatively engage with states of things that are only possible is one of the great gifts of culture."[13]

Whereas the longing for return could be regarded as conservative, the above difference would make it – at best – a soft or merely apparent conservatism. Such conservatism would strive to change that which is in order to achieve something that once was. This could be regarded differently were we to accept Scruton's definition of conservatism's essence as the "will to live." Then, the dialectical movement of change and return could be called conservative. "The desire to conserve," Scruton concludes, "is compatible with all manner of change, provided only that change is also continuity."[14]

These aspects are revealed in language, custom, psychiatry, and philosophical thought.

Language

In everyday language, the meaning of the word "cult" is expanded. Leaving its original, strictly religious context, it has been adopted to express economic and somatic experiences. Phrases like "cult of the body" or "cult of youth" are not only figures of speech but are also connected with certain "rites." "Are not beauty salons," Irena Borowik asks, "churches in which the rites of this cult are performed by way of smoothing wrinkles and liposuction, not to mention straightening noses or enlarging lips and busts, all of which radically change the 'created'

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11) Morawski, *Niewdzięczne rysowanie mapy,* 15.

12) Rosińska, "Pragnienie powrotu," 161.

13) Ibid., 27.

14) Scruton, *The Meaning of Conservatism,* 11.

person?"[15] The "cult of money" that gave birth to banks, which in turn support it, has engulfed the entire world. Instead of mass-books we carry debit cards, while great fashion houses call themselves "orders." Is it not an example of sacralizing the profane?

Custom

I was shocked when I saw hundreds of French people praying and crying in public after the fire of the Notre Dame Cathedral. Would it be the case that one of the most secularized cultures in Europe still feels the need to turn toward transcendent power? This is perhaps best captured by the proverb "When in fear, God is dear." It would seem that fear and human powerlessness in the face of existential struggles set off the desire to turn to "nonconditioned being."

I was also amazed to see a group of young, educated Americans from Massachusetts, who would sing carols during Christmas, going from door to door, or simply performing in the streets. Neighbors would wave cordially from balconies and terraces, sometimes even joining in. These were not only Christians but also Jews. Together they went to sing at an old people's home and it is impossible to forget the joy they brought into the lives of the sick and the lonely living there. When I asked them about this, they replied that they wished to revive an old custom practiced in the area. "We crave community, not profit," they said. We cannot know how long this cultural practice will last, whether it will become more popular or fall into oblivion, but it has to be mentioned in the present context of reflection on reversions. In this light, the disappearance of shared experiences and the desire for community could be treated as a "cause" of reversion.

Finally, there is an art movement in Poland which gathers performers of traditional music, often of religious origin, who play old instruments and sing in white voice. Their repertoire includes procession songs from various denominations, and church songs. The reversion to white singing expresses the need for continuity and conservation in vocal music. However, it is much more difficult to reach further back into history. This is sometimes practically impossible due to lack of continuity in certain traditions, mostly owing to the absence of musical scores. When it comes to Greek culture, for example, we can only reconstruct that which was written down or carved in stone.

Psychiatry

Humanistic psychiatry gives expression to a sense of being tired with progress. It also identifies attempts to reverse to persisting and widely accepted ways of experiencing one's existence in culture.

When we submit ourselves entirely to medicine, psychiatry, and psychology, we also need to discern the consequences of this decision. These include, as the psychiatrist Bogdan de Barbaro claims, "taking control over human behavior and giving up power to healthcare systems and pharmaceutical companies."[16] Naturally, this does not mean that we should refrain from using medical knowledge or refuse help from psychiatrists and psychologists. We simply cannot allow these practices to completely eliminate from our lives the cultural ways of experiencing and living. After all, they lend meaning to our sensations, empowering us and making us feel complete. During a conference devoted to the value of psychotherapy, a certain young man told me in a private conversation that he "would have to be mad to treat depression with long-term psychotherapy as long as taking a pill can help achieve the same result." However, would the result be really the same? The ease with which such

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15) Borowik, "Między 'upadkiem' religii a 'religijnym ożywieniem,'" 266.
16) de Barbaro, "Medykalizacja i psychiatryzacja życia codziennego."

judgments are made indicates complete oblivion to long-term effects in comparison to immediate ones. It is rarely the case that easy solutions prove to be lasting. This does not only concern the lengthy duration of therapeutic effects, but also the shaping of personality, developing our humanity, and achieving maturity, none of which are possible without effort and toil. People who have invested time and energy to understand their own disconcerting psychical experiences, and have achieved this result by exploring these issues and their potential sources, are much better equipped to deal with similar situations in the future. What does taking a pill prepare my young interlocutor for? At best for popping another one. I probably do not have to add that pharmacological manipulation of moods can be addictive and lead to tragedy.

Stanisław Pużyński, a psychiatrist, argues:

> Analysis of literature and developments in psychiatry during the last few centuries indicates that the diagnostic term "mental illness" may have played a positive role in expanding our knowledge on mental disorders and in supporting the position of psychiatry as a branch of clinical medicine, but with time it has become anachronistic because neither its contents nor its boundaries have been ever correctly determined. It began to be used to mask ignorance about the causes of mental disorders. It would be even abused for purposes incompatible with its original goals, specifically to label people whose behavior does not conform with conventions accepted in a given community. Sometimes, this term would even contribute to the social exclusion of these people.[17]

Philosophy

In philosophy, reversions occur through interpretations guided by specific intentions. Secularization is considered to be one of the symptoms of progress. "Secularization (and modernization) is understood as the emancipation of various areas of social life, including law, politics, economy, science, or culture from the influence of church and religion."[18] Religious accounts of the origin of the world and humanity have lost credibility. Science has become the guarantee of truth about reality and people. Attempts to reconcile these two competing approaches – actually made in both religion and science – have not turned into a widespread or even dominant trend. The tension between religion and science is still felt and forces people to make the choice on their own. According to psychologists, the cognitive dissonance created by this tension is difficult to resolve. In order to avoid it we have to make a decision. However, life does not fully submit itself to rationalization. Despite having made the decision, we can experience reversions that may even contradict our choice. Let us repeat, however, that these reversions are not exact re-enactments of what once was. They are in fact highly selective. Consciously or not, we return to only certain aspects of past experiences. In philosophical reflection we achieve this by renegotiating meanings and reinterpreting phenomena. Secularization thus ceases to mean only "emancipation from the influence of church and religion" and acquires positive senses. Secularism turns into a "positive and active world view, which is defined by a coherent code of values rather than by opposition to this or that religion."[19] These values are truth, compassion, equality, freedom, courage, and responsibility. Only selected values are retained from past experience, while others are ignored and fail to be incorporated into the present worldview, like the ones contained in the Decalogue, a moral codex that reflects experiences from the past. One consequence of this interpretation of secularism is the emergence of "hybrid identity," which means that

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17) Pużyński, "Choroba psychiczna."

18) Borowik, "Między 'upadkiem' religii a 'religijnym ożywieniem,'" 260.

19) Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, 399–400.

it is crucial to abide by the above norms but no religious identification is necessary. As a result, everyone can join the secular club, regardless whether they are Christian, Jewish, or Muslim.

Is it not the case that the theological turn in philosophy, or the process of adopting theological categories and subjecting them to philosophical reflection, mark a turn toward spirituality, a dimension that contemporary humanity had amputated? The philosophy of dialogue, which could be argued to have prepared philosophy for the theological turn (though this was not its intention,) would consider theological categories without encroaching on their metaphysical meaning. When Franz Rosenzweig takes up the topic of experiencing God, already at the outset of Part One of *The Star of Redemption*, he writes: "We are seeking God, as we shall later seek the world and man, not as one concept among others, but for itself, dependent upon itself alone, in its absolute factuality … that is, in its 'positivity'."[20] Similarly, when Emmanuel Lévinas analyzes the category of "infinity" he also focuses on its metaphysical dimension. "The idea of infinity hence does not proceed from the I, nor from a need in the I gauging exactly its own voids; here the movement proceeds from what is thought and not from the thinker… The idea of Infinity *is revealed*, in the strong sense of the term… Infinity … is the desirable, that which arouses Desire, that is, that which is approachable by a thought that at each instant *thinks more than it thinks*."[21]

When Józef Tischner set out to find the essence of evil he resigned from grasping it ontologically, but would not relinquish its transcendental character. He argues:

> Evil is neither a being nor a non-being. Evil is a phenomenon, or more precisely a phantom that startles and teases. We can include evil in the general category of phenomena. This does not mean that we underestimate it. It is not crucial how evil exists but what it wants. By saying that it is a phantom we do not really push things forward much. We in fact still stand with one foot firmly planted in ontology. In order to grasp its essence, however, we need to abandon ontology, regardless of the paradoxes that arise from this. Our key claim is as follows: evil is beyond being and non-being – it is transcendental in the radical sense.[22]

None of the above authors who represent the philosophy of dialogue speak of reversions. This is because none of them really depart from religion and theology. They practice philosophy over and above any religious categories.

Developing the concept of anatheism entails returning to the sacred, to God and holiness. Participants in the dialogue that has established anatheism include well-known philosophers: Charles Taylor, Julia Kristeva, Gianni Vatimo, Jean-Luc Marion, and John Caputo. Richard Kearney published a book titled *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, in which he explicitly addresses the question of return. Not only does he return to God after "God's death," but also revisits dialogical practices in philosophy after the discipline's period of lone monotheism. Kearney asks: "What is still sacred after the death of God? What can we continue to call holy after the disappearance of the Alpha God of triumphal might and metaphysical certitude? Might anatheism open an alternate way of dialogue beyond the sterile polarization of theism and atheism?"[23]

Jean-Luc Marion also discusses the return to God: "What interests me is how anatheism may help us define the current situation of passing from the death of God to the death of death of God. We are no longer

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20) Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 31.

21) Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 61–62.

22) Tischner, *Filozofia dramatu*, 219.

23) Kearney, *Reimagining the Sacred*, viii.

in an atheist society but a post-atheist one. And here we can talk of the double sense of the ana- of anatheism. Namely, as both a non-theism and as a return to something beyond atheism and theism. I would speak of '*la remontee a l'anatheime.*'"[24]

The question of revived faith is also addressed by Charles Taylor:

I think the "believing *again*" idea is crucial for our age.… There are many people who still believe that the religious tradition they want to belong to has remained forever what it is, as it has been handed down to them, and they feel they have to defend it at all costs, in every aspect and angle, in order to remain true to it. And there are, happily, a growing number of believers who understand their itinerary differently – namely, as a journey they are returning to out of provisional or early alienation, and in which they are rediscovering a new wealth of possible itineraries that can lead to where they are hoping to go. You can start from the number of different paths in order to arrive at you goal.[25]

Conclusion

The question of reversions in culture certainly demands broader discussion. I have been also intrigued by the opinion expressed on this subject by Grzegorz Czemiel. He argues:

It seems true that there has been some resistance to what we might call the "fruits of progress." Examples of this demonstrate conflicting tendencies. We observe the resurfacing of nationalism and xenophobia despite the fact that the world has become smaller and we have many occasions to come into contact with representatives of other ethnicities and nationalities. We have unlimited access to information and yet we are easily manipulated and fail to verify sources. We are aware of potential risks and yet anti-vaccination theories proliferate. On the other hand, more and more people choose bicycles over cars, make the effort to recycle and sort waste, as well as refrain from eating meat, or at least limits its consumption. I would argue that these examples show that we are experiencing a crisis of belief in progress, though this can manifest in different ways. It seems that we are at a loss as to where we should place our trust. We lack coordinates that would help us orient ourselves. Science has lost some of its credibility because it has been harnessed to generate profits, which makes some people view some of its claims as a hoax. The world has been disenchanted and no longer fits in historical narratives. However, there is also a strong desire to replace these old narratives with new ones. Thus, we create modern mythologies and new theories of everything, which easily lapse into so-called conspiracy theories. To sum up, what comes to the fore today is a deep disorientation and ambivalence toward the benefits of modern civilization, or rather toward the ways in which these benefits are introduced to people, as is the case with consumerism. In other words, I would interpret the above examples as symptoms of crisis, regardless whether I agree with any of the assumptions behind them.[26]

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24) Ibid., 177.

25) Ibid., 87.

26) Gregorz Czemiel, e-mail to author, 20 May, 2019.

"The world has been disenchanted" and "we lack coordinates that would help us orient ourselves" – these would be "symptoms of crisis." I prefer to tone down this claim. "Fatigue with progress" is not as strong a position as that of "utter loss of faith in progress." We do not wish to relinquish progress. We still believe in it, but desire to weaken its imperialistic power, which aims to take possession of our lives. We would like to have a rest from progress by restituting that which has always been present in culture but began to disappear. The question that arises from this is whether such reversions are always positive and which might have a degrading effect.

translated by Grzegorz Czemiel

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