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## Perspectives on Emancipation Hermeneutic and Aesthetic Investigations

Edited by Saša Hrnjez and Søren Tinning



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## Introduction

SAŠA HRNJEZ, SØREN TINNING

What does “emancipation” mean today? A hermeneutical approach to this question tries above all to investigate the significance of emancipation in relation to human praxis. Yet, in order to answer this question another question arises: “emancipation from what?”. Generally speaking emancipation implies an oppressive or restraining structure, a system of unjustified constraints from which we have to free ourselves. With Enlightenment, emancipation emerges on the theoretical horizon first and foremost as the idea of liberation — through Reason — from the old structures of power based on dogmatic faith. But if contemporary hermeneutics, primarily with Gadamer, wants to face critically and in the last instance detach itself from the tradition of Enlightenment, what then remains from its emancipatory project? Is it to be abandoned, to be reduced, or rather to be transformed and concretized according to the new conditions set by history? Other attempts, such as Habermas’, have tried to keep the emancipatory project of Enlightenment alive by reaffirming the force of the self-reflexion of the subject and postulate the ideal of the communicative community. Furthermore, the emancipatory movement, besides counteracting the violence of the *status quo*, usually implies a direction toward some future horizon of freedom, some sort of purposiveness or teleological project of an “emancipated state”. If emancipatory praxis contains the utopian horizon of the overcoming or the abolition of the actual state of things, as it is the case in Marxist thought, how can hermeneutics contribute in order to better define this utopian “beyond” towards which emancipation aims?

Moreover, is the infinite and non-conclusive process of interpretation by definition an act of emancipation? One possible answer is to think emancipation together with nihilism as the dissolution of foundations and the abandonment of every objective and metaphysical order of truth (Vattimo). Can we say, rephrasing the evangelic message, “Interpretation will set you free”? What would be a postmodern perspective on emancipation? How to think emancipation: as a linear process of progress or rather as an event, a discontinuity — the creation of something new or the rearticulation of what already exists?

Another interesting question to reflect upon is whether the emancipation of sense from the violence of Truth in the last instance leads to the

emancipation from sense itself. All these questions taken together are trying to outline the space of emancipation in the epoch defined sometimes as “post-emancipative”: if we do no longer live in the age of emancipation (Laclau), or, at least, if emancipation has become fragmented in a plurality of different emancipations, could we still project a common horizon of emancipatory engagement?

In this volume, we have not wanted to limit the range of possible answers of these questions to hermeneutics alone. An important contribution to the “space of emancipation” is found in the arts and contemporary aesthetic reflection as well. From Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* to Rancière’s “emancipated spectator”, only to mention a few examples, we find a vast variety of studies and practices, which intend to open new perspectives of emancipation through different aesthetic experiences.

Since capitalist societies today prompt the rethinking of emancipatory practices, this volume sets the task to examine the topic of emancipation through a dialogue between different hermeneutical and aesthetic inquiries, while also opening for broader philosophical discussions of the main question here: “what does it mean for us to emancipate ourselves today?”

Rasmus Dyring’s article, *A Spectacle of Disappearance: On the Aesthetics and Anthropology of Emancipation* makes a historical outline of the anthropological core in the concept of emancipation, before he confronts the results of this outline with a phenomenological analysis of the self-immolation by Mohamed Bouazizi that set off the recent Tunisian revolution. In the contrast between a traditional understanding of the human being as the ground of emancipation by either *possessing* and *producing* it, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as a primarily *responsive* being; Dyring sheds new light both on the concept of emancipation and the concept of freedom.

In his article, *Interpretation and Social Transformation: On the Function of the Philosophical Profession* (in Italian), Giacomo Pezzano discusses the function of the philosophical education and the role that philosophical hermeneutics can play in the emancipatory education of subjects. His article compares three different positions (analytical, Marxist and hermeneutical) as three different paradigms of the philosophical relation between world and subjects. According to Pezzano, the emancipatory project lies in the critical renewal of the social character of philosophy and it is in this sense that hermeneutics, as education for the care of subjects, finds its transformational capacity in the interpretative resemantization of the subject’s self-reflexion. As conclusion, the author proposes a kind of reciprocal convergence between hermeneutics and pedagogy.

In his contribution, *Nostalgic Freilassen: Emancipation beyond Empowerment*, Nicolai Krejberg Knudsen takes up the question of emancipation in

relation to Heidegger's concepts of nostalgia and attunement. Knudsen here argues that since nostalgia in Heidegger is a kind of attunement, it should not be understood as a willful, metaphysical longing for the full presence of Being, but as a world-disclosing mode of experience. The consequence of this argument is that nostalgic attunement should not be conceived as a reactionary current in Heidegger's thought as e.g. Vattimo and Caputo suggest, but as a gesture that has a fundamental emancipatory potential.

The article written by Ilaria Nidasio, "*Free From*": *Hans-Georg Gadamer and the Hermeneutic Way toward a Constructive Emancipation* (in Italian) investigates emancipation in terms of dialogical rationality in the context of contemporary pluralism. Hermeneutics, as it is shaped in Gadamer's thought, is seen as a kind of third way between metaphysics and relativism, which tries to emancipate human existence from the violence of absolute claims. According to the author, hermeneutical rationality manifests itself as an ethical search for a peaceful coexistence with Others. In this sense, she argues, the emancipatory project offered by hermeneutics is constructive and important for the dialogue between religions and cultures.

Graziella Travaglini's article, *Paul Ricoeur: The Reception of the Concept of Catharsis Between Ethics and Aesthetics* (in Italian), examines how Ricoeur develops the Aristotelian concept of *catharsis* as a key for opening a horizon of experience emancipated from technical-instrumental interests. In this horizon of experience, the sensitive moment becomes constitutive of a model of rationality, the principles of which belong to *praxis* rather than to *theoria*. *Catharsis* is, accordingly, interpreted as a central concept for understanding both the ontological and the ethical-practical values that Ricoeur attributes to the experience of art. In the indomitable tension between temporal contingency and narrative structure, the imagination finds the basis to redefine and renovate the world of *praxis*.

Yvonne Hütter's contribution *Emancipation from Rationality — Richard Rorty's Attempt to Enlighten the Enlightenment from the Spirit of Romantic Hermeneutics* indicates an emancipatory horizon, which goes beyond the Enlightenment rationality that operates in dichotomies and under the domination of representational discoursiveness. Arguing this, the article shows the connection between Rorty's thought and the Romantic tradition: what ties Rorty to the Romantic authors (first of all with Schlegel) is a non-foundationalist elimination of dichotomies. Hütter points out that "the aesthetical revolution" of the Romantics, aiming at the new use of language beyond dualist discourse, coincides with Rorty's ideas, since both have the idea of emancipation from dichotomously separated subjectivity and objectivity in common. Furthermore, Rorty's strategy offers an important shift: to break with dichotomies but using the same language of dualists and continuing with traditional modes of writing.

In her article on *The Problems with an Emancipatory Theory Based on an Aesthetics of Existence*, Linda Schaumann analyses Foucault's works bringing forward his appreciation of neoliberalism as an emancipatory stance. A decision-making subject who becomes the entrepreneur of him/herself (maximizer of profit and strategist on his/her own) is at the core of neoliberal anthropology. According to the author, it is exactly this point that motivates Foucault's appreciation. By assuming a critical approach, she concludes that in an asymmetrical power relationship, the subject's autonomy turns out to be only the fulfillment of the will of more powerful agents; in fact, the neoliberal strategy of maintaining individual freedom reproduces the truth of more privileged agents.

In the article, *Reappropriating Sovereignty — A Critique of Giorgio Agamben's Abandonment of Sovereignty*, Nicolai von Eggers traces the concept of sovereignty back to Pindar and Aristotle in order to develop an alternative to Agamben's understanding of this concept. Von Eggers shows how sovereignty in Aristotle entails both political and democratic elements — elements that Agamben has claimed to be essentially missing from the logic of sovereignty. On this basis, von Eggers criticizes Giorgio Agamben's conception of sovereignty for being too legalistic and apolitical and thereby incapable of identifying its political and emancipatory potential. He illustrates this by asserting the need to reappropriate the political legacy of the French Revolution rather than abandon it, as Agamben argues.

In outline, the two first articles introduce two comprehensive perspectives on emancipation, the next three develop three classical hermeneutical positions on this theme (Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur), while the last three takes up emancipation within more recent and broad perspectives (Rorty, Foucault, Agamben). More specifically, this volume investigates a wide variety of hermeneutical and aesthetical perspectives on the concept of emancipation. Taking the lead from central hermeneutical concepts such as plurality, praxis, non-foundational rationality, history, and the Other, the contributions engage with many different philosophical disciplines (metaphysics, ontology, ethics, history of philosophy, political philosophy, pedagogy) as well as philosophical currents (e.g. phenomenology, Marxism, German Idealism, pragmatism, existentialism, analytical philosophy, Romanticism, and antique philosophy). Throughout these many approaches, the concept of emancipation comes forward as a central issue that highlights the philosophical relevance and potential of hermeneutics and aesthetics as important contributors to how we are to conceive of emancipation in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.