

PROVINCIALISM IN PHILOSOPHY

Opening talk given at IIP meeting, Helsinki 28 August 2019

The International Institute of Philosophy was created in 1937, at a time when there were not so many philosophy journals, when English was not yet the vehicular language, when travelling to conferences was rare, and when there were not many of these. Papers were not circulated or, if so, using carbon copies, and the main model for collective research was the university seminar, usually ran by a single Professor or chair. There was no internet, no electronic journals, no e-mail, no *Facebook* friends or foes, and one crossed the Atlantic by boat, not by plane, not to mention the time it took for travel to China. The IIP was meant to be an instrument of “intellectual cooperation,” bringing philosophers of all countries together, in the hope of overcoming the obstacles created by differing traditions, institutional differences and the diversity of languages. Things have changed¹. English is the vehicular language, nearly all journals have electronic versions, and everyone, at least in the academic world, has access to internet and to e-mail. If one of our colleagues writes an article, the whole learned world (or almost whole, since there are a lot of blind spots) has the possibility to read it. Bibliographies, journals, books, encyclopedias, are all on-line. In many ways the differences between traditions are narrowing, at least geographically. A lot more analytic philosophy is done in China, in Korea, India and Japan, than even 20 years ago, and a lot more of Confucian or Buddhist philosophy is published in the US and elsewhere. Hermeneutics is no longer a German and French specialty. Many laugh at the idea that there could be a divide between analytic and continental philosophy: as John Searle once said, the difference is like the one between driving a Toyota or a Volvo: who cares (especially since Volvo cars are made in Japan)? Philosophy has become international. Or so it seems, when we see things on the bright side. So why is there any need to have an International Institute of Philosophy?

I think we still need it, because in spite of all the progress made since 1937, philosophy is still very provincial. By “provincial” I mean that local and national differences between academic institutions, intellectual traditions, styles of work and intellectual habits, readership of works categorized as “philosophy,” varieties of publics, and even access to common resources count more than the so-called global village to which we all belong. These differences persist even though standards of academic work tend to coalesce, and information and international circulation of ideas is widespread². Only very large and wealthy departments

¹ See Agazzi, Evandro. 2003. *A Short History of the International Federation of Philosophical Societies (FISP)*. Ankara: FISP/Philosophical Society of Turkey.

² In many ways the International Institute of philosophy was created not to overcome this provincialism, but to connect the various provincial traditions. This was what Raymond Klibansky did, in then fifties and sixties, to inform on what philosophers all over the world were doing in their own countries. See Klibansky, 1968. *Contemporary Philosophy*, 4 vols. Florence: La Nuova Italia; Raymond Klibansky and David Pears. 1993. *La philosophie en Europe*. Paris : Gallimard.

of philosophy at prominent universities can afford to recruit graduates or tenure track young colleagues coming from abroad. In others, except in Germany, where *Hausberufung* is not allowed, most people are recruited from the inside. Circulation of academics is encouraged, and there are many more people today than 50 years ago who pursue their career in other countries than the one where they were born and educated, but it is still the case that graduates tend to be recruited in the place where they did their Ph.D. Simply look at the faculty lists in Europe, US, Asia, and you will see that apart from some dedicated and eminent places which are very international, universities in most countries recruit people from their own natives. A famous “Gourmet report” purports to rank the departments of philosophy in the US, and provides some ranking for the English speaking world, but totally ignores non-English speaking countries, as though they did not exist or have a merely Meinongian status within the realm of academic entities. Recent statistics show that even within analytic philosophy, which is supposed to be the most internationalized and the most open to all style of philosophy, journal articles quote massively a very small number of authors, most of whom are from the US.³ Indeed, the prevalence of English has created a system where if one does not write in English, one is simply ignored⁴. Philosophical production in other languages tends to be isolated, and translations into English are rare. Even articles published in English in journals based in non Anglo-American countries have little chance to make it to a wider public. The differences are not only nation-wide, they can also be large within countries and within traditions. Imagine for one moment that after a big earthquake Oxford and Cambridge in England switched their respective places, all philosophers from one place being transferred to the other. Would Oxford philosophers do Cambridgian philosophy? No. In Sweden Stockholm and Lund do not practice the same kind of philosophy, and differences are important between the kind of philosophy practiced in Rome and in Naples, or between Bologna and Catania. The same is true about Canberra and Sydney, and about Shanghai and Beijing. The language barrier plays a great role: for instance there is a world of differences between the style of philosophy done in the Portuguese speaking Brazil and in the Spanish speaking countries in South America. The kind of philosophy done in one place is still shaped by local traditions, by particular individuals who teach there and are able to attract students. These differences create chauvinism and chilliness among teachers and students, not only because moving to other places is hard and because the level of salaries and scholarships does not allow much. Even in such a globalized world as ours, the geography of philosophy counts as much as its history.

To this it might be replied that the more a place is open to foreign students, who finally turn into colleagues, the more there is international activity and the more exchanges there are within a continent and between continents, the less these effects of provincialism are perceptible. And indeed this is true of much philosophy today, in most places. But the differences remain strong. The main question is: is this provincialism a bad thing? Not at all. We should here distinguish two things: *provincialism* and *parochialism*. Provincialism

³ Moreover, the bibliometric system encourages graduates and young researchers to cite only respected or popular figures, in order to be able to receive more citations. This encourages intellectual parochialism.

⁴ An example of this is the ERC evaluation system that requires applicants to write in English and especially to try to speak exactly the language and conform to the frame of mind of the evaluators, who themselves represent the most uniform mainstream.

implies the existence of a center and a periphery. One can be provincial without ignoring what happens on Broadway. Parochialism, by contrast, implies *ignorance* of what happens elsewhere, outside one's village (although the village can be a large one⁵). Philosophy is not, at least not in all its quarters, a science. It is rooted in culture and in traditions. Being provincial does not preclude originality, nor does it entail ignorance of what happens elsewhere. Australian philosophy is a typical case. It is located strongly within the Anglo-American tradition, and has produced great philosophers within the analytic tradition, but it has kept its own style. Or take Swiss philosophy. It has indeed strong links with German and French philosophies respectively, but it has a distinctive style. The same holds for French Canadian and English Canadian philosophy. The differences might not be visible from outside, but anyone who has got to know these philosophies a little bit sees different ways of handling issues, which are due to the differences in religious traditions and in public life. Is it a bad thing? Only when the differences lead philosophers to be locked down in their traditions.

The fact that large sectors of philosophical research today are dominated by English, by certain schools of thought and styles of work is overall a good thing. I agree here with those who say that it also promotes linguistic justice.⁶ It allows easier communication and transfer of ideas. For instance, analytic philosophy would never have developed in Europe if its practitioners had not used English as their working language. But this domination has also perverse effects, which I am not afraid of calling forms of cultural neo-colonialism.

Analytic philosophy does not like provinces. Everyone aspires to Broadway, or at least to the neighboring streets. In practice this leads to a domination of North American philosophy, and within it of the strongest departments (the Gourmet reports are supposed to precisely inform you on which they are). It would not matter so much if philosophers from the US cared to learn at least one other language than English. But apart from Kant or Hegel scholars, or Descartes and Spinoza scholars, who today know their German, their French and their Latin (it has not always been the case), most analytic philosophers read only English, and know very little or no history of philosophy⁷. Combined with the desire of philosophers outside the US to play the Only Game in Town, this creates a *de facto* monopoly. It also creates strange situations within Europe. For instance, in a number of European departments of philosophy at big universities today, a number of programs host a certain number of students from other countries. They work in seminars, conferences, and lectures with the "locals" (those who studied in their native language and still use it), but they do not mix with those who do not teach in English, and it may happen that some Ph.D. students spend several

⁵ An interesting example of this was noted by A.C Ewing : " When I reviewed the ethical literature published in 1937 and 1938 in order to write a manual for the *Institut international de cooperation intellectuelle* [the first name of the *Institut international de philosophie*], I found that on the continent of Europe naturalist or subjectivist ethics was indeed the exception", and mentions that philosophers on the Continent take value realism for granted. This reminds us of the famous headline on a British newspaper: " Fog on the Channel: the Continent isolated".

⁶ Philippe Van Parijs , *Linguistic justice*, Oxford 2011

⁷ As Ricardo Pozzo reminds me, unfortunately, current Kant literature is divided into (1) papers and books that quote only English translations and English studies and (2) papers and books that can analyze the German original and know other literature than English titles. This is becoming a big problem.

years in a place without having ever spoken a single sentence in the local language. In some cases, this creates a situation which can be compared, at the level of academic departments, to the one that existed in the colonial times, when the British did not socialize with the locals in India, or the French with the locals in Africa⁸. We cannot change this by magic, and English is both a tool of domination and a tool of liberation in philosophy⁹.

In such a context, is there still a need, as in 1937, of an International institute of philosophy? On the one hand, cosmopolitanism is a good thing, even, I would say, a matter of principle in philosophy. Ideally it would be good to come back to Latin¹⁰. Philosophy has to be international, and parochialism entails its decay. On the other hand, provincialism is both unavoidable and a good thing. One works from within a tradition, and traditions like phenomenology and analytic philosophy do not escape this fate. Similarly for Confucian philosophy, or Catholic philosophy. But if there is no discussion, enrichment, transfer from one tradition to another, the tradition becomes a set of paradigms and prisons. So the role of an International institute of philosophy is to serve as a go-between among traditions. It is certainly not the only institution that aspires to playing this role, and today its means are very reduced and feeble. But it should at least firmly keep this ideal¹¹.

Pascal Engel

⁸ There is a double side of this. Although many see it as a tool of colonial domination, francophonie in Africa, has also been a tool of development. See Bachir Diagne's work on these issues.

⁹ Arianna Betti has suggested that time has come for data-driven history of philosophy. See Betti, Arianna, and Hein van den Berg, Yvette Ortwijn, Caspar Treijtel. 2019. "History of Philosophy in Ones and Zeros." In *Methodological Advances in Experimental Philosophy*, ed. Eugen Fischer and Mark Curtis, 295-332. London: Bloomsbury

¹⁰ One can indeed think of Latin in medieval Europe, as Julien Benda remarked in his *Discours à la nation européenne*, Gallimard, 1933. Though Latin had one advantage in comparison with English: it was a foreign language for all the scholars.

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