

Über Diderot und riskantes Denken

Provokative Fragen stellen statt Lösungen präsentieren: Die Aufgabe der Geisteswissenschaften der Zukunft besteht darin, die Komplexität von Problemen sichtbar zu machen, so eine der Thesen von Stanford-Professor Hans Ulrich «Sepp» Gumbrecht bei seinem Besuch in Luzern.

■ INTERVIEW: CHRISTINE ABBT

In seinem am 7. Juni gehaltenen Vortrag «Prosa der Welt. Warum Hegel von Diderot irritiert (und fasziniert) war», rückte Prof. Dr. Sepp Gumbrecht die Frage nach den Zeichen der Zeit und den in diesem Kontext verbleibenden Zukunftsperspektiven in den Fokus. Denis Diderot, so zeigte der international renommierte Romanist, Kulturtheoretiker und Literaturwissenschaftler auf, bietet mit seinen Auffassungen von Aufklärung einen wichtigen Referenzpunkt für heutige Fragen. Diderots Umgang mit Kontingenz und Unwägbarkeit, seine Aufwertung der Bedeutung von Materialität und Sinnlichkeit sowie der differenziert formulierte Imperativ, Gespräche nicht nur zu fordern, sondern diese zu führen, kommen heute hohe Aktualität zu.

Gumbrecht, der auf Einladung der Förderprofessur für Philosophie an der Universität Luzern war, ging in seinem Vortrag ebenfalls auf die zentrale gesellschaftliche Aufgabe ein, welche Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften angesichts eines neuen Zeitempfindens im Kontext der Digitalisierung aller Lebensbereiche seines Erachtens übernehmen: die Komplexität von Problemen in aller Schärfe und differenziert kenntlich zu machen. Voraussetzung dafür ist eine Form von «riskantem Denken». Es handelt sich dabei um ein Denken, welches aktiv angestrebt und geübt werden muss. Es fokussiert nicht in erster Linie die Lösung eines Problems, sondern die Erkennung des Problems und hält den Herausforderungen komplexer Sachlagen stand.

Sepp Gumbrecht, inwiefern ist Diderot ein aussergewöhnlicher «Aufklärer»?

Sepp Gumbrecht: It is my impression that he is much less «goal-driven» than, for example, Kant or Lessing. Despite his commitment to occasional «political» causes and some concepts, I do not see a practical point of convergence in Diderot's activity as a writer and as a participant in many lively and important decisions in eighteenth-century France. What perhaps most characterizes him is an enormous «world-openness», a capacity (and sometimes a problem) to be interested in absolutely everything – which of course also meant that it could be «derailed» by absolutely everything. Another way of describing this intellectual style is to say that it is between difficult and impossible to identify works that are really «central» in Diderot's production. Nor can we establish a clear-cut distinction between his «literary» and his more systematic «philosophical» writing. But I often imagine that it must have been fascinating – and even energizing – to be engaged in an intellectual exchange with Diderot.

Neben Diderot thematisieren Sie in Ihrem kommenden Buch «Prosa der Welt» auch Goya, Lichtenberg und Mozart. Warum diese Auswahl?

One could certainly do the thought experiment of asking whether there was a similarity between Diderot's intellectual style and that of Goya and of Lichtenberg – now that you're saying/asking it, I may perhaps end up doing so in my book. From an epistemological perspective, however, there seems to be something like a «common denominator». My four «protagonists» are thinkers and artists of the eighteenth century who, I believe, cannot easily be subsumed under the concept of «Enlightenment» – although we normally use this concept as synonymous to «Eighteenth Century». To go back to what I call the «Historical worldview», there are mainly two differences (shall I say «absences»?) that my four protagonists share: none of them regarded time, as the historical worldview suggests, as a «necessary agent of regular change», which also means that none of them believed in the dimension of «historical necessity». At the same time, none of them participates in the distancing from the experience and the reflection of the «material world», as it became increasingly conventional since the philosophical moment of Descartes.

Vermochten diese Personen, «riskant» zu denken?

By «riskful thinking» I refer to an intellectual style that I consider to be the specific potential / possibility of the Humanities and Arts. «Riskful» is a thinking that we should not and mostly cannot practice under everyday circumstances because, in the everyday context, it might have highly problematic consequences. In the so-called «ivory tower» of the Humanities and Arts however, we can practice riskful thinking and use it for an ongoing complexification of our worldview because, in this context we are set at a distance from the everyday world. In their individual ways, my four protagonists were probably practitioners of «riskful thinking» («avant la lettre»); especially Diderot's already-mentioned «world-openness» seems to have an affinity with this intellectual style.

Warum fällt dem sogenannten «homo digitalis» das riskante Denken zunehmend schwerer?

Perhaps I disagree with the premise of this question, for I do not necessarily assume that «digital natives» are less likely to practice riskful thinking than thinkers of the past. On the contrary, we might perhaps say that the remoteness and isolation of many electronic forms of communication from the everyday



Sepp Gumbrecht: Ein Forscher, der sich regelmässig und mit Leidenschaft in aktuelle Debatten einmischt oder selbst solche lanciert. (Bild: Reto Klar)

world includes a potential and a positive challenge for riskful thinking. What concerns me about it, rather, is a centrifugality of thinking under electronic conditions. A figure of nightmare for me is the intellectual who, in writing his «blog», for example, assumes or presupposes that he can potentially reach «all of humankind» – while in reality (s)he does not reach a single human being.

Welche Aufgaben kommen den Geisteswissenschaften und Kulturwissenschaften im 21. Jahrhundert zu?

Whenever I receive this question, I insist that, at least from my point of view, the institutional survival of the Humanities and Arts beyond the next two or three decades does not seem to be fully guaranteed to me (after all, they are a luxury product of Western societies for which, let's face it, there is no claim of «necessity» to debate as we could make it for medicine or the legal profession). This said, I believe that the Humanities improve their chances of survival if they abandon their old (and today sometimes ridiculous) self-image of having to provide «orientation for society». Rather than answering connective connections and providing solutions, I believe, as I already said, that the Humanities and Arts are at their best when they produce new, provocative questions, and when they make our world both more complex and more complicated than its «official» institutionalized versions.

Welche Rolle hat die Kreativität im Umgang mit der immer komplexer werdenden Welt?

This very much depends on what you mean by «Creativity» – a concept, I'm sorry to say, that I normally try to avoid (perhaps because it is so grotesquely overused in California, where I am living). So let me make a remark about a recent change in the meaning of «Creativity». The person and the face of the twentieth century that we most associated with «Creativity» was, without any doubt, the face of Albert Einstein. Einstein as the man and the mind, who, in observing the world as a scientist, had this absolutely «breakthrough» and «insight» toward truth. Sometimes, I feel that this almost «melodramatic» version of «Creativity» is vanishing today. The most creative mind for our present may well have been Steve Jobs – who did not invent anything «breathhtakingly new» but changed our relationship to the things of the world (think of the iPhone, which quite literally allows one to «have the full world in your hand»). So, «Creativity» (and even «Genius») may rather be the result of variations and tentative approaches than of «epiphanic» insights and breakthroughs.

Diderot war (wie auch schon Sokrates) der Überzeugung, dass es so viele Sichtweisen wie Menschen gibt. Entscheidend dabei ist, dass sich diese vielfältigen Perspektiven alle auf eine Welt beziehen und innerhalb eines Universums zustande kommen. Stimmen Sie dem zu?

I've never thought about Diderot in this exact way – but this makes me appreciate your perspective all the more. Yes, indeed, Diderot seems to have taken for granted the impossibility to reduce our views of the world to just «one» perspective that this plurality and pluralization of observers goes along, especially when Diderot talks about «materiality», by a strong (implicit) insistence on the world as a referent to which we can refer. I can personally (and we, historically) have certainly more doubts than Diderot had about the existence (and, above all, the availability) of «the world as a referent». But if we do not assume that such a «referent» exists, all our intellectual activities end up being gestures of self-undermining.

Voranzeige: Als Kooperationspartner des SNF-Projekts von Prof. Dr. Christine Abbt, ««Fremd- und Vieltun». Über die Verwirklichung demokratischer Freiheit in Formen des Nicht-Identischen», wird Sepp Gumbrecht im Dezember 2017 wiederum zu Gast in Luzern sein. Mehr Informationen zu gegebener Zeit unter www.unilu.ch/phlsem > Veranstaltungen

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