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Experience of Multiplicity, Multiplicity's Experience. From a Critical Genealogy of Homo Economicus to a Contemporary Machine Phenomenology

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Abstract:

In *Experience. New Foundations for the Human Sciences*, sociologist Scott Lash addresses the human sciences in general. He proposes a new perspective on the methodological status of experience. His book covers a vast array of fields and topics: rooted in sociology and cultural studies, Lash takes his readers on a profound, sometimes swift journey from Greek antiquity to the *Methodenstreit* in 19th century sociology, from Kant's transcendentalism to Arendt's political thought and from the rise of cybernetics to Chinese art and aesthetics – always focussed on the historical conditions, role, and function of experience. Lash's aim is twofold: firstly he is presenting a critique of the *homo economicus*, the currently dominant ideology of the Western world, by a genealogy of objective experience and formalism in the social sciences and economics. Secondly, he develops, with Aristotle, Hannah Arendt, William James but also Chinese thought, a perspective on subjective experience suitable for our present.

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Lash, Scott: *Experience*. New Foundations for the Human Sciences, Cambridge (UK): Polity 2018. 200 pages, 25 USD. ISBN: 978-0-745-69518-1.

Abstract:

In *Experience. New Foundations for the Human Sciences*, sociologist Scott Lash addresses the human sciences in general. He proposes a new perspective on the methodological status of experience. His book covers a vast array of fields and topics: rooted in sociology and cultural studies, Lash takes his readers on a profound, sometimes swift journey from Greek antiquity to the *Methodenstreit* in 19th century sociology, from Kant's transcendentalism to Arendt's political thought and from the rise of cybernetics to Chinese art and aesthetics – always focussed on the historical conditions, role, and function of experience. Lash's aim is twofold: firstly he is presenting a critique of the *homo economicus*, the currently dominant ideology of the Western world, by a genealogy of objective experience and formalism in the social sciences and economics. Secondly, he develops, with Aristotle, Hannah Arendt, William James but also Chinese thought, a perspective on subjective experience suitable for our present.

Scott Lash is one of the leading scholars in the social sciences. With Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens he developed the reflexive modernization theorem; with John Urry and *The End of Organised Capitalism* he gained attention in the field of cultural geography. His latest book *Experience* is the result of decades of research: Its topic is one of the most crucial, most shimmering concepts in the history of philosophy. Lash goes back to Antiquity, gives an analysis of our present, and strives beyond the margins of Western intellectual history. His book is critique and progressive perspective, genealogy and new foundation.

Explicitly, it attacks the ideology of *homo economicus* and its foundation in positivism and in formalist, a priori thinking. The roots of this mode of thinking Lash traces back to Kant, whose transcendental

philosophy prioritises objective experience: in the construction of the universal subject, experience is conceptualized “on the lines of the objective observer in Newtonian physics” (9). The Kantian subject still serves as the basis for modern positivism and neoclassical and neoliberal economics. Referring to them, Lash claims: “They do not start from experience – they start instead with axioms like utility-maximizing social and economic actors – but then synthesize with the empirical and experience” (10). To deepen this thought, Lash constructs the pair of form vs. substance as a scheme for analyzing a history and prehistory of social sciences from Plato to the 21st century. Experience, still, remains the focal point of his endeavour. With the role of rationalization in Max Weber and with Karl Polanyi’s substantivism, particularly Polanyi’s notion of embeddedness, Lash’s schema realizes its full potential. “If formalism is ‘epistemological’ and reduces or negates experience, then substantivism is very much ontological and a question of experience” (21).

Besides this critical genealogy, Lash renders an alternative notion of experience to cope with machine-mediated technological experience in “a technological age” (124). This line of argument also sets out with Kant, albeit with Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* and with aesthetic experience, referring to William James’ radical empiricism and then building on Hanna Arendt’s political thought. “Arendt, it seems to me, refuses metaphysics, including metaphysical notions of justice. [...] All is empirical. All is fragile.” (97). In *Experience*, Arendt provides a bridge from Greek political praxis and Roman institutions to modernity – via the key mediation of free will and natality in Augustine. Political action, according to Arendt, only takes place in a community, in the public sphere. Taking up Kant’s concept of aesthetic judgement as always linked to a community of others that are able to share such a judgement, Lash with Arendt emphasizes the connectivity of the *sensus communis* between imagination and connectivity: “Moral judgements are valid even if not communicated. Judgements of taste are only valid through communication. We cannot reflect on the object until we imagine it. And even then, reflection takes place through this *sensus communis*, through its communications. The *sensus communis* is an extra sense, yet like an extra mental capacity that fits us into a community” (121).

In one of the climaxes of *Experience*, in density as well as in ingenuity, Lash uses Arendt’s radically a posteriori, empirical politics of plurality to develop an understanding of contemporary technological experience. Lash’s argument heavily relies on Wittgenstein’s notion of forms of life, but by claiming a shift from language to information, from semiotics to algorithms in the 21st century, he performs a daring move. Nowadays, the game theory of Simon, Hayek and von Neumann replaces the Newtonian model. “Now systems become self-organizing on the lines of control, command, communications and intelligence, or C3I. Now big data and databases – themselves nonlinear systems of self-organizing data – are king in neoliberalism. [...] With *homo economicus* no longer at the helm, the market is no

longer a mechanism for the allocation of scarce resources, but an information-processing mechanism” (138).

Finally, in Chinese painting, Lash finds a notion of experience that is less inside a unified subject but the experience of a multiplicity – multiplicity here as the grammatical subject. One has to be conscious that this multiplicity is not a formalist condition of the possibility of experience, but an agential component in a complex constellation (in his discussion of Chinese painter and theorist Shitao, Lash briefly hints at Niels Bohr and Karen Barad’s agential realism). With François Jullien, Lash argues that mountains and trees in Chinese paintings of landscapes, in their misty, dynamic, and almost formless shape, are less the bearer of qualities, but of capacities or faculties. After seven chapters Lash manages to make a notion of subjectless experience thinkable – and even shows that this agential multiplicity is not too far away from Kant’s objective experience.

Lash’s book is bulging with knowledge, confronts its reader with quick jumps, cascades of names and dives fast *in medias res*. Due to unstructured repetitions of subsidiary points and the mainly implicit structuring of paragraphs, the velocity of his thought from time to time overtakes the reader. Still, the further the reading proceeds, the more strings Lash weaves deftly together. Far from pretense, referencing and contrasting here are genuine modes of reasoning: Like the figures on a chess-board, Lash arranges and marshals the names of authors. His ideas emerge in moments of confrontation, when he contrasts one claim with another. To the well-read reader, these labels are references enough to show the orientation and direction of Lash’s thought. Since Lash aims at a wider, interdisciplinary audience and deals with topics from Chinese aesthetics to cybernetics, from social theory to antique ethics, this game of orientations might cause an avoidable overload.

Lash’s decision to turn to China is brilliant, provides his argument with fascinating input, and opens a unique perspective. His reference to Chinese modernity and Chinese translations (alongside Greek or Latin etymology) is an exemplary step towards a mode of intercultural thinking that is urgently needed today. Unfortunately, his deliberations stay somehow abstract when compared to the excellent work in other chapters. Instead of providing his readers with an introduction to this material – as he does impressively in the case of Western concepts – there are only quickly sketched contrasts. This could have been easily circumvented: Countless scholars at the intersection of sinology and philosophy, like Jean François Billeter, Mathias Obert (both experts on Chinese painting), A.C. Graham, Hans-Georg Moeller or François Jullien (out of whose huge oeuvre Lash only refers to two books), have published profound translations and excellent introductions on Chinese classics.

Highlighting the subtitle of Lash's book, one could certainly argue that this project is too ambitious to succeed on all fronts – many fascinating theses, some almost dropped en passant, serve enough material for whole chapters on their own. The last chapter ends with an appeal instead of a manifesto and Lash admits that the programmatic new foundation was often oblique (185). Does this mean Lash didn't reach his aim? On the contrary. Lash's thinking is dialectically enough to signal his readers that a shift of perspective can make all the difference.

German Abstract:

Erfahrung der Vielfalt. Von einer kritischen Genealogie des *homo oeconomicus* zu einer modernen Maschinen-Phänomenologie

Der Soziologe Scott Lash richtet sich mit *Experience. New Foundations for the Human Sciences* an die gesamten Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften und liefert nicht weniger als seine neue Perspektive auf den methodologischen Status von Erfahrung. Das Buch behandelt dabei eine große Vielfalt an Feldern und Themen: verwurzelt in Soziologie und Kulturwissenschaft, begleitet Lash seine Leser_innen fundierte und stellenweise rasant von der griechischen Antike zum Methodenstreit in der Soziologie des 19. Jahrhunderts, von Kants transzendentalen Idealismus zu Arendts politischer Philosophie und von der Geburt der Kybernetik zur chinesischen Kunst und Ästhetik. Das Augenmerk liegt dabei stets auf dem historischen Rahmen sowie der Rolle und Funktion von Erfahrung. Lashes Ziel ist ein Zweifaches: Erstens präsentiert er eine Kritik des *Homo oeconomicus*, indem er eine Genealogie von objektiver Erfahrung und Formalismus in Sozialwissenschaft und Ökonomie vorlegt. Zweitens entwickelt er mit Aristoteles, Hannah Arendt und William James, aber auch im Rückgriff auf chinesische Traditionen, eine Perspektive auf subjektive Erfahrung, die unserer Gegenwart angemessen ist.

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