

JUDITH P. BUTLER. *Subjects of Desire. Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-century France*, Columbia University Press, New York 1987. 268 pp.

The volume presented here is the first book by this young American scholar. It is an example of that lively rediscovery of certain currents from the continental thought - mostly those that were seen with great discomfort in America at the time of the analytic-philosophy sway - by American culture over the last two decades.

The book presents itself as a compact philosophical 'micro-history': the history of a philosophical theme and its different receptions. The theme of desire is examined in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* and its revival in twentieth-century French thought. The path reconstructed connects, after the obvious starting point represented by the authors of Hegel-Renaissance, Kojève and Hyppolite, existentialist or post-structuralist authors such as Sartre, Lacan, and Deleuze, to conclude with Foucault, who, as the author of a proposal to dissolve the notion of desiring subject, could embody the 'farewell' from the Hegelian theme.

It should be noted that the architecture of the book, deriving from the choice to reconstruct a single theme through different authors and texts allows an original point of view, allowing us to approach authors who wanted to be mutually extraneous (think of Sartre and Foucault) rediscovering a path that connects paths considered discontinuous.

The first chapter is meant to set up the scenario through the presentation of the theme in the *Phenomenology of Mind*, focusing on the paragraphs dedicated to the servant and the master. This is the least original chapter but, in the architecture of the book, it plays the role of a base that cannot be eliminated. It should be borne in mind that for the American reader (think that the classics of Kojève and Hyppolite were translated respectively in 1980 and 1974) these are things on average much less well known than for the Italian reader.

The second chapter reconstructs the Hegel-Renaissance of the Thirties and Forties and the reasons for the reinterpretation of Kojève and Hyppolite. Of particular interest is the interpretation of the notions of desire and recognition in Kojève as elements of an attempt to construct a synthesis between Marxism and liberalism, where liberalism had to overcome Hobbesian anthropology which foresees society only as a place of conflict between the blind desires of individuals already inbuilt in their nature before the advent of the societal state (see p. 78).

The third chapter is dedicated to a substantial reconstruction of the notion in Sartre, demonstrating its derivation from Kojève and Hyppolite. The author follows Sartre through her first works on the imagination, *Being and Nothing* and *Saint Genet*, reaching *L'idiot de la famille*.

The fourth chapter, the one that covers the most topical themes of interest, but also the one that in a certain sense contains the point of arrival, not merely chronological, of the reconstruction carried out, considers the authors of post-structuralism, from Derrida, Lacan and Deleuze to Foucault. With Foucault, in the *Histoire de la sexualité*, the very notion of a desiring subject is subjected to genealogical deconstruction, as is the notion of sexuality.

For Foucault, as is well known, sexuality is a category constructed within the framework of juridical-medical-demographic strategies implemented in modern Europe in order to acquire control over bodies that are at last disciplined; a history of bodies and pleasure, not of sexuality, should therefore be written. Thus, also the notion of desire is unmasked by Foucault as a participant in this strategy and heir to the ancient opposition between the spirit and the desiring flesh (see pp. 234 ff.).

In conclusion, this is an original and significant contribution, which cannot fail to interest both the scholars interested in the authors touched upon in the reconstruction carried out, and the scholars interested in themes from philosophical anthropology, as well as, last but not least, those interested in the feminist re-discussion (from Beauvoir to Kristeva) of the notions of body, subject, sex and gender.

Beauvoir and the subsequent authors of feminism, to whom Butler had dedicated a stimulating article in "Praxis International", 5.1986, are indeed a part of the background of this book. If some authors like Derrida, apparently only masters of negation, have an interest for Butler, it is because from Beauvoir onwards we have seen how questioning everything that seemed most indubitable is always the unavoidable first step of any liberation project.

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