

Transcendent Individual: Towards a literary and liberal anthropology

A review of Nigel Rapport's book on „the individual as a work of art that gave birth to itself.” (1997)

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Introduction

“Individual creativity has remained a submerged strand in anthropological perspective, drowned out by the demands and rigors of social structure,” claims Nigel Rapport in the collection of essays he compiled in order to save “the dissolved, decentered, deconstructed individual actor.” Before we proceed to the more elaborated exemplification of “a straw-man” author skillfully builds and confronts, it is important to underline various attempts of transcendence he wishes to navigate through.

As it has become gradually sign of 1990s, quoting various scholars Rapport shows a little respect to disciplinary distinctions and boundaries “between academician and layman,” or even his own experience as an author, member of academia and an ethnographer. On the other hand, author's assertion of his intention “to juxtapose ethnography against theory and analysis,” needs to be treated with a special care since there are only two sections of the book introducing non-academic voices of rather weak connection to the main argument. Likewise, even if I subscribe to author's description of the collection as “tonally various,” I cannot confirm they are “wide-ranging in terms of genre” since the essayistic character of the argumentation is quite consistent throughout the whole book.

Cutting through the themes of movement and fixity, creativity and structure, meaning and form, or individual and society, the author attempts to “outline a liberal basis for social science which recognizes individuals as universal human agents above whom there is no greater good, without whom there is no wider society, and in contradistinction to whom there is no cultural tradition.” In a nutshell, using an imagery of writing and movement, Rapport advocates for a paradigm shift from functional-structuralism to “social-scientific writing which makes the world personal.”

In order to do so, the author shapes his strategy involving mainly thoughts of Nietzsche, Mill, Bateson and Rorty with the intention to pinpoint weakness of symbolic anthropology, confront “conventional anthropological understanding” of home and identity, and, above all, challenge Durkheimian „totalitaristic“ science wherein real people are only „convenience of supposition.“

The Straw-man

In order to prove that “knowledge is always individual,” Rapport recognizes five rhetoric strategies that make the world impersonal and denaturalized. As we, humans, possess an ability to abstract from ourselves through epistemic operation, we create ontic objects, but at the expense of “giving those structures a false, impersonal, ontological status.” These objects, born out of the cognitive impulse, we later treat “external to us.” To the certain degree, the impulse overlaps with human inclination to objectivity as “an extension of subjective certainties and personal knowledge into the world beyond ourselves.” Using the concluding quote of Michael Jackson (1989), to whom objectivity translates as “a euphemism for indifference,” the author advises us to be more aware of the seductive tendencies of our imagination.

Next, Rapport identifies that relation between forms and meanings is unequal since a limited number of forms can house an unlimited number of meanings. According to the author, it “holds us back from the real creation of new” because we tend to recycle meanings, rather than actively create new forms. As an ultimate controller Rapport rushes to see the religious impulse which “substitutes human agency and responsibility by the superhuman.” In his point of view, religion serves to naturalize, cosmize and “sacralize” the order which humans have created. Given the sharp, even edgy, nature of the argumentation I would expect the author to ground the cases more thoroughly because he treats the section as if it is almost automatically expected from the reader to follow his train of thought.

Finally, the narrative moves fully in the direction of wholesale critique of Western scientific endeavor which is presumably based on the fifth strategy – the negatory impulse. For the sake of “metaphysical purity,” scientists have denied human complexity by the commitment to “materialism, technology and unconsciousness,” says Rapport. As an example serve modern astrophysics aspiring “to know the mind of God” (Hawking) and, target number one, social science under the influence of sociologist Émile Durkheim. Ultimately, the author claims that social science derived from French sociologist is “a willing accomplice to all five paths of impersonalization.”

The main Rapport’s critique is targeted at the supremacy of externalized concepts ruling over the agency of an individual. Such concepts are fueled by implicit “primacy of cultural or linguistic realities“ and “communitarian” way of thinking. „Social fact“ of Giddens, “social identity” of Barth and Sahlins, or even “culture” of Geertz are thus „an objective and institutional phenomena external to, constitutive and coercive of the individual.” In author’s opinion, these intellectual conceptualizations emphasizing delineation, structuration and fixation go against the contemporary social world of increasingly fluid, hybridized and individualized character. Since the paradigm is rotten, its fruits cannot be delicious, Rapport assumes. Generations of scientists, therefore, commit a crime of “confusing the rhetoric of metaphysical homogeneity with the reality of individual diversity.”

Let me now elaborate on the author's attempt in the paradigm shift and, finally, present my own conclusion.

The Argument

"I state the universality of the individual as the fount of agency, consciousness, interpretation and creativity in social and cultural life; this by virtue of his or her sole ownership of discrete, corporeal, sense-making apparatuses," opens the author in his manifesto-like redefinition of humanity. Refusing to enter into a scholarly conversation on individualism versus collectivism, or confusing representational logic, Rapport's "Transcendent Individual" proposes a new approach entitled „methodological individualism."

While constructing his argument along the ideas of Nietzsche and Mill, he identifies himself with the reconciliation of their seemingly contradictory worldviews as demonstrated in the work of philosopher Richard Rorty.

Correcting Nietzsche, by stating that the major human drive is not will to power, but "will to meaning," Rapport presents four ethnographic narratives in order to highlight one previously underestimated constituent of what makes us human – power of an individual in "writing of social reality." Since every human being is inherently "self-caused and free," he or she is responsible for the sense-making generated out of the given historical socio-cultural situation. In other words, if we acknowledged our own responsibility for the "redemption through self-creation," it would directly challenge our human tendencies to impersonalization because we would consciously "eschew seeing individuals as the playthings of inhuman, impersonal, historicist, determinist conditions or tendencies."

There are various consequences of such a paradigm. It has a potential to make us more aware of our narrational predisposition (Bruner 1990): "a capacity to organize experience into narrative form and a constant human readiness to rewrite such narratives." It twists the seductive tendencies of human imagination in the creation of ontic meta-objects because it exposes the temporality of such fixations. It corrects our reading of the dialectic between movement and fixity according to the lines of "moving-between identities, relations, people, things, groups, societies, cultures, and environments" and, moreover, allows us to revisit humanity along biological terms. In Rapport's point of view, such a kind of redefinition leads us towards a liberal and literary; towards realizations of Richard Rorty's vision of a planetary society.

"We need to maximise the quality of education, freedom of the press, opportunities to exert political influence... and inculcate a free and open encounter between the citizens of a polity engaging in domination-free communication," claims a visionary philosopher.

In the conclusion of the book, when Rapport advocates for the creation of liberal communities, he does not negate social or collectivity *per se*. Referring to philosophy of John Stuart Mill and Rorty's vision of the public ethic of a liberal civilization, he sees these social groupings firmly grounded in "tolerance to diversity of cultures constituted upon diversity of individuals and their civil rights."

Having the construction of a straw-man in mind, his sympathetic response to Rorty is primarily designed in order to defy the convention of functional-structuralism in social sciences. Rapport's recognition of „communitarian politics which treat the group as given“ therefore mirrors a recurrent criticism of Durkheimian „totalitarianistic“ approach. Instead, drawing contours of the new perspective, he advocates for the correction of framework by the apprehension of relations between movement and identity, and by the refocus of the discipline “setting out to analyze the impulses toward impersonalisation and their working-out in a socio-cultural milieu.” Nigel Rapport, faithful to the metaphor of writing, urges social scientists to acquire “the poetic virtues in ironism,” and accept the task of „a mover of final vocabularies.” The mover who contributes to the change in the way people talk because “to rewrite the language of our self-descriptions is to rewrite ourselves.”

Conclusion

Analyzing Rapport's word choice and recognizing his intentions, I see the book as a contribution to the overall reconstitution of humanities in the late 1980s and beginning of 1990s. Among other consequences, so-called “crisis of representation” served as a turning point towards epistemological reframing of an individual, increased awareness to the prescriptive power of texts, and renegotiation of the relationships among informant, researcher and his/their subject of enquiry. In this respect, Rapport's project corresponds with the ones of James Clifford (1986), Michel de Certeau (1988), Henri Lefebvre (1992), Manuel Castells (1996), Tim Ingold (1996, 2000), or Marc Augé (1999).

Behind the appealing argumentation, I identify two main paradoxes which make me ponder over Rapport's vision, the question of utopia/dystopia, the current significance of the collection.

The paradox no. 1: The author urges scientists to become non-Durkheimian socially-minded creators of “new vocabularies,” in other words, designers of more fitting words/forms, yet, simultaneously, he criticizes the oppressive tendency of ontic objects, terminology including, which results in hijacking of individual diversity in favor of false coherency.

The paradox no. 2: In the name of glorified liberal polity as a to-be-globalized project, the author suggests to „humiliate those who currently insist on a mutually exclusive absoluteness.“ Isn't so that the image of Rapport-crusader is in striking contrast to the one of Rapport-guardian of personal freedoms over cultural, religious or any other ideological systems?

J.J. Abrams, the new director of Star Wars saga, casted John Boyega as the first leading African-American Jedi character by saying he recognizes a great responsibility for the cultural impact the restarted movie series would have. As it is the case of sci-fi genre that implicitly feed our imagination by resonations of possible, the power of the fictional story would melt with the normative structure of globalizing society. In my opinion, anthropologist Rapport strives to do the same with the minds of social scientists since he is aware of the fact that in the moment of reconstitution, new horizons need to be drawn. At the end of the day, it is not important what vision is but what vision does in order to stimulate the imagination. This particular aspect makes the book very much up-to-date.

On the contrary, if we allow ourselves an intellectual experiment and envision manifesto's darker corners as extremely influential, where can we get?

Due to growing acceptance of "methodological individualism" among the scientific community, majority of inappropriate terms such as "culture," "society" and "community" is abandoned being seen as impersonalizing vehicles. Not only "big" theories are disregarded, but the willingness to go beyond personal experience in general. Originally human-oriented project results in dissolution of the prescriptive nature of social sciences. As humanities slowly dissolve into insignificance, the process goes hand in hand with the increasing indisciplinary. Scientists keep discovering fascinating truths of others; discourses within various historical domains. Originally conceived as a project of vital liberation, it results in loss of disciplinary communication channels since there is no need to maintain them. Worlds of art, science and politics turn into arenas of competing individual life trajectories. In the year 2015, one might say, it has already become an inevitable consequence of information-driven network society digital natives keep building up so eagerly.

In my opinion, delineating new approach in opposition to its alleged predecessors, Rapport has created its most significant weakness – the yearnings of manifesto-like style pushes the argumentation into extremes right from the start. More "methodological individualism" treats supra-individual phenomena with a restrictive vocabulary, more inadequate it becomes. Especially, if one assumes that the absolute individual freedom augmented by technological means tends to increasingly destabilize the world (Beck 2009, Eriksen 2010). Having the respective vocabulary and ability to "think globally" are necessary prerequisites of any decision-making social scientists should not withdraw from.

What are the images we create ourselves in? What are limits of this self-creation? If everyone is infinitely autonomous in the struggle for private redemption, which results in harm of many others, who is there in just society to recognize this collective injustice and limit it? For me, these are one of the fundamental questions the Western civilization needs to answer. The questions which make Nigel Rapport's book "Transcendent Individual" worthwhile piece to think along.

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