Massimo Ferrari

Well, and Pragmatism?
Comment on Michael Heidelberger’s Paper

Michael Heidelberger suggests that “we are witness today of a renewed interest in the history of philosophy of science, especially of the 19th century”. This statement involves a broad historical perspective and asks not only that we take a deeper look into the philosophy of science of the age of Helmholtz and Mach, of Poincaré and Hertz, but also that we consider them and other leading figures of the time in the context – as Heidelberger correctly says – of national traditions (such as that of France or even Italy) and within a more articulated historical background. I agree in particular with the proposal for “comparative studies in the history of philosophy of science”. The transfer of ideas from one country to another during the 19th century represents a crucial historical issue for our research and may contribute to a new interpretation of the history of philosophy of science, not only during the “long century”, but also in regard to the “short” one, i.e. looking forward – broadly speaking – to our present debates and our philosophical agendas.

Heidelberger offers very stimulating considerations about the “nostalgic return” to Kant that can be noted today and suggests that philosophers such Friedrich Albert Lange can be read in a different perspective. His great work on the History of Materialism was actually a Standardwerk for almost two generations of philosophers of science; and as Wilhelm Dilthey wrote in 1877, Lange’s opus magnum was destined to remain a book marking a turn point in the philosophical debate of late 19th century. But the History of Materialism was a very important reference for Carnap, Reichenbach and Schlick still in the age of early Logical Empiricism. Though it may seem strange, we can read in the third issue of Erkenntnis an enthusiastic portrait of Lange, one of the few philosophers who was able – according to the editors of his correspondence with Anton Dorn – to engage in a dialogue with the natural sciences and to acquire in this sense the great «merit» (quite similar to the Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism) to have rediscovered “Kant as a natural scientist”, in opposition to the metaphysical interpretation of


Kant’s philosophy endorsed by “professional philohers”. It will be useful to remember, that such a praise of Lange was drawn from no less than Rudolf Carnap and Hans Reichenbach.³

Otherwise it is well known that Neokantianism, first of all the Marburg Neokantianism of Cohen, Natorp and Cassirer, but also the Neokantianism of Alois Riehl or, to some extent, of Hans Vaihinger, had a great influence on the philosophy of science which starts its journey at the Vienna Station. Historical and systematic reconstructions – in the case of Carnap it will be enough to remind you of the contributions of Alan Richardson and Andre W. Carus – show in a very exciting way how the received view and the current genealogies of Logical Empiricism must be corrected within the framework of another story.⁴ That story starts from scientific Neokantianism and reformulates some crucial aspects of this tradition in a really revolutionary new perspective. But the breakdown of the older world in every revolution is more complicated than a mere farewell to the previous age or, in this case, to previous conceptual tools. In my opinion, Neokantianism was in this context not only a philosophical stream, but a branch of late 19th century philosophy of science that, first of all in the German speaking world, was very influential on, and at some length was elaborated from, the leading scientists in their own work.⁵ There was a time, to put it differently, in which a great physicist as Heinrich Hertz was able to read Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason or his First Metaphysical Principles of Natural Science after long hours of hard laboratory work, obviously not as a “moral holiday” from his scientific engagement.⁶ If our historical and philosophical task is the contextualization of philosophy of science as well as of epistemological frameworks elaborated in the late 19th century, it seems unavoidable to elucidate the assimilation within philosophy of science of the Kantian and Neo-Kantian heritage, or – to quote Michael Friedman’s statement – to describe

---


