



IV. SURVEY

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE “PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURAL CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES”

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On September 22–24, in 2011, the second international phenomenological conference took place in Vilnius, Lithuania. It was organized together with Antioch University of the USA and it was hosted in Vilnius Gediminas Technical University's Faculty of Architecture. Urbanists, philosophers, educators and other academic scholars had a chance to deepen their knowledge and present the results of their researches on the subject of “Phenomenological Perspectives on Cultural Change and Environmental Challenges”. More than 10 speakers from various countries had presented their speeches and afterwards actively indulged in group discussions on the most problematic issues. Due to a huge success that the event has proven to be, it is expected to be just a beginning of a new tradition to hold such conferences in the university regularly.

Keywords: cultural change, environmental challenges, phenomenology.

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Introduction

22–23 September 2011, international conference on phenomenological perspectives on cultural change and environmental challenges was held in Vilnius. Vilnius Gediminas Technical University's Faculty of Architecture opened its door to the event. It was organized after the success of the previous conference of such kind held in Vilnius, in 2009. During the latter, phenomenology, pedagogy and psychotherapy were considered and discussed while the recent conference focused on cultural change and environmental challenges. Guests from around the globe were invited to share their ideas on the topic. The conference was open for philosophers, urbanists, educators and other

academic scholars interested in being part of a global shift to integrate meaningful social change and environmental resiliency. The purpose of the conference was twofold: to develop phenomenological discourses and the paradigm of ecological sustainability and social well-being that reintegrates human systems with more-than-human systems (Rudyte *et al.* 2011). The reunion proved to be successful as the participants shared their insights in rejuvenating the world around us by reflecting the phenomena of life environment, closing the gap between culture and nature, bringing together a variety of disciplines, and participating in the creation of an eco-humanistic culture.

Phenomenological ideas and environment

The guest of honour Prof Dr **John Deely** (University of St. Thomas, Houston) had started the conference with his paper “The Concepts of Environment, *Umwelt* and *Lebenswelt* in Semiotic Perspective”. In the first place, Dr Deely distributed sheets of paper with the main thesis and the guests were able to familiarize with the content of his speech. Nevertheless, Dr Deely chose a different direction and started an interactive presentation on such topics as semiotic entanglement, physical environment, naivety, relations, etc. Every participant was involved in his paper and this kind of extramural presentation was a great method to arouse interest and make the specific information more comprehensible.

The second lecturer to speak was Prof Dr **Farouk Y. Seif** (Antioch University, Seattle, USA). His paper “Phenomenological Challenges of Transmodernity: From Absoluteness to Metamorphosis” was about current events in the world triggering significant phenomenological challenges. Dr Seif explained in detail the case study of the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt, and what it represented. He also took time to emphasize the threat to the metamorphosis into democracy and liberation that the belief in the absolute God and dogmatic ideologies imply while the entire region seems to be moving away from the absolute monarchy and autocratic political power. The conclusion that Dr Seif presented was that Society needs to accept the fact that the age of the absolute has become obsolete, willing to engage in the process of metamorphosis that is essential for a transmodern discourse.

The next speaker was **Susana McCune** (Antioch University, Seattle, USA). She prepared a report “Phenomenological Perspectives on Modern-day Death”. McCune presented a problem of contemporary society – the aging. She also employed a transdisciplinary perspective to consider the individually lived phenomena and global implications of modern-day death. The aim was to inspire thinking about how we might better prepare for a worldwide future of extended living and dying by developing new paradigms that transcend cultural, economic, and geographic boundaries, thereby cultivating wellbeing at the micro and macro levels. Her case study united theoretical wisdom with clinical insights. Phenomenology, hermeneutics, psychology and ecopsychology, social systems-change, health and hospice care, and grief theories were combined with arts-based research methodologies to aid in illuminating and meeting the anticipated challenges of extended living and dying in the 21st century.

Assoc Prof Dr **Basia Nikiforova** (Lithuanian Culture Research Institute, Department of Practical Philosophy) was another lecturer that analysed the topic. She made a presentation on “Religious Landscape of Vilnius: A Phenomenological Glance“. Dr Nikiforova explained that the traditional religious landscape is changing considerably and is shifting. She highlighted the importance of phenomenological approaches that are crucial for developing new and deepening existing modes of cooperation between dissimilar cultures and religions (Nikiforova 2011). Dr Nikiforova talked about religious landscape of Vilnius from two general views: old, historical, traditional source and nowadays the increasing diversity. Finally, she proposed a short discussion about definition of “religious landscape” and the possibilities of its interpretation.

Culture and nature as environment

Davide Scarso Centro Interuniversitário de Historia das Ciências e da Tecnologia (CIUHCT) da Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Portugal) presented a report that revealed another topic of the conference – culture and nature. His paper was on “Reassessing the Nature and Culture Dichotomy: T. Ingold’s ‘Dwelling Perspective’”. Scarso began his report by analyzing how anthropological thinking, in the last twenty years, had put the conceptual categories of Culture and Nature into radical questioning. Scarso emphasized that the idea of culture had been considered a theoretical artifact that substantialized a set of phenomena that were not necessarily related, but were, on the opposite, the result of specific historical processes. He then tried to prove Tim Ingold’s opinion that nature is not constituted by a set of objects detached from culture but, on the contrary, it is the practical engagement with the environment. Finally, Scarso tried to persuade the participants into believing that the “dwelling perspective” developed by Ingold offers many insights and raises crucial questions on the categorical opposition between nature and culture.

After the speech of Scarso, Dr **Elizabeth A. Behnke** (Antioch University Seattle, USA) made an extramural presentation on the topic “Phenomenology of/as Cultural Transformation”. She talked about the objections against phenomenology playing a transformative role and then carried this discussion further by demonstrating how the practice of phenomenological method can itself help develop skills relevant to social / cultural change. More specifically, Dr Behnke addressed some aspects of the current social / cultural constitution of the sense, “food”, she considered some ways in which the current anomaly of small-scale, sustainable, organic farming can move toward becoming a new “normality” and suggested some ways in which the practice of phenomenology might fruitfully partner the emerging social movement toward local, resilient, and ecologically sound food production.

The last speaker of the first day was Prof Dr **Tomas Kačerauskas** (Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Lithuania) with his paper “Phenomenology of Urban Space and Cultural Narration”. Dr Kačerauskas discussed the urban spaces in the perspective of the cultural narratives. His main thesis was that the urban life spaces open after clash between the aspects of cultural visibility and narrativeness. The minor

theses, as following: a city is the place of existential education, where we transit to a new life space over and over; a city is the space of both historical signs and utopia without any place; temporality; a city is both the environment of communication and communicative actor, were also taken into consideration (Kačerauskas 2011). The author used the tools of existential phenomenology and cultural regionalistics to draw audience’s attention and profoundly explain his main points.

Social life from the phenomenological point of view

The second and, as it turned out, the last day of the conference, conference, Prof Dr **Béla Mester** (Research Institute of Philosophy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences) was the first speaker. His topic was “The Human Nature and the Nature Itself Natural and Societal Aspects of the Human Nature”. Dr Mester talked about his investigation and its conclusions. With his presentation he tried to demonstrate, that the Stoical philosophers and their interpreters were unconscious of the ambiguity of the roots of human morality offered by them. He also proved that a hidden tension in our anthropological thinking about the human nature as a *natural* or a *societal* phenomenon has its roots partly in this ancient ambiguity, hidden and unconscious. Finally, the rise of this conceptually confused ambiguity in the recent philosophy was presented by several instances in the last part of his paper.

Matti Itkonen (University of Jyväskylä, Finland) made a report on the topic “*Alter et alter* Revisited: The Two Faces of the Mirror”. Dr Itkonen began by sharing his point of view that the world is always something before we partake of it– something prior to our being-in-it, that original understanding pre-exists us and we do not create our environment as we proceed – it has its own mode of existing.

Then he resumed, that the pre-predicativity of the world and understanding exist side by side, apart from each other. And finally, Dr Itkonen finished his presentation by asking rhetorical questions like “what is the world like?” and “what am I?” making the guests get involved into discussion.

Political and economical environment

Dr **Gábor Kovács** (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungary) read a report on the topic “H. Arendt’s interpretation of natural and artificial in the political phenomenology of *The Human Condition*”. Dr Kovács was talking about modernization, world-alienation, natural, artificial technology. He presented the Arendtian critique of modernity, which had deeply been influenced by Martin Heidegger’s philosophy. “What are our relations like, according Arendt, to earth and world and what kind of obligations are can be deduced from them?” – those were the questions that Dr Kovács tried to answer.

After a coffee break **Ligita Landzmane** (University of Latvia) made a speech on the topic “Phenomenological Aspects of the Development of Qualitative Meditation Services”. Landzmane explained that by integrating the results of phenomenological and methodology studies in studies regarding the organization and management of mediation services, it is possible to create balanced, meaningful and naturally effective

theoretical positions and guidelines. The results of the respective study can be used to understand and meaningfully improve both, the quality of mediation services and mediation expertise criteria. Finally, she highlighted that even though the study looks at and presents the experience of Latvian experts, the methodology and results can be used also for understanding and solving the problems of mediation spheres of other countries.

Art and education: phenomenological perspective

And the last but not the least speaker that finished the conference was Assoc Prof Dr **Agnieška Juzefovič** (Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Lithuania) with her report “Phenomenology of the City: a View on Shanghai Through the Cinema”. Ms. Juzefovič analysed the relationship between cinema and the city. She discussed various films the action of which takes place in Shanghai and separated the two kinds of them: those, which show daily, front face Shanghai and those which show darksome faces of the city (Juzefovič 2011). To better illustrate her shared insights, Ms. Juzefovič showed extracts from films “The white countess” (James Ivory), “Lust, caution” (Ang Lee), “Shanghai dreams” (Wang Xiaoshuai) and “Suzhou river” (Lou Ye) during the presentation.

Discussions

After every few presentations the participants were invited to discuss the mentioned, most popular and engaging issues. The guests shared their thoughts on topics like nature, naturalness, alienation, changes brought by technologies. They also tried to answer the questions like “why mediation system development is so important”, “why do we use phenomenological methods in management?”, “what is the world like” and many many others.

The closure

After the last presentation, a meeting for all participants and moderators was held. The speeches were resumed and the official closing of the conference began. Of course, no one can predict the unpredictable and the conference was no exception. While sharing the final opinions and feelings about the event, the guest of honour, Mr. John Deely, stood up only to say that he had never seen so poorly organized conference like that one. The lesson for the organizers to be learnt the hard way was to always, always, always (!!!) book a hotel room for the guest of honour!

Summa summarum

The international conference was proven to be successful: scientists of all over the world shared their thoughts on issues of crucial importance. The guests did not only discuss the problematic topics but also found time to visit the most popular places in

Vilnius and learn a little more about its rich history. It is important to highlight that this time the leading authority of the conference Tomas Kačerauskas, together with the co-partner Antioch University Seattle, USA, managed to convoke the greatest minds of all around the world into one place and make this international conference immensely productive.

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SOCIALINIŲ POKYČIŲ IR APLINKOS IŠŠŪKIŲ FENOMENOLOGINĖS PERSPEKTYVOS

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Santrauka

Antroji tarptautinė fenomenologų konferencija Lietuvoje įvyko 2011 m. rugsėjo 22–24 d. Ši konferencija, kitaip nei 2009 m. įvykusi jos pirmtakė, buvo organizuota kartu su JAV Antiocho universitetu. Vilniaus Gedimino technikos universitete, Architektūros rūmuose urbanistai ir architektai turėjo galimybę sužinoti daug naujo ir patys pateikti savo tyrimų rezultatus tema „Socialinių pokyčių ir aplinkos iššūkių fenomenologinės perspektyvos“. Daugiau nei 10 pranešėjų iš viso pasaulio parengė kalbas ir po jų aktyviai įsitraukė į diskusijas, kuriose buvo gvildenami problematiškiausi klausimai. Tikėtina, kad tokios konferencijos ateityje taip pat bus organizuojamos ir pamažu virs pasididžiavimo verta tradicija.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: fenomenologija, socialiniai pokyčiai, aplinkos iššūkiai.

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