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Book Review

Barbieri, Cristiano. *Edgar Zilsel: Ricerche di storia della scienza e della filosofia*. Edizioni Efesto, 2025. ISBN: 978-8833816807, 14,25 €

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There is a strong tradition of production and critical analysis in the history and philosophy of science in Italy. Names such as Paolo Rossi, Aldo Gargani, among others, are internationally renowned. Perhaps because the seed of the historiography of science was planted so well in that country, this tradition has borne fruit, producing several other excellent authors on the subject. In the ten years that I have been in charge of coordinating editorial projects on the historiography of science with the participation of authors from more than twenty countries, the number of Italian authors has been the most significant. Often, when I needed a qualified opinion on a very specialized historiography of science manuscript, Italian colleagues came to my rescue with precise and in-depth analyses.

The young author of this book comes from this tradition. So, he carries not only the weight of responsibility for belonging to it, but also the signature of a tradition that represents the quality of a job well-done. He thus has a kind of certification of origin. We can certainly expect much more from this author in the future, as everything indicates that he will continue this tradition of the historiography of science in Italy and abroad.

This time, the author has chosen to give us an excellent analysis of the work of Edgar Zilsel (1891-1944). This is the first book in Italian dedicated exclusively to the thought of the Austrian philosopher and historian of science, Edgar Zilsel. Considering that Paolo Rossi's work is part of this tradition opened up by Edgar Zilsel and Leonardo Olschki, it's quite surprising that Zilsel hasn't previously been the object of attention from Italians in a single book dedicated to him. However, this oversight can be put into perspective considering that Zilsel's work has attracted much more attention abroad than in his country of origin, Austria. In part, that difficulty seems to be explained by the fact that Zilsel broke through the barrier of Viennese logical empiricism.² Thus, the work of this Austrian philosopher and historian of science seems to have suffered prejudice due to his Jewish ancestry (Taschwer 2022), but

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² Like Zilsel, many other philosophers who distanced themselves from logical empiricism, such as Wittgenstein, Popper, Feyerabend, Jantsch, etc., left Vienna, never to return to institutional philosophical activity in Austria. In other words, all these thinkers not only left Vienna, but left the logicist atmosphere of the Vienna Circle and built much broader and more complex approaches involving social aspects, and in Zilsel's case, a whole historical dimension.

also to a kind of epistemological prejudice when he expanded the boundaries of knowledge by including society and history as foundational elements of his epistemology (Condé 2022).

Despite important efforts (Romizi, Wulz and Nemeth 2022), it seems that Zilsel has not yet been fully recognized in his homeland, since the logicist tradition still seems to be strong on Austrian soil. It is enough to see that the work of preserving the memory of the Vienna Circle carried out by the Vienna Circle Institute, in keeping with its tradition, focuses on logic and logicist approaches, with little room for social-historical perspectives such as those offered by Zilsel, even though he was a genuine member of the Vienna Circle.

* * *

Barbieri's book is an excellent opportunity to get an overview of Zilsel's work. This is because, more often, Zilsel is best remembered for his thesis on the birth of modern science, formulated when, to flee Nazism, he was forced to leave Austria for North America. But it is rare for this reception of Zilsel's work abroad to take into account the first part of his work produced within the logical empiricism movement before his exile in the United States. In particular, his thesis about the role of genius. Barbieri's book plays an important role in understanding the whole of the Viennese thinker's work, because it addresses all these elements present in Zilsel's work from his youth in Vienna to his exile in the United States.

To fulfill this purpose of a more organic approach to the Austrian thinker, in a first chapter entitled "Biography and historical-philosophical context", Barbieri discusses Zilsel's life in the intellectual atmosphere of the first half of the 20th century. Analyzing various authors from that context, he tries to position Zilsel as a product of his time and of the philosophical implications that arose there. And this was a very unfavorable context. Not only with the academic difficulties faced by ideas that were not very receptive at the time, but also the whole social and political dimension brought on by the Second World War that led to his exile and, later, to his death. In fact, according to Barbieri, "The author's personal vicissitudes must be taken into account to explain the course of his impervious and difficult career that led him to live on the margins of the academic institutions of the time" (Barbieri 2025, 25). Delving deeper into that historical and philosophical context, as well as Zilsel's personal life, Barbieri discusses the empirical logicism movement and the Marxist-influenced social perspective of the history of science.

After delineating the historical-philosophical context, in the second chapter entitled "The social origins of modern science", Barbieri discusses the part of the Austrian philosopher's thought that gave him international prominence, and which became known as the Zilsel thesis. At which point, to effectively understand the Zilsel thesis on the rise of modern science, Barbieri establishes the Austrian thinker's very starting point,

Zilsel noted how in the medieval era theoretical knowledge and experience, two fundamental components of the scientific method, were rigidly separated: doctors did not stoop to debate with laymen/*ydioatae*. The Middle Ages completely lacked an individualistic culture capable of valuing critical thinking independent of Scripture and the writings of Aristotle. Contempt for manual workers, according to the Viennese scholar, led scholastics to the rejection of experimentalism. (Barbieri 2015, 87)

Thus, only in the context of capitalism would science find an environment in which to emerge. In other words, Zilsel's thesis establishes a new key to understanding the emergence of modern science, according to which it arose in the environment prepared by capitalism, because, unlike the feudal world, capitalism brought a series of new values such as individualism, the possibility of profit, social mobility, the production of consumer goods, etc. all of which greatly facilitated the social interaction of two different traditions, namely university doctors (and also humanists) and higher craftsmen. In short, it enabled the

meeting of theoretical and philosophical “knowing how to think” and the “manual making” of craftsmen. To conclude chapter two, Barbieri discusses particularly Marx and Weber’s influences on Zilsel in formulating his thesis.

Continuing his analysis, so that we can have an overall idea of Zilsel’s work and understand his trajectory and ideas, Barbieri ends his book by including a chapter entitled “Zilsel and the Critique of *Geniereligion*” about Zilsel’s youth with his most expressive work at that time, *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffes* [1926], as well as his first foray into the subject with *Die Geniereligion* [1918]. According to Barbieri, “the problem of genius criticism is not separated from the social origins of modern science” (Barbieri 2025, 177). Also, according to him, Zilsel criticized the cult of genius that emerged after the Aesthetic Revolution of Romanticism, arguing that it generated a “religion of genius”. For Barbieri, the Viennese thinker sought to demystify this idea, revealing its irrational nature. Barbieri continues, in Zilsel the concept of *Geniebegriff* is analyzed as a form of pseudo-religion centered on figures such as Shakespeare, Beethoven, Nietzsche, etc. Zilsel used the rationalism of Kant and Hegel to criticize the idea of genius, arguing that the enthusiasm (*Begeisterung*) associated with genius is a form of irrationality.

From this reading of Barbieri, we can see that, likewise, important figures in science, despite their importance, are not the unique and exclusive expression of the entire process of the scientific revolution. That long process has included many other actors in an environment conducive to it. In short, modern science was the result of this combination of different actors, as Zilsel puts it, in a favorable environment produced by the values brought about by capitalism. In Zilsel’s words,

In the period from the end of the Middle Ages until 1600, the university scholars and the humanistic literati are rationally trained, but they do not experiment, they despise manual labor. Many more or less Plebeian craftsmen experiment and invent but lack methodical rational training. About 1600, with the progress of technology, the experimental method is adopted by rationally trained scholars of the educated upper class. Thus, the two components of scientific research are united at last: modern science is born. The whole progress is embedded in the advance of early capitalistic economy which weakens collective-mindedness, magical thinking, traditions, and the belief in authority, which furthers mundane, rational and causal thinking, individualism and rational organization. (Zilsel 2000 [1939], 6)

Last but not least, I must mention that the book’s preface (Paolo Savoia – University of Bologna) and introduction (Henrique Leitão – University of Lisbon) bear the signatures of two leading experts on Zilsel’s work. In particular, I would like to highlight Leitão’s approach to Zilsel’s work from Portugal (again, a foreign reading) to demonstrate the richness of the Austrian philosopher’s thought for understanding the birth of modern science and its developments.

This book will certainly meet the author’s expectations (Barbieri 2025, 19), which is to spread Zilsel’s ideas on the philosophy and history of science. May the reader have an excellent experience!

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