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Book Review

Dersley, Stephen. 2025. *Thought Collectives and Cultural Change: Applying Ludwik Fleck's Theory of Thought Collectives to the Study of Cultural Transformations*. Springer Nature. 438p.

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How did reason come to be regarded as a superior form of knowledge compared to more subjective ways of knowing? How did philosophy become the field capable of thinking legitimately and autonomously about all others? How did this movement toward valuing reason – already underway since Antiquity – culminate in the Enlightenment of the Modern Era? What cultural changes made the consolidation of these conceptions possible? On the other hand, what are the particularities of the different contexts involved? These are some of the questions courageously explored by the philosopher Stephen Dersley in his remarkable book *Thought Collectives and Cultural Change: Applying Ludwik Fleck's Theory of Thought Collectives to the Study of Cultural Transformations*, published by Springer Nature in 2025.

The book analyzes the process through which reason came to be valued – from Antiquity to Modernity – culminating in the Enlightenment, drawing on Ludwik Fleck's theory of knowledge. However, according to the author, the aim of the work is not merely to examine this historical process, but also to show that Fleckian epistemology constitutes a more robust theoretical framework compared to other models used to analyze cultural change and can therefore be considered better suited for studying it. Indeed, Dersley argues that Fleck's theory of thought collectives is capable of revealing the complexity involved in cultural transformations by focusing on the emergence of new thought styles through the circulation of ideas among different collectives. He maintains that, as an interactional model, Fleck's epistemology shows that such changes invariably encounter resistance, are contested, reinterpreted, and reshaped in various ways before becoming consolidated.

Thus, what makes the book admirable is not only the scope and complexity of the historical process it examines, but above all, the depth of its analysis. The work does not merely reproduce the most common historical narratives on the subject; on the contrary, it sets out to critique them and to show that this history was not a linear process, but a complex one, marked by specificities across different contexts and involving diverse intellectual movements and disputes.

Moreover, in order to make this analysis possible, the book develops its own methodology, grounded primarily in the epistemology of the Polish philosopher Ludwik

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Fleck, while also seeking to supplement it with concepts drawn from Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Ernesto Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe, among others. With this robust and ambitious proposal, the book is organized into eleven chapters and divided into two main parts. In the first part, the author presents, contextualizes, and expands upon Fleck's theory of thought collectives; in the second part, he applies this theoretical framework to understand the processes of cultural transformation surrounding the theme of reason that culminated in the Enlightenment.

In more detail, Chapter One provides an overview of the book's proposal. It begins by defining what will be considered, throughout the work, as constituting revolutionary cultural change. For the author, such change consists of an intertwined network of epistemic, discursive, economic, technological, informational, and institutional developments that culminate in fundamental transformations.

He then critiques several models that, in his view, attempt to explain these changes but ultimately present significant limitations, insofar as they place too much emphasis on certain factors while minimizing or overlooking others. While acknowledging the importance and contributions of these approaches, Dersley criticizes Marxist economic theory for emphasizing the role of economic development while downplaying factors related to intellectual exchange; Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science for emphasizing epistemic and perceptual factors while paying relatively little attention to the role of social, technological, and economic factors in paradigm shifts; and Foucauldian discourse analysis for amplifying the role of discourse and power relations while assigning insufficient importance to non-discursive practices.

Building on these critiques, the author argues that Fleck's theory of thought collectives is better suited to exploring cultural change, as it assumes that new thought styles emerge gradually through transformations in inherited knowledge and perceptions, without disregarding specific local contexts. Despite this defense, he also contends that Fleck's framework needs to be supplemented with concepts from other authors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how thought styles evolve, interact, and contest one another. Finally, he clarifies that the aim of the book is not to offer a naïve defense of Fleckian epistemology, but rather to assess the extent to which this theory can shed new light on processes of transformation when applied to the study of specific cultural phenomena.

Next, in Chapters Two through Five, Dersley presents and contextualizes Fleck's theory of thought collectives and develops the methodology he will employ throughout the rest of the book. In Chapter Two, the author situates Fleck's work in its historical context, emphasizing his commitment to democratic values and to the collective and collaborative production of knowledge – positions that stood in contrast to the dominant way of thinking in his time. He also situates Fleck's ideas in relation to other thinkers and intellectual currents, discussing his debate with the philosopher Kurt Riezler, his alignment with the physicist Niels Bohr, the influences of the so-called Polish School of Philosophy of Medicine, and his criticism of the Lwów School.

Chapter Three presents Fleck's thought by positioning it in relation to key epistemological issues and contrasting his comparative epistemology with Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's social anthropology and Ernst Mach's conventionalist history of science. Chapter Four outlines the main features of Fleckian epistemology, emphasizing its interactive character and its conception of knowledge as necessarily collective, grounded in the view that perception and the process of knowing are socially conditioned. It also argues that Fleck's emphasis on the circulation of ideas makes it possible to explore how internal and external pressures on thought collectives can unsettle well-established epistemic conceptions and foster reconfigurations in thought styles.

However, the author notes that, to address broader sociocultural issues – including categories such as class, race, and nationality – this theoretical framework needs to be extended. Accordingly, in Chapter Five, Dersley develops his own methodological approach, complementing Fleck's comparative epistemology with concepts drawn from Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe, and Bourdieu, to apply it to the study of cultural transformations. According to the author, this methodology enables a deeper understanding of the processes of circulation of ideas involved, insofar as it seeks to capture the relationships among discursive interactions, power structures, and cognitive elements that underpin transformations in thought styles.

Next, in Chapters Six through Ten, Dersley applies this methodological approach to the study of specific historical cases involving the theme of the valorization of reason. Chapter Six explores the emergence of philosophy as a cultural practice in Ancient Greece, critiquing more traditional narratives that seek to frame this history within a simple evolutionary logic moving “from myth to logos.” The author argues that Plato's defense, in his *Dialogues*, of the supposed supremacy of philosophy over other practices – such as poetry and rhetoric – can in fact be understood as a form of strategic adaptation to a historical context marked by a prolonged period of sociopolitical conflict and intellectual unrest.

Chapter Seven, in turn, analyzes how the narrative known as the “Socratic Caesura” – which casts Socrates as the founder of philosophy for allegedly making a decisive break with naturalism and rhetoric – was transmitted and reinterpreted across different contexts and historical periods, from its original articulation by Plato to its reframing by German thinkers in the late eighteenth century. Dersley argues that, as it was reinterpreted in modernity, this narrative became a means of legitimizing philosophy in Europe and can be understood as a discursive strategy aimed at elevating the status of philosophy while marginalizing other forms of knowledge.

In Chapter Eight, the author examines how the Hegelian concept of *Bildung* was used to position philosophy as the master discipline, capable of subsuming and redefining other fields, and to distinguish it from mythology, religion, and poetry. To do so, he shows how Hegel's interpretation of Greek culture and philosophy played a specific role within the intellectual disputes surrounding educational reforms and nationalist currents in early nineteenth-century Germany.

Chapter Nine then analyzes the role of the concept of *Bildung* in the consolidation of the faculty of philosophy within German universities, through which it evolved from a subordinate institution into one possessing significant intellectual authority. In this process, the concept of *Bildung* was gradually adapted by different thought collectives representing competing intellectual currents. This allowed it to shift from a concept originally bearing a mystical connotation, rooted in religion, to its modern meaning, as it was reinterpreted by Enlightenment and neo-humanist thinkers.

Finally, in Chapter Ten, through an analysis of Kant's texts in dialogue with other modern authors, Dersley examines how different reconstructions of the German concept of *Aufklärung* enabled the faculty of philosophy to assume the role of a mediating body between the state and the public sphere – regulating cultural production, restricting the public articulation of thought, and often acting as a mechanism of censorship in the early modern period and during the European Enlightenment.

The book concludes, in Chapter Eleven, by assessing how the methodology employed in the analysis of these historical episodes – grounded in Fleckian epistemology – succeeds in illuminating the complexity involved in the processes through which emerging thought styles evolve, as they move between phases of development and contestation across different contexts and historical periods.

With this robust analysis, Dersley's work provides a compelling overview of the potential and insights that Fleck's theory of thought collectives can offer as a foundation for studying cultural change. However, like any broad and ambitious proposal, the book also leaves certain gaps that could become the subject of scholarly debate and be explored in future research. In line with Fleck's original proposal of an open epistemology, the work invites other researchers to explore, for example, how Fleck's theory of knowledge might be combined with the work of other authors in the study of this and other themes, while also encouraging discussion about the relevance and limitations of such combinations.

It also invites specialists in the specific topics addressed in the book – such as the history of philosophy, the history of the Enlightenment, Marxist economic theory, Kuhn's philosophy of science, and Foucauldian discourse analysis – to engage with the critiques presented, both of the traditional historical narratives surrounding the episodes analyzed and of the different models and perspectives to explain cultural change. Thus, the book is strongly recommended for those interested in these topics, as well as for readers concerned more broadly with historiography of science and epistemology.