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Jérôme Lamy, Arnaud Saint-Martin

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Chapter 18

Zilsel, Zilsel: Reconnecting with an intellectual legacy that deserves to be revived

Jérôme Lamy, Arnaud Saint-Martin

Abstract:

The following is a revised version of a text which appeared in the first issue of the biannual journal *Zilsel* in 2018. It describes the aims of the then new journal and explains how the intentions of the editors refer to the work and life of Edgar Zilsel. Zilsel's scientific strategy of theorizing the historical developments of modern science continues to inspire our approach in the ever-expanding field of social studies of science and technology.

Key-words: STS, discipline, science, science publishing, autonomy

18.1 S, T, S

Science, technology and society: it is a wide area that the journal *Zilsel* intends to explore in order to map overcrowded regions, borders, peripheral areas, deserted spaces and borders. As a biannual journal, *Zilsel* will seek to give an account of past and present transformations occurring in the sciences and technologies, whether they are in the mathematical, physical, biological and engineering sciences, or in the humanities, social sciences, legal or economic sciences; whether they involve incorporated know-how or artefacts, simple or complex, artisanal or industrial, obsolete or advanced, dominant or marginalized sources of knowledge. To this end, *Zilsel* will be attentive to the new knowledge and technical systems that are emerging and aims to be of interest to the sociology, the history, the anthropology and the philosophy of science and technology. These analyses will be developed in such a way that they will be readable beyond the specialists in the social studies of science and technology. Critical essays on a particular subject discussed outside the walls of universities and laboratories will thus provide thought-provoking contributions to anyone interested in the intellectual life. Last but not least, we will not dilute any positions that may have been taken in the discussion of controversial subjects. Composed of concerned academics, the editorial board of *Zilsel* chooses not to pretend to issue superior and neutral judgement, whether it is a matter of stating theoretical choices or discussing the ongoing transformations of universities and research.

18.2 Another journal?

Initiating a humanities and social science journal may today appear to be a daunting challenge, since the general opinion tends to be that there are too many of them already and that, from the point of view of an optimal management of the human forces of knowledge, it would probably be a better idea to bring some order to it. Releasing this journal on paper and in an extended format (a journal-book of over 400 pages!) is no less challenging, because the

injunction to digitalize has normalized the very depressing possibility of the death of the printed press. To publish a “printed” journal may thus be perceived as a nostalgic resistance to change. However, we will not give up: every six months, the goal will be to deliver an issue of the journal *Zilsel* in print and online (via Cairn.info), with a variety of original articles, intellectually challenging statements, conversations, and classic texts reissued for the occasion.

The editorial board is composed of about twenty members, whose research covers history, sociology, philosophy, political science and the anthropology of science and technology. The specializations of each member include a broad spectrum of knowledge. The aim is to expose and confront different perspectives on issues that often offer opportunities for interpretative frictions, to clarify and articulate theoretical points of view, or methodological strategies, while respecting the rules of a scientific game that the editorial board will strive to cultivate.

Zilsel is a francophone journal, something that is not self-explanatory in the very anglocentric field of Science & Technology Studies. It is not a question of excluding articles written in foreign languages, quite the contrary. Nevertheless, the diversification of linguistic idioms in scientific productions seems to us necessary, precisely in order to resist as much as possible to the linguistic imperialism of English (Casanova 2015). This does not mean that all English-speaking references should be banned, of course. The journal will therefore include, as in this first issue, articles translated by us, as far as possible from all linguistic areas.

From Montreal to Washington, via Moscow or Roma, the international presence of the journal is an important part of our editorial identity. It also happens that the composition of the editorial board of *Zilsel* reflects a generational renewal. There is nothing sensational about it: we are well aware that we are making a banal move that our predecessors have, in their time, achieved in other forms. As avid readers of sociologists of knowledge, from Robert K. Merton to Andrew Abbott, we are aware that we are part of cycles of reconstruction in epistemological thought, and we enact, without dramatizing or heroicizing it, a sort of generational irruption.

18.3 Pixels and grammage: a journal? a book? a book-journal?

We’re not starting from scratch. *Zilsel* is extending an experience in scientific blogging, the *Carnet Zilsel*, hosted since November 2013 on the hypotheses.org platform, into a new editorial space. Since its creation, the *Carnet* has published more than a hundred texts of varying status, length and scope: book reviews (the majority of the texts), survey essays, historiographic reviews, conference minutes, critical intervention contributions (with the revelation of the “Jean-Pierre Tremblay” hoax as a high (Quinon, Saint-Martin 2015)). The format of the “billet” proved to be ideal for testing ideas or presenting essays that would probably be difficult to publish in academic journals. It must be acknowledged, however, that for a non-negligible portion of the academic and research community, blogging will remain – for how much longer? – a peripheral expedient. The “posts” published in the *Carnet Zilsel* were, for some of them, much longer than articles published in journals; they have been the subject of fastidious rereading and productive exchanges with their authors. At the intersection of the “note” and the academic contribution, some of these texts have circulated beyond specialist circles: this was one of the primary objectives of the *Carnet*. Even so, it was

difficult for these texts to enter the academic arena: they are either not cited or rarely cited – or when they are, it is as second-rate material. It seems interesting to us today to extend the experience beyond this trench that still separates the world of so-called “academic” journals and that of scientific blogging, in order to increase and intensify discussions on science and technology “in society” in the French-speaking academic space¹.

18.4 Zil... what?

But, by the way, what does “*Zilsel*” actually mean? Zilsel is first of all the name of an Austrian historian, philosopher and sociologist, whose contribution to the history of knowledge is immense but unfortunately not widely recognized. Edgar Zilsel (1891–1944) embodied, until his tragic death, a sense of intransigence in the face of adversity. A regular member of the Vienna Circle and a partisan of Austro-Marxism, his work testifies both to a great intellectual exigence and an admirable open-mindedness. Critical and iconoclastic, he worked on the margins of the academic institutions of his time, in Austria as well as in the United States (where he went into exile after the Anschluss), while at the same time instigating innovative research that shook up the established frameworks of the philosophy of science. His texts – and especially the best known of them, devoted to the social roots of science (Zilsel 1942, 2003) – combine penetrating sociological insights (*e.g.* reporting on the social class-related relations that determine the stratification of scientific practices in the modern age, from craftsmen to university academics), with great historiographical ambitions, as illustrated by his quest for historical laws.²

18.5 Discipline, critics and inquiry

The definition of what constitutes the editorial project of a journal does not depend solely on the aspirations of its editors. It is also based on what we know (or think we know) about the conditions of reception of the publication, which inform the issues to be faced, the answers to be given (or not), the positions to be adopted (or not). Based on the experience of the *Carnet Zilsel*, three major sets of questions will define the journal in terms of its epistemic purpose: the relationship to disciplinarity, the modes of criticism, and the importance of investigation. The present text is (still) not a manifesto³, but it is useful to put it down in black and white.

The disciplinarity issue is not one that we have to deal with. It is rather that it overdetermines the reception of published texts and that we must, as far as possible, try to escape the grip of the socio-intellectual regime of the disciplines (Heilbron, Gingras 2015). On this point, the journal *Zilsel* subscribes to the following position: each of the authors writes from a more or less situated point of view, due to his or her training and qualification (history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy...), but this does not prohibit playing with/on disciplinary boundaries. What is at the heart of our project are practices, processes and transfers of knowledge. However, studies of science and technology often benefit from being

¹ It is worth mentioning here that we put an end to this experience in February 2019. Not only the critical exchanges were exhausting for us, but also the management of a journal like *Zilsel* required a bit of discipline... So we decided to focus.

² About the life and the work of Zilsel, *cf.* Diederick Raven and Wolfgang Krohn (2000). For a more personal presentation, see the beautiful portrait drawing by his son, the physicist Paul Zilsel (2016).

³ « Ceci n'est pas un manifeste », *Carnet Zilsel*, 31 octobre 2013, URL : <http://zilsel.hypotheses.org/a-propos>.

approached with tools from several disciplines of the human and social sciences. By subtling the journal “Science, Technology, Society,” we have identified the limits of a space that is large enough to accommodate all disciplines dealing with knowledge matters. And if disciplinarity does not worry us, neither does interdisciplinarity – as long as the disciplinary precedes the interdisciplinary.

Insisting on criticism, in the sense of making counter-arguments to claims that are being made within scientific fields, is more problematic. We remain convinced, however, that criticism is an essential feature of research as a profession, and not an enterprise of depreciation most often won by bad faith. It is strange to have to remind ourselves of this: the criticism we speak of only concerns the texts, the content and articulation of arguments, the way a concept is constructed, or the ways in which a case study is built. The person who has written it is not in question as a person, but only as the author of the ideas expressed in the text. There are places in which theoretically opposing researchers may otherwise maintain cordial or friendly relations. We consider this critical ideal to be a salutary one. It is also an essential catalyst for genuine collective research.

An argument that has not often been stressed, but which seems crucial to us, may be added: Bernard Lahire, in the introduction to his book *L'homme pluriel*, wrote that he found himself “split, divided” as an author and that “the criticisms that he could address to other authors were largely addressed to himself and that, through them, he sought to convince himself as much as to convince his readers.” More generally, he continued, “one argues and criticizes more effectively the more one has internalized the reasoning held and deployed by others, in all its complexity and without caricature” (Lahire 2001, 12). One could not put it better. Criticism is first and foremost a matter of intellectual honesty. It is also a matter of ethics. Without being in an ancillary relationship, the reflexivity that accompanies criticism must be without complacency. He who criticizes can (and must!), when he publishes, be criticized.

As to the third and final element: the need for investigation: it is not easy to envisage it in the current situation of the human and social sciences. One should not neglect, as Nicolas Offenstadt remarked about a number of texts received by the French journal *Genèses*, the “fruit and vegetable” effect (Schotté and Trépiéd 2015, 120) that describes empirical work centered on narrow objects, local dynamics and micro issues. They are undoubtedly accompanied by incremental gains in knowledge, but it is difficult to generalize them. On the other hand, the call for “Great Theory” (and, if possible, a radical one) has an artificial side, as if Charles Wright Mills’ warnings had gone unheeded (Mills 1967). It is all the easier to reject these two temptations since the passion for investigation does not prevent the taste for theorizing, quite the contrary. Everything is good as long as one does science, in other words, as long as one produces knowledge that is substantiated, coherent and cumulative, thus the opposite of dogmatic and/or “freewheeling” *essayisme*, which can always be found in the weakest areas of the human and social sciences.

This epistemological awareness is not without a political imperative. In these troubled times of ideological confusion, when half-skilled and semi-knowledgeable discourses capture the attention of the media or the arenas of public debate, it is important to recall that the project of “doing science” is not without political consequences – let us even say that, to a certain extent, it is a matter of “doing politics.” For, noting the relative autonomy of the professional fields of science and politics, we do not neglect the work of subordination that

political and techno-bureaucratic actors carry out in order to index research on managerial criteria of "excellence." Similarly, the problematic allusions by political leaders to what they think they know about the humanities and social sciences call for necessary vigilance. Because we do not work in a vacuum, because studies of science and technology are caught up in often tense public debates, these considerations relating to science and technology policy-making are not purely rhetorical.

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