# Between the crisis of dialectic and the dialectic of crisis

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## Abstract

The content of this article is structured in three steps. The first step is assumed as a partial recension of the book *Crisis in the castle of culture. From the stars to the screens* by Moisés de Lemos Martins[1]. It is a merely a partial recension due to the focus I assume on dialectic, which appears in the above mentioned book as a part of a more extended analysis on contemporary culture technology, its subordination to media processes and the technological environments of our time. In the second step of this text, I underline some of the stated arguments and question some of the author's conclusions. In the third step, as a result of this questioning I present some proposals and essay a synthesis's first gesture.

## Keywords

Crisis; culture; dialectic

## Resumo

O conteúdo deste texto está estruturado em três passos. No primeiro, assume parcialmente a forma de recensão do livro de Moisés de Lemos Martins *Crise no Castelo da Cultura. Das Estrelas para os Ecrãs*[2]. O caráter parcial da recensão resulta do enfoque dado por mim ao tema da dialética, que surge no livro em apreço inserido numa análise alargada da transformação da cultura contemporânea, da sua subordinação aos processos mediáticos e aos ambientes tecnológicos do nosso tempo. No segundo passo, sublinhando passagens da argumentação exposta, questiono algumas das conclusões propostas pelo autor. No terceiro, no quadro daquele questionamento, apresento algumas propostas e ensaio um primeiro momento de síntese.

## Palavras-chave

Crise; cultura; dialética

## First Step

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The book in analysis was edited en 2011 and presents simultaneously a summary of the author's theoretical thoughts, developed in the scope of cultural and communication studies, and also reflects his positioning collected from his texts about those two matters, which are gathered in an essay form.

M. L. Martins supports his questioning and his proposals by cross-referencing several authors' thoughts in book, and also using his own texts in which the cultural crisis' theme is approached. The crisis theme is handled in a communication perspective, with a hermeneutical basis, where the textual interpretation is assumed as a privileged method of observation and analysis. Nevertheless, what captures our interest the most is dialectic and the way it is treated and reflected.

M. L. Martins brings forward a perspective of contemporary culture immersed in a tragic *pathos*, as a result of the mutations introduced in social behaviour by globalized culture, through an increasing technologization of existence. Digital technology, namely the one imposed in communicational processes, is associated to profound mutations in individual and collective ways of acting, and determines its practical meaning. Technology's action is, however, not merely achieved through technical criteria. It is accomplished in social practices determined by a *field of social forces* and also by *states of power* (p. 42).

It is within the framework of the relationship between technique and social practices that the crisis of culture is affirmed, in particular with regard to the University, a problem to which M. L. Martins devotes considerable space of reflection (pp. 135-150).

The social *praxis*, as a category of the existent, is assumed in its global dynamics and in a time marked by globalization, in which digital technology is the fundamental material support. M. L. Martins' analysis takes in account the nature of the sensitive experience and the increasingly importance it assumes in discursive processes. He points out the observed transformation in contemporary society, where the *sensologic order* prevails over the *ideological order* (p. 64), and where the calls for emotion, desire and seduction are affirmed in a cultural production level, particularly in the means of communication, and defends the "idea that the *media* are 'the thought of our tragic modernity'" (p. 68).

It is also stated that "technologies globally connect people in real time, creating in individuals the brain they need, the brain of employable, competitive and performing individuals for the labour market, but at the same time disarticulate those individuals as citizens, imposing, from that time on, a fragmentary, chaotic and nomadic destiny" (p. 27). This will be a feature that characterizes the present moment, of confluence of "information technologies which support the global market" and of "bio-technologies that enhance human life", in a process of change of perceptive processes, where "the alienation and expropriation of sociability, the immobility and the deterritorialization, the loss of historical conscience and the dissolution of memory" are combined (p. 28).

Social dynamics are associated to the role of technique, in the configuration of the "epoch's crisis", emphasizing its profoundest consequences. However, they are put in equation in a generalization level and in comparison with their previous historical epochs. Still, according to M. L. Martins, "this crisis is triggered by technique's autotelism" (p. 28) which leads to the proposition of a "means without ends" thinking. The question

is" the technique's nature mutation – it is no longer an instrument, as an extension of the "human arm", but it "goes through" the human, "investing in it, producing also the arm itself and menacing to produce the whole man" (p. 18).

Evoking Walter Benjamin in the statement "imaging devices cause commotion and a generalized impact and, thus, our sensitivity is penetrated by the technical apparatus in an optic and tactile manner simultaneously" (p. 80), M. L. Martins also refers to McLuhan when he states that it is not "at an ideal and conceptual level that technology has its effect; it transforms, little by little, the relation between senses and perception models, without the least resistance" (p .117).

Television, as a technological device, has the capability of turning us on and off from the world, and does it as an effect of the machine's operation through image. M. L. Martins further claims that "technologically produced image comforts us in a broth of emotions" (p. 81). The outcome is an anesthetization of social consciousness, which begins to exist without "any sort of commitment to the era and ideas which motivated that social consciousness" (Benjamin quoted in p. 81) .

The power of technological devices is also aesthetic and, according to M. L.  Martins, they "reorganize our experience around our subjectivity and emotionality, modelling an artificial sensitivity (...) since those devices work for us like prosthetics of the production of emotions, like gadgets that produce and administer affection" (p. 81). Still, according to him, "the technological image has power, yet it is not the power; (...) it just represents the power and symbolizes it" (p .82).

M. L. Martins signalizes that it is observed in the network society an identity transformation, a cultural hybridization where the distinctive features of social classes are weakened (especially of the proletariat and bourgeoisie) (p. 85). Technology is capable of generating "uniformity expressions at a global scale and inscribes itself, on the other hand, in the logic of conformity production (...) in a way that what is agreed by most people is in fact subjectively expressed as what is real, rational and moral" (p. 86). And it even points to the existence of "a kind of syncretism, in which new socio-technical tribes coexist with the structures of domination linked to capitalism" (p. 86), because being "connected permanently to the information system, the individual is mobilized infinitely for the market" (p. 87).

"The wreckage of our traditional beliefs" and "the sequential process of general delegitimization" (p. 90) are underlined by M. L. Martins. Ambivalences are detected in the choices of social actors, in which the "'non-logical' attitudes appear side by side with the logical actions" (p. 93), and also "the precarious intensity of relationships, the fluctuation of feelings of love, in the ideological incoherencies and the existential and professional movability" (p. 94) are emphasized. This ambivalence is "stressed by mobility and the 'wander' (...) punctuated by multiple separations and ambivalences, by multiple transitions and 'passages' (...) in a perpetual movement of a journey of endless crossings, which comprehend exile, loneliness, 'clandestinity', and at the same time excitement, effervescence, emotion" (p .93).

The traits our time, according to M. L. Martins, present the "idea of a 'social tragic'"

associated to "the ruin of body in the contemporary society" (p. 102), considering this image also extensive to the idea of "a social body in effective ruin too: the persistent electoral abstention reflects and deepen the crisis of the representative system; the alternation of ruling parties bring no new policy, no alternative; the indicators of participation and citizenship are at their lowest point" (p .102), alleging further that "it is undeniable the *media* contribution, both for their staging, simulacra and euphoria, and for their silences, elusive and evasive  for the closure of democracy" (p. 110).

This author develops his thinking around the concept of crisis, "the crisis of historical reason, the crisis of sense, and ultimately, the crisis of the human condition. And also reflects about the eruption of the vertigo of the end" (p. 90). Therefore,

> the vertigo of crisis, and of the end, is associated, meanwhile, to the risk, a kind of vertigo of the beginning of modern time, which is a general characteristic of human life (...). The risk indicates that our decisions may have unexpected outcomes. (p. 92)

Still according to M. L. Martins "the generalization of the vertigo of risk in every sector of experience – technological risk, venture capital, investment risk, the risk in marriage, risk in intimate relations, risk behaviour – places man before his limits and prevents him from trusting in eternal life an in the institutions that guaranteed it" (p. 92), and relates "the tragic of modernity" to the shadow of "zero risk", concluding:

> the zero tolerance and the zero risk account for the 'intimate terror' (...) of a pragmatic and civilized order, an order which dreams about success and closes a condominium to fully enjoy it. This shadow is nowadays perfectly metaphorized by the shopping center. (p. 155)

Thus is presented by M. L. Martins a reflection on the crisis in contemporary society and points out some of its causes, highlighting the causal relation the technologization of communication has in the context of cultural crisis. It is also signalized the emergence of an aesthetic ideology, which "corresponds to a proposal of ontological and depoliticized thinking, configuring a kind of 'situationism, willing to enjoy what is presented, what is seen, what is given to live'" (Maffesoli quoted in p. 110).

## Second Step

Moisés de Lemos Martins has established the framework of a cultural crisis, to which a political response has to be given. In his understanding, explicit in the conclusions of the essay in question, that political response will require the reinvention of a "philosophy of the event: the philosophy for a future astonished by the spontaneity of what is in action, astonished by the restlessness of playing all in the historicity of present time" (p. 209). It makes way to a "materialist dialectic" (p. 211), which must also be reinvented: M. L.  Martins claims it is no longer about "the dialectic we know form Hegel and Marx, a dialectic which, historically, accomplishes a given narrative purpose and that

is performed in a fusion of opposites", only points to a "tensional dialectic" defined as "a dialectic which no synthesis redeems" (p. 209).

The text quoted above, taken from the conclusions of the book, confronts us with a problem: the causal relations, established during the analysis of the relationship between technology and the cultural crisis, are presented in a logical framework in which we do not find the discussion of dialectic fully supported in the text. Although M. L. Martins takes a materialist logic on, we a certain theoretical *a priori* in the statement: "both Aristotle's identity logic and Hegel's dialectic of contradiction are, nowadays, completely incapable of explaining what is happening to us" (p. 180).

On the other hand, the perception of *risk* appears as the triggering element of action, where the *instant* gives meaning to the definition of *moment*, though *moment* devoid of measure of time, the immediate time, where there is no place for reflexive action. And it is in that precise *instant* that the concrete action takes place. The *instant* escapes thus from the possibility of a conscience-controlled action.

We can, however, consider that the *instant* in action does not necessarily represent absence of time, in an absolute manner, but the absence of its perception, providing a distinction between the concepts of *act* and *action*, in a meaning that the action unfolds in successive acts. And it is in this succession of acts we have the possibility of time consciousness.

Thus, it will not be so much the *instant* but the *fragmentation* it represents, which will determine the contemporary thought, fragmentation of the human who, in contemporary society, is the product of the same technology which supports and promotes the cultural globalization. Time and the consciousness about time follow permanently the scientific and philosophical questioning, leaning over its limits, from the tiniest time of the *instant* to the large historical cycle of an epoch. Establishing the practical basis of technology, in terms of a "*novum* of contemporary experience" (p. 115), we will have to consider the impact it will have on the concept of *time*, in that broad spectrum, from the very least to the incommensurable extent.

Edward Hall, in his tour about different *types of time* (which are explained in *The dance of Life, the other dimension of time*), defends that *time* is an "aggregation of concepts, phenomena and rhythms retrieved from a very broad reality" (Hall, 1983, p. 23), which go from, for instance, the *biological time* to the *meta-time*, passing through the individual time, the *physical* time, the *sacred* and *profane* time, the *micro-time* (with its *polychrony* and *monochrony*), the *synchrony* and *rhythm*. The *micro-time* (as defined by Hall, "a temporal system inherent to a primary culture level which is part of a [specific] product"(Hall, 1983, p. 35) of a given culture), is the one closest to the reality analysed by M. L. Martins, of a technologically produced time, to which the human being submits himself without being aware of it.

Technology, as a "*novum* of contemporary experience", as the proposed definition implies, something temporal, a paradigm that can be delimited by a long historical cycle, and which does not yet offer the opportunity to recognize its outlines and boundaries (however, even if it cannot be explained by dialectic, and specifically by the materialist

dialectic, neither can it be refused *a priori*).

Still in a long term historical cycle, this concept can be likewise applied to political issues, as enunciated by M. L. Martins, concerning the "configuration of a new democratic space" (p. 82), understood as a space where the other is assumed as "being the excluded, the illiterate, the outcast, the unskilled" (p. 82). The same broadening of horizons was observed in the middle of the twentieth century, in Portugal, in a process of discovering the other, where the other was the inhabitant of the rural world, the peasant, as well as the ones who left the countryside migrating to the city in search of hired wage labour.

Back to the dominant culture of the western world, we live in an epoch where the intersubjective validity rules and is affirmed as a truth criterion. And, if it is subjected to the cultural possibilities built by society, then this criterion should be assumed as part of the problem, which is extended to technology and culture *praxis*, and therefore, should be questioned considering the dominant thinking that claims the "wreckage of our traditional beliefs" (p. 90).

The demographic mutations, for instance, are correlated with the cultural mutations perceived in contemporary societies. They can even determine drastic social and political mutations which deepen the existent crisis, as we can observe nowadays in issues such as migrations, religion and also social organization[3].

In the same sense, individuals who build their modes of relationship shaped by *media* technology could also be deprived of the use of that technology and thus suddenly excluded from the technological environment we assume as a common feature of our global culture, as in fact happens with the majority of human beings, in a worldwide scale.

Technology shapes our social actions, our individual behaviours, and interferes in the way we perceive the environment, through a modification of sensorial processes, in which the perception of time is one of the processes where those modifications manifest more sharply. This induces a necessity of considering this question in an epistemological level. The *instant* imposes itself as an element of analysis, as mentioned before, as well as the *fragmentation* of action, which leads to the proposition of the concept of *difference*.

The *logic of difference*, in the current context of individuation, is argued by M. L. Martins both in the "logic concepts of diversity and opposition" and in the "dialectic concepts of distinction and contradiction", leading to the questioning of the perenniality of dialectics as we know it today, since the logic of difference affirms the overcoming of oppositions "that dematerializes things and dilutes the difference between copy and model" (p .210).

The fact that the recognition of *difference* may be opposed to the recognition of *identity* or *conciliation*, places us in a "*greater conflict* than authorized, both in logical concepts of diversity and opposition, and as well as in dialectic concepts of distinction and contradiction" (p. 53), and does not exempt us form placing ourselves in a positioning that is

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[3] With the progressive growth in affirmation of an Islamic matrix in western society, for instance, the dominant western thinking – that claims the wreckage of the traditional beliefs – might no longer maintain the dominant role.

also ideological. That positioning is visible, for instance, in the words of M. L. Martins, in the observation that nowadays

> our experience is no longer commanded by the perfection demand and the conciliation which characterize the modern thinking. On the contrary, its source of inspirations resides in this type of sensibility, very similar to psychopathological states of the mind and with mystic ecstasy, a kind of sensibility that expresses itself in «delusions» frequently found in electronic interaction and also in drug addictions and perversions, in *handicap* or disability situations, in the so called 'primitive' cultures as well as in the 'other' cultures (*underground* and suburban cultures). (p. 45)

We can, still in the above mentioned text, observe possible and superficial correlations with other discourses formulated under other logics (mostly in moral contexts) that do not recognize – or do not naturally accept – the difference, as in dogmatic speeches, produced within a traditional (both religious and political) believes' framework, which today still stand as 'truths', and express the contradictions inherent to the crisis that marks the contemporary.

*Difference*, as part of the modern philosophical discourse, is affirmed as dominant ideological value, penetrating in the deepest structure of discourse about knowledge, and determining it. It was possible to observe the same phenomenon, in a recent past, on the subject of dialectic. However, the concept of dialectic is neither univocal nor static. In Marx's conceptualization, for instance, it can be signalized a category differentiation between dialectic as a *content* – the internal contradiction evidenced in each phenomenon – or as a *method*, the way phenomena are scrutinized.[4]

Marx acknowledged, and established as his methodological criterion[5], the necessity of knowing the limits of dialectic as form of enunciation, pointing out that these limits are linked to the historical process of the configuration of society. Dialectic is, thus, also understood as a historical product, subjected to limitations and transformations, that is, susceptible of questioning and evolution.

We can correlate Hegel's or Marx's dialectics formulations with the dominant philosophical and scientific contexts of their time, and find – in the observable correlations – justifications for their differences.

In a scientific-technical level, the present time also raises new questions and new forms of equating problems, both in physics, in mathematics, chemistry, geometry, cybernetics or neurology, and all these scientific areas have undergone fundamental transformations. It is in this assumption we understand the conclusion reached by M. L. Martins, in which the need for a reinvention of dialectics is reaffirmed, a need that lies

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[4] That is the interpretation proposed by José Maria Ripalda (2005, p. 77) while Norberto Bobbio discusses both meanings of dialectic (dialectic of reciprocity and dialectic of movement), in the chapter dedicated to Marx (Abbagnano, 1971, pp. 266-69).

[5] As stated by Marx (2008), p. 364): "the most abstract categories, in spite of their validity – indeed, as a result of their abstract nature – for every epoch, and for what is determinable in each abstraction, is also a product of historical conditions and does not have full validity except for these conditions and within the limits of these precise conditions".

in the most current scientific and technical transformations and in their social implications (these social implications being considered, above all, with regard to their impact on human communication).

In the same way, just as scientific transformation does not entirely obliterate the precedent technology – but rather subjects it to a process of transformation, which comprehend deconstruction, re-signification and reuse – knowledge, which at each moment is formulated according to state of the scientific and technical development, is also deconstructed so that it can then be reused (certainly with new significations) and, beyond that, the momentary obliteration of the preceding knowledge assumes an ideological dimension.

### Third Step

We return to the initial problem, the one of contemporary culture crisis enunciated by M. L. Martins, where the *tragic pathos* is not expressed in the denunciation contained in each given example but, mainly, in the assumption of the logical impossibility of its explanation and, prospectively, try to face it and resolve it.

We have sought a deep understanding of Moisés Lemos Martins' essay on the *contemporary cultural crisis*, by undertaking a critical appropriation that led us from the crisis of dialectic to the dialectic of the crisis, and to the crisis of an epoch characterized by the "alienation and the expropriation of sociability, by the immobility and deterritorialization, the loss of historical consciousness and the dissolution of collective memory" (p. 28), and which dominant trait is the imposition of a "logic of conformity, with the political action drastically reduced to a real of consensus" (p. 86).

M. L. Martins also states that "there is a radical contradiction between event and culture". And that "culture is integrative and has a totalizer function, unites what only exists in a dispersed and fragmented form" (p. 212), and that for the crisis of the existent (of what is in action) an answer, not cultural but political, has to be given (it is necessary to give an answer, not cultural but a political one). M. L. Martins underlines a dialectic thought to be kept in mind: culture is an event that "unifies e totalizes what exists only in a state of dispersion and fragmentation" (p. 208). And he also calls upon Bragança de Miranda's thinking to complete his argument: "Culture is the current way of controlling the event. From a critical point of view, we can even say that culture and the event are antithetical" (p. 208).

On the other hand, if in the light of a *philosophy of the event*, the response to the crisis of culture is indeed political, as M. L. Martins defends, it would have to be "a political response that allow us to act with everything within our reach, throwing ourselves in the historicity of the present" (p. 211), assuming the political action as a means of fulfilment of knowledge where the logical contradictions of thought are crossed by the contradictions inherent in the event that are intended to be known, this response will also become cultural.

The proposed conclusions reinforces the validity of dialectic as a necessary method to analyze a reality that is manifested and apprehended in its contradictions, together

with the urgency of its discussion, in view of the needed adequacy to an ever changing reality.

But the affirmation of perenniality of dialectic cannot be restricted to a mere statement of principle or be simply supported in the prospection of an ultimate purpose, which would reduce it to a dogmatic caricature. The considered concept of dialectic assumes that the dialectic thinking does not cultivate the dogma of a foreseen future, rather it seeks the way for a possible future.

Finally, the path of argumentation covered in the analysed text, discussing how the *technologized living* marks contemporary thinking, makes it possible to question McLuhan's statement when he says that it is not "at the level of ideas and concepts that technology has its affects". And M. L. Martins also identifies the moment in which the conceptual transformation occurs: *the transition from analogue to digital*, which will be fully defined with the emergence of virtual access.

The emergence of digital reproduction technology has expanded a process already observed in analogue technology: the object becomes reproductible (in the Benjaminian sense), but retains its physical distinction. The digital technology as an exponential effect on the repetition of the object, in the sense suggested by Deleuze (1988, p. 43): "a repetition of elements, which are indeed distinct, and nevertheless have strictly the same concept. Repetition appears thus as a difference, yet an absolutely concept less difference, hence an indifferent difference".

Repetition preserves the material singularity of each object. However, virtual access has qualitatively altered that reproductive sense (it is no longer a repetition of the object, only a repetition of its inscription).

M. L. Martins refers the dematerialization of things by technology and the dilution of "the difference between copy and model" [p. 210]. It is important to underline that in virtual access something substantially new occurs: a given object can be accessed in multiple moments by multiple individuals, of even simultaneously, with no need that, in this multiple and simultaneous access, those the individuals have to meet or recognize themselves in the quality of common users of the same object.

The technological process of individuation in communication was initiated launched in the analogue phase of technology, with the implementation of portable technologies devices and the individualization of listening spots and, afterwards, extended by with digital technology to the individual viewing, thereby deepening a behavioural change that reinforced the individuation.

The process of identification (of the individual with his community) becomes preferentially guided by strategies of publicity, in the same way that the advertising discourse imposes itself as the dominant mode[6]. But we dare to say (going against the current dominant and *marketing* discourse about the construction new social forms appealing

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[6] According to M. L Martins: "in classrooms the commercial style become generalized, in one case the spot style, in another the style of a promotional film, different modes for the same purpose: the search for immediate communication and the proposal of a meaning at the highest speed. Classrooms cannot, in fact, be diminished in the comparison with the rhythm of advertising communication" (p. 152).

to cybernetic technology) the *virtual usufruct* has not proved, by itself, to be able to build a sense of community consistent with what occurs in human interaction, and that may be one of its limits. ´

The transition from analog to virtual signals a paradigm shift, a change in the concept of lived time, that is imposed to the society and to the individuals that constitute them. This change, which, being historical, does not take place simultaneously in all societies and in relation to all individuals, but corresponds to a dominant tendency and which, in this condition, will be neither absolute nor definitive.

This is the material base and the historical moment of a technological paradigm shift, an alteration of the concept of *lived time* that is imposed both at the level of societies and the individuals who constitute them. An alteration which, however historical it may be, does not happen simultaneously in all societies and in relation to all individuals, but rather corresponds to a dominant tendency which, in this condition, will neither be absolute nor definitive.

McLuhan developed his thinking around the communicational *marketing* process as a hallmark feature of the economy and shaped the culture of the consumer society. The herald of modern times (and of crisis too), he ended up putting the essence of human problems in the sphere of technology.

In his conclusions, M. L. Martins, shifts the axis of the problem from the technical sphere to the politics, and points out the role of *media* in the construction of an existence regulated by the metaphor of the "commercial center", where a part of Humanity isolates itself in its security standard, comfort and, also, consumption.

At this point, we can conjugate the thought of M. L. Martins with the statement by Zygmunt Bauman, when he denounces the political dimension of this issue: "government deregulates everything it can, so that nothing can continue to be perceived as lasting and trustworthy, predictable, susceptible of being assured a anticipated; (...) it defines the citizen, in theoretical and practical terms, as the satisfied consumer" (Bauman, 2007, p. 287).

Nevertheless, Bauman situates the genesis of the problem (of the crisis of the existent) not in technique but in politics and assumes an optimistic possibility, declaring that

> life does not have to be this way. The space in which we all live can be perfectly structured en terms of concerted action: in a space structured in such a concerted basis in which multiple things of the greatest importance for the life of each of us (...) will be *shared*, we can look to and see the others more as opportunities than as obstacles in terms of our collective and individual well-being"[7].

But, in an ethical sphere, we interrogate: "'they can...'. But the question is: they could and will want to do it?" (Bauman, 2007, p. 289) Could it be the other side of

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[7] Then Bauman points out: "it is too easy to present the hopes of other people as insufficiently well-founded (reasoned/substantiated) and their solutions as insufficiently realistic. It is much more difficult for us to propose our own assumptions of hope and our own solutions in terms of putting one and the other under accusations of the same order" (Bauman, 2007, p. 290).

contemporary crisis, of its *tragic pathos*, to which a *philosophy of the event* must also respond?

Placing his discourse in the thematic specificity of communication, M. L. Martins advances a parcel of the response to the *media*: "if any promise can be made by them today, it will be exactly that: to place themselves in root on the horizon of a shared community" (p. 54).

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