

CORNELLI, G. (2013). *IN SEARCH OF PYTHAGOREANISM. PYTHAGOREANISM AS AN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CATEGORY*, "STUDIA PRAESOCRATICA" 4, DE GRUYTER, BERLIN

Alessandro Stavru*

STAVRU, A. (2014). Resenha. CORNELLI, G. (2013). *In Search of Pythagoreanism. Pythagoreanism as an Historiographical Category*, "Studia Praesocratica" 4, de Gruyter, Berlin, *Archai*, n. 13, jul - dez, p. 171-173

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.14195/1984-249X_13_17

* Freie Universität,
Berlin

1. G. Cornelli, *O pitagorismo como categoria historiográfica*, "Classica Digitalia Brasil", CECH-Universidade de Coimbra/Annablume, Coimbra/São Paulo 2011. In the same year the author organized a conference on Pythagorean tradition in Brasília, the proceedings of which have appeared recently (*On Pythagoreanism*, eds. G. Cornelli, C. Macris, R. McKirahan, de Gruyter, Berlin 2013).

2. See the reviews of the Portuguese version of Cornelli's book: Francesc Casadesús Bordoy, *Archai* 7 (2011), 159-162 and Manuela Dal Borgo, *Digressus* 12 (2012), 64-71.

This book is the English version of a work which appeared two years ago in Portuguese.¹ Its structure and general aim are clearly outlined²: I will give a brief sketch of them before moving to more general issues. The volume consists of four chapters. The first two have a methodological character, and deal with the history of modern scholarship on Pythagoreanism and Pythagoreanism as an historiographical category respectively. Chapters three and four have a more specific character, being focused on two fundamental doctrines of Pythagoreanism such as metempsychosis and arithmology. The interplay between these different aspects, that is on the one hand methodology, on the other the discussion of sources, is a main feature of the book. Equally noteworthy are the range of ancient and modern materials examined, the variety of scholarly approaches surveyed, and the original insights provided on different topics.

The author's main claim is that Pythagoreanism cannot be understood by the conventional means of scientific investigation. Pythagoreanism is a phenomenon *sui generis*; it requires therefore a methodology which must also be *sui generis*. First of all, it is a phenomenon which is not limited in time, as Pythagorean tradition never died.³ Secondly, it is a multi-faceted phenomenon which cannot be

studied without taking into account its complexity and its contradictions. Last but not least, even the definition of “Pythagoreanism” is a problem: every scholar has more or less his own view of what is “Pythagorean” and what is not, of what belongs to the tradition going back to Pythagoras and his immediate followers and what has been added to it later.

As the author puts it, the uniqueness of Pythagoreanism depends on the fact that this phenomenon is both diachronic and synchronic. It is diachronic because it can be understood only if one deals with the different strata of its *tradition*. Every stage of Pythagoreanism is a *construction* (or even a *re-construction*) whose reliability depends both on the trustfulness of the elements which constitute it and the soundness of the methodological criteria applied. Since the times of August Boeckh,⁴ scholars have been analyzing these elements trying to sort out doxographical trees of succession which would enable to grasp fragments of lost texts of Pythagoreanism. This task has been accomplished by studying late authors such as Porphyry and Iamblichus, whose accounts turned out to rely on earlier texts such as those of Aristotle and his followers. But however successful (or unsuccessful) these studies have been,⁵ other problems arose from them. The data made available by *Quellenforschung* showed that Pythagoreanism had always been a multifaceted as well as an extremely controversial movement, and that reconstructing its tradition from Neoplatonism up Aristotle and Plato could not help in explaining its inconsistencies. On the contrary, the more “original” testimonies emerged from Hellenistic and Roman literature the more it became evident that Pythagoreanism was characterized by two apparently incompatible strands of knowledge, i.e. the “mystical” one of acousmata and metempsychosis and the “scientific” one of cosmology and mathematics.

Cornelli gives full account of the interpretations which led to this impasse. His scrutiny of Pythagorean scholarship is both exhaustive and stimulating. The different hermeneutic approaches to Pythagorean literature make clear that a purely diachronic approach to the historical development of tradition is not sufficient to grasp its uniqueness.

Cornelli suggests therefore to combine this approach with another one, which he calls «synchronic». As he puts it, «to synchronically understand Pythagoreanism is to recognize its place within the categories ordinarily used to describe ancient philosophy», namely: «“pre-Socratic”, “school”, “science”, “religion”, “politics”, or even “philosophy”» (54). But as none of these standard categories is multifaceted enough to apply to Pythagoreanism, an adjustment in methodology becomes necessary. A truly synchronic understanding of Pythagoreanism must be multidisciplinary, in order to overcome «the dichotomies between science and magic, writing and orality, Ionians and Italics, to which historiography usually appeals» (55). Such an approach had already been attempted by Walter Burkert, who in his seminal book of 1972 pointed out the necessity to have a treatment of Pythagoreanism as «many-sided as possible».⁶ Cornelli follows this path, but goes further. He claims that if Pythagorean wisdom is polymathy, as Heracleitus puts it (fr. 22 B 40 and 129 DK), the study of it must suit its nature, and thus turn into a «*methodological polymathy*» (54). This leads Cornelli to claim that *Pythagoreanism itself* must be considered as an historiographical category. It does not fall under the “conventional” categories of Presocratic philosophy such as religion, politics and science, but encompasses them all.

Cornelli’s aim is ambitious: he maintains that one has to understand Pythagoreanism not through already *existing* categories, but as a category *on its own*. This «will permit Pythagoreanism to emerge from the mists of its complex history» (54), and in turn enable to get a better understanding of other categories of ancient philosophy. Such a methodology may even be of great impact outside the field of Pythagoreanism, as it will likely have consequences also for the study of the pre-Socratics in general.⁷

One may wonder whether such an holistic approach, which aims at eliminating barriers between disciplines, is altogether possible, given the ultra-specialized character of contemporary scholarship. Another problem concerns the subjects of research which characterize Pythagoreanism. These appear to be fundamentally heterogeneous: on the one hand science, on the other religion: can we cope

3. 53: «Rather, the proposed methodology aims to understand how, through the intertwining of diachronic and synchronic dimensions, the category of “Pythagoreanism” survived the expected dilution of a multifaceted movement, a movement that is not only radically and extensively diverse in its authors and subjects, but that additionally spans over a thousand years of the history of Western thought. In fact, the unique challenge of this project among to the problems associated with the history of pre-Socratic philosophy lies in the fact that Pythagoreanism has properly never died».

4.A. Boeckh, Philolaos des Pythagoreers Lehren nebst den Bruchstücken seines Werkes, Vossische Buchhandlung, Berlin 1819.

5. Seminal *Quellenforschung* in Pythagoreanism has been done since the last decades of 1800. See E. Zeller, E. Rohde, *Die Quellen des Iamblichus in seiner Biographie des Pythagoras*, Rheinisches Museum für Philologie 26 (1871), 554-576; J. Mewaldt, *De Aristoxeni Pythagoricis sententiis et Vita Pythagorica*, Dissertation Berlin 1904; W. Bertermann, *De Iamblichi vitae Pythagoricae fontibus*, Dissertation Königsberg 1913; A. Delatte, *Études sur la littérature pythagoricienne*, Slatkine & Fils, Paris 1915, *Essai sur la politique pythagoricienne*, Slatkine & Fils, Paris 1922, *La vie de Pythagore de Diogène Laërce*, Lamertin, Bruxelles 1922; H. Jäger, *Die Quellen des Porphyrios in seiner Pythagoras-Biographie*, Dissertation Zürich 1919; I. Lévy, *Recherches sur les sources de la légende de Pythagore*, Leroux, Paris 1927; A.-J. Festugière, *Sur la ‘Vita Pythagorica’ de Jamblique*, *Revue des études grecques* 50 (1937), 470-484; K. von Fritz, *Pythagorean Politics in Southern Italy. An Analysis of the Sources*, Columbia University Press, New York 1940 and *‘Pythagoras’*, *RE* 47, 1963, 171-203; W. Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1972, esp. 53-83 and 97-109. The achievements reached by these scholars have been recently doubted by Leonid Zhmud, who claims that «attempts to reconstruct authentic Pythagorean texts from the fifth and fourth centuries brought to no

result», and that «perhaps because of the absence of palpable success in this area of *Quellenforschung*, in recent decades very few scholars have ventured far into it» (*Pythagoras and the Early Pythagoreans*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, 9-10). Despite Zhmud's skepticism, many scholars do nowadays still believe that later authors (such as Iamblichus) use sources going back to texts of the 5th and 4th centuries (such as Aristotle's works on Pythagoreanism). A recent work going in this direction is P.S. Horky, *Plato and Pythagoreanism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, esp. 85-88.

6.W. Burkert, *Lore and Science*, 12: «Most studies of Pythagoreanism have dealt with only one restricted aspect; even Zeller confined himself to the development of philosophical concepts, left mathematics aside, and bracketed out religious and ethical questions; and later works have been even more specialized, whether in the philosophical area, in that of mathematical, astronomical, and musical problems, or that of religion». This approach has been severely criticized by Leonid Zhmud, who thinks that Pythagoreanism can be studied only by sorting out single issues «which may prove amenable to solution» (L. Zhmud, *Pythagoras*, 12; on this issue see also Zhmud's latest paper *On the Fallacy of the Holistic Approach to Pythagoreanism*, held in Berlin on October 20, 2013 at the workshop «Pythagorean Harmonics from Philolaus to Leibniz»).

7. Thanks to its complexity, Cornelli's Pythagoreanism turns out to be a paradigmatic hermeneutic category which forces to overcome the traditional boundaries that characterize the study of ancient thought and culture: «In the case of Pythagoreanism, it will be necessary to overcome the rigid dichotomies of a historiography too accustomed to distinguish, for example, between science and magic, writing and orality, Ionian and Italian. None of these alone seems to capture the complexity of Pythagorean social organization and doctrine» (55).

with such diverse topics using one single approach? Cornelli's book leaves many questions open: only time will tell if its ideas will be able to convert into reality. One thing is certain: a holistic approach to Pythagoreanism may be difficult if not altogether impossible to attain. But even more so, there is no doubt that such an approach represents a highly wished desideratum in scholarship, where compartmentalization of the different facets of Pythagorean knowledge has become more and more increasing, thus making it difficult to study the context of their origins, development, and interdependency.

But Pythagoreanism is not only an historiographical category. Cornelli goes further this categorization, and tackles key-issues linked to it, namely the *definition of Pythagoreanism* and the *criterion for being Pythagorean*.⁸ To answer these questions, he focuses on three distinct strands of Pythagorean tradition, namely: way of life as attested in the *akousmata* and *symbola*, immortality and transmigration of the soul, and numerology. Cornelli's idea is that all of these forms of knowledge, though different, go back to «Proto-pythagoreanism»,⁹ that is to the most ancient stage of this philosophical movement, and that they remained a distinct feature of Pythagoreanism also in later ages. In two distinct chapters he deals in detail with these topics (chapter 3, on metempsychosis; chapter 4, on numbers), which showcase how varied and multifaceted Pythagoreanism is. Here we learn, among other things, that Pythagoreanism appears to be «both mystical and scientific, because on the one hand, the theory of metempsychōsis does not respond only to a soteriological mystique, but also becomes an explanatory element of a reality that is irreducibly interconnected, as well as being the foundation of epistemology in the practice of *anámnesis*» (192).

One might think that in Cornelli's view the definition of Pythagorean identity is a complex one, similar to that of Pythagoreanism as an historiographical category. But this is not the case, as for Cornelli the criterion for being Pythagorean is «membership in a community and a shared *bíos* consisting primarily in observing Pythagorean *akoúsmata* and *symbola*, rather than the acceptance of certain philosophical and scientific theories» (82). This means that if on one hand there is no

contradiction between the acousmatic and the mathematical Pythagoreanism, on the other there is no doubt that the acousmatic moment is decisive: not science but way of life and belonging to a Pythagorean *koinonía*¹⁰ is the ultimate criterion for identifying a Pythagorean.¹¹

So we see: the concern of an historiographical Pythagoreanism which encompasses the contrasts and differences of tradition does not impede the author to provide the distinctive feature of what is specifically Pythagorean and what is not. A major achievement of the book lies in the productivity of this ambivalence: very different figures of tradition like Philolaus and Apollonius turn out to be similar as soon as their adherence to a special lifestyle and a community comes to the fore. We can therefore conclude that Cornelli's Pythagoreanism is not just a «historiographical category», as it has to do not with the doctrines, but with the lives of its protagonists. It is a category *in flesh and blood*, which cannot be separated from the charismatic manners and attitudes of the representatives of Pythagoreanism in its different historical stages.

Recebido em maio de 2014,
aprovado em junho de 2014.

8. In Cornelli's view, the criteria which are commonly used for defining «what is Pythagorean» are not sufficient: «The criteria commonly used to classify someone as a Pythagorean did not seem to stand up to our methodological test: because one cannot think of the Pythagorean school as something doctrinally homogeneous. Further, neither geographical criteria nor doxographical trees of succession serve as adequate ways to define the category» (84).

9. The term «Proto-Pythagoreanism» is not new in scholarship: see, e.g., G. de Santillana & H. von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill. An Essay on Myth and the Frame of Time*, Gambit, Boston 1969. New is the systematical use of it Cornelli makes in his book (5-6, 42-44, 49, 51, 60-61, 73, 84-85, 87, 91, 94, 97-99, 119, 126, 132, 134, 135, 137, 144, 145, 147, 185, 188, 190, 192, 194).

10. The issue of Pythagorean *koinonía* is debated at pages 67-77 of the volume. To define the specific character of Pythagorean «clubs» Cornelli opts for the neutral term *koinonía*, thus rejecting other definitions such as «sect» (Rohde, Burkert, Riedweg) and «church» (Toynbee, Jaeger). On this and related issues see also G. Cornelli, *Sulla vita filosofica in comune: koinonía e philía pitagoriche*, in: S. Giombini & F. Marcacci (eds.), *Il quinto secolo. Studi di filosofia antica in onore di Livio Rossetti*, Aquapiano, Perugia 2010, 415-436.

11. In Cornelli's view, these two aspects are linked: «However, the possibility of adherence to a particular way of life implies, at least in its inaugural pre-Socratic times, the actual existence of a community that is structured around that same way of life» (59). Bruno Centrone (Review of Zhmud, *Wissenschaft, Philosophie und Religion im frühen Pythagoreismus*, *Elenchos* 20 (1999), 441) and Carl Huffman (*Two Problems in Pythagoreanism*, in P. Curd & D.W. Graham (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook to Presocratic Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, 301) have similar claims, but they do not connect these two aspects.

