

Alexander Kojève: from revolution to empire

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Abstract History begins in a struggle producing two figures, Master and Slave. It ends in a “universal and homogeneous state”, an Empire. Revolution with its inevitable terror is the central point in this history. Kojève himself had experienced the Russian revolution and Civil War; in 1920 he left Russia for Germany, where till the end of 1923 he had witnessed the same strife between the “left” and the “right”. This experience is the basis of his view of history, his interpretation of the path from Mastery and Slavery to the figure of the Citizen, to universal recognition. The French revolution with the Jacobins’ terror and Napoleon’s Empire represent for him the model by which to understand not only the revolutions of the twentieth century, but of the entire course of history.

Keywords Kojève’s philosophy of history · Fight for recognition · Master and slave · Enlightenment · Revolution · Empire

Alexandre Kojève wrote about the French Revolution that ended in Napoleon’s Empire, yet Kojève himself first witnessed revolutionary terror in Moscow; then, after fleeing from Russia to Germany in the early 1920, he experienced the German crisis with its elements of civil war that was resolved at the end of 1923 (the suppression of the Bavarian Soviet Republic, the Kapp Putsch, the uprising of communists and left-wing socialists in Saxony, Hitler’s “beer hall putsch,” etc.). Many pages of his works point precisely to this experience of revolution. Kojève himself admitted that his turn to Hegel’s philosophy of history was partially prompted by the experience of revolution. “He wanted to know what led to the kind of events that made an individual helpless in their face,” as the German translator of his principal work (Kojève 1975, 7) reported. However, for Kojève, all twentieth

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century revolutions took the French Revolution as their model; it was the first revolution to reject “the old order,” i.e. the world of Masters and Slaves, replacing these two ancient *Gestalten* with the Citizen.

The idea of “revolution” acquired its current meaning during the French revolution, coming to mean two groups of events: (1) a violent overthrow of an existing state system, which sometimes descends into civil war; (2) a long-term structural change that affects the most far-flung areas of society (science, humanities, technology, industry, culture, morals, etc.) leading to progress and even to the end of history. These two semantic fields overlap, synchrony and diachrony complement each other (Cf. Brunner et al. 1984). What sets Revolution apart from any reform is a sharp break with the past; yet revolution also is part of humankind’s continuous movement out of the past and into the future. Without this teleology, without the ideological background created by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution would have merely have been another Fronde; it would have never gained such international reaction and influence (Cf Dawson 1972, 92–95).

Revolution presupposes violence, as it overthrows the elites of the “old order,” which impede “emancipation”; Revolution is conceived as a transition from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom. It does not limit itself to mere negation; it establishes freedom, equality, and brotherhood. The equality of civil rights is inevitably followed by the question of economic equality: an attempt is undertaken to employ political means and violence to free the people from poverty. “Ça ira,” the sans-culottes’ song, repeatedly said “aristocrats to the lamp-post” and claimed, “We will no longer starve.” Revolutions are started by enlightened minorities wishing to have parliamentary debates, freedom of speech, conscience, yet revolutions inevitably involve the masses, “*les damnés de la terre*,” who demand redistribution of property.

Thereafter, the actions of revolutionaries who involve “the masses of people” in their struggle, are a part of humankind’s movement toward “progress.” Since the late eighteenth century, history has been understood as a world-wide process of changes, a clean break with all the traditions inherited from preceding societies. “Ever since the French Revolution, it has been common to interpret every violent upheaval, be it revolutionary or counter-revolutionary, in terms of a continuation of the movement originally started in 1789, as though the times of quiet and restoration were only the pauses in which the current had gone underground to gather force to break up to the surface again—in 1830 and 1832, in 1848 and 1851, in 1871, to mention only the more important nineteenth-century dates (Arendt 1963, on-line).” In the twentieth century, revolutions and civil wars continued this movement, first in continental Europe and then throughout the entire world.

The very perception of history changed. A new era arrived, Modernity (*Modern*), which no longer could borrow its landmarks from the models of centuries past. In its self-perception, Modernity proceeds solely from being self-oriented—it takes its norms from itself. From now on, the true present is at the point where continuity of traditions overlap with innovation (Habermas 1985, 141). The past is viewed exclusively as a reservoir of energy for the present, and from now on, the project of the future determines the content of historical studies. From their very outset, the debates about the French Revolution were conducted by those who attempted a

philosophical conceptualization of the grandiose changes. Condorcet and Paine, de Maistre and Burke were simultaneously philosophers and forbears of the nineteenth century ideologies. However, it was German thought, primarily Hegel's philosophy of history, that had the greatest influence. The vanishing faith in Providence was replaced with the faith in history's reasonable plan. While for Hegel himself historicism was oriented toward the past as the memory of successive *Gestalten*,¹ for Neo-Hegelians the "spirit of history" or "self-consciousness of time" became the criterion of what is true and what is false, the truth of an era being borne out by time. The religion of the "educated," the revolutionaries' *Ersatz* faith is the idea of progress aimed at an eschatological goal that concludes empirical history. Hegel's disciples wanted to be more than historians; they wanted to create history, and they transformed their teacher's absolute historicism into historical *futurism* (Löwith 2002, 373-374).

In the philosophy and historiography of the twentieth century, *Historismus* owes its existence in equal degrees to Hegelianism and to German Romanticism. Besides, not all theories categorized as "Neo-Hegelian" are oriented toward a revolutionary transformation of the world. British "absolute idealism" is a case in point. Yet, despite Hegel's own quietism,² Hegel's philosophy of history became "the algebra of revolution" (Herzen). History is the victorious March of reason, the actualization of freedom: this is the leitmotif of Neo-Hegelian concepts that quickly transform into political projects: Marx and Engels' socialist vision, Bakunin's anarchistic project. Although twentieth century Neo-Hegelianism was ideologically diverse (Croce was a liberal, Gentile a fascist), "leftist" interpretations of Hegel's legacy dominated. G. Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* and H. Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* are good examples of revolutionary practices founded on the Hegelian teaching of the identity of substance and subject. The left has always viewed Hegel, and still does, as an heir to the Enlightenment.³

¹ "...[T]he goal, absolute knowledge, that is, spirit knowing itself as spirit, has there collection of spirits as they are in themselves and as they achieve the organization of their realm," these are the words Hegel chose to conclude *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

² Whatever "the left," who counted Hegel among their predecessor and the liberals, who viewed his philosophy either as a "reaction," or as a "fountainhead" of totalitarianism, had to say, he was a moderate liberal conservative. In his article "Political Absolutism" (1926), C. Schmitt pinpointed the particular social group whose interests Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* represented: it was Prussia's liberal officials who carried out reforms in the early nineteenth century. Cf. Ritter (1984).

³ The short period of Stalin's final years is an exception. Stalin personally ordered that Hegel be viewed as a reactionary; it resulted in such measures as the confiscation of Volume 3 of *The History of Philosophy* where Hegel appeared as a direct predecessor of Marxism (à la Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks*). However, ideological debates in the USSR had largely nothing to do with the history of philosophy. The only curious point is that Stalin and Zhdanov's views of the "reactionary Romanticism" and of Hegel's idealism were in full accordance with the liberal "unmasking" from Hayek to Popper.

Anthropology and history

The interpretation of Hegel in Kojève's lectures (1933–1939) published later as *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* seems to have much in common with the aforementioned works of Lukács and Marcuse. Although there are almost no direct references to Marx, “the dialectic of Master and Slave” is frequently compared to the Marxist “class struggle.” However, Kojève differs from both Marxist historical materialism and from Hegel. For the latter, slavery and tyranny constitute in the history of peoples a necessary stage and therefore are relatively legitimate; moreover, a slave subjugating his self-love to the will of the master is the beginning of a man's true freedom. The trembling of an individual will, the feeling of the nothingness of self-love, the habit of obedience are a necessary stage in the development of each human being.⁴ For Marxists, all of human history, starting with the first slavery-based states, is the history of class struggle (see “The Manifesto of the Communist Party”). In Kojève's philosophy, dominance and slavery go far beyond antiquity, these are two “forms of life” that initiate and will be present throughout history until its “end” (or “purpose”—the French *fin de l'histoire* has both meanings).

For Kojève, interpreting Hegel was a pretext to expound his own doctrine that could be labeled “Neo-Hegelian,” since several of its crucial tenets come from the German titan, yet the doctrine itself clearly differs from Hegel's. *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is written in recondite language that many commentators have attempted to clarify. Kojève is engaged in a different pursuit. He presents his readers with a “modernized” Hegel. His expressive translations of excerpts from the *Phenomenology* convey the principal idea, but not the style of the original. Kojève did not turn Hegel into a precursor of Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger; he transformed him into the author of their ideas. He turned the early nineteenth century thinker into his contemporary, a co-author of existentialist anthropology and the revolutionary history of philosophy.

From the start of his lectures, Kojève claims that Hegel's *Logic* and *Philosophy of Nature* deviate from his basic ideas due to the two “biases” Hegel had retained: the first, “monism” (in the *Logic*)⁵ and, the second, the classical philosophy bias of not distinguishing the human mode of being from that of nature. The latter prevented Hegel from assuming an entirely “Judeo-Christian” stance in regard to Man, which stance, according to Kojève, is the idea of negativity and therefore of individuality, of historicity, of freedom, in the face of one's own death. Hegel's ontology in the *Phenomenology*, unlike in his later works, is the “ontology of Man,” since when he speaks about “spirit” he means exclusively the being of Man. In other words, Hegel's ontology is anthropology, and his phenomenology is an “ideational abstraction,” i.e. consideration of a specific person, specific historical eras. The essence of man is the totality of the possibilities of man's historical

⁴ Hegel. *The Philosophy of Mind*, paragraph 435.

⁵ Sometimes, Kojève speaks about differences between *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Logic*; sometimes, he asserts that their contents are essentially identical, “*Logic* gives us an atemporal ontology, while in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, that ontology unfolds in time.” See Kojève (1971), 420–421.

manifestation, the cognitive, affective potentialities, capacities for action. They have changed throughout history, since every particular culture, era, social milieu stimulate the actualization of only some of them. This is why *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is the description of a sequence of forms (*Gestalten*) manifesting that essence. Phenomenology was a sort of a “veiled remembrance” (*Er-innerung*) of completed human history. Kojève believed Hegel adhered to this very stance, although from time to time he strayed into the “classical” position such that historical evolution also emerges in his works as the manifestation of a pre-existing eternal idea, a view at odds with the “Judeo-Christian” vision of Man’s historicity of Man, his becoming [Ibid., 40].

Pointing out Hegel’s “inconsistencies” in this manner has a long-standing tradition. Already his disciples, the Neo-Hegelians, held that when Hegel spoke of “spirit,” he meant solely the history of mankind. Such statements abound in the works of Russians offering an interpretation of Hegel (for instance, Herzen’s “Dilettantism in Science”). Yet Kojève understands “historicity” not only in the spirit of left-wing Hegelianism that includes Marx, but also in the manner of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Kojève identifies Hegel’s phenomenology with that of Husserl and Heidegger; from the start of his lectures, he characterizes phenomenology as a “philosophical anthropology” focused on “a Man’s existential goals.”⁶

For Kojève, the central place in Hegel’s philosophy is held not by the “negation of negation” as a principle of development, but by pure negation, negation as such. If we recall Hegel’s *Logic*, Kojève appears to stop at the first triad (being—non-being—becoming) and casts away everything that the German philosopher wrote about movement and development. Becoming that links being and non-being is time that “brings to nothing” everything that is. What has been destroyed becomes the past. A moral obligation is attributed to Hegel, “*Do not be what you are, be the opposite of what you are (Transform, become a new Man).*”⁷ Even though Kojève pointed to early Buddhism as the source of his teaching on “non-being,” he read Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* back in his youth (that book’s concluding chapter contains philosophical analysis of “non-being”), and he believed Heidegger to be the only thinker to have exerted significant influence on him.

We should recall another, probably the most important of Kojève’s predecessors, F. Nietzsche. Certainly, Kojève uses Hegelian terminology and carefully selects appropriate fragments from *The Phenomenology of Spirit*; however, the “fight” that history begins with is comparable to the “will to power,” and the outcome of history in Kojève’s lectures is a semblance of the *Übermensch*. It would seem that at the time when Kojève was delivering his lectures in Paris, Nietzsche was primarily perceived as a “harbinger” of Nazism, but it should be borne in mind that in the early twentieth century in Russia, Nietzsche was primarily embraced by the “left-wing” intellectuals, including those who gained a symbolic status in Soviet Russia after the revolution (whether the writer Gorky or the People’s Commissar

⁶ He writes about it in the summary of the 1933–1934 lecture course Ibid., p. 57.

⁷ Kojève, *ibid.*, p.65. One of the 1939 lectures is entirely devoted to the statement that “time is in itself the concept.” Temporality is entwined into being through our activity.

Lunacharsky). Traces of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* are clearly seen, for instance, in Trotsky's articles included in *Literature and Revolution* (1923).

Naturally, Nietzsche himself was an undeniable opponent of everyone on the left, but his attitude to revolution and its outcome was not unequivocal. Europe was moving to the kingdom of the "last men"; overcoming it was only possible with the arrival of "new barbarians," and only revolution could beget them. Nietzsche predicted the arrival of "twentieth century barbarians" via a "socialist crisis."⁸

Fight for recognition

A fairly large fragment (IV A) beginning with ruminations on self-consciousness, desire, fight for recognition proves for Kojève to be the principal subject of the entire *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Without tracing the entire discussion of the doubling of self-consciousness, negation, multiple fluid essences, and the unity that self-consciousness strives for ("desire" and its satisfaction) we shall note only the end point: "Self-consciousness attains its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness [Hegel ...]." It should be noted that Hegel considers "desire" and "satisfaction" exclusively as a relation between self-consciousness and an object in general; he speaks of the "negation" of an object, of "sublating" it altogether, while Kojève relegates desires to humans' biological nature (hunger, sexual attraction, etc.) [Kojève, 50]. Hegel also links going beyond biological nature to spirit, i.e., to connection with the other: self-consciousness exists for another self-consciousness. "I" is only possible in a relation to "We," and "We" in a relation to a multiplicity of "I's." Hegel writes, "As the concept of spirit, consciousness first reaches its turning point in self-consciousness, where it leaves behind the colorful semblance of the sensuous world and the empty night of the supersensible other-worldly beyond and steps into the spiritual daylight of the present (Hegel 1971, 99)." Self-consciousness is in itself and for itself because it is for another self-consciousness, it is recognized by it, and recognizes it in turn. In other words, our identity is impossible without recognition by others.

A Man is a social and historical creature: at its deepest level, our "I" relates to other "I's." Kojève had phenomenological training and knew Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*; he was familiar with the treatment of the problem of the Other in the works of Scheler and Heidegger. Both anthropology and philosophy of history have as their starting point the initial act of the "fight for recognition" between self-consciousnesses, and that struggle begets both Men and society. A historical Man desires universal recognition. "And since the boundaries of its present being and the given structure of the natural and human worlds around him resist this *universal* recognition of his *individuality*, he transforms this world and transforms himself through a series of acts of negation. His actions lead to recognition; he is recognized as acting. The integrity of actions which negate particularities and are aimed at

⁸ "Problem: wo sind die *Barbaren* des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts? Offenbar werden sie erst nach ungeheuren sozialistischen Krisen sichtbar werden und sich konsolidieren,—es werden die Elemente sein, die der *groessten Haerte gegen sich selber* faehig sind und den *laengsten Willen* garantieren koennen..." (Nietzsche 1996, 592).

general recognition constitute the contents of world history [Kojève 19XX, Ibid.].” A Man’s true being belongs in history where Men act, negating and “sublating” the natural present being through their actions. This fight for recognition is a human characteristic throughout history, and it terminates with the end of history, i.e. with the universal recognition of all by all.

Certainly, Hegel stated nothing of the sort in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and in *The Philosophy of Mind*, where he returned to the fight for recognition, he emphatically wrote that he speaks about the starting point of history only. Kojève employed Hegelian terminology to expound his own teaching which he could have, should he have so wished, expounded in terms of the “Lebensphilosophie.” Already the starting point of his exposition, “desire” (*Begierde*), is understood differently from Hegel and is even translated into French as *désir*. In essence, Kojève speaks of the will to power, and Hegel speaks of blind longing (*Trieb*), and both in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, and in *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Hegel noted the destructiveness of desire; the relation between desire and object is still unquestionably that of egotistic *destruction*, not *creation* [Ibid. 219]. Kojève inherited M. A. Bakunin’s vision of negation (“Passion for destruction is also a creative passion”), and for him, when desire transforms into “a desire of desire,” i.e. into the desire of recognition from others, desire is the power that creates both Men and history.⁹ Self-consciousness and, by the same token, true human existence, is not based on passive contemplation; it is founded on desire: it negates what is and leads to action that alters what is. “A Man is a negating *Action* which *transforms* the present Being and which thereby transforms itself [Kojève 19XX, 219].” Ontologically, becoming emerges from the synthesis of being and non-being, and thereby time and history emerge as well as struggle and labor as the initial forms of action. In the human world, “any evolution is *creative*, and any creation is a negating *Action* of what presently is, an Action performed at the expense of what is given, in *destruction* and through *destruction* [Ibid. 236]. Hegel’s “anxiety of spirit” turns into a becoming that is both destructive and creative.

Desire, therefore, is the source of human existence, and it is easy to recognize therein Nietzsche’s “will to power,” Bergson’s “*élan vital*,” and Simmel’s “life” as transcendence. Kojève’s ontology deviates from Hegel’s already in its starting point, although it is expounded in Hegelian terms.¹⁰ Still, the closest “relative” is Nietzsche, since the presence of many desires leads to postulating the inevitable fight to the death, readiness to risk one’s own existence to gain dominance over the desires of others. Yet it does not make Kojève a strict Nietzschean, since for him, dominance is an “existential dead end,” and the entire historical role of the fight for recognition is the emergence of a slave forced to labor; the subsequent history of humankind is the history created by the slave, and not the master. Like Nietzsche, Kojève says “yes” to becoming, yet while Nietzsche

⁹ These thoughts are not quite as developed in the 1930s lectures as they are in *Outline of a Phenomenology of Right* (1943) in the section on the “anthropogenetic desire”.

¹⁰ One could trace certain links between Kojève’s ontology and V. Solovyov’s teaching of the “supra-being” as a dialectical unity of being and non-being, with the qualification that for Kojève, the human reality becomes the Absolute. See the section on organic logic in *The Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge*.

wholeheartedly rejects Hegel's philosophy of history,¹¹ Kojève accepts and augments this in the spirit of Hegel's "left-wing" followers, primarily in the spirit of Marx.

Although Kojève spent a year (the 1933–1934 lectures) interpreting the first three sections of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the notes for those lectures are extremely brief, and these sections are not particularly important for Kojève's concept. The transition from the "subjective" to the "objective spirit," i.e. to society and history, starts with self-consciousnesses' fight for recognition; moreover, this fight is not "sublated" through the subsequent development of society, it is retained until the end of history. This is why, throughout his lecture course, Kojève continually returns to this fight and to the master/slave dialectic that emerges from it. The determination to enter the fight and the attendant risk make Man free, bring him out of the animal state. Since this is a fight "to the death," its outcome is the death of one of the adversaries; then there is no recognition, yet it was the goal of the fight. Recognition occurs at the moment when one of the fighters, fearing for his life, surrenders and throws himself at the winner's mercy. The one who surrendered resigns himself to the fate of a slave: he has recognized the other as the master. Thus, this stage of history witnesses the appearance of the first two figures, the Master and the Slave; or, it would be more correct to say that history emerges along with these two.

Revolution

Historicity stems from Man's temporariness and negativity; Man denies present being with his project for the future, with his action that always presents itself as Fight and Labor (*Kampf und Arbeit*, Kojève notes in German). History is made by the Slave, the Master is an "existential dead end," his entire role in history is reduced to starting it by begetting the Slave, only to be subsequently dialectically "sublated" (together with the Slave) by the figure of the Citizen. Contrary to Hegel, Kojève deduces conceptual thinking, scientific knowledge, and the arts from the Slave's forced labor [Kojève 19XX, 176]. The very ideas of freedom and progress could only be formed in the Slave's mind. This is why Kojève describes stoicism and skepticism of classical philosophy and Christianity alike as "slave ideologies," and he believes the bourgeois of the Enlightenment to be slaves just like medieval burghers, the metics of the Greek polis, and Roman *peregrine*. All the labor in history was slave labor. And since the Slave toils in the sweat of his face, opposes nature, improves technology, creates science, then the day will inevitably come when revolution will overthrow the Master. When the Slave rises from his knees and demands the recognition of his human dignity, his slavery thereby ends: he resumes the fight for recognition and he is ready to die fighting.

It cannot be said that when Hegel considered the Enlightenment ("Spirit alienated from itself; cultural maturation") he managed entirely without references

¹¹ See the insightful comparison of Hegel's philosophy with Nietzsche's teaching: Jünger (2001, 196–198).

to social reality. Kojève's commentary is different not only in that he creates a "sociology of intellectuals" of sorts, a sociology of the poor bourgeois who dream of becoming rich bourgeois. The role of the Enlightenment in the preparation of the revolution is limited to introducing atheism and undermining tradition: with the death of "superstitions," the Enlightenment itself, the last "slave ideology," loses its meaning.

The world of burghers, be they believers or atheists, is replaced by the world of Citizens, which cancels out both the "old order" and the entire era of Slaves and Masters. The fight for recognition resumes, and it frees everyone from erstwhile mutual dependencies. The time of "absolute freedom" arrives. "Hegel does not speak of the fall of the Old Regime; it is already dead. It was killed by the Enlightenment propaganda; now it is a matter of burying it. At its inception, a Great Revolution is always bloodless; there is even no fight yet. The Old Regime dies of an infection (*Ansteckung*)..., not murder. The Enlightenment propaganda was that 'illness.' Now the corpse has been buried, and the World of absolute Freedom has arrived. What do we have as a result? No conformism, since there is nothing to conform to. Nothing separates humans from the *Befriedigung*, but it is still far away. There is liberation from the *given* that no longer exists, but there is, as of yet, no *creation* of a new *actual* World. A human being found himself in complete emptiness; such is the 'absolute Freedom'" [Ibid., 141]. Previous appearances have crumbled, obligations have disappeared, there is no community among isolated individuals. The state depends on *ideas* of private persons proposing draft constitutions. "Anyone may wish to transform their personal ideas into political reality, without being declared insane or a criminal" [Ibid., 142].

Kojève appears to follow Hegel in the description of the French revolution. Yet it is not accidental that the emphasis here is on the initial stage of the revolution, when there is no fight, no violent destruction, "This ideology of absolute Freedom is something like Heaven descended on Earth that 'enlightened' Reason has dreamed of" [Ibid.]. He notes the empty rhetoric of the revolutionary government which itself is suspended in a void, without touching reality, since in actuality, no one obeys it, and the government in itself is unable to bring about anything positive.¹² Yet this "nothing" itself should be destroyed. Just like Hobbes, in *The Leviathan*, indicated that revolution resumes the "war of all against all" in the natural state, Kojève states that the collapse of the "old order" leads to a bloody fight for recognition. Absolute freedom inevitably begets Terror, which Hegel called the "fury of disappearance," the revolutionaries' own mutual destruction.

To realize actual freedom, it is necessary to destroy absolute freedom. Each revolutionary strives to become a dictator "in the name of the Revolution," and in this fight of individual wills, "the universal will" is abolished. A faction that emerges victorious from factional fighting becomes the revolutionary government, yet this party is also doomed to fall, since post-revolutionary government must be the power of the Whole, not of a single party. "Yet since it is revolutionary, it is doomed to be a party government and, therefore, to act through Terror" [Ibid., 143].

¹² The experience of the Russian revolution is apparently evident here: Kojève's words pertain primarily to the Provisional Government of March–October 1917.

Kojève personally experienced the Bolshevik terror of the civil war. His description is in no way an interpretation of Hegel who has neither the thesis of resuming the “fight for recognition,” nor the positive assessment of terror. In Kojève’s thinking, terror is conducive to the recognition of the fact that Man himself is nothing (that idea is present in Hegel). Yet this thought is followed by his own doctrine: “Only following such an experience, does Man become truly ‘reasonable’ and may implement a Society (State) where Freedom is truly possible. Until that moment (i.e. Terror), Man (still a Slave) distinguished between soul and body, remained a Christian. Yet, through Terror, he understood that the desire to implement abstract (‘absolute’) Freedom is a desire for *death*, and he therefore understands that he wants to *live* here, in soul and body,—this is the only thing that interests him and can satisfy him” [Ibid. 144]. Fear of “the Absolute Master, Death,” forces individual wills to recognize the State that allows them to be truly free. Fear created the Slave at the outset of history, and fear contributes to the conclusion of history, grinding away human self-will. It transforms into “nothing,” and only this “nothing” is capable of becoming “everything.”¹³

It is Terror that finally crushes Slavery, expunges the very Master–Slave relation, and thereby expunges Christianity. Now we are talking exclusively of satisfying individualists in this world who mutually recognize one another. Individualistic anthropology went down in history as personalist theology, but it relegated the actualization of individual striving to the otherworld. “To *implement* Christianity by implementing the anthropological ideal of Individuality in the empirical World, Christian *Religion* and *Theology* must be suppressed, that is, anthropology must be cleansed of the remnants of pagan cosmology and axiology of the Master, thereby freeing the Slave from the remnants of Slavery” [Ibid. 156]. Human “hubris” that used to be a mortal sin is removed (“sublated” in its negative aspect [vanity]), but is asserted in its truthfulness. Such is the result of revolution.

Revolutionaries themselves mostly exterminate each other in factional strife. It should be noted that Kojève’s view of revolution was far from enthusiastic. Of course, for him, History is a “permanent Revolution, since it progresses through negations of the social given” [Ibid. 404]; this is why a philosophical idea of a future society lies behind a true revolution. However, revolutions are not made by philosophers; they are made by “people of action,” and in conjunction with these people, Kojève recalls Nietzsche’s “blond beasts”: these people change the world and change themselves, but they do it out of an excess of animal power, restlessness, non-conformism. “And experience shows, for instance, that people who make revolutions do not stay in power precisely because they remain (or they are believed to remain) the same as they were before the Revolution, namely, non-conformists. ... In Hegel’s definition, such ‘blond beasts’ are animals just as much as inert and passive conformist animals are” [Ibid. 402]. From the point of view of value, and not the will to power, Kojève believes that there is no difference between such

¹³ Traces of Heidegger’s philosophy are evident here, but even a Marxist reading of Hegel’s dialectic exhibited examples of such transitions from “nothing” to the “fullness of being.” See, for instance, Lukács’s comment on Marx’s tenet that when a proletarian, due to his life conditions, finds himself at the point of absolute poverty, the summit of inhumaneness, loss of a human image, it leads the worker to the extirpation of all social inhumaneness. [Lukács 2003, 121–122.].

representatives of the “animal kingdom”: the world of value belongs with the spirit. The fight between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries acquires a spiritual dimension when values are pitched against values. In the *Outline of a Phenomenology of Right*, Kojève will write about the “tragedy of revolution”: human struggle is tragic when two truths, two ideas of justice collide uncompromisingly. Revolutionaries themselves are destroyers of the past, but they are incapable of creating anything new. They destroy each other in factional strife to give way to a new reality.

Kojève’s approach to the French revolution (and to revolutions in general) is neither historical nor sociological: real figures, forces, antecedents, etc. do not interest him. The criterion that determines that we are dealing with a revolution, and not with a mutiny, coup d’état, Fronde, is precisely the resumption of the fight “to the death” which inevitably gives rise to terror. A curious story is recounted in Raymond Aron’s memoirs. In May 1968, he visited the US and had a long telephone conversation with Kojève, asking him about the events in Paris. Kojève told him that it “wasn’t a revolution, it was a disgrace,” “no one is being killed”; students of the time, i.e. spoiled children of bourgeois and officials, are playing at a revolution, and he did not see them as people ready to fight and die fighting (Aron 1981/1983). Everything else is interesting for a historian, but these details are not interesting for a philosopher.

Empire

The revolution concludes with Napoleon’s empire. Neither in his lecture course, nor later, did Kojève address Bonaparte’s real deeds, be they military victories or reforms. The Emperor’s cult that existed then and still exists now (“the greatness of France,” “glory,” etc.) was totally alien to the Russian émigré. Hegel was a contemporary of both the revolution and the empire. Even after the Restoration, he saw the former as the “great sunrise,” he valued the reforms Napoleon instituted in the Rhineland he had conquered. Yet this is an assessment of empirical actions, while a philosophical and historical assessment points to a different reality. In a well-known letter written to Niethammer before the battle of Jena in October 1806, Hegel described his impressions of an accidental meeting with the Emperor who had ridden out on reconnaissance. One impression stands out in the totally mundane description: Napoleon is declared to be the “world-soul.” It is clear what Hegel meant when he used the term that goes back to Neo-Platonists and that played a great part in Christian theology (the Holy Spirit). Like the Romantics, Hegel gave credit to great people, only he viewed them as the actualization of the potentialities of the era, the focus of historical forces, the maximum manifestation of the spirit of the time. Hegel viewed neither Napoleon’s empire, nor the Prussian monarchy in its empirical manifestation as political forms that conclude history; these are interpretations offered by scholars. For Hegel, events of the world history are the dialectic of the spirits of individual peoples, the universal judgment (*Die Weltgeschichte ist Weltgericht*) of the political squabble that reigns supreme in our world. The centralized French Empire empirically goes back to the sequence of

reforms that start sometime with Louis XI, continue through the actions of Richelieu and Louis XIV; the revolution of 1789 also has its antecedents. The universal historical (that is, “supra-empirical”) significance of the revolution and Napoleon’s armies was understood by those historians who opposed Hegel. 70 years after the publication of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, J. Burkhardt wrote that, “We want to know on which wave of the great storm-tossed sea we are drifting” (Burkhardt 1999, 261).

For Kojève, the Emperor is the one who concludes the revolutionary terror, brings the new historical reality that knows neither Slave, nor Master; he brings the kingdom of the Citizen, which has cancelled the Christian religion. The greatness of the emperor himself is linked to the fact that he manifests the ideal of Individuality in its fullness, the universality of recognition. “That is the *reality* of Napoleon as Hegel *discovered* it; Napoleon acted as an *erscheinender Gott*, as an actual and living God, manifested to humans in the World that has been created by him in order to be recognized therein” [Kojève 19XX, 157]. In essence, Kojève speaks of the kingdom of man-god, or *Übermensch*, and Hegel, naturally, said nothing of the sort. “The only head of the universal and homogeneous State, Napoleon is the only ‘satisfied’ one in his striving for universal recognition; therefore, ‘he alone is truly free’; all citizens of this state are ‘also potentially ‘satisfied,’ since *each* of them may *become* such a Head” [Ibid., 146], recognized due to their personal merits earned in the eyes of everyone, either by laboring for everyone’s good, or at war, by defending the common homeland of free people. The Citizen combines a belligerent Master and a laboring Slave. Such a State is headed by the best of Citizens, a universally recognized Leader. These statements correlate with the historical context of the 1930s: the USSR was such a state with a claim to universal historical significance, and Stalin was its leader.

Kojève called himself a “Stalinist” when he delivered his lectures, and he did it not only *pour épater le bourgeois*. He thought that just as the French revolution concluded with Napoleon’s empire, the October revolution inevitably begot Stalin’s empire. Moral judgments on dictators and their henchmen can be made by private persons, but not by someone who muses on the course of history. Out of vanity, Napoleon spilled blood all over Europe, but for Hegel, he was the manifestation of the absolute spirit. “From the Christian point of view, Napoleon is a manifestation of Hubris, and therefore he is Sin incarnate (Antichrist). ... For Kant and Fichte, he is *das Böse*, an immoral being *par excellence*. For a liberal and tolerant Romantic, he is a traitor (he ‘betrays’ the Revolution). For a ‘divine’ poet, he is merely a hypocrite” [Ibid. 153]. However, for Hegel, he emerges as the power that implements the requirements of the world spirit. In his striving for glory, the vain Corsican spreads throughout Europe the legal principles of the revolutionary power he has overthrown.

Kojève’s 1936–1937 audience understood the analogies well when he explained the manifestation of the world spirit on horseback on the eve of the battle of Jena: in 1936, Trotsky’s *Revolution Betrayed* was published—it was clear who Kojève listed under the “Romantics of the revolution.” At that time, when the civil war in Spain started, when the Long March of the Red Army of the Communist Party of China had just concluded, when Germany, in violation of the Treaty of Versailles,

marched into the Rhineland and de facto regained the right to re-armament, the rise of the dictator in the Kremlin and his massacre of his rivals did not look like something “immoral *par excellence*”—they were a continuation of the revolutionary terror Kojève himself encountered in 1919, the forced de-kulakization and de-Cossackization, the civil war that turned into a war with interventionists, with all the forces of the “old world.” But was not the French revolution, that turned into the wars with European monarchies, an example for the Bolsheviks? Were not hundreds of thousands of peasants of the Vendée exterminated for the sake of victory of “the rights of man and of the citizen”?

Philosophy is “an era captured in thought,” and Hegel’s thought corresponds to the moment of the conclusion of history. Napoleon is the manifestation of the absolute spirit, “he is, if you will, the God incarnate that Christians dreamed of (the actual true Christ = Napoleon-Jesus + Hegel-Logos; the incarnation thereby took place not in a particular place, but at the end of time)” [Ibid. 147]. Hegel succeeded in understanding the manifestation of Napoleon, i.e. the new historical reality that concludes the entire preceding history.

Of course, there were no such statements in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*; moreover, dialectical sublation of “absolute freedom” leads to the emergence of the kingdom of “moral spirit” (“spirit certain of itself”). Kojève admits that Hegel discusses Kant’s ethics of duty and certain tenets of his contemporaries, the German Romantics (“a beautiful soul”). Taking into account Kojève’s view that Kant’s philosophy paved the way for the doctrines of German idealism, including Hegel’s, we face an obvious contradiction: it is the “moral spirit” that replaces the revolutionary “fury of disappearance,” and it is the teaching of Kant, and not Hegel, that corresponds to the post-revolutionary world.

Kojève finds a simple way out of this quandary: here Hegel simply returns to the ideology of “absolute freedom” at a philosophical level, while Kant and Fichte are thinkers who paved the ideational way for the revolution. This philosophy corresponds to the post-revolutionary Man who has not yet drawn necessary conclusions from the revolution. He defends universalism in morality only, he exalts universal freedom (Romantics), but he does not agree with the means of achieving it, i.e. “the bloody Fight and Labor for all” [Ibid., 150]. Romantics assert individuality, but they have no desire to fight for universal recognition. Another appearance is put in by the figure of an Intellectual who is satisfied with the hypocritical wish for *tolerance* toward any convictions (excluding “intolerant” ones). “This is the pacifist ideology of *Gewissen*, this is *political and economic Liberalism*. Romantics *prattle about the public good*, while entrepreneurs *act in accordance with their private interests*” [Ibid. 151]. In other words, what is partially reproduced here is the pre-revolutionary bourgeois ideology, and the type of Intellectual who is different from his pre-revolutionary predecessor in that he does not retreat into the kingdom of dreams, but proudly declares himself to be a “creator” and a superior type of Man. Romantics have already reached anthropotheism, but it is just a pitiful exaltation of poetic imagination. For Kojève, the Romantics’ “beautiful soul” is “the Christians’ Unhappy consciousness which has lost God” [Ibid., 152].

There is a historical reality that corresponds to these spiritual phenomena: Napoleon's empire that has been conceived as universal crumbles in confrontation with awakening nations. Fichte and the Romantics are the ideologues of such an awakening of peoples. However, the nations themselves tread the same path of building civil societies, of technological progress, and of social revolutions. The previous Bourgeois begets two fighting classes. Kojève partially follows Marx, but in his view, the proletarians' fight against exploitation is not the central phenomenon of bourgeois society. The worker is a poor bourgeois wishing to become rich. Both the rich and the poor bourgeois are enslaved by Capital [Ibid. 191]. The bourgeois is his own slave. Masters are long gone from this world, there are only bourgeois remaining, therefore, there is no class struggle in the real sense of the word (when the Slave is opposed by the true Master).

Neither the fights of national states, nor revolutions that buffet various states any longer introduce radical changes to the human world. The Russian and Chinese revolutions, the liberation of some Togo from the colonial power—this is merely a continuation of the French revolution, the spreading of its principles throughout the globe. Fairly soon, revolutions will cease in the single universal and homogenous State, the last Empire. History concludes, or, rather, it has ideally concluded with Hegel's system, which is no longer philosophy, but Wisdom. The “end of Man” is the consequence of the end of history.

Kojève defines Man as *negativity*, negation of being, as becoming through action. If the confrontation between the world and Man ceases, if Man no longer creates himself in negation (and thereby no longer creates history), then we are no longer talking about a historical Man. Man denied being and fell into countless errors, blundered, “Man still must err, while he doth strive.” When errors are replaced with a total system of scientific and philosophical knowledge, the erring stops. “The disappearance of Man at the end of History is not a cosmic disaster: the natural World remains the same as it has been eternally. This is not a biological disaster: Man continues to live as an animal *in accord* with Nature and present being. Man disappears in the proper sense of the word, i.e. [as] present negation of Action and Error of a general Subject in confrontation with an Object” [Ibid., 434–435]. In a universal and homogeneous state, there will be no bloody wars and revolutions, borders and armies will disappear. Philosophy will also disappear. If Man no longer changes substantially, there is no need to review fundamental principles underlying his cognition or morality. The arts, play, love, friendship, everything that makes Man *happy*, may well remain, but it no longer will be the same Man who worked in the sweat of his face and died in a bloody fight.

Kojève agrees with Marx: a transition will be made from the “kingdom of necessity” to the “kingdom of freedom.” Thus spoke Kojève at the end of his 1939 lecture course. In the *Outline of a Phenomenology of Right* written during the war, these ideas are further developed. His vision of “a universal and homogeneous state” is far removed from the Marxist picture of socialism and communism, since Kojève's state retains private property and conditions of labor hire (i.e. “exploitation” in Marxist terms); yet on the whole, Kojève here follows the socialist project. Together with the appearance of an “*Übermensch*”—the Citizen, all the potentialities of historical existence are actualized. “The actuality which actualizes its

potentiality exhausts it and is consequently annulled. This is why Man is a finite being, even taken as such. Humanity can realize human reality in actuality, but it cannot be eternal. If there is an end of history, marked by the perfection of Man, there is also an end of historical humanity, marked by its complete disappearance” (Kojève 2000, 213).

However, he has his own doubts that the implementation of the progressivist project and the end of history will lead to the society of “*Übermenschen*” of sorts. In a 1946 note to the manuscript of one of his concluding lectures of the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* he speaks differently. If Man becomes unchangeable, he turns into an animal, and therefore his “arts, games, love, etc.” will be *animalistic*; meaningful speech (Logos) will disappear, and therefore, Wisdom will disappear, as will philosophy.

He will come back to that note in the second edition of the book, indicating that already in the late 1940s, Kojève himself viewed the course of history differently than in the 1930s. “The end of history” has already arrived, Robespierre and Napoleon, as the humanity’s avant-garde, have already delineated the subsequent course of history. Two world wars, all the large and small revolutions of the last 150 years were merely spreading “Robespierrean Bonapartism,” the dying out of all kinds of anachronisms in Europe and in the former colonies.¹⁴ Speaking of the final stage of Marx’s “communism,” i.e. “class-less society,” it was nearly achieved, not in the USSR, but in the US, and Russian and American communists are essentially Americans in their strivings, though still poor [Ibid., 437]. For a while, therefore, Kojève believed that humanity’s post-historic existence would look like the American way of life, and for Kojève, that meant the kingdom of Nietzsche’s “last man,” i.e. a human being very similar to an animal. However, when he visited Japan in 1958, he decided that a slightly more positive view of the future is possible. The end of wars, revolutions, and forced labor may lead not to the kingdom of consumers, but to the world of aesthetic rituals, ceremonies, a sort of Oriental “snobbery.” An animal cannot be a “snob,” therefore, in the post-historical periods; we will remain *Homo sapiens*, but with the qualification that the creation of the new and the rejection of the past will cease. Man will become a *Homo ludens*, a “glass bead game player,” that is, someone, who creates pure forms whose contents have no meaning whatsoever.

In other words, “the end of history” has arrived so far in one sense only: the history of philosophical thought has reached its completion, for in Hegel it reached its summit and became Wisdom. Labors and bloody battles are going on, and they will go on until only one “universal and homogeneous state” remains on Earth populated either by “*Übermenschen*” who have become almighty, or by animal-like consumers, or by aesthetes playing with forms. Even now, engaging in philosophy is pointless, unless we are expounding Hegel’s system.

¹⁴ Although in a 1945 paper (A. Kojève, “Esquisse d’une doctrine de la politique française” https://archive.org/stream/KOJÈVEPOLITIQUE1945/KOJÈVE=POLITIQUE=1945_djvu.txt) he writes about a long period of strife not between nations, but between empires, until all of them are subsumed by the single remaining one.

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