

[NOTAS Y DEBATES]

Concept and Use of the «Historical Sign» in Kant's Philosophy of History

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RESUMEN

Este trabajo analiza uno de los aspectos de la filosofía de la historia de Kant. En concreto, el “signo histórico” de determinados acontecimientos de naturaleza “revolucionaria”. Así, sobre el trasfondo de la interpretación kantiana de la Revolución francesa, adquiere relieve político la tesis ilustrada sobre el progreso de la humanidad. En el trabajo se presenta una lectura comparativa de las tesis de Kant y Burke sobre la Revolución francesa que destaca la articulación interna entre las interpretaciones históricas sobre su significación para el futuro y el curso posterior de los acontecimientos. El trabajo las reconstruye hasta evaluar su rendimiento en perspectiva histórica.

PALABRAS CLAVE

KANT, REVOLUCIÓN FRANCESA, PROGRESO, FILOSOFÍA DE LA HISTORIA

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on one of the aspects of Kant's philosophy of history, namely the “historical sign” of certain historical events of “revolutionary” nature. Against the background of the Kantian interpretation of the French revolution, the Enlightenment thesis on the progress of humanity gets political prominence. The paper presents a comparative reading of both Kant's and Burke's thesis on the French revolution, that highlights the correlation of historical interpretations with their significance for the future and the development of further events. The final aim is thus to evaluate both interpretations in historical perspective.

KEYWORDS

KANT, FRENCH REVOLUTION, PROGRESS, PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

IN HIS WORK ENTITLED *DER STREIT DER FAKULTÄTEN* IMMANUEL KANT introduces the notion of «historical sign» (*Geschichtszeichen*) which, in a certain sense, could prove the «tendentious character» (*Tendenz*) of mankind and its history (K 9: 357). At the same time, the concept constitutes an organic part of Kant's whole conception of philosophy. It is almost a commonplace to point out the connection between theoretical and practical philosophy in Kant's oeuvre in the same way as many authors did while referring to his practical philosophy: several references were made to the connection between his moral philosophy and philosophy of religion. Naturally, we can hardly imagine a large scale system of philosophy (that took shape in his different works), in the texture of which there would be no frayings here and there, and as pointed out by farsighted analysts, it is true for Kant's system, too. Kant himself considered his philosophy as a structure homogeneous and devoid of contradictions. In one place for example he thinks that although in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* there are alleged contradictions (*vorgebliche Widersprüche*), but «sie schwinden insgesamt von selbst, wenn man sie in der Verbindung mit dem übrigen betrachtet» (K 8: 135). According to Kant the faculty of philosophy (which, when considered as a servant-maid of theology, will rather carry the torch before its mistress than the tail after her) has «two departments» (*zwei Departemente*): «das eine der *historischen Erkenntnis* (wozu Geschichte, Erdbeschreibung, gelehrte Sprachkenntnis, Humanistik mit allem gehört, was die Naturkunde von empirischem Erkenntnis darbietet); das andere der *reinen Vernunfterkentnisse* (reinen Mathematik und der reinen Philosophie, Metaphysik der Natur und der Sitten) und beide Teile der Gelehrsamkeit in ihrer wechselseitigen Beziehung auf einander» (K 9: 291). It is well-known that Kant was greatly interested in anthropology, history and geography, and in his case it did not mean some accidental interest: the history of states has to be written in a way that shows what use the world made of a certain government, history itself has to contain the plan for improving the world, and not by approaching the whole from its parts, but the other way round. What is the point in doing philosophy if it does not put the means of teaching people into the service of their own good? A well-known example of an *encyclopaedia universalis* and that of a *mappe monde* as a necessary basis for recognition as a whole was before Kant's eyes so that we could try and define the horizon of humanity in past and future ages.

As we know, in his writing entitled *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* Kant outlined this perspective of past and future ages. Accordingly, history has a «regular course» (*regelmäßiger Gang*) and events happen according to «constant laws of nature» (*beständige Naturgesetze*) (K 9: 33). In *Der Streit der Fakultäten* Kant described the introduction of this *a priori* point of view as a «Copernican turn» and thought that those who reject

it would «in Tychonische Zyklen und Epizyklen bis zur Ungereimtheit verwickeln» (K 9: 355). At the same time he formulated the following idea clearly: «Die Menschen [...] zwar *gesehen*, aber mit Gewissheit nicht *vorhergesehen* werden können» their free acts in the future, but «wenn man *dem* Menschen einen angeboren und unveränderlich-guten, obzwar eingeschränkten Willen beilegen dürfte, so würde er dieses Fortschreiten seiner Gattung zum Besseren mit Sicherheit vorhersagen können; weil es eine Begebenheit träfe, die er selbst machen kann» (K 9: 356). The assumption of such an innate property necessarily leads to a teleological view, which appears in both of the above quoted works as well as in several other writings. This idea manifests clearly in his work about the *Eternal Peace*. He states that «die Natur *will* unwiderstehlich, daß das Recht zuletzt die Obergewalt erhalte» or «denn das moralische Prinzip im Menschen erlöscht nie» (K 9: 225, 243). That is why – and again in different writings – Kant not only acknowledges, but also explicitly emphasizes, that «die Philosophie könne auch ihren *Chiliasmus* haben; aber einen solchen, zu dessen Herbeiführung ihre Idee, obgleich nur sehr von weitem, selbst beförderlich werden kann» (K 9: 45).

And now Kant states exactly what the purpose of human society, at which the necessary trends of development are directed, is: the achievement of civil constitution in the life of nations on the one hand, and a league of nations on the other. For Kant there are certain *signs* that suggest the achievement of these purposes: one is the irresistible progress of general enlightenment described in his earlier works on the philosophy of history (cp. K 9: 46, 59) and the Revolution in France described in his later works. It is definitely the latter one Kant introduces the notion of *historical sign* in connection with. He states: «Die Revolution eines geistreichen Volks, die wir in unseren Tagen haben vor sich gehen sehen, mag gelingen oder scheitern; sie mag mit Elend und Greuelthaten dermaßen angefüllt sein, daß ein wohldenkender Mensch sie, wenn er sie, zum zweitenmale unternehmend, glücklich auszuführen hoffen könnte, doch das Experiment auf solche Kosten zu machen nie beschließen würde – [...] findet doch in den Gemütern aller Zuschauer [...] eine *Teilnehmung* dem Wunsche nach, die nahe an Enthusiasm grenzt, und deren Äußerung selbst mit Gefahr verbunden war, die also keine andere, als eine moralische Anlage im Menschengeschlecht zur Ursache haben kann.» (K 9: 358)

However, Kant does not say exactly, which events or phenomena of the Revolution in France gave rise to his desire of an almost enthusiastic participation. In his writings we can only generally find concrete hints to the Convent or the Directory, but a lot more is expressed in mentioning plenty of «misery and horrors» (*Elend und Greuelthaten*), which is first of all an obvious reference to the *Terreur*, the knowledge of which noticeably did not prevent Kant from expressing his general sympathy. Analysing the concrete phenomena of the

Revolution in France another contemporary author, Edmund Burke arrived at the complete rejection of the revolution as a whole, although he analysed the course of revolution only in general, and till the summer of 1790. Burke states that he already foresaw the later catastrophies after reading the names of the *Tiers État* representatives, because even the best «were only men of theory» (B: 128). Perhaps it was he whom Kant polemized with in an indirect way with the characterization: «der über Theorien und Systeme so keck absprechende Ehrenmann» (K 9: 130). At the same time it is well-known, that Kant had the idea: it would not at all be desirable for philosophers to become kings. (See *Zum ewigen Frieden*, K 9: 228.)

And now it seems to be worth drawing a parallel, at least a general one, between the political views represented by Kant and Burke: Perhaps the reason for the sharp contrast can be found here. Kant distinguishes between the *forms of state*, which differ from each other depending on who has the main power, and according to which there are autocracy (monarchy), aristocracy and democracy; and the *forms of government*, according to which there are states governed by republican and despotic means (cp. *Zum ewigen Frieden*, K 9: 206). Kant states that an autocratic state can also be governed by republican means and a democratic one by despotic means (cp. for example K 9: 360, fn). This distinction between democracy and republicanism reminds us of the standpoint represented by the *Federalist Papers*. Kant rejects all forms of despotism radically and while using the formula *provideant consules*, he seems to consider that, in general, dictatorship is «perhaps permissible for a short time» (*etwa auf kurze Zeit eingeräumt werden dürfte*) (K 9: 338). He qualifies Cromwell's state as a «verunglückte Mißgeburt einer despotischen Republik» (K 9: 366, fn).

Burke is an adherent of the hereditary monarchy, but he does not think that all other forms of state should be rejected: in certain cases both aristocracy and democracy might be suitable. And the monarch cannot govern by despotic means – if he does so, he breaks his silent agreement with the people. Although the masses cannot elect him, by expressing agreement they can legitimate and through their representatives control him. That is why it was lawful that king James II. was dethroned after the Glorious Revolution (B: 147 ff). Of course it was an exceptional regulation applied in a specific situation, but as Burke states, there are (or in the past there were) exceptional situations of this kind, when, that is to say, «the great bad men of the old stamp» – like Cromwell – «acted in the spirit of a civil war». But «the virtues of such men were to be taken as a balance to their crimes», means Burke. «These disturbers were not so much like men usurping power, as asserting their natural place in society.» (Cp. B: 136-137.) As opposed to the established state power, Kant, as it is well-known, considers the revolution unjust, and if it is defeated, he would

not be astonished at a retaliation, because the rebels – whether it is just or unjust – restored themselves to the Hobbesian *state of war*; but Burke was not enthusiastic about restoratory retaliations (see his ambiguous reference to the legal case of the reverend Hugh Peters (B: 157-158), what is more, in a given case he would even be ready to understand the revolution: «If it could have been made clear to me, that the king and queen of France [...] were inexorable and cruel tyrants, [...] I should think their captivity just. [...] The punishment of real tyrants is a noble and awful act of justice [...].» (B: 174) Perhaps there seems to be a sharper contrast in the following respect: although Kant does not consider economic inequality to be liquidated, he does not wish to undermine the «notion of property», which was so important for Burke (B: 139 ff). He considered utopias unrealizable (K 9: 366), but Burke was the adherent of certain (ecclesiastical and noble) inequalities even in political respect. Why is Burke's rejection of the revolution as a whole so violent, while it elicits from Kant the greatest enthusiasm?

As a result of his practical-mindedness it seems evident that – in the course of events – Burke, due to his theoretical standpoint, was able to find *signs*, Kant obviously was not interested in: the general disorder and anarchy during the summer and autumn of 1789 (the Great Fear and the March to Versailles); the destruction and substitution of the existing bases with uncertain ideas in the winter of 1789/90 (when the over-rationalised constitutional process was subjected to the terror of the gallery); the breaking loose of the uninhibited financial and political speculation in the spring and summer of 1790 (the squandering of church properties and the unbridled issuing of the *assignats*). But it seems especially remarkable that Burke reacted to the events in France so violently not immediately and directly. His reaction manifested itself early in 1790, only after receiving reverend Richard Price's speech sympathising with the revolution. It has to be appreciated as a decisive fact, because this speech described the Revolution in France as a perfection of the Glorious Revolution and as an example to be followed for Great Britain. As a result of his clear-sightedness Burke noticed immediately: the Revolution in France was not the parallel equivalent to the English 1688/89 revolution, but that of the 1640/49 one. Following this track perhaps it was not very difficult to recognize (for this prediction he deserved the praises he got), that the states of anarchy and the «despotism of the multitude» (B: 227) sooner or later would lead to emergency states in economics and military dictatorship (B: 311, 342) and some totalitarian despotism (which was not foreseen until that time), and this might as well happen during the existence of the old as well as the new dynasty (B: 301). (Bonaparte's creative genius and congenial personality often makes the succeeding generations forget his mass murders and the prince of Enghien's show trial.) Of course, perhaps for subjective reasons, Burke himself

overestimated the existing values of the British constitution (having been ripe for a reform), but he saw clearly that in France, after the initially exaggerated admiration, people did not intend to develop these values, but they wanted to reject them (B: 145).

History did not provide Kant with experiences of this kind, and neither could his wide knowledge substitute them. For him experience in history was provided by the system of autocracy governed in an enlightened or a less enlightened, a republican or a despotic way. What he knew was that the given system had to be stopped, because it was not only unjust but also intolerable. On the basis of the events experienced in the Netherlands, Britain and France he thought that trade and the «mercenary spirit» (*Handelsgeist*) of Smith, the march of triumph of the *laissez faire* system and that of the «right for visiting other countries» (*Hospitalität/Wirtbarkeit*) cannot be stopped, and this necessarily brings matters forward, towards the republican constitution and the alliance of nations (K 9: 213, 226, 279 ff). He thought that the British constitution was *not* republican, because in that system the king was free to start war, although – as emphasized by Kant in several of his writings – war was the greatest evil of mankind. From the standpoint of his argument for the Revolution in France I do not think it to be a decisive factor that when he was writing the work *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, the Jacobin terror was over: on the one hand, the situation in France still bore the traces of the civil war, and on the other hand – and this can be said exactly because of this – the terror did not necessarily influence Kant's standpoint. Neither could he have seen his conceptual conviction about the (gradual but quite sure) ceasing of wars refuted by the Napoleonic wars taking place after his death. It must have been the Seven-Year War that had a shocking effect on Kant: it essentially was a *world war* fought pan-European and overseas war-fields, the real prototype of the Napoleonic wars. In connection with this idea he stated the following: «Denn ein solches Phenomän [the revolution] in der Menschengeschichte *vergißt sich nicht mehr*. [...] Aber, wenn der dieser Begebenheit beabsichtigte Zweck auch jetzt nicht erreicht würde, [...] doch wiederum alles ins vorige Gleis zurückgebracht würde, [...] so verliert jene philosophische Vorhersagung doch nichts von ihrer Kraft. – Denn jene Begebenheit ist zu groß, zu sehr mit dem Interesse der Menschheit verwebt, und, ihrem Einflusse nach, auf die Welt in allen ihren Teilen zu ausgebreitet, als daß sie nicht den Völkern, bei irgend einer Veranlassung günstiger Umstände, in Erinnerung gebracht und zu Wiederholung neuer Versuche dieser Art erweckt werden sollte; da dann, bei einer für das Menschengeschlecht so wichtigen Angelegenheit, endlich doch zu irgend einer Zeit die beabsichtigte Verfassung diejenige Festigkeit erreichen muß, welche die Belehrung durch öftere Erfahrung in den Gemütern aller zu bewirken nicht ermangeln würde.» (K 9: 361-362)

Now the question is whether we should consider Kant as a *dogmatic (doctrinaire)* philosopher of politics, who does not pay attention to the signs of experience? Well, this is not what we are talking about, but we *are* talking about the general principles of Kant's practical and theoretical philosophy. Let us have the following starting point: which are the signs that help man to recognize divine revelation according to Kant? «Denn wenn Gott zum Menschen wirklich spräche, so kann dieser doch niemals *wissen*, dass es Gott sei, der zu ihm spricht. Es ist schlechterdings unmöglich, daß der Mensch durch seine Sinne den Unendlichen fassen, ihn von Sinnenwesen unterscheiden, und ihn woran *kennen* solle. – Daß es aber *nicht* Gott sein könne, dessen Stimme er zu hören glaubt, davon kann er sich wohl in einigen Fällen überzeugen; denn, wenn das, was ihm durch sie geboten wird, dem moralischen Gesetz zuwider ist, so mag die Erscheinung ihm noch majestätisch, und die ganze Natur überschreitend dünken: er muß sie doch für Täuschung halten.» (K 9: 333) Looking upon this question in general on the basis of the distinctive feature that experience provides us with, we can never recognise whether something is a divine revelation or not, «daß eine Offenbarung göttlich sei, kann nie durch Kennzeichen, welche die Erfahrung an die Hand gibt, eingesehen werden. Ihr Charakter [...] ist immer die Übereinstimmung mit dem, was die Vernunft für Gott anständig erklärt» (K 9: 312-313). And whether we can speak about God and – in respect of history – about providence at all, also depends on the mind: «diese Vorsehung [...] wir zwar eigentlich nicht an diesen Kunstanstalten der Natur *erkennen*, oder auch nur daraus auf sie *schließen*, sondern (wie in aller Beziehung der Form der Dinge auf Zwecke überhaupt) nur *hinzudenken* können und müssen.» (K 9: 217-218)

The present study is confined to the analysis of Kant's philosophy of history, which makes it impossible to go into details of the connection between his views in political and moral philosophy, his theoretical and practical philosophy, and his philosophy of history and philosophy of religion. Only reference is made to the fact that Kant's historical-philosophical writings are interwoven with the idea of the fight between the Empire of Good and Empire of Evil and that of the progress towards good (K 9: 167, 309, 323) as well as the application of the principle of *Sollen* and the *als ob* method (K 9: 315, 335).

Undoubtedly, Kant's positive predictions were false in the short run, but not in the long run. Furthermore, while Burke interpreted some depressing events of the Revolution in France as signs of the revolution as a whole, in Kant's interpretation the whole of the revolution and its enthusiastic results appear as historical signs for the whole historical development of the human species. Otherwise being extremely pessimistic in the short run, Burke was rather optimistic in the long run, which is clear from his hopeful reference to the 19th century (B: 250). It cannot be doubted that in the 19th and the 20th centuries, in

spite of the lot of «misery and horrors» and after time was off for «the great bad men of the old stamp», mankind made progress towards free trade, republicanism as well as towards globalization and federalism. Furthermore, in the last half a century even wars have been avoided – at least in Europe and America. Kant’s prophecy concerning the mutually warning effect of the increasingly big military preparations came true. Regarding globalisation, Kant made a realistic and considerable reference – even for those days – stating that due to differences among races, languages and religions the fusion of nations is impossible. And all this «Hang zum wechselseitigen Hasse, und Vorwand zum Kriege bei sich führt, aber doch, bei anwachsender Kultur und der allmählichen Annäherung der Menschen zu grösserer Einstimmung in Prinzipien, zum Einverständnis in einem Frieden leitet» (K 9: 226). Although today’s historical signs show different directions, Kant’s philosophy should have only one interpretation and one direction. It is true until «das Ende aller Dinge».

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(K 8 = Bd. 8; K 9 = Bd. 9)

B= Edmund Burke: *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. by Conor Cruise O’Brien (Penguin Books – Penguin Classics, London etc. 1986).

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