

# Rethinking society

*Individuals, Culture and Migration*

Volume 1

Individuals and Society

# **Individuals and Society**

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**Vladimer Luarsabishvili**

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This book demonstrates the role of individuals in the formation and development of societies. Forming part of the first volume of the book series *Rethinking society. Individuals, Culture and Migration*, the principle aim of *Individuals and Society* is to reveal the main peculiarities of an individual thinking and acting in a complex world of human communication.

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## Introduction: Individuals and Society

VLADIMER LUARSABISHVILI

The book series *Rethinking society. Individuals, Culture and Migration* aims to describe the structural peculiarities and functional characteristics of modern society. In the era of globalization, multiculturalism and massive migrations, the disappearance of one set of values and the appearance of another is observable. Society as a form of human interactions is subjected to revision and re-definition from the points of view of philosophy, rhetoric, history, literature and psychology, among others.

*Rethinking society* means the critical examination of modern ways of communication and their impact on the creation of new sets of values. Different approaches to the system of education and its role in the formation of free individuals may be of crucial importance for personal liberty and for establishment of liberal democracies all round the world.

*Individuals* are the main composers of human progress due to their different and original approaches to human values and basic rights. As Bertrand Russell put it, “[...] a community needs, if it is to prosper, a certain number of individuals who do not wholly conform to the general type. Practically all progress, artistic, moral, and intellectual, was dependent upon such individuals, who have been a decisive factor in the transition from barbarism to civilization.” The role of individual needs to be reconsidered in modern socio-cultural ambience and historical context which is one of the main challenges for modern society.

*Culture* is an ambience where values are formed and shared. Peter Burke indicates the coexistence of *Cultural History* and *History of Cultures* making emphasis on five moments of the development of the History of Culture in different parts of the world. The cultural tradition is a mode of experience and acting which reveals the intellectual possibilities and human perspectives of creation and thinking. “Studies

in Culture” may contain basic mechanisms of human relations demonstrating the acceptance or rejection of ideas, values and relations.

*Migration* facilitates diffusion of ideas and values, reveals possibilities for adaptation in the new *topos* and conditions the formation of new individual and/or collective narrative. According to Stephen Greenblatt, in an age of global mobility we need to rethink the essence of culture.

\* \* \*

*Individuals and Society* is the first volume of the book series *Rethinking society. Individuals, Culture and Migration*. Its principle aim is to reveal the main peculiarities of an individual thinking and acting in a complex world of human communication. Researchers from different European and American universities have contributed to this volume, studying multiple aspects of human coexistence in modern society. As a book series editor, I would like to thank all authors for their kind participation – I indicate here my sincere debt to them for their encouragement with this project. Special thanks to the members of Editorial and Advisory Editorial Boards for their remarks and suggestions.

Thinking with Mamardashvili: Human Responsibility,  
Transnationalism, and the Relevance of His Thought for the 21<sup>st</sup>  
Century

Alyssa DeBlasio

**Abstract:** Merab Mamardashvili (1930-1990) was a Georgian-born, multilingual philosopher whose work spanned a wide variety of topics, including philosophy of consciousness, literature, ancient philosophy, and contemporary European thought. He was one of only a handful of Soviet-born practitioners of a European, French-influenced style of philosophical discourse that, in Mamardashvili's case, bordered at times on a form of Marxist existentialism, given his early methodological foundation in Marxist analysis and his commitment to investigating the human experience. Although he is one of the most oft-cited contemporary philosophers in Russia today, until very recently, Mamardashvili's name was mostly unknown outside the former Soviet Union. My goal in this paper is to consider how Mamardashvili's philosophical thought can help us to grapple with, and to (re)consider, those key concepts that underlie some of the most critical flashpoints of the contemporary age: issues like human responsibility, citizenship, freedom, nationalism, and transnationalism. Upon first glance, these topics are abstract enough to have been addressed by many a philosopher, at many historical moments. And yet, what makes Mamardashvili's position distinctive is the way that he occupies a space that is simultaneously East, West, and Other, thereby making his philosophical work perhaps especially suited to the contemporary moment, where most of the world's most pressing issues are essentially transnational in character.

**Keywords:** Mamardashvili, Soviet philosophy, human being, philosophy of consciousness, freedom, transnationalism

Merab Mamardashvili (1930-1990) was a Georgian-born, multilingual philosopher whose work spanned a wide variety of topics, including philosophy of consciousness, ancient philosophy, literature (most notably, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*), contemporary European thought, and the work of Descartes and Kant. He was one of only a handful of Soviet-born practitioners of a European, French-influenced style of philosophical discourse that bordered at times on a form of Marxist existentialism, given his early methodological foundation in Marxist analysis and his commitment to investigating the human experience. Although he did publish some articles and books,

Mamardashvili was known primarily as an orator. Within his particular style of oration, furthermore, he sought to model for his audiences the process of thinking in action, so that those in attendance might too harness the human capacity for philosophical reflection. Although Mamardashvili was formally trained as a philosopher, his conversational, non-linear philosophical style and the wide variety of topics he addressed perhaps explains how he was able to find an audience among people of all professions and disciplines, “from intellectuals to hairdressers,” as one attendee described it.<sup>1</sup>

Until very recently, Mamardashvili’s name was unknown outside the former Soviet Union, except among a small contingent of Slavic Studies scholars and philosophers specializing in Russian/Soviet thought.<sup>2</sup> In Russia, where Mamardashvili spent most of his academic career, his legacy has always been the subject of active scholarship, not just because many of Russia’s leading philosophical names knew him personally, but because for much of the Russian-speaking world he was “one of the most prolific philosophers of the twentieth century.”<sup>3</sup> His appearance behind the podium in Moscow in the 1970s and 80s, often to standing-room only crowds, came to represent ideals of freedom of thought and cosmopolitanism that transcended the official discourse of Soviet academia of the era. In his native Georgia, the reception of his work has been more complicated. As we will see later in this article, Mamardashvili’s legacy in Georgia has, at times, suffered from an incomplete understanding of his views on national identity and

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\*Some ideas contained within this article appeared in an earlier form in: Alyssa DeBlasio, *The Filmmaker’s Philosopher: Merab Mamardashvili and Russian Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

<sup>1</sup>Uldis Tironis, “I Come to You from My Solitude,” *Eurozine* (June 2006), <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-06-22-tironis-en.html>.

<sup>2</sup> A recent cluster of publications in English on Mamardashvili’s intellectual legacy in the period between 2019-2022 have helped bring his life and work to the attention of non-specialists. These include a special issue of *Studies in East European Thought* 71.3 (October 2019), ed. by Diana Gasparyan; DeBlasio, *The Filmmaker’s Philosopher*; and Diana Gasparyan, *The Philosophic Path of Merab Mamardashvili* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> “Filosof Mamardashvili o Gruzii: ee nikogda nel’zia bylo pokorit’,” *Sputnik*, November 16, 2017, <https://news.rambler.ru/caucasus/38430918-filosof-mamardashvili-o-gruzii-ee-nikogda-nelzya-bylo-pokorit/> (last accessed June 23, 2020).

citizenship, which can be summarized in his view of “truth [*istina*] above homeland [*rodina*]” (Mamardashvili, 1992a: 207).

The majority of the work we have under Mamardashvili’s name has made its way to us not as articles or books written for publication, but as transcriptions of his university lectures, which he preferred to call “conversations” [*besedy*] or “variations” [*variatsii*]. These are the philosophical achievements for which he is most known today, and which earned him near celebrity status among the Soviet intelligentsia in the 1970s and 1980s. With regards to his style of philosophizing, in my view it is best described as both open and closed: it was open in the range of topics he addressed, his playful use of language, and the way his work lent itself to interpretation by the audience; it was closed in the fact that he only occasionally referenced other thinkers directly and rarely connected his ideas to the philosophical context (secondary sources, etc.) outside his own thought process. In his Vilnius lectures, he described his own rhetorical style as “pulling a thread through debris,” where the expectation of intellectual effort on the part of the reader is a defining feature of his process (Mamardashvili, 2018: 23). Philosopher Valerii Podoroga has stated that “it is impossible to cite Mamardashvili,” since his speech is structured in such a way that the removal of any individual line automatically breaks down the logic of the idea.<sup>4</sup> I have tended to take the opposite approach and to cite Mamardashvili’s texts whenever possible, so as to offer English-language readers the chance to interpret and experience his challenging language themselves.

My primary goal in this paper is to investigate how Mamardashvili’s philosophical views can help us to grapple with, and (re)consider, those key concepts that underlie some of the most critical flashpoints of the contemporary age: responsibility, citizenship, freedom, nationalism, and transnationalism. At first glance, these are abstract ideas that are applicable to any historical moment. And yet, Mamardashvili occupies a distinctive position by simultaneously representing East, West, and

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<sup>4</sup> Niko Nergadze and Misiia Paresishvili, “Merab Mamardashvili, original’nyi myslitel’,” *Ekho Kavkaza*, September 15, 2010.

Other, thereby making his philosophical work perhaps especially relevant at a moment when many of the world's most pressing issues are transnational in nature. What is more, at the time of this volume's publication, Russia and Georgia are two continents that continue to drift further apart: Russia is more than two decades into a twenty-year process of national consolidation under Vladimir Putin, while Georgia continues to move away from Russia, away from its Soviet past, and thereby towards its European ambitions. Questions of Russia, Georgia, and their roles in "Europe" were of the utmost importance for Mamardashvili, who himself had a personal stake in all three of these identities yet chose to identify with something higher than nationhood. Finally, I hope this contribution might bring Mamardashvili's thought into dialogue with the international and transnational cohort of authors represented in this volume, thereby aiding the slow-moving yet ongoing process of transnationalizing the tradition of Russian-language philosophy.

### **What is the Human Being?**

From the mid 1970s to his death in 1990 at age 60, Mamardashvili lectured at some of the most prestigious institutions in Moscow and Tbilisi, including Moscow State University, the institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, and Tbilisi State University. The topics of his lecture cycles there included Introduction to Philosophy, Ancient Philosophy, and Contemporary European Philosophy. But no matter the topic on which Mamardashvili was lecturing, he was always – in one way or another – talking about the problem of consciousness. Here I refer to consciousness as a *problem* because the topic was for Mamardashvili, as it remains among experts today, shrouded in enigma. Although neuroscience, cognitive science, and other fields in the study of mind have uncovered a great deal about the role and structure of consciousness in the decades since Mamardashvili's death, there is still no consensus on a theory that fully explains the mysterious unity of emotions, impressions, sensations, and

thoughts that comprises human conscious experience. Mamardashvili's work emphasizes the fundamentally unknown dimension to consciousness through the language of paradox: the idea that the process of investigating consciousness always leads us into "a sphere of paradox to which it is impossible to grow accustomed" (Mamardashvili, 1992b: 85).

A guiding idea within Mamardashvili's ontology of the human being is, as Janis Skesteris has put it, "to oppose the human to the natural" (Skesteris, 2013: 153). First, Mamardashvili argues there is no way to trace the cause or source of consciousness back to some primary cause or primordial explanation: "there is no natural cause of the sequence of events that would generate the human, including that which could generate a thought in a human," he argued in a lecture series from 1986 – 1987 (Mamardashvili, 2018: 102). Over a decade earlier, in a series of dialogues with philosopher Alexander Piatigorsky, Mamardashvili articulated the problem of consciousness not in terms of scarcity, but overdetermination: "consciousness is very difficult to explain not because there is no explanation, but because there are too many explanations" (Mamardashvili and Piatigorskii, 1991: 31).

Even if consciousness had a "reason" or "explanation," there would still be no way to access it directly, since consciousness itself can never become the object of study (Mamardashvili, 2018: 140). In this view, consciousness is synonymous with being, since we cannot speak about human beings as having one but not the other (except maybe in some specific, individual cases); even when we lose consciousness, even if for an extended period of time, our ability to lose it hinges on there having been the possibility for consciousness in the first place. Philosopher Diana Gasparyan describes Mamardashvili's view of consciousness through the productive metaphor of light: "Consciousness resembles light – all things in the world are given to us through light, but light itself is not given as a thing. It is projected on things in the optical mode of the eye – the eye allows you to see things,

but it does not fall into the same field of view.”<sup>5</sup> But even so, we are reminded that light always has its source and that we can trace both the source and the mechanisms of the eye down to the very act of seeing (the retina, the cornea, the vitreous humor, all doing their work) – and even turn a mirror on them, to observe that work in action. Consciousness, in other words, is prior to even the best analogies we can devise. What is more, the fact that consciousness is synonymous with being means that there are no possible solutions that do not already include the problem itself: “describing consciousness is something that we cannot do, because consciousness is already implied in the construction of the physical methods themselves, already presupposed,” as Mamardashvili explained (Mamardashvili, 2019: 128).

Mamardashvili was not content, however, to say that consciousness must therefore remain a complete mystery to us. Although we are unable to “jump out of the world” and investigate consciousness from an objective point of view, we do have the necessary tools at our disposal to “place [ourselves] on the edge of the world” (Ibid., 26). Philosophy, in particular, is a tool for investigating consciousness: “Always and everywhere, philosophy is the language in which the witness of consciousness is deciphered.”<sup>6</sup> Like Viktor Shklovsky’s method of defamiliarization offered the opportunity “to see the world through different eyes,” Mamardashvili’s work in the philosophy of consciousness demands that we look beyond experience to those enduring ideas that do not come with readymade answers: what is God, the soul, consciousness, the human being, etc.<sup>7</sup>

My task here in this article is not to summarize Mamardashvili’s philosophy of consciousness in any holistic way. And yet, if we are to speak with any certainty about his conception of human responsibility or any of the topics that follow, then we do need to understand the fundamental role that the problem of consciousness plays in his

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<sup>5</sup> Gasparyan, *The Philosophic Path of Merab Mamardashvili*.

<sup>6</sup> “Filosofia – eto soznanie vslukh,” in Mamardashvili, 1992d, 57.

<sup>7</sup> On God and the soul as among such problems, see: Mamardashvili, 2019, pp. 26–27.



philosophical outlook. At the methodological level, his approach to consciousness is defined by the trope of paradox, a move that is indicative of his philosophical style more broadly: consciousness is both found everywhere and nowhere; it is that thing that never allows direct knowledge, and yet we seek it out nonetheless.<sup>8</sup> Mamardashvili's approach in this vein was not some kind of purposeful act of obfuscation but was integral to his philosophical method. He saw his goal not to "discuss or summarize the content of philosophical scholarship," but to "try and help you feel what philosophy is" (Mamardashvili, 2012: 12). Often that took the form of expressing ideas not through classical methods of argumentation, but through associative circles. When at the end of a lecture from 1988, he concluded by saying that "I believe I've come full circle" – I think this quite accurately sums up his approach to philosophical discourse (Mamardashvili, 1992c: 387).

Returning more directly to the question of the human being, Mamardashvili describes human life as "effort in time" (Mamardashvili, 2014: 13). This is among the most well-known "sound bites" of his lectures, in that this idea has been quoted in a variety of contexts, including in the work of psychologists and filmmakers alike.<sup>9</sup> This was the effort to know, to seek, and even "to remain alive" (Mamardashvili, 1992d: 395). There are obvious connections here to the etymological roots of philosophy as the love of wisdom, and to philosophy's Socratic roots as the never-ending, "extended effort" of philosophical inquiry.<sup>10</sup> In her study of the correspondence between Mamardashvili and Louis Althusser, Miglena Nikolchina adds that Mamardashvili's philosophy of the human being can be described as "a

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<sup>8</sup> On the trope of paradox in Mamardashvili's philosophy, for instance, he writes that "[t]he language of philosophy is paradoxical; it stands in relation to that which is impossible to know in principle." See: Merab Mamardashvili, "Filosofia i svoboda," in *Kak ia ponimaiu filosofiiu*, ed. Iu. P. Senokosov, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Progress - Kul'tura, 1992), 367.

<sup>9</sup> On the appearance of this quote in psychology, see: Elena Sapogova, *Territoria vzroslosti* (Moscow: Genezis, 2016). On the use of this quote by filmmaker Andrei Zviagintsev, see: DeBlasio, *The Filmmaker's Philosopher: Merab Mamardashvili and Russian Cinema*, 160-176.

<sup>10</sup> Miglena Nikolchina discusses Mamardashvili's use of "becoming" (devenir) in: Miglena Nikolchina, "Inverted Forms and Heterotopian Homonymy: Althusser, Mamardashvili, and the Problem of 'Man,'" *Boundary 2* 41, no. 1 (2014): 79-100.

negative ontology,” since the effort to become human is “a failing effort in most cases, a frequently abortive effort, to be sure, but an effort nonetheless.”<sup>11</sup> Plato too used the language of becoming; a process that was always ongoing and never completed. For Mamardashvili, in fact, “the whole of history can be described as the history of efforts to become a person.”<sup>12</sup>

And yet, I think it is important that we do not forget the language of “joy” [*radost*] that figures into Mamardashvili’s reflections on the human being. Philosophy investigates things that have no answers, and therefore we should be guided not by hope for those answers (or by the lack of answers) but by the process itself. Above all, in my reading, Mamardashvili’s work on consciousness was a celebration of the human mind and the power of thought. To be a human being – not just a body with a mind, but an individual [*lichnost*] – is something we must constantly work at, Mamardashvili argued.<sup>13</sup> Like the process of *becoming*, it is a battle that must be constantly fought and can never be won. This is where his conception of human responsibility comes forward. By virtue of our being conscious beings, we have the power to be philosophical beings; insofar as we have the potential to be philosophical, we have the responsibility to ourselves and to others to take advantage of that potential. In Mamardashvili’s own words: “a person must always see his own face and respect himself, to know himself – without this there can be no human existence.”<sup>14</sup> If we have a responsibility to ourselves and to others in Mamardashvili’s philosophy, then this duty to *know* must be at least one important component of it.

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<sup>11</sup> Nikolchina, 87.

<sup>12</sup> “Evropeiskaia otvetstvennost’,” in Mamardashvili, 2013a, 40–41.

<sup>13</sup> Mamardashvili used the Russian word *lichnost*’ (individual) in his writing on consciousness as early as the 1970s, when the term was considered a contentious, and in some contexts forbidden, topic of bourgeois reflection. For one example, see his 1977 presentation “Philosophy and Personality” at the Institute of Psychology (Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow). The text of his talk was posthumously published as Mamardashvili, “Filosofiia i lichnost’,” *Chelovek* 5 (1994): 5–19.

<sup>14</sup> Mamardashvili, “Vena na zare XX veka,” 397.

## What is (Un)Freedom?

The concept of striving, addressed above, also underlies Mamardashvili's views on freedom. Like consciousness, freedom is impossible to pin down. On the one hand, it has no identifiable source and also produces nothing but itself – “freedom produces only freedom,” just as a thought produces only a thought.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, “that which is impossible to know and which we have called freedom is the primary goal of human striving.”<sup>16</sup> This striving is a part of the ontology of the human being, about which we spoke earlier: “It is as if within the human being there is established the movement towards that which is impossible to know in principle.”<sup>17</sup> Freedom is the antitheses of determinism; freedom is only possible, he continues, when we are given the power to choose. And yet, freedom is not given to us directly; it is always somewhere *over there*, inaccessible, or as Mamardashvili describes it: it is among the things that “can only just be and that we cannot presuppose in advance.”<sup>18</sup> To explain this idea further, Mamardashvili quotes Nietzsche: it is “on the other side of good and evil.”<sup>19</sup>

Mamardashvili likens the movement toward freedom to a roundtrip journey. On the way there, we know nothing; it is on the way back, “the retroactive path,” where knowledge appears.<sup>20</sup> Literary-philosophical texts also employ the spatial metaphor of the journey to represent the path to self-knowledge, be it Dante's *Inferno*, the works of Dostoevsky, or Plato's *Republic*. The latter, in particular, concludes with the “Myth of Er,” in which Er travels to the afterlife and then returns home, offering an eyewitness account of metaphysical truths that then contextualize the intellectual journey of the *Republic* itself. Spatial metaphors appear in other places in Mamardashvili's work as well: for

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<sup>15</sup> “Filosofia i svoboda,” in Mamardashvili, 1992e, 370.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 368. Mamardashvili employed the philosophical term *transcendent* and its associated forms in Russian (*transsendirovanie*, as a noun, and *transsendirovat'*, as a verb) to speak about the process of movement. For more on this, see: *Ibid.*, 368–69.

instance, *aporia* is both conceptual, as a logical puzzle or impasse, and physical, since etymologically it describes the unknown as the logical puzzle of “impassable space.”<sup>21</sup>

Mamardashvili talks about freedom in many of the same ways he talks about consciousness. He speaks about how “the language of philosophy is the language in which we speak about freedom,” and how the phenomenon of freedom, like consciousness, cannot be made into an object.<sup>22</sup> Much like consciousness, “freedom is, after all, something that demands very serious physical labor. But un-freedom [*nesvoboda*] is much simpler. In this seductive abyss, an abyss of un-effort [*netrud*], an abyss of irresponsibility, an abyss of un-freedom, the entire world may fall, may tumble down.”<sup>23</sup> When discussing freedom, much of Mamardashvili’s work remains at the abstract level of philosophical ideas. In his work on Descartes, in particular, he emphasizes that we should not understand freedom in the context of “fighting for freedom of thought” (against the Church, etc.) in a historical context, but as the “elusive halo of individuality, that elusive magma – that, which I call freedom was, to the highest degree, intrinsic to Descartes in every movement of his soul and life (Mamardashvili, 1993: 43). Likewise, in his Introduction to Philosophy lectures from 1978-1980, he asks explicitly that his audience not consider his reflections on freedom in a political context: “I ask you to understand the word ‘freedom’ in a philosophical or metaphysical sense *for now*, without any concrete associations, whether political or otherwise” [italics added].<sup>24</sup>

And yet, we may ask ourselves: What did Mamardashvili – a philosopher who lived with considerable restrictions on his own freedom of publication, employment, and movement – have to say about freedom in the specific Soviet context in which he lived? To put it another way, we might ask: When we leave the realm of philosophy and enter the contemporary world, what implications do his ideas on freedom (or un-freedom, to use his own language) have for individual

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<sup>21</sup> Mamardashvili, *Besedy o myshlenii*, 183.

<sup>22</sup> Mamardashvili, *Vvedenie v filosofiiu*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Mamardashvili, *Ocherk sovremennoi evropeiskoi filosofii*, 80.

<sup>24</sup> Mamardashvili, *Vvedenie v filosofiiu*, 45.

human beings? For Mamardashvili, “[t]he human being is free in one simple sense of the word: he is not an element of some kind of causal, primordial nature: that is, does not produce freedom.”<sup>25</sup> And yet, this explanation is not likely to satisfy the reader looking for contemporary relevance. However, I believe that the italicized “for now” in the quote above (*poka* in the Russian) indicates that Mamardashvili did feel that his work on freedom had potential political implications. We might conceive of the relationship between freedom and human responsibility in terms of the prior conclusions we have drawn about the relationship between consciousness and responsibility: that we have “freedom and power to take control of [ourselves] and [our] inclinations, as there is nothing else that we possess,” as Mamardashvili articulated in his work on Descartes.<sup>26</sup> As we will see in the section that follows, Mamardashvili explicitly addressed the political dimension of his philosophy in his work from the last decade of his life.

### **What is (Trans) Nationalism?**

In the mid- and late 1980s the tone of Mamardashvili’s work became increasingly political, in line with the new freedoms and reforms of the Gorbachev era.<sup>27</sup> In addition, at this time Mamardashvili began doing regular media appearances in print and on television, genres that lend themselves to topics of a political nature. In Moscow, where he lived until 1980, Mamardashvili’s public popularity and the content of his lectures was met with resistance from Soviet authorities: he was dismissed from many of his teaching posts, fired from the editorial board of the journal *Problems of Philosophy (Voprosy filosofii)*,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>26</sup> Mamardashvili, *Kartezijskie razmyshleniia*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> It is important to note how, in Svetlana Klimova’s words, “Mamardashvili was a rather consistent thinker. The ideas he formulated at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s remained the object of his attention until the end of his life.” See: Svetlana Klimova, “Thinking Eternally and Continuously. The Russian Experience of Mamardashvili,” *Studies in East European Thought* 71 (2019): 199-215. Evert van der Zweerde takes of the question of the political relevance of Mamardashvili’s philosophizing in: Evert Van der Zweerde, “Philosophy in the Act: The Socio-Political Relevance of Mamardasvili’s Philosophizing,” *Studies in East European Thought* 58 (2006): 179–203.

forbidden from traveling abroad for two decades, and then eventually returned to Georgia, though he travelled to Moscow regularly for lecture appointments.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Mamardashvili was living in an environment with a growing political momentum. In the 1970s and 1980s, Georgia was known for having an unusually vibrant civil society, and questions of identity, independence, and language garnered significant public interest as Georgians took to the streets to protest against Soviet rule and prepared for the contentious parliamentary elections of 1990.<sup>29</sup>

Among Mamardashvili's explicitly political works is his lecture "Consciousness and Civilization," which he delivered in 1984 in the Georgian port city of Batumi. Here he warned of an impending "anthropological catastrophe" with the power to irreparably change, and even destroy, civilization as we know it.<sup>30</sup> He was not referring to a natural or industrial disaster, although the Soviet Union had a history of both such kinds of catastrophe. Mamardashvili instead seemed to have in mind a moral apocalypse at the level of consciousness, in which "something vitally important [to human civilization] could be irreparably broken."<sup>31</sup> In a later work from 1989, he referred to the same condition as "sick consciousness," which he identified as a leading malady of Soviet life at that time.<sup>32</sup>

For Mamardashvili, sick consciousness seemed to describe a way of relating to the external world that is insular, selfish, and disconnected from concepts like civic duty and the greater good. "The people themselves are sick, and this is apparent in the way they react to what

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<sup>28</sup> The philosopher's daughter, Alena Mamardashvili, notes that Soviet authorities offered Mamardashvili a choice: to permanently emigrate from the Soviet Union or to return to Tbilisi, and that he chose the latter.

<sup>29</sup> Irakli Zurab Kakabadze and Ronald Grigor Suny have written about intellectual life in Georgia in the post-Stalin era. See: Irakli Zurab Kakabadze, "I Am with Chubik: Faces of Georgian AlterModernity, Modernity and Anti-Modernity," *Arcade* (Jan. 31, 2013), <http://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/i-amchubik-faces-georgian-altermodernity-modernity-and-anti-modernity>; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> "Soznanie i tsivilizatsiia," in Mamardashvili 2013b, 8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> "Tret'e sostoianie," in Mamardashvili, 2013c, 163–5.

is happening around them, to themselves, to those in power, and to the surrounding world.”<sup>33</sup> Living with this kind of consciousness, he continued, was like being trapped in a room covered in mirrors, where instead of seeing the way out you see only the multiplied reflection of your own image.<sup>34</sup> The trajectory of late Soviet politics and culture “stung and worried” Mamardashvili, and aroused in him “a sense of horror and the desire to ... think, understand, and see some kind of broader principle behind it all,” as he expressed.<sup>35</sup>

Mamardashvili went on to argue that while sick consciousness was a problem of Soviet mentality, it above all affected people living on Russian territory. “I would call the country that we live in [Russia] a country of eternal gestation. After all it is certainly a kind of hellish condition: to never be delivered from your burden. Or to be constantly delivering but to never be delivered.”<sup>36</sup> By way of example, he references the “National Patriotic Group ‘Memory,’” which was founded in Moscow in 1980 and was known for its radical nationalism, including, at various times, anti-Semitism, pro-monarchism, Russian Orthodox ideology, and pro-Stalinism rhetoric. Not even 100 years have elapsed since the Black Hundreds pogrom, continued Mamardashvili, and “once again we are faced with nearly the same scheme of political forces and possibilities: Bolsheviks and ‘patriots.’”<sup>37</sup> It is not just “that history repeats itself,” as the platitude goes, but that the problem was never resolved in the first place. “It all continues turning, like an eternal machine.”<sup>38</sup> The only way out is “by falling into a different world, through a change in the very soil that gives birth to this coupling, which itself is unresolvable.”<sup>39</sup> We should take a moment to notice how familiar much of Mamardashvili’s language is, though here he is talking about pressing questions of contemporary relevance to his time.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>35</sup> “Soznanie i tsivilizatsiia,” 7.

<sup>36</sup> Mamardashvili, “Filosofia i svoboda,” 372.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 372.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Mamardashvili was equally critical of his birth country. Of particular worry was the nationalist rhetoric stoked by supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who led Georgia's transition to independence in 1991 and would become the country's first president, though for a short-lived term. While addressing a Moscow audience at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in October of 1990, in one of his final public appearances, Mamardashvili spoke of making the journey that day from Tbilisi to Moscow: "I woke up in one of the most provincial spots of the black tunnel in which we find ourselves, where there was no visible light at all. I am talking about my life in Tbilisi."<sup>40</sup>

In media interviews and at political events, he spoke out against nationalism and ill-directed patriotism, and in the name truth and self-reflection. Valerii Podoroga's earlier-quoted statement, about it being impossible to accurately cite the philosopher's lectures, is equally relevant here.<sup>41</sup> Mamardashvili's citations were taken out of context and, according to one such inflammatory misreading in a Russian newspaper, "the Russian nationalists consider him the worst enemy of Russia, an ideolog of Georgian militarism, while the Georgian nationalists on the side of Gamsakhurdia labeled him a traitor of national interests ...".<sup>42</sup> Gamsakhurdia himself is reported to have called Mamardashvili "the main enemy of the Georgian people" after censoring an interview with the philosopher that was set to appear on national television in 1990.<sup>43</sup>

It was not the case that Mamardashvili was against Georgian nationalism, specifically; he was against nationalism in all its forms. In many of his interviews and essays from the 1980s, he spoke about how the human being "knew no national borders" and the way that "truth is higher than Nation."<sup>44</sup> Moreover, he articulated how philosophy could

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<sup>40</sup> "Vena na zare XX veka," 388.

<sup>41</sup> Ryklin, "Ia Istinu stavliu vyshe moei rodiny."

<sup>42</sup> Niko Nergadze and Misiia Paresishvili, "Merab Mamardashvili, original'nyi myslitel'," *Ekho Kavkaza*, September 15, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Dularidze, "Merab Mamardashvili segodnia."

<sup>44</sup> "Odinochestvo - moia professiia," p. 549.; Timur Selivanov, "Svobodnaia mysl' Meraba Mamardashvili: Interv'iu s issledovatelem filozofa," *Svobodnaia Gruzii*,



serve as a space apart from politics, and how a-political philosophizing was a reaction to environments in which there was a lack of political freedom. In a letter from 1968 to Althusser, he articulated:

In a situation like ours, it is best not to have any political title. For us, good politics is to depoliticize philosophy, insofar as we aren't able (censorship, ideological pressure, totalitarianism, etc.) to create, develop, and publish serious work on politics, or to act politically in any real sense, and so we refrain from politics as such and, in general, in every sense.<sup>45</sup>

We can view the various “negative” moves of Mamardashvili’s career—his refusal to participate in the Soviet project, the bold and unprecedented manner of his lectures, and his rejection of the language of dialectical materialism and of the Georgian and Russian languages in general—as similar political moves, which violated the norms of Soviet scholarship not through antagonism, but in calculated refusal. His own apophatic descriptions of himself as an “antihumanist,” as “atypical” within the Soviet context, and as someone who “watched politics from a distance,” even as late as 1988, also play into this trope.<sup>46</sup> The irony of this stance, however, was that at the same time Mamardashvili insisted that a civil sphere was impossible within the conditions of Soviet reality, he was seen as a beacon for the very possibility of such a sphere.

Mamardashvili was against nationalism, but how do his ideas fit with current debates over transnationalism? Most definitions of transnationalism share an emphasis on “exchanges, connections, and practices across borders, thus transcending the national space as the primary reference point for activities and identities.”<sup>47</sup> As borders become less defined and the traditional concept of nation-state sheds its historical inheritance, the topic of migration—and the connected themes of movement and restriction, synergy and inertia—comes

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<http://svobodnaya.info/ru/society/1620-svobodnaya-mysl-meraba-mamardashvili-intervyu-s-issledovatelem-filosofa> (last accessed June 23, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> E. Mamardashvili, 20.

<sup>46</sup> See, for instance: Mamardashvili, “Moi opyt netipichen,” 356-7.

<sup>47</sup> “Migration and Transnationalism: Opportunities and Challenges,” 2010, 1. [https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/microsites/IDM/workshops/migration\\_and\\_transnationalism\\_030910/background\\_paper\\_en.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/microsites/IDM/workshops/migration_and_transnationalism_030910/background_paper_en.pdf)

forward as a leading phenomenon of transnationalism and of the contemporary experience. The International Origination for Migration frames this movement in the language of agency and subjectivity: that “every migrant can be an agent as well as a subject of transnationalism, engaging in transnational activities and practices to a greater or lesser degree.”<sup>48</sup> Transnationalism, thus, is not a state but a dynamic mode, whereby individuals (or subsequent generations, even several times removed) can participate in or not participate in the mode of being transnational to varying degrees. This is a topic with significant philosophical potential, as the emerging research in this field demonstrates.<sup>49</sup>

Mamardashvili’s work was transnational in some important regards. He read widely, was fluent in multiple languages, lived between Moscow and Tbilisi for a time, and traveled extensively at the beginning and end of his career. Importantly, his philosophical style hints at the transnational in the way it mixes influences and is therefore much closer to concurrent European traditions of existentialism, Continental philosophy, and post-Marxism than to the official Soviet philosophy of his day. His work expanded the experience of his reader outside the immediate Soviet context, into the inaccessible (at the time of his lectures) category of Europeanness. And yet, Mamardashvili was in many ways bound by the system into which he was born – not in terms of the ideas that he espoused but, as we have seen above, but in the way that system restricted his intellectual freedom. Questions of the transnational come into play most clearly not as developed philosophical ideas, but as biographical data points.

We might perhaps glean some insights into the transnational in Mamardashvili’s discussions of East and West, whereby Russia takes up a role at the center of this debate. In a lecture from 1990, he expressed: “I would say that ... Russia has taken upon itself (highly unsuccessfully, in my view) this role: the role of the center point of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>49</sup> Laura Doyle, “Toward a Philosophy of Transnationalism,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1.1 (2009), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9vr1k8hk> (last accessed June 22, 2020).

problem of West and East, in the most basic sense.”<sup>50</sup> In that same lecture, he also articulates the East-West problem in its metaphysical dimension: “West and East are the two eternal sides of the states of humanity: this is not geography, these two eternal points.”<sup>51</sup> The historical moment in which Mamardashvili lived was an era of clearly defined borders, the antithesis of the transnational mode. And yet Russia has historically served (in its own mythology about itself, as well as the mythologies imposed on it by others) as a liminal space that is neither East nor West, and which sits at the intersections of various identities.

Here it is worth raising, if only very briefly, Mamardashvili’s problematic concept of “Europe,” which has already been discussed by Miglena Nikolchina in her 2014 article. In Mamardashvili’s own words, the adjective “European” refers not to territorial affiliation, “but is a different slice of human existence, in the sense that Europe is not a geographic notion. European can be present in Tokyo but absent in Moscow; Europe can be present in Hong Kong but absent in Moscow.”<sup>52</sup> As Nikolchina distils it, in Mamardashvili’s work the concept of “Europe is shorthand for human being.”<sup>53</sup> If “European” indeed refers to a way of being, or even an *idée-force*, then it risks functioning as an aspiration and even exclusionary idea – perhaps in contrast to what Mamardashvili saw happening in Tbilisi, where he lamented the loss of the historic center of the city and the disrepair in the public spaces in apartment buildings, where dilapidated entry-ways [pod’ezd] served as “an external expression of the structure of one’s understanding of oneself.”<sup>54</sup> We know from Mamardashvili’s biography that Europe – and France, above all – occupied a special place in his intellectual training, and that he identified himself as being born “outside Europe.”<sup>55</sup> From our vantage point today, we also know

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<sup>50</sup> Mamardashvili, “Vena na zare XX veka,” 392.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> “Problema cheloveka v filosofii,” 240.

<sup>53</sup> Nikolchina, “Inverted Forms and Heterotopian Homonymy: Althusser, Mamardashvili, and the Problem of ‘Man,’” 86.

<sup>54</sup> Mamardashvili, “Odinochestvo - moia professiia. Interv’iu Uldisa Tironsa,” 551.

<sup>55</sup> Mamardashvili, “Evropeiskaia otvetstvennost’,” 311.

how problematic the concept of Europe can be, whereby the platform of “European values” is often coopted by nationalist and ultra-right groups to oppose diversity (religious, ethnic, etc.), multinationalism, and transnationalism – to oppose freedom of thought, movement, and existence, in general.

And yet, these exclusionary, nationalist views of “Europe” are not, of course, what Mamardashvili had in mind. In “European Responsibility” from 1988, he identifies himself as being born outside Europe, “in the provinces,” but that this experience equipped him with “a privileged vantage point from which he could see those things that a European might miss.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, he was clear that to be “European” was not to be “above all others,” and that “Europeanness” in fact went hand-in-hand with a lack of awareness of the full condition of being human: “For you Europeans, too many things seem natural, taken for granted. For instance, you don’t even reflect on what constitutes the essence of your existence. You don’t have that heightened consciousness that to be a human being is first and foremost the effort to become human.”<sup>57</sup> If, as we saw earlier in this paper, a fundamental component of our human responsibility is to engage in that difficult and never-ending process of *becoming* an individual, then it seems that the state of being “non-European” offered significant advantages. For those like Mamardashvili, living under conditions where ideals of freedom and openness were not a given, perhaps that journey of self-knowledge was already underway.

## Conclusion

Our process here of “thinking with” a philosopher, and especially one as complex as Mamardashvili, has resulted not in any concrete conclusions, but rather in a series of reflections on how Russia’s and Georgia’s most well-known philosopher of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century might help us grapple with those problems most critical to our contemporary

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<sup>56</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem.

age: human responsibility, freedom, and transnational values. The idea of transnationalism is anachronistic in the context of Mamardashvili's time, and yet his own biography often fits that trope of in-betweenness that we find so commonly represented in his work. Especially in the last decade of his life, he was candid about the cost of positioning himself as neither ideologue nor dissident, neither nationalist nor émigré. "I am not afraid of a civil death [*grazhdanskaia smert'*]," he wrote in 1990, reflecting on troubles he had faced during his career. "My oppressors back then were themselves Georgians—the lies, aggressive ignorance, and the vigilante justice of the ruling contingent of my own people. It was precisely because of them that I and others like me went into internal emigration."<sup>58</sup> We might view internal emigration as the metaphysical counterpart to Mamardashvili's earlier claim about depoliticization. Retreating into the self and, more specifically, into the power of ideas and philosophy to enact existential change, is a Socratic reaction—and perhaps the only reaction—in the face of such pressures.

Mamardashvili employed the concept of "civil death" to describe his position in the Soviet system, and like Socrates, he articulated the practice of philosophy as preparation for death.<sup>59</sup> It seems, in fact, that despite Mamardashvili's commitment to the European intellectual tradition, he felt some kind of philosophical duty to *remain* in the Soviet Union, despite the pressures it placed on him. In one appearance from 1990, he recounted the line by Russian poet Osip Mandelstam that "the highest ambition of an artist—is to exist, to remain."<sup>60</sup> Just as he distanced himself from any clear identity that could be pinned upon him, Mamardashvili preferred to see himself as a human being first and foremost, above national concerns, and perhaps even above the transnational, although there is no doubt that the shifting borders of his era played a role in shaping his work from the 1980s.

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<sup>58</sup> "Veriu v zdravnyi smysl."

<sup>59</sup> Dularidze, "Stranstvuiushchii filosof."

<sup>60</sup> Mamardashvili, "Vena na zare XX veka," 389.

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# Alexandre Kojève, or the philosopher as a madman<sup>61</sup>

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**Abstract:** The possibility of knowledge has been the main philosophical concern since Plato. In other words, the philosopher who claims that he knows something ought to answer the question: how can he *know* that he knows something? Needless to say, subjective certainty will not be enough to demonstrate that one is in possession of knowledge. That is, ideas must be externally verified in some sense. Alexandre Kojève's (1902-1968) philosophical attempt has in view this forceful verification, whose goal is nothing less than absolute knowledge (Wisdom). Kojève places Hegel at the base of his attempt. The Russian-born French philosopher radicalizes the uttermost modern, Hobbesian-Vichian *verum-factum* thesis. He does so in History, as it is a human product that is in turn anthropogenic. The result is that, at the end of history, truth is rationally revealed (Man is made truly self-conscious) and the philosopher becomes a Wise Man. Or, to put it in another way: according to Kojève's radical atheism, God does not exist and there is no transcendent truth (no theology). Therefore, if truth exists, it has to be immanent in History (through Work and Struggle in the Master-Slave dialectic). Hegel's thesis is that the Concept is Time. However, on the other hand, if the Concept is not Time but temporal (and there is no end to History), the philosopher becomes "a madman, who claims or wants to be what one can *not* be and (what is worse) what he *knows* to be impossible." In this chapter, this problem will be addressed in light of the Strauss-Kojève debate on tyranny.

**Keywords:** Philosophy, knowledge, dialectic, recognition, end of history, madness

In his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel (IRH)*, Kojève starts by showing the need to surpass mere "subjective certainty" in order to attain "knowledge". According to the Russian-born French philosopher, subjective certainty is thus not enough to acquire knowledge<sup>62</sup>. It is not its criterion. In the text, we learn how social

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<sup>62</sup> It goes without saying "qu'à la base de la compréhension (*Verstehen*), du Discours (*Rede*) ou de la pensée raisonnable, il y a la présence-pratique-et-émotive (*Befindlichkeit*) - et non purement «théorique» - de l'homme dans son monde" (Kojève, 1993: 37). Knowledge is not purely theoretical. It is rather *experiential*.



verification will be the means by which man can achieve knowledge (reassurance) of his own value as a man. Subjective certainty could be false or mad. In order to clear away the danger of madness, the relationship with the “other” is necessary:

The “first” man who meets another man for the first time already attributes an autonomous, absolute value to himself: one can say that he believes himself to be a man, that he has the “subjective certainty” of being a man. But his certainty is not yet knowledge. The value that he attributes to himself could be illusory; the idea that he has of himself could be false or mad. For that idea to be a truth, it must reveal an objective reality, that is, an entity that is valid and exists not only for itself, but also for realities other than itself. In the case in question, man, to be really, truly “man,” and to know that he is such, must, therefore, impose the idea that he has of himself on beings other than himself: he must be recognized by others (in the ideal, extreme case: by all others). Or again: he must transform the (natural and human) world in which he is not recognized into a world in which this recognition takes place. This transformation of the world that is hostile to a human project into a world in harmony with this project is called “action,” “activity.” This action—essentially human, because humanizing and anthropogenic—will begin with the act of imposing oneself on the “first” other man one will meet. (Kojève, 1980: 11)

In effect, prior to social recognition, “the idea he has of himself could be false or mad.” It is known that this situation (i.e., the encounter with “the first other man one will meet”) leads to the fight to the death for recognition and, afterwards, to the whole Master-Slave dialectic that articulates human History in Kojève’s philosophy. Recognition is momentous. Action is required. However, let us focus our attention on this proximity between falsehood and madness, that is, on the appearance of the danger of madness and error at the beginning of the entire process. Certainly, “[m]adness plays a significant role in Kojève’s thought” (Love, 2018: 17)<sup>63</sup>. Madness haunts Kojève’s work

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<sup>63</sup>“As does the related notion of nonsense, particularly in terms of Kojève’s concern in his later works to provide a theory of sense as opposed to silence and nonsense, the latter being described most succinctly as unending or infinite discourse, a discourse than cannot find or limit itself. See Kojève, *Essai d’une histoire raisonnée de la philosophie païenne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968–1973), 1:23–33, 57–95.” (Love, 2018: 294).

like a pervasive threat<sup>64</sup>. It is one of the paradigms of the problem of sense and nonsense. It has to do with discourse and man: discourse can be nonsensical; man can be mad (madness is obviously tied to nonsense). Avoiding such pitfalls constitutes the core of the Kojevian quest for Wisdom. Moreover, the question of sense worries Kojève to the extent that it involves the possibility itself of a meaningful discourse. In *Le Concept, le Temps et le Discours*, Kojève envisages the prospect of a multiplicity of discourses which have nothing to do with each other. Without a unifying discourse that integrates them for comprehension, discourses finally lack a sense:

À première vue, il pourrait y avoir plusieurs développements “circulaires” extérieurs les uns aux autres, chacun d’eux développant le sens d’une notion différente. Mais cela signifierait qu’il y a plusieurs discours dont les sens n’ont rien de commun entre eux et qui ne peuvent par conséquent pas être intégrés en un seul et même discours cohérent. Or, s’il en était ainsi, on ne voit pas comment il serait possible de comprendre tous ces sens à la fois, c’est-à-dire de parler d’eux comme de sens. Il est évident que pour avoir vraiment un *sens*, le sens discursivement développé doit être *un* en lui-même et unique en son genre, c’est-à-dire *uni-total*. (Kojève, 1990: 46-47)

Closure (*fermeture*) and circularity (*circularité*) are two necessary (and evidently related) features of the Kojevian system of knowledge. Nothing can fall outside it. Everything must be accounted for. “The Wise Man’s “absolute Knowledge” is *circular*, and *all* circular knowledge (only *one* such knowledge is possible) is the “absolute

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<sup>64</sup> “In her biography of Lacan, Élisabeth Roudinesco informs us that Kojève prepared a text on Hegel and Freud in collaboration with Lacan. The source of this information is Dominique Auffret, according to whom the manuscript in question—written in Russian, dated July 1936—was divided into three parts: “Genesis of Self-consciousness”; “*The Origin of Madness*”; and “The Essence of the Family.” (Luchelli & McGowan, 2016: 331 [emphasis ours]). It is a well-known fact that Jacques Lacan attended for some years (1934-1935, 1935-1936, and 1936-1937) Kojève’s seminar on Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in the Parisian École Pratique des Hautes Études (Auffret, 1990: 239; Roth, 1988: 225-226). However, it is less known that Lacan himself during Kojève’s 1935 course “interpreted the passages relative to Madness (*Wahnsinn des Eigendünkels*) and gave a suggestive talk, inspired by Freud, dedicated to a confrontation between Hegelian anthropology and modern anthropology” (Luchelli & McGowan, 2016: 333).

Knowledge" of the Wise Man" (Kojève, 1980: 94)<sup>65</sup>. Knowledge is either all-encompassing or it is not knowledge at all. The same happens to "sense"; as we have seen, it must be "*uni-total*" (in other words, it must integrate all meaningful discourses into one total discourse). Kojève's attempt is to achieve this absolute knowledge (i.e., Wisdom) and, therefore, to show how the Philosopher can become a Wise Man. We read in the *IRH* that there has already been a Wise Man in History, that is, Hegel. Therefore, Kojève's attempt is a "*mise au jour*" (an update) of the Hegelian system. Much has been discussed about the fact that Kojève unilaterally interprets Hegel's work<sup>66</sup>. In fact, the Kojevian reading of Hegel depends on Marx and Heidegger, and thus it is a clear Marxist-Heideggerian interpretation of Hegel<sup>67</sup>. Be that as it may, Kojève sharply differentiates between Philosophy and Wisdom. Philosophy is a quest. Wisdom is the achievement. Philosophy is a way. Wisdom is the goal. Philosophy is a question. Wisdom is the answer. Thus, Philosophy only has a *sense* as long as its promise of knowledge can possibly be fulfilled. In Kojève's words:

Philosophy is meaningful and has a reason for existing only in the event that it presents itself as the road leading to Wisdom, or at least to the extent that it is guided by the ideal of the Wise Man. Inversely, acceptance of the ideal of the Wise Man necessarily leads to Philosophy conceived as a means of attaining this ideal, or at least of directing oneself by it and toward it. (Kojève, 1980: 88)

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<sup>65</sup> As Kojève (1980: 90) indicates, "the knowledge that the Philosopher is supposed to end with can be revealed as absolute or total -i.e., as entirely and definitively true, only by being revealed as *circular* (which means that in developing it, one ends at the point from which one started)."

<sup>66</sup> Some words about "la «fidélité» de l'interprétation kojévienne de Hegel. Que ce dernier ait tenté de mener à sa vérité politico-historique moderne l'héritage conjoint de la raison ontologique des Grecs et de la liberté théo-anthro-logique des chrétiens, on en conviendra sans trop de peine. Mais que cela l'ait conduit aux thèses paradoxales et massives de «l'anthro-théisme», de «l'Etat universel et homogène» ainsi que de la «Fin de l'Histoire», voilà qui apparaît infiniment plus douteux et discutables" (Guibal, 1997: 700). On this subject, see also Labarrière & Jarczyk (1996): *De Kojève à Hegel - 150 ans de pensée hegelienne en France*, Paris: Albin Michel.

<sup>67</sup> "Kojève distinguished between a commentary and an interpretation. The former starts from the text only to rediscover the thought of the author, whereas the latter starts from the thought in order to discover the text: "Compte rendu of G. R. G. Mure's A Study of Hegel's Logic", in *Critique* 54 (1951), 1004." (Roth, 1988: 118).

But what happens if the possibility of absolute knowledge is denied? What happens if Wisdom is deemed impossible? In the answer to these questions, the threat of madness reappears (but this time it does so in the horizon of Philosophy itself):

Certainly, one can, like Plato, deny the possibility of realizing Wisdom. But then, one of two things: either the ideal of the Wise Man is never realized anywhere; and then the Philosopher is simply a madman, who claims or wants to be what one can *not* be and (what is worse) what he *knows* to be impossible. Or else he is not a madman; and then his ideal of Wisdom is or will be realized, and his definition of the Wise Man is or will be a truth. But since it cannot, by definition, be realized by *man* in *time*, it is or will be realized by a being *other* than man, *outside* of time. We all know that such a being is called God. (Kojève, 1980: 89)

If we suppose that Wisdom is humanly unattainable but at the same time we persist in Philosophy, we are faced with two alternatives: theism (Plato) or madness. The theistic System in its pure form, according to Kojève (1980: 121), is Plato's System. It must be said that "the symbol of the theistic System is valid for every System that defines the Concept as an *eternal* entity in relation to *something other* than itself" (Kojève, 1980: 121). In other words, "[t]heism, of course, is the belief or conviction that there is one (or several) superior entity (or entities) higher than the beings experienced in this world" (Nichols, 2007: 14). This difference is crucial. Truth has to be beyond Time and the World. Concept has to be *eternal*. Then, the Philosopher strives (perhaps hopelessly) for a glimpse of Eternity by way of "intellectual intuition" or "supernatural revelation". Human discourse will be true only to the extent that it reveals the otherness of man and the world (Kojève, 1980: 89). Philosophy becomes *Theology*, since this revelation is not a revelation of Man (or the World) but a revelation of God. Religion is the final result of this Philosophy (*ibid.*), which means that in the end Philosophy ceases to be Philosophy. It seems that the price of *persisting* in Philosophy (without abandoning it) but simultaneously denying the possibility of achieving Truth is philosophical madness: by aiming for the *impossible*, the Philosopher loses his mind. What he *does*, as a Philosopher, will be manifestly *irrational*. Again, there is either Plato (leading to Theology) or madness.

The only way out of this dilemma, according to Kojève, is by affirming the possibility of Wisdom. Philosophy is *directed* to Wisdom. Henceforth, Wisdom has to be realizable. Finally, we know that, for Kojève, Plato's *ideal* of the Wise Man is personified in Hegel: "he actually realized in his person the ideal of all Philosophy –that is, the ideal of Wisdom" (Kojève, 1980: 96). Kojève's philosophical attempt is to show how Wisdom can be attained. However, Wisdom will not be a revelation of a Truth that transcends the World. That is, Concept is not eternal. By contrast, Truth will be immanent in the World. Furthermore, Truth will be revealed by Discourse parallel to its manifestation in Time. Concept is Time. But "Time is the History of Man in the World" (Kojève, 1980: 138). Thus, in a sense, Truth will be realized (made real) in the course of History ("understanding History as the becoming of Truth is Hegelianism"). And only once History is completed, the revelation of Truth will be achievable. Consequently, Wisdom is not possible until the end of History. Otherwise put: "[t]o deny that Concept is eternal, to say that it is Time, is to deny that Man is immortal or eternal" (Kojève, 1980: 148). In a clearly Heideggerian guise (*Sein-zum-Tode*), Man must come to terms with *death*, that is, with his own finitude. Not only the individual Man, but also the collective Man. "Therefore, History itself must be essentially finite; collective Man (humanity) must die just as the human individual dies; universal History must have a definitive *end*" (*ibid.*). All this for the sake of Wisdom.

If (philosophical) madness of pursuing what is (and must be) out of reach is excluded, we are left with a choice. "On pourrait donc dire que le choix en question est un choix entre le theisme et l'atheisme. Mais que signifient theisme et atheisme pour celui qui doit choisir entre eux?" (Kojève, 1993: 43). This choice<sup>68</sup>, among other things, was presented

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<sup>68</sup> It is an *existential* choice: "Et les deux attitudes extrêmes sont réalisées: l'une, par l'anthropologie de Hegel, l'autre - par l'élaboration de la théo-logie chrétienne. Elles sont, évidemment, inconciliables. Et aucune ne peut être dépassée. Et si l'on peut passer de l'une à l'autre, c'est seulement par saut brusque; car il n'y a pas de *transition* possible, puisqu'il n'y a rien entre les deux. Être dans l'une, c'est se décider contre l'autre; rejeter l'une, c'est s'établir dans l'autre. La décision est absolument unique; et simple au possible: il s'agit de se décider pour soi (c'est-à-dire contre Dieu) ou pour Dieu (c'est-à-dire contre soi-même). Et il n'y a pas de « raison » de la

in a public debate between Alexandre Kojève and Leo Strauss. We are going to take a closer look at this philosophical exchange. The history of the debate is well known. Strauss published his first American book in 1948 (*On Tyranny* [New York: Political Science Classics]). The book was a commentary on Xenophon's *Hiero*, a dialogue between the poet Simonides (portrayed as a Wise Man) and Hiero the tyrant of Syracuse. Strauss's commentary is thorough, meticulous, and detailed. It represents the beginning of the author's turn to the classics, that is, to classical political (mainly Socratic-Platonic) philosophy. Strauss asked Kojève to review his work. Kojève enthusiastically agreed. The result of the Kojevian review was an essay entitled "L'Action politique des philosophes" that was published in the journal *Critique* (its first section in vol. 6, 1950, no. 41, 46-55 and the three other sections in no. 42, 138-155)<sup>69</sup>, a very influential journal founded by Georges Bataille in 1946. The second version of the essay was published in *De la tyrannie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954, 215-280) with its definitive (and more provocative) title "Tyrannie et sagesse". *De la tyrannie* included Xenophon's dialogue *Hiero* (which in the American first version of Strauss's book was not added), Strauss's commentary on the *Hiero*, Kojève's essay and Strauss's "Mise au point" (or "Restatement", which was Strauss's reply to Kojève). There are two more published versions of Kojève's essay in English: the first one in *On Tyranny* (Strauss, 2000) that also contains the Strauss-Kojève correspondence, and the second one in *Philosophy, History and Tyranny* (Kojève, 2016). This last edition includes portions of text taken from the original manuscripts that do not appear in the other printed versions. Therefore, we are going to refer to and quote from the very last edition.

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décision autre que la décision elle-même" (Kojève, 1968: 293).

<sup>69</sup> Kojève first tried to publish his review in *Les Temps Modernes* (the journal then run by Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty), but it was rejected "for philosophical as well as political motives" (Patard, 2016b: 289); see Merleau-Ponty's letter to Eric Weil (*Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*, 36 [no. 1, Fall 2008]: 16-17), and Kojève's letter to Strauss dated 9 April 1950 (Strauss, 2000: 250). For a detailed account of the successive versions of the essay and its avatars, see Patard (2016b).

The Strauss-Kojève debate dealt with the issue of (ancient and modern) tyranny. However, in a way, the subject of tyranny was linked to a deep ontological framework. Heidegger was at its base<sup>70</sup>. As Strauss wrote in his “Restatement”<sup>71</sup>:

On the basis of Kojève's presuppositions, unqualified attachment to human concerns becomes the source of philosophic understanding: man must be absolutely at home on earth, he must be absolutely a citizen of the earth, if not a citizen of a part of the inhabitable earth. On the basis of the classical presupposition, philosophy requires a radical detachment from human concerns: man must not be absolutely at home on earth, he must be a citizen of the whole. In our discussion, the conflict between the two opposed basic presuppositions has barely been mentioned. But we have always been mindful of it. For we both apparently turned away from Being to Tyranny because we have seen that those who lacked the courage to face the issue of Tyranny, who therefore *et humiliter serviebant et superbe dominabantur* <themselves obsequiously subservient while arrogantly lording it over others. Livy XXIV.25.vi>, were forced to evade the issue of Being as well, precisely because they did nothing but talk of Being. (Strauss, 2000: 212)

Let us clarify this. According to Strauss, Heidegger “did nothing but talk of Being” instead of facing “the issue of Tyranny” (= Nazism), with the consequence that he was “forced to evade the issue of Being as well”. Kojève and Strauss did face the issue in question in their famous debate. Actually, they were convinced that “the thinking of what is first in itself or of Being has to remain continuous with what is first for us, the political life” (Gourevitch & Roth, 2000: xxii). Thus, the philosophical discussion was also (and foremost!) political.

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<sup>70</sup> The correspondence between the two “confirms what attentive readers had noticed long ago, that although Heidegger is never mentioned in the published debate, he is present throughout it. It is not surprising that he should be. Both Strauss and Kojève had been deeply impressed by him in their formative years” (Gourevitch & Roth, 2000: xxii). “During the 1930s both Strauss’s and Kojève’s readings of modern philosophy were influenced by Heidegger. In their interpretations they both concentrate on death and finality, fear and anxiety, atheism and redemption, nature and the conquest of nature” (Armon, 2019: 10). In particular, both “were impressed by Heidegger’s interpretation of “the Call of Conscience” in section 57 of *Being and Time*” (McIlwain, 2019: 120).

<sup>71</sup> Strauss suppressed this excerpt in the subsequent English editions of *On Tyranny*. It was not until the 2000 edition of the book that the original text fragment was available for the reader. There is a new version of the Straussian “Restatement” edited by Patard in *Interpretation 36* (1): 3-100 (2008).

In a sort of updated “quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns”, Strauss contends that the essential reference for all possible philosophy is classical philosophy. In other words, the Greeks posed the fundamental questions and there has not been any substantial philosophical progress since them (Auffret, 1990: 333). In a nutshell, Modernity is a wrong path. Kojève, for his part, replies that the present understands the past better than the past does itself (Frost, 2016: 163)<sup>72</sup>. As a Hegelian, he believes that progress<sup>73</sup> is a fact. Modernity becomes a conquest. This has a powerful consequence for Tyranny. For the ancients (= Plato), Tyranny was unreformable (Strauss, 2000: 75). The Wise Man’s advice was impossible to implement. That is why in the last part of the *Hiero* the ruler is silent about Simonides’s suggestions to improve Tyranny. Consequently, the dialogue ends in a draw. Strauss concludes that this has to be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the radical distinction between practical life (the Tyrant) and theoretical life (the Philosopher). No synthesis is possible between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. However, Kojève asserts that Modernity has changed the whole situation: whereas “the “ideal” tyranny of which Simonides speaks is only a utopia (...), in my opinion the Simonides-Xenophon utopia has been *actualized* by modern “tyrannies” (by Salazar, for example)” (Kojève, 2016: 298). There has indeed been progress (in Kojève’s mind, of course). The synthesis between theory and practice is possible and actual. The ancient utopia is now a reality.

They take two *extreme* positions in the debate. On the one hand, Strauss upholds the ancient (= Socratic) view. The philosopher’s “dominating passion is the desire for truth, i.e., for knowledge of . . . the eternal causes or causes of the whole” (Strauss, 2000: 197-198):

Philosophy in the strict and classical sense is quest for the eternal order or for the eternal cause or causes of all things. It presupposes then that there is an

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<sup>72</sup> Strauss disagrees: “the thought of the past must be understood as the authors themselves understood it” (Frost, 2016: 164).

<sup>73</sup> Kojève defines “progress” in the following manner: “there is progress from A to B, if A can be understood from B but B cannot be understood from A” (Kojève, 1980: 87). This formula can be applied to the Strauss-Kojève debate by pointing out that Hegel (Kojève) cannot be understood from Plato (Strauss) and Plato (Strauss) can be understood -even better understood than from himself- from Hegel (Kojève).



eternal and unchangeable order within which History takes place and which is not in any way affected by History. It presupposes in other words that any “realm of freedom” is no more than a dependent province within “the realm of necessity.” It presupposes, in the words of Kojève, that “Being is essentially immutable in itself and eternally identical with itself.” (Strauss, 2000: 212)

On the other hand, Kojève is the utmost modern (= Hegelian). He advocates an ontological dualism. Nature (“the realm of necessity”) and History (“the realm of freedom”) are ultimately independent from one another. In effect, “[i]n the *dualistic* hypothesis, Ontology would describe *Being* that realizes itself as Nature separately from *Action* that negates Being and realizes itself (in Nature) as History” (Kojève, 1980: 215). Man is a *free* and *historical* agent that negates Being (by Work and Struggle for recognition) and realizes himself. Particularly, this active realization means that “Being creates itself in Time, and that History judges whether a Truth is efficacious and thus a Truth in the first place” (Frost, 2016: 167). In Schiller’s dictum, *die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, there is always historical verification based on success. That is, philosophical theses have to be verified (if they are not verified in practice, they lack validity). “Tyranny and Wisdom” is a bold apology for this practical verification. In short, “it is history itself that attends to “judging” (by “achievement” or “success”) the deeds of statesmen or tyrants, which they perform (consciously or not) as a function of the ideas of philosophers, adapted for practical purposes by intellectuals” (Kojève, 2016: 355). There is a link between ideas and actions as both of them are equally *historical*.<sup>74</sup>

History is the key concept in Kojevian terms. Once it is completed (at the end of History), Wisdom is possible (the dream of Philosophy is fulfilled). The completion of History is the *universal and homogeneous state*, in which all citizens are reciprocally recognized<sup>75</sup>. In order to

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<sup>74</sup> “Because there is no essential difference between thought and action, there is no essential difference between the philosopher and the tyrant” (Velkley, 2016: 259).

<sup>75</sup> “Man can be truly “satisfied”, History can end, only in and by the formation of a Society, of a State, in which the strictly particular, personal, individual value of each is recognized as such, in its very particularity, by *all*, by Universality incarnated in the State as such; and in which the universal value of the State is recognized and realized by the Particular as such, by *all* the Particulars. Now such a State, such a synthesis of particularity and Universality, is possible

accept this conclusion, one has to accept that History is Fight for *recognition* (Master-Slave dialectic) and Work (the Work of the Slave). History is a human construction. The *verum-factum* thesis is a firm presupposition: “[h]istory is human beings freely making themselves and the world” (Lawler, 1996: 133). Finally, Wisdom reveals itself as self-consciousness and *satisfaction*. History has an ultimate goal, and therefore this goal (universal and homogeneous state) is its immanent criterion of validity. There are no transcendent criteria (atheism). The result is that *is* and *ought* must coincide in the Endstate.

What can Strauss offer against this picture? In the first place, he stresses contra Stuart Mill (cf. *Utilitarianism*, chap. 1) that “utility and truth are two entirely different things” (Strauss, 1953: 6; Gourevitch, 1968: 62). Against the modern prejudice of identifying truth and success, the Philosopher always points beyond (cf. Plato’s *Gorgias*). What is more, society and philosophy cannot be reconciled. The Endstate does not (and cannot) satisfy the Philosopher (homogenization is at odds with *quality* or the philosophical qualitative pursuit). “While perhaps doomed to failure, [a] nihilistic revolution may be the only action on behalf of man’s humanity, the only great and noble deed that is possible once the universal and homogeneous state has become inevitable” (Strauss, 2000: 209). Besides, philosophy is more evidently a quest than it is an achievement (*ibid.*). In a word, it is a zetetic *Lebensform*. Philosophy is the theoretical research for the “eternal order” or *transcendence* (theism).

However, the Straussian Philosopher is left only with *subjective certainty*<sup>76</sup>. Kojève retorts that this implies a deep problem, a problem in which the threat of madness makes a new appearance: “[t]he subjective criterion of “obviousness” is not a criterion of truth, because it does not exclude the possibility of madness” (Kojève, 2016: 328)<sup>77</sup>.

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only after the “overcoming” of the opposition between the Master and the Slave, since the synthesis of the Particular and the Universal is also a synthesis of Mastery and Slavery” (Kojève, 1980: 58).

<sup>76</sup> Strauss agrees with Kojève that “subjective certainty” is a problem (Strauss, 2000: 195-196).

<sup>77</sup> Regarding subjective change that is not communicated to others and remains “mute”, Kojève recalls the following in the *IRH*: “Only work, by finally putting the objective World into

As Michael S. Roth says in commenting this issue: “[h]ow can the philosopher’s “subjective certainty” of a natural order be differentiated from the paranoid’s certainty that everyone is out to get him or her?” (Roth, 1988: 132). There can be “systematic” or “logical” madness:

In other words, the isolated philosopher necessarily has to grant that the necessary and sufficient criterion of truth consists in the feeling of “evidence” that is presumably prompted by the “intellectual intuition” of the real and of Being, or that accompanies “clear and distinct ideas” or even “axioms,” or that immediately attaches to divine revelations. This criterion of “evidence” was accepted by all “rationalist” philosophers from Plato to Husserl, passing by way of Descartes. Unfortunately, the criterion itself is not at all “evident,” and I think that it is invalidated by the sole fact that there have always been *illuminati* and “false prophets” on earth, who never had the least doubt concerning the truth of their “intuitions” or of the authenticity of the “revelations” they received in one form or another. In short, an “isolated” thinker’s subjective “evidence” is invalidated as a *criterion* of truth by the simple fact that there is madness which, insofar as it is a correct deduction from subjectively “evident” premises, can be “systematic” or “logical.” (Kojève, 2016: 325-326)

Kojève’s concern with subjective certainty<sup>78</sup> as a criterion of truth lies at the foundations of his Hegelianism (Bessette, 2016: 59). The Philosopher who detaches himself from the social order cannot be sure of his conclusions as a thinker. He will need to confront his views with others. That is, he will engage in dialectical conversations in order to persuade the public of his views – or at least, in order to test his insights, just as Socrates did when he went to the agora (Kojève, 2016: 333).

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harmony with the subjective idea that at first goes beyond it, annuls *the element of madness and crime* that marks the attitude of every man who – driven by terror – tries to go beyond the given World of which he is afraid, in which he feels terrified, and in which, consequently, he could not be satisfied.” (Kojève, 1980: 28 [emphasis ours]).

<sup>78</sup> The paradigm of subjective certainty is the Cartesian *cogito*. In this respect, the *cogito* must be historically contextualized. “To put the point in historical terms, the Cartesian *cogito* certifies itself and its cognitive work by intuition, the residual “platonism” of the *lumen naturale*. But intuition, even when associated with mathematics, is essentially private and silent. It cannot justify itself or distinguish itself from faith” (Rosen, 1989: 95). *Cogito* does not exclude madness either. However, it could guarantee *knowledge* regardless of the subject’s possible insanity: “[w]hether I’m mad or not, *Cogito, sum*” (Derrida, 1978: 56). Nevertheless, madness cannot be communicated and is bound to be mute (doomed to isolation) since “if discourse and philosophical communication (that is, language itself) are to have an intelligible meaning, that is to say, if they are to conform to their essence and vocation as discourse, they must simultaneously in fact and in principle escape madness” (Derrida, 1978: 53).

Contradicting Strauss, Kojève contends that the Philosopher's pedagogical activities are a motor driving history and history itself is a dynamic, progressive process (Frost, 2016: 170). Both the Philosopher and the Tyrant (statesman) seek universal and mutual recognition. Strauss, however, denies this parallelism. According to him, the Philosopher does not need recognition from the *uninitiates*. He will only engage in true discussions with other Philosophers and will solely go to the streets in order to "fish" new potential Philosophers (thus, the Socratic dialogues certify that the ignorant is not able to rationally sustain his position and then the Philosopher obtains all he wishes: self-admiration). Philosophers are an elite (Strauss, 2000: 205). Kojève describes these elites as the Ancient Epicurean Garden and the Modern Republic of Letters (Bayle). Both are *isolated* and cannot overcome their possible prejudices. Thus, if the danger of madness can be excluded by "the social criterion of discussion" within the elite (the mad is quickly identified and removed from the cloister<sup>79</sup>), discussion does not guarantee Truth. Madness is replaced by the problem of sectarianism (Kojève, 2016: 327), a second-degree madness<sup>80</sup>. A solid criterion of truth is thus needed:

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<sup>79</sup> Kojève states: "Although by taste, and by virtue of their very profession, the "lettered citizens" never agree among themselves, they will always be unanimous when it rightly comes to sending one of their number to an asylum" (2016: 326-327). This is clearly discriminatory. However, Kojève includes the insane (equalization of the sane and the insane) in his universal and homogeneous state (Bessette, 2016: 70): "If *Droit* does not recognize the existence of incurable cases, it admits that the insane can become normal "one day". Therefore, they are [normal] juridically speaking, from whence comes the fiction of their individual moral personality" (Kojève, 2007: 60). However, in this case "madness" will not be *singularly* recognized. See Rashed, Mohammed A. (2019). *Madness and the demand for recognition: A philosophical inquiry into identity and mental health activism*, New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>80</sup> "Strauss presents the classical, i.e. Socratic, position that philosophers seek the truth independently of historical fashions and that they are prevented from the madness of solipsism by associating with their friends. To this, Kojève rightly replies that even madmen have friends, namely, other madmen: the only secure verification of the truth of one's doctrines is that they are made true by historical success, that is, by political enactment, not by the agreement of private individuals. In my opinion, Strauss has no effective reply to Kojève's criticism on this point. (...) If on the other hand the philosophers practice extreme esotericism, or communicate to one another only by hints and the various devices of Aesopic speech, the dangers of madness or solipsism are not averted, because hints can be misunderstood, just as is the case with hinted responses to hints." (Rosen, 1999: 243)

Moreover, the discussion within a limited and closed elite does not enable one to detect prejudices. Of course, neither is the “opinion of the majority” at a given historical moment a criterion of truth. Even unanimity of all humanity would not be one (if it is not about humanity taken in the whole of its historical evolution). The only possible criterion is that of *experiment* (in the sense of “manipulation,” and not of simple “observation”: *Experiment* and not *Erfahrung*). The criterion of truth of a *physical* theory e.g. is the fact that the bridge which has been built according to this theory does not collapse. The experimental checking of an anthropological theory is, in the last analysis, the fact that the State where this theory is applied (or to which it applies) does not “collapse” either. But all States “collapse” sooner or later, except the “last one.” (...) So, by definition, absolute Knowledge can be reached only at the end of History. In a certain sense it is the integration of all the opinions issued in the course of history (“unanimity” in place and *in time*) or the result of a “universal” discussion that lasts as long as historical time lasts. But man comes to the end of his history only if he *acts*. The *discussion* cannot therefore come to its end if one does not make *experiments*, if man does not put *into practice* his opinions. Absolute Knowledge, the truth of which is ensured by its *circularity*, is therefore as much a total integration (in relation to time) in the universal *discussion* as an integration of all the *experiments* made by man in the course of history. So, “circularity” is a *synthesis* of the “rationalist” and “empiricist” criteria. (Kojève, 2016: 328-329)

As we have seen before, the Kojevian criterion of truth is “circularity” (integration of all discourses into one total discourse) and “experiment” (*verum-factum*). Truth is not even universal consensus. Real practice is needed. Historical verification (success) has the last word. The “universal discussion” of Philosophy is definitely closed by the sanctioning of all *historical* facts. The result justifies the successive steps taken so far (“the wounds of the spirit heal, and leave no scars behind”). Concept is Time. To this, Strauss has a crucial twofold reply: on the one hand, Kojève is unable to reconcile his dualistic ontology (Nature and History, Being and Action) with the requirements of circularity. The circle remains open in dualism (its two distinct principles cannot match). On the other hand, final satisfaction seems impossible if we define human essence as desire for recognition (*désir de désir*) because there is no guarantee that the possibilities of recognition (its “figures”) are finite (Patard, 2016a: 334). That is, historicism leads to relativism. In contrast to the Kojevian modernism,

ancient ethics offers an alleged complete satisfaction in the philosophical form of life. Straussian *zeteticism* (ancient skepticism) is not relativism, though. It is a search for the “eternal order”. Concept is eternal. However, as Strauss finally admits, the presupposition that “there is an eternal and unchangeable order within which History takes place and which is not in any way affected by History (...) *is not self-evident*”<sup>81</sup> (Strauss, 2000: 212 [emphasis ours]). The eternity of the Concept is just a surmise. Awareness of one’s own *ignorance* is all the knowledge one can attain.

Historicity prevails in any case. If Concept is neither Time nor eternal, there remains a last possibility: namely, “Concept is temporal”. As soon as we realize that History never ends (how could we *know* that the end has arrived?) and that the Kojevian, dual circle is forever open (Wisdom is impossible), we are face to face with a new choice: silence<sup>82</sup> or *indefinite* chatter (a groundless and multisensical proliferation of text in the shape of Rameau’s Nephew universalized); that is, mysticism or postmodernism (Rosen, 1989: 98). This remaining “decapitated Hegelianism” (Gourevitch & Roth, 2000: xvii) results in radical relativism or historicism, which is Strauss and Kojève’s black beast. In a letter to Strauss (July 1, 1957), Kojève summarizes his basic dilemma as follows: “[o]ne is then faced with choosing between Heraclitean<sup>83</sup> “relativism” (= historicism in the fashion of Max Weber) according to which: concept = temporal; and Hegelian “absolutism,” according to which: concept = time (“time” = completed history; knowledge = recalled [completed] history)”<sup>84</sup> (Strauss, 2000: 280-281). Furthermore, Strauss announces in another letter (January 18, 1950): “I am working

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<sup>81</sup> Yet, if it was self-evident, one could still raise Kojève’s objection to subjective certainty.

<sup>82</sup> Bataille, Georges (1952). “Silence et littérature”. *Critique*, 57, 99-104.

<sup>83</sup> “Excluons d’emblée la solution «héraclitéenne», celle de tous les scepticismes et de tous les relativismes. Dans cette hypothèse, le vrai est exclusivement *temporaire* et, par conséquent, le discours n’est qu’un «bavardage» sans fin où il est toujours possible et justifié de contredire à un moment donnée ce qu’on a dit auparavant. Ce n’est pas que le bavardage soit «contradictoire»: sans fin, il est par là même in-défini puisqu’il ne reçoit jamais un sens susceptible d’être discuté, mais peut toujours, pareil à une phrase inachevée, recevoir n’importe quel sens. C’est dire qu’il n’en possède aucun. Le discours philosophique est alors impossible.” (Kojève, 1990: 11). Relativism is not “livable”, adds Kojève (Lutz, 2016: 204).

<sup>84</sup> “Zeit = voll-endete Geschichte; Wissen = er-innerte [vollendete] Geschichte” (Strauss, 2000: 322).

on the first lecture, a summary criticism of historicism (= existentialism<sup>85</sup>)” (Strauss, 2000: 249). As Geoff Boucher indicates, “being temporal the concept essentially changes: that is to say, there is no definitive knowledge, hence no true knowledge in the proper sense of the word<sup>86</sup> (...). I would suggest that this latter is in fact the only way out of the end of history thesis” (Boucher, 1998: 10). This way out does not preclude madness, though. “Without intersubjective and, finally, universal recognition, there is no way of distinguishing genuine consciousness of freedom from madness” (Lawler, 1996: 138). Moreover, the historicist thesis is a philosophical thesis that *negates* Philosophy<sup>87</sup>. After all, the Philosopher ends up affirming and denying himself *qua* Philosopher at the very same time (Kojève, 1980: 89). While speaking, he will madly contradict his own word. Silence is the only solution to the conundrum left by the absence of Gods and Wise Men. Otherwise, Philosophy has to welcome madness into its domain.

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<sup>85</sup> “Heidegger is the only radical historicist” (Strauss, 2000: 251).

<sup>86</sup> “Now, as long as a man is alone in knowing something, he can never be sure that he truly *knows* it. If, as a consistent atheist, one replaces God (taken as consciousness and will) by Society (the State) and History, one must say that whatever is, in fact, outside of the range of social and historical verification is forever relegated to the domain of *opinion (doxa)*” (Kojève, 2016: 336). Henceforth, without ultimate social *verification* (unending historical dynamic instead of end of History) everything is what opinion (*doxa*) makes it. At this juncture, nothing prevents us from falling into collective madness.

<sup>87</sup> “Whereas, according to the ancients, philosophizing means to leave the cave, according to our contemporaries all philosophizing essentially belongs to a “historical world,” “culture,” “civilization,” “*Weltanschauung*,” that is, to what Plato had called the cave. We shall call this view “historicism.” (...) Historicism asserts that all human thoughts or beliefs are historical, and hence deservedly destined to perish; but historicism itself is a human thought; hence historicism can be of only temporary validity, or it cannot be simply true. To assert the historicist thesis means to doubt it and thus to transcend it. As a matter of fact, historicism claims to have brought to light a truth which has come to stay, a truth valid for all thought, for all time: however much thought has changed and will change, it will always remain historical. (...) Historicism thrives on the fact that it inconsistently exempts itself from its own verdict about all human thought.” (Strauss, 1953: 19-25).

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## Ortega y Gasset and the twenty-first-century theories of civil society

J. A. Garrido Ardila

**Abstract:** Some political scientists have compared the rise of populism after the 2008 crash to the advent of authoritarianism in the wake of World War I and particularly in the 1930s. Although these analogies are, in the opinion of others, inaccurate, they have drawn everyone's attention to the alarming extent of political decay across the West today. In 1993, Julián Marías noted that José Ortega y Gasset's *La rebelión de las masas* (1930) addressed many social questions still pervasive in Spanish society. And, indeed, in *España invertebrada* (1921) and *La rebelión de las masas* Ortega examined some of the social and political troubles that have persisted until this day. His definition of *society* in *La rebelión de las masas* prefigures the concept *broken society* used by politicians like David Cameron in the late 2000s; his definition of *particularismo* cogently describes today's *identity politics*; and his term *hiperdemocracia* encapsulates the concept of *political decay* as it was coined by Samuel Huntington and later described by Francis Fukuyama. This paper will explore how Ortega analysed and explained crucial political phenomena which have recently been observed in 21st-century liberal democracies by political scientists and sociologist like Bernard-Henry Levy, Carolin Emcke, Francis Fukuyama, David Runciman, and others. This comparison will reveal Ortega's *España invertebrada* and *La rebelión de las masas* as a lucid point of reference to understand the nature of political decay in the 2010s.

**Keywords:** José Ortega y Gasset; civil society; particularism; populism; liberal democracy

In his prologue to the 1993 edition of José Ortega y Gasset's *La rebelión de las masas* (1930), Julián Marías noted that the book “was becoming more truthful” with the passing of time.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, Ortega's works address a host of issues entrenched in Western societies for the past two hundred years. And, certainly, Ortega's ideas are today — in the 2020s — as “truthful” as they were in the early 1990s. Marías made this remark just four years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in a time when the former soviet republics were undergoing a process of democratisation. The early 1990s inspired hope, and political scientists were, at the time, optimistic about the future of liberal democracies — in the 1970s what Samuel Huntington (1992) called the *third wave of democratisation* had brought democracy to former conservative

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<sup>88</sup> Julián Marías: “Por un extraño fenómeno, va pareciendo más verdadero, más fiel a la realidad, a medida que pasa el tiempo” (1993: 31). Henceforth I will translate quotes in Spanish and provide the original quote in footnotes.

dictatorships in countries like Spain and Portugal, and in the 1990s the fall of communism had meant, in Francis Fukuyama's words, "the end of History" (2012) or the triumph of liberal democracy over authoritarian ideologies. Conversely, Ortega wrote *La rebelión de las masas* in the late 1920s, just around the time of the 1929 crash, when communism had taken root in eastern Europe and fascism was gaining momentum in countries across the central and western parts of the continent. Although the period spanning from the third wave in the 1970s to the 1990s certainly brought *the end* of authoritarian regimes and the triumph of democracy in Europe, Ortega's observations still provided, in the 1990s, insight into the dichotomy elite-masses, an issue that had concerned intellectuals since the mid-19th century. (It has been noted that his theory of the masses replicates some of the ideas expounded by Ibsen in his 1882 play *En folkefiende* [cf. Garrido Ardila 2014], and, indeed, it also mirrors, *lato sensu*, Tocqueville's conception of the "tyranny of the majority" and Mill's arguments to deny *non-educated* citizens a political voice [vid. infra].<sup>89</sup>)

Ortega's ideas conveyed in both *España invertebrada* (1921) and *La rebelión de las masas*, seem particularly "truthful" still in the 2010s and 2020s, a time oftentimes compared to the 1930s. After the 2008 crash, populism, in its many guises, has risen across the West, and political and economic commentators have warned against the dangers these illiberal forces pose to liberal democracy. Philip Coggan, for instance, has noted that "[t]he combination of voter disillusionment, austerity economics and antagonistic rhetoric means that democracy faces its greatest challenges for decades" (2014: 245). These factors combined have prepared the ground for populism to grow and erode liberal democracies to such a degree that, in 2016, Nick Clegg, former Deputy Primer Minister of the United Kingdom, emphatically declared that "our democracy is a disgrace" (2016: 127). Clegg regrets that, in his words, "politics has become so volatile and unpredictable in recent

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<sup>89</sup> For a study of Ortega's theory of the masses, see Sánchez Cámara (1986). For an overview of Ortega's philosophy see, inter alia, Cerezo Galán (2010) and Marías (1983). For the life of Ortega see the recent biographies by Gracia (2014) and Garrido Ardila (2018).

years” (2016: 2) that the future of democracies is unclear. Nonetheless, in his book *How Democracy Ends* David Runciman insists that “the current crisis in democracy [is] unlike those it has faced in the past” (2019: 6). Compared to the 1930s and the rise of fascism and Nazism, Runciman notes three factors rendering 21<sup>st</sup>-century democracies considerably stronger than those in the 1930s — low “political violence”, “the threat of catastrophe has changed”, and “the information technology revolution” (2019: 6). Runciman concludes that “[t]his is not, after all, the end of democracy. But it is how democracy ends” (2019: 218) meaning that liberal democracies, as we knew them around the time of the fall of the Iron Curtain, are changing.

Ortega’s words and thoughts resonate with us one hundred years after the publication of *España invertebrada* in 1921 inasmuch as they describe precisely the crucial problem highlighted of late by political scientists like Runciman and commentators like Clegg and Coggan — in Runciman’s words, *how democracy ends*. Focusing attention first on Spain and then on western Europe as a whole, the thesis expounded by Ortega in *España invertebrada* and *La rebelión de las masas* suggests that (i) civic society was broken by the vested interests of minorities and by the uneducated masses, and (ii) society could only recover by neutralising those egotistic interests and by entrusting itself to the intellectual elite. *Grosso modo*, this line of thought analogises current political theories — said in today’s terminology, liberal democracies are exposed to and under the effects of a *reverse wave* brought by *identity politics*.

This paper will examine Ortega’s theory of the masses and how it prefigures present-day political theory. We will look at three central concepts in Ortega’s *España invertebrada* and *La rebelión de las masas* — *sociedad*, *particularismo*, and *hiperdemocracia*. We will explain how these three concepts are comparable to some of the main political theories published in recent years, particularly after 2008. Ortega’s works will emerge as resolutely “truthful” and also germane to understand the uncertainties which our liberal democracies face today.

Ortega's arguments in *España invertebrada* and *La rebelión de las masas* address one fundamental question — civil society is broken and needs to be restored. His definition of society is provided in the latter work: “society springs automatically from coexistence”.<sup>90</sup> In his 1921 essay Ortega had noted the difference between a community of people who *coexist* and a community whose members merely *exist*. “People don't live together for the sake of it, and this *a priory* association only happens in families. The groups of people who form a state live together with a common purpose: they are a community with their own shared purposes, aspirations and resources. They don't coexist just to be together, but to do something together”,<sup>91</sup> he wrote. Despite its simplicity, Ortega's definition explains the breakdown of democracy that led to the Civil War in Spain and also to World War II: a community whose members refuse to coexist and to share a common purpose is one where confrontations are likely to occur and escalate. In both *España invertebrada* and *La rebelión de las masas*, Ortega seeks to explain the causes and the nature of this phenomenon in order to raise awareness of it. The dichotomy existence versus coexistence — or to live together with no common purpose versus living together sharing a purpose — implies social division and consequently the breakdown of civil society.

Interestingly, this breakdown was noted in the late 2010s by some British politicians who used the terms *broken Britain* and *broken society* to refer to the deterioration of Ortegian *coexistence*. In Britain, the terms were consistently deployed by the Conservative Party in the run up to the 2010 general election; they were central to the conservative campaign to present themselves as the party that, if elected to form a government, would stop the increasing degradation of civil society. The conservative frontbencher and previous party leader Iain

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<sup>90</sup> “Sociedad es lo que se produce automáticamente por el simple hecho de la convivencia” (2005b: 45).

<sup>91</sup> “No viven las gentes juntas sin más ni más porque sí; esa cohesión *a priori* solo existe en la familia. Los grupos que integran un Estado viven juntos para algo: son una comunidad de propósitos, de anhelos, de grandes utilidades. No conviven *por estar juntos*, sino *para hacer juntos algo*” (2005b: 31).

Duncan Smith published two reports on this issue, titled *Breakdown Britain* and *Breakthrough Britain*. David Cameron, as the conservative candidate, deployed the term *broken society* before and after becoming Prime Minister. In a speech given in 2011 he wondered — “Do we have the determination to confront the slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations?”. He then defined this broken society as one mired in “Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences” (quoted in Stratton 2011). “Moral collapse” and “selfishness” very much corresponds to Ortega’s assessment of European society in the 1920s and 1930s, specifically to his assessment of selfishness by way of the term *particularismo*.

The concept *particularismo* is laid out in *España invertebrada*. Ortega submits that all nations are formed in a *process of adding* (*proceso incorporativo*) formerly independent elements. Adding these elements results in the *consolidation* (*totalización*) of a unified whole, of civil society. He then explains that “for the process of adding to take place, it commonly required *totalisation*, that is, the process whereby formerly independent social groups unite to become parts of a whole. The opposite phenomenon occurs when the parts of the whole live as if they do not belong in the whole. This historical phenomenon I call *particularismo*”.<sup>92</sup> Ortega contends that, by the 1920s in Spain some particular social groups had cultivated a sense of identity causing them to seek to stand apart from the rest of society. He further argues that the asymmetry between the aspirations of particular groups and the aspirations of the rest of the people will always lead to the disruption of coexistence and to the demise of civil society. Social unity then ebbs away and some particular groups even choose to overlook and defy the law of the land. Ortega summarises the effect of *particularismo* in Spain thus: “the purported democratic air ... of our old laws underpinning

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<sup>92</sup> “El proceso incorporativo consistía en una faena de totalización: grupos sociales que eran todos aparte quedaban integrados como partes de un todo. La desintegración es el suceso inverso: las partes del todo comienzan a vivir como todos aparte. A este fenómeno de la vida histórica llamo *particularismo*” (2005a: 47).

Spanish jurisprudence, is merely sheer hatred and grim suspicion”.<sup>93</sup> Hatred and suspicion are, in his view, the psychological effects of *particularismo* and the feeling that moves *particularista* groups.

*Particularismo* encompasses a range of attitudes present in some degree in all democratic societies. Ortega’s account of this phenomenon highlights selfishness and hatred as its two central features. Selfishness inheres in those groups that refuse to empathise with the rest of society, those groups that claim unreasonable prerogatives for themselves. And this frame of mind springs essentially from — in Ortega’s words quoted above — hatred and suspicion. In his opinion, *particularismo* stems from hatred, and hatred stems from the purported sense of superiority fostered by some social groups. The focus of Ortega’s discussion of *particularismo* is on the masses. He believed that, in Spain, the masses developed a deep hatred for the intellectual elites. As the masses stubbornly refused to harken to the intellectuals, the uneducated majority took control of the political direction of the country sidelining the intellectual elite.

This elitist view of civil society is not original in Ortega’s times nor dated in ours. In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), John Stuart Mill insisted that the franchise should exclude uneducated people — “The plurality of votes must on no account be carried so far, that those who are privileged by it, or the class (if any) to which they mainly belong, shall outweigh by means of it all the rest of the community. The distinction in favour of education, right in itself, is further and strongly recommended by its preserving the educated from the legislation of the uneducated” (2015: 293-294), Mill held. And although today we all stand by the “one man, one vote” principle, renowned sociologists like Stephen Pinker hold that, in Pinker’s words, “most voters are ignorant not just of current policy but of basic facts” (2019: 204) and their ignorance impinges on the quality of democracy.

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<sup>93</sup> “El pretendido aliento democrático que ... solpa por nuestras más viejas legislaciones y empuja el derecho consuetudinario español, es más bien puro odio y torva suspicacia” (2005a: 128).

Nearly a century before Ortega, Alexis de Tocqueville in his book *Democracy in America* (1840) cautioned that the main threat to new democracies was what he called “the tyranny of the majority”. *Particularismo* defines the attitudes of specific social groups, for instance, in 1920s Spain, the military. Ortega suggests that the breakdown of civil society is prompted by the selfishness of those *particularista* groups and by the masses, as both believe they are superior to the elites. As Tocqueville foresaw, the basic democratic principle of equality then wanes and may disappear.

Ortega’s *particularismo* prefigures some of the most influential political theories concerned with the breakdown of democracy. Firstly, *particularismo* explains the origin and the development of what Samuel Huntington (1965) called *political decay*. In his article titled “Political Development and Political Decay” (1965), Huntington noted that new democracies established new democratic institutions that were improved over time, but warned that this “does not suggest that movement is likely to be in only one direction: institutions, we know, decay and dissolve as well as grow and mature” (1965: 393). Political decay occurs when democracy is faced with non-democratic challenges and these challenges impinge upon democratic institutions sometimes perverting them. In a later book, Huntington noted that former authoritarian states undergoing a transition to democracy commonly experience what he calls *democratisation waves*. As they develop democratic institutions, democracies also face forces against them which he calls *reverse waves*. “In one sense, the democratization waves and the reverse waves suggest a two-step-forward, one-step-backward pattern” (1992: 25), Huntington suggests. However, these reverse waves can often reverse the democratic process to the point of bringing back an authoritarian regime, as it happened, for instance, to the Weimer Republic. Ortega described and viewed *particularismo* as the one anti-democratic force causing all reverse waves. *España invertebrada* and *La rebelión de las masas* were written in the late 1920s, at a time when Spain was a dictatorship since General Miguel



Primo de Rivera's coup in 1923 and when much of Europe was experiencing a sharp radicalisation in political life.

Today's concerns about political decay voiced by Runciman (supra) and others have oftentimes placed radical emphasis on hatred. In this sense, Ortega's *particularismo* defined as social hatred prefigures Carolin Emcke's theories laid down in her 2016 book *Gegen den Haß* or "against hatred". Emcke's essay examines how social groups have developed a form of social *Haß* that is now rife across western democracies. She is not alone in her appreciation of hatred. Just three years after the publication of *Gegen den Haß*, a group of thirty European intellectuals led by Bernard-Henri Lévy published, on 25 January 2019, a manifesto titled "L'Europe est en peril" in the French journal *Libertation*. This group of thirty signatories included the likes of Milan Kundera, Orhan Pamuk, António Lobo Antunes, Salman Rushdie, and Mario Vargas Llosa. Their manifesto described present-day politics as "un désastre" and alerted that "when populisms grow, one needs to fight for Europe or sink".<sup>94</sup> Their proposal to fight populism and to avert the end of Europe's civil society as we know it, requires that "whilst the threats to sovereign power are everywhere, we have to foster political will or else succumb to resentment, hatred and the sad passions associated to them".<sup>95</sup> In the spirit of our age, they denounce populism and, like Ortega did in the wake of the reverse wave in the 1920s and 1930s, they identify resentment (*le ressentiment*) and hatred (*la haine*) as the origin or populist ideologies.

By *particularismo*, therefore, Ortega described and analysed the one counter-democratic phenomenon that 21st-century political scientist and sociologists currently decry — the hatred and selfishness of specific social groups that repudiate the rest of society. Hatred and resentment are the source of *particularismo* according to Ortega and they are, too,

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<sup>94</sup> "Il faut, quand grondent les populismes, vouloir l'Europe ou sombrer" (Lévy et al 2019).

<sup>95</sup> "Il faut, tandis que menace, partout, le repli souverainiste, renouer avec le volontarisme politique ou consentir à ce que s'imposent, partout, le ressentiment, la haine et leur cortège de passions tristes" (Lévy et al 2019).

the source of populism according to, for instance, Emcke and to Levy's group.

Ortega showcases *particularismo* in 1920s Spain referring to two social groups. One is the military; the other, the separatist movements in Catalonia. These groups, he argues, seek "to impose their will upon the will of others" by means of "direct action".<sup>96</sup> By *direct action* Ortega means partisan political action outside parliament, such as demonstrations, riots and coups d'état. His view of *particularismo* immediately brings to mind, in Spanish history, the military coups in 1934 and 1936, the failed Marxist revolution in October 1934, and the Catalanian declaration of independence on 6 October 1934. But it also describes minutely the events leading to the unlawful referendum held on 1 October 2017 in Catalonia, including the passing of *ad-hoc* legislation by the Catalanian devolved parliament. Today, we refer to these *particularismos* as *populism* including episodes like the pro-Brexit and Trump's campaigns in 2016 or the 2017 Catalanian referendum.

Jan-Werner Müller (2017) has defined populism, broadly speaking, as the political forces challenging democracy. Yet, populism does have an ideological basis. In Ortega's view, democratic breakdown occurs when the masses refuse to acknowledge the superior discerning capacity of the intellectual elites. The masses firstly claim to be equal to the elites and then take over political power. Francis Fukuyama has conveyed this very idea in his *The End of History and the Last Man*, where he highlights "the resentment of the weak against the strong" (2012a: 313) and where he notes that "the fanatical desire for equal recognition ... will constitute the greater threat to democracy in the end" (2012a: 314). In a recent work, titled *Identity*, Fukuyama has further developed this theory in an attempt to addressing the rise of identity politics in western countries since the 2008 crash. He submits that identity politics has brought considerable "disruptive social change" (2018: 4) and that "the rise of identity politics in modern liberal democracies is one of the chief

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<sup>96</sup> "la imposición inmediata de su señera voluntad; en suma, la acción directa" (2005a: 69).

threats that they face” (2018: xvi). Ortega’s assessment of society in the reverse wave of the 1920s and 1930s corresponds to Fukuyama’s view on 21st-century challenges threatening liberal democracies. Ortega holds that resentment and hatred have prompted the masses and social groups to defy the system. *Particularismo* or identity politics may lead to a situation that, in *La rebelión de las masas*, Ortega called *hiperdemocracia*.

Ortega contends that the rule of the masses distorts democracy and eventually imposes an alternative political system he calls *hiperdemocracia*. In *La rebelión de las masas* he describes *hiperdemocracia* as the state of things “where the masses conduct themselves with disregard for the law, exerting pressure on others, imposing their aspirations and their desires”.<sup>97</sup> He adds: “I doubt there have been any other periods in History when the masses ruled as clearly as they do today. That is why I say hiperdemocracy”.<sup>98</sup> In the 1920s, workers’ political movements had been gaining momentum for some decades. The Russian Revolution had proved to workers across the West that they could revolt and take control of a state, and socialism and communism had become influential political forces in other European countries. In Spain, for instance, the Russian Revolution inspired a general strike in 1917 that sparked a week of dramatic riots in Barcelona known as *La Semana Triste* (the sad week). What Ortega called the “acción directa” of the masses, or their tendency to act with disregard for the law, is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that in the 40 years before Ortega penned these two essays, three Spanish Prime Ministers had been assassinated by left-wing radicals — Antonio Cánovas del Castillo in 1897, José Canalejas in 1912, and Eduardo Dato in 1921.

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<sup>97</sup> “Hoy asistimos al triunfo de una hiperdemocracia en que la masa actúa directamente sin ley, por medio de materiales presiones, imponiendo sus aspiraciones y sus gustos” (2005b: 79).

<sup>98</sup> “Yo dudo que haya habido otras épocas de la historia en que la muchedumbre llegase a gobernar tan directamente como en nuestro tiempo. Por eso hablo de hiperdemocracia” (2005b: 80).

*Hiperdemocracy* encapsulates the crux of Huntington's *political decay*. In *The Origins of Political Order*, Fukuyama has provided an antithetical definition of political decay — “successful liberal democracy requires both a state that is strong, unified and able to enforce laws on its own territory, and a society that is strong and cohesive and able to impose accountability on the state” (2012b: 479). Ortega's *hiperdemocracia* occurs when the masses first reject the authority of the elite, then exert direct action, and finally take over the ruling of the state. This phenomenon subverts Fukuyama's model democracy — using Fukuyama's terms, the masses break up the “unified” civic society by fracturing social “cohesiveness” refusing to comply with the “laws on its own territory”. In *Political Order and Political Decay*, Fukuyama suggests that “Democracies exist and survive only because people want and are willing to fight for them” (2015: 548). In Ortega's view, the masses did not want democracy and chose, instead, to fight *against* democracy, causing the breakdown of society in terms similar to those used by many political scientists and commentators today to blame identity politics. Douglas Murray (2017; 2019), for instance, has alerted that the prerogatives claimed by social minorities in the past decades impinge dramatically on true equality. The examples are countless. Michael Sandel, for instance, has written about affirmative action in US university admissions and noted many cases where applicants with higher academic achievements are not admitted by a university that admits others with lower academic qualifications on the basis of their ethnic *identity*. Sandel acknowledges that many believe that “using race or ethnicity as a factor in admissions is unfair” (2010: 173). Generally speaking, *hiperdemocracia* being the moral and/or executive rule by the masses describes the same socio-political phenomenon as Huntington's term *political decay* now exacerbated by identity politics assessed by Fukuyama, Murray and others.

Overall, all these similarities between Ortega's works and the works of 21st-century political scientists spring from the similarity of their respective times. Indeed, Ortega's nomenclature *plenitud de los tiempos*

(*the plenitude of the times*) in *La rebelión de las masas* and Fukuyama's *end of history* capture almost identical historical moments. Ortega explains that "there have been ... periods in history when the people considered they had arrived at the highest point of democracy, when they believed they had reached the end of a journey ... this was the 'plenitude of the times'".<sup>99</sup> Since the times of the French Revolution, western European states had developed democratic systems which, in the 1920s, seemed to have reached perfection. Yet, Ortega was also mindful that democracy was being forcefully challenged by *particularismo*. Inspired by Alexandre Kojève, Fukuyama noted that "an 'end of history' is implicit in the writing of all Universal Histories" (2012a: 56) and "what Kojève called the modern 'universal and homogeneous state', represented the end point of human ideological evolution beyond which it is impossible to move forwards" (2012a: 66). That "end point" of History marks the same moment as Ortega's "plenitude of the times" — the "universal and homogeneous state" of liberal democracies. Huntington's political decay occurs when states fall from that *end point* as a result of social fractions. In Ortega's terminology: *hiperdemocracia* occurs when states fall from the *plenitude* as a result of *particularismo*.

Ortega's *La rebelión de las masas* and *España invertebrada* are "truthful" still in the 2020s and even so more now than in the 1990s. Ortega's works prefigure some of today's most influential political theories — his *plenitude of the times* prefigures Fukuyama's *end of history*; his *particularismo* prefigures identity politics as described by Fukuyama and others including Murray; his perception of social *odio* prefigures Emcke's *Haß*; his *hiperdemocracia* prefigures Huntington's *political decay* and *how democracy ends* according to Runciman. In *España invertebrada* and *La rebelión de las masas* Ortega could not analyse these concepts in the same depth as these present-day political scientists have in their works. Yet, Ortega is still "truthful" today

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<sup>99</sup> "Ha habido ... varias épocas en la historia que se han tenido a sí mismas como arribadas a una altura plena, definitiva: tiempos en que se cree haber llegado al término de un viaje ... Es la 'plenitud de los tiempos'" (2005b: 90-91).

because he reveals and helps us to understand the origins, the rise, and the dangers of populism as a challenge to liberal democracies. Runciman takes the view that “[w]e have reached the point where there is good historical evidence that democracies eventually rise to meet the challenges they face” (2014: 161). And, indeed, the institutions of today’s liberal democracies are substantially more robust than those in the 1920s and 1930s. Nonetheless, Ortega delineates these political phenomena with such lucidity that his essays are now, in the 2020s, even more “truthful” than they could have been in the 1990s when Marías extolled their contemporaneity.

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# Individuality in the Philosophy of José Ortega y Gasset<sup>100</sup>

Gerardo López Sastre

**Abstract:** Our purpose is to defend the relevance of Ortega for current philosophical thought. We start explaining what Ortega claims is a central element of the modern world: the construction of our own identity according to personal criteria. To outline this project, Ortega introduces a vocabulary that forms a central part of his philosophy. These terms include “heroism”, “solitude”, “vocation”, “authenticity”, and “self-absorption” or “being in one’s self” (“ensimismamiento”), as opposed to “being beside one’s self” (“alteración”). Ortega thinks that this personal project constitutes a pivotal component of European culture that must be defended at all costs, because there will always be demagogues, “impresarios of *alteration*”, willing to harass people so they cannot think and doubt by themselves, and trying to ensure “they are kept herded together in crowds so they cannot reconstruct their individuality in the unique place where it can be reconstructed: solitude. They cry down service to truth, and in its place offer us *myths*.” When this opposition to myth and the corresponding defense of reason is translated into a theory of knowledge, the result is a perspectivism that legitimizes liberal democracy. Liberalism (respect for others’ differences) can lead to democracy, because we want other people to speak their points of view. And, in turn, democracy allows those differences to flourish.

**Keywords:** Individuality, Liberalism, Democracy, Perspectivism.

Philosophy can be considered from two standpoints: as an academic specialty studied in some universities, or as a human dimension, and, therefore, everyone’s business.<sup>101</sup> Academic philosophy has reached an incredible level of specialization with some scholars dedicating their lives to studying Hume’s, Kant’s or Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Many are

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<sup>101</sup> Mosterín, 1994, p. 20.

forever entangled in a research we should rightly call a scholastic project, and there is always the danger that their concentration on these thinkers can detract them from contributing to the other, larger philosophy, which would seem desirable. Rather than helping, as it should, this approach instead becomes an obstacle. Reflecting on Ortega's philosophy, or with him, can be an excellent option to avoid this possibility.

Why? In the first place, because these two dimensions of philosophy were always present in his work. He never wanted to separate himself from the general public, since he believed philosophy had a great deal to contribute to them. That is why he chose an adamant clarity of style in his willingness to address truly important issues that can help guide us in our personal and social lives.

Ortega wrote on many issues, but in this essay we will focus on some ideas that seem central to his philosophy and are extremely important from our current standpoint: individuality, liberalism and democracy.<sup>102</sup> We will start with two fundamental elements of Ortega's thought: the social dimension of man and the issue of freedom. We will see how his analysis leads him to a very well-constructed presentation of the ideals of liberal modernity, of the project to construct our own identity, and how he views this project as a characteristic of European culture that must be

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<sup>102</sup> Of course, these terms can mean very different things. I will use this quotation to clarify the first: "To be individual is to be distinctive – an accomplishment or perhaps a happy biological accident. To be the reverse of the individual is to be nondescript. Schoolchildren, for example, are often extremely anxious to be nondescript, not to stand out. But among cultivated adults, to be individual is to stand out felicitously, a less ambivalent judgement, for example, than to be eccentric. It is, in short, to be well on the way towards being enviable. What cultivated person would not prefer being individual to being nondescript?" John Dunn: *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, p. 34. Ortega makes it quite clear: "Individualism is a passion for peculiarity, a heroic cultivation of our very personal physiognomy, of our genuine traits, of our unequaled action." "El cabilismo, teoría conservadora", José Ortega y Gasset: *Obras Completas*, Taurus/Fundación José Ortega y Gasset, Madrid, 2004–2010, vol. I, 173. From now on, we will quote this edition as O.C. and follow it with Roman numerals indicating the volume, and then the page or pages in Arabic numerals. I also want to clarify that I will not discuss the change or evolution of Ortega's ideas, and I recognize that my reading will be quite selective, only choosing the ideas I find more valuable. Should readers wish to discover the evolution of Ortega's liberalism based on its philosophical foundations, I strongly recommend Alejandro de Haro Honrubia: "El liberalismo de Ortega como filosofía. Del neokantismo a la metafísica de la vida humana como realidad radical", *Alpha*, 47, 2018, 191–209; and in general, all the bibliography in footnote 6.

defended at all costs. Finally, when this is translated into a theory of knowledge, we have a perspectivism that legitimizes democracy.

In my understanding, Ortega continuously moves on two different levels in his analysis of individual life: firstly, there is a descriptive plane, and, secondly, a clearly normative level.<sup>103</sup>

On a descriptive level, he insists on the dimension of man as a social being. Other people do not represent an accident that may or may not happen to us, but, on the contrary, they form an original attribute of our constitution. Thus, in *La pedagogía social como programa político*, Ortega writes: “The isolated individual cannot be a man, the individual human being, separate from society — Natorp has said —, does not exist, he is an abstraction.”<sup>104</sup> Consequently, the social nature of human beings is part of the human condition. Concrete human reality is always that of the socialized individual, that of the individual who begins their life by seeing the world through ideas (that work as jail bars) received from others.<sup>105</sup> Ortega is aware that the society we live in already has an interpretation of life, a repertoire of ideas about everything surrounding us. Therefore, he writes that:

what we can call “the thought of our time” becomes part of our circumstance, envelops us, penetrates us, and carries us. One of the constituent factors of our fatality is the set of environmental convictions we find ourselves with. Without realizing it, we find ourselves installed in that network of ready-made solutions to the problems of our life. When one of these squeezes us, we turn to that treasure, we ask our neighbors, our neighbor’s books: What is the world? What is man? What is death? ... But we do not have to ask ourselves such questions: from birth we expend a constant effort of reception, absorption, in family life, at school, reading and social life that transfers those collective convictions into us before ... we have felt the problems that they are or pretend to be solutions.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> In my explanation of these two levels I repeat, with some slight variations, what I first outlined in Spanish in “La modernidad liberal de Ortega en el tema de la constitución de la persona”, in Atilano Domínguez, Jacobo Muñoz, y Jaime de Salas, (Coords.): *El primado de la vida (Cultura, estética y política en Ortega y Gasset)*. Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Cuenca, 1997, pp. 41–51; and later in “La actualidad del pensamiento de Ortega y Gasset. ¿Qué nos cabe reivindicar?”, *Kultura i Wartości*, Nr 28 (2019), 255-275.

<sup>104</sup> O.C., II, 95.

<sup>105</sup> See *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, 206.

<sup>106</sup> *En torno a Galileo*, O.C., IV, 382.

The fact that social influence can be so important does not mean we must accept it. As we will see, people manifest themselves as real human beings when they question this.

Secondly, within this descriptive level, we must mention the central importance of another characteristic of human beings: freedom. According to Ortega, the life given to us is empty when we receive it, and everyone has to fill it and occupy it with their decisions.<sup>107</sup> This differentiates humans from animals. Animals possess an already fixed and resolute being. Humans, however, must choose their own path through life. As we are always surrounded by a variety of possibilities for action, by necessity we must choose and, therefore, exercise our freedom:

our being as “being in the circumstance” is not still and merely passive. To be, that is, to continue being, we must always be doing something. But what we have to do is not imposed or predetermined; we have to choose and decide, in a non-transferable way, by ourselves and before ourselves, under our exclusive responsibility. No one can replace us in deciding what we are going to do, we even have to decide to surrender ourselves to another’s will. This forcedness of having to choose and, therefore, be condemned, whether we want to or not, to be free, to be at our own risk and expense, comes from the fact that the circumstance is never one-sided; it always has several and sometimes many sides. That is, it beckons us towards a variety of possibilities of doing, of being.<sup>108</sup>

Or:

Instead of imposing one path on us, [the world] imposes several and, consequently, it forces us ... to choose. What a surprising condition that is of our lives! To live is to feel *fatally* obliged to exercise our freedom, to decide what we are going to be in this world. Not for one moment is our activity of decision-making allowed to rest. Even when in desperation we abandon ourselves to whatever is going to happen, we have decided not to decide.<sup>109</sup>

This idea of human freedom as a human characteristic leads Ortega to a moral ideal (and thus we enter into the normative level): the urge not to

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<sup>107</sup> See *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, 161.

<sup>108</sup> See *loc. cit.*; “Man is condemned to be free” is a phrase made famous by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Existentialism is a humanism*.

<sup>109</sup> *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 401. I have added the words between square brackets.

allow our way of life to be “locked” by the habits provided by tradition. Because this substantial freedom could be steered in two opposite directions: making or building our lives by remaining faithful to the heritage conveyed by our society’s tradition; or, on the contrary, seeking the transcendence of the limits of the world around us. Ortega is highly aware of both possibilities, and that we can classify societies or historical times based on the extent to which acceptance of one option or the other predominates:

There are two kinds of epochs: those in which a “good deed” is the action that repeats a model estimating the effort *not to be individual*, for a person to fully embrace a generic type or concept; and others in which, in contrast, the action’s value is its sincerity, that smell of spontaneity, which we find when we see it emerge from an individual as a tree leaf emerges from a bud. We are pleased with the effort *not to conform to the model*. These are, therefore, two reverse preferences.<sup>110</sup>

Similarly, Ortega writes in *Principios de metafísica según la razón vital. Curso de 1932–1933*:

I should warn you that as we go back in historical chronology and approach primitive life, the abandonment of life to the social and collective self is more pronounced. What is “said”, the old established opinion—in short, tradition—completely dominates individual thought. It is not this that discriminates, judges and sentences according to a personal criterion of intimate evidence about the truth or error of the traditional idea, but, in contrast, individuals submit their spontaneous conviction to the court of tradition. When a thought before me bases its truth on what seems evident to me, the principle that moves me to adopt it is called *reason*. When, on the contrary, it bases “its truth” on the fact that it has been “said” by people since time immemorial, therefore, on the gross fact of its repetition, the principle that moves me to adopt it is called *tradition*. Here reason already seems an imperative for everyone to rely on themselves. Tradition, in contrast, as an imperative to hide our “myself” by dissolving it in the collective.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> *Sobre la sinceridad triunfante*, O.C., V, 224.

<sup>111</sup> O.C., VIII, 624; and see the continuation of the text for the idea of the ineludible weight of tradition. In *El hombre y la gente* Ortega writes: “There are some who live almost no more than the pseudo-life of conventionality and there are instead extreme cases in which I glimpse others energetically faithful to their authenticity. All the intermediate equations are given between both poles, since it is an equation between the conventional and the authentic, which has different manifestations in each of us ... But, for the record, even in the case of maximum authenticity, human

Within this contrast between reason and tradition, Ortega clearly supports reason, the autonomy of individuals, whose right to base their life on their own criteria or the promptings of their internal self must be recognized. When outlining the descriptive level, we saw that Ortega was highly aware of the importance and influence of the surrounding society on us. This is the aspect on which a whole tradition of thought we can term “collectivist” has insisted, and which Ortega describes remarking that:

The highest and most marvelous qualities, on occasion even divine ones, have been attributed to the collective soul, “Volkgeist” or “national spirit”, to the social conscience. For Durkheim, society is a true God. In the writings by the Catholic De Bonald—the effective inventor of collectivist thought—by the Protestant Hegel, by the materialist Carlos Marx, that collective soul appears as something infinitely superior, infinitely more human than man. For example, wiser.<sup>112</sup>

But in confronting these theories, Ortega makes his position explicit: “The *community* [*colectividad*] is indeed something human; but it is human without the man, human without the spirit, human without the soul, the dehumanized human.”<sup>113</sup> Here we find the meaning of individualism in Ortega: individuality is what makes us real human beings. We would say that the spirit is provided by individuality, implying that we are extremely lucky if we live in an environment of freedom allowing us to become ourselves—what we have decided we want to be—the only way (as we will see) to feel happy.

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individuals live most of their lives in the pseudo-living of their surroundings or social conventionality.” O.C., X, 238. Therefore, in real life, reason works in some sectors of our life, while in others we will live dominated by tradition. However, quite apart from personal differences, it is also evident that there are societies or cultures where one human type predominates and societies where the other is more positively valued.

<sup>112</sup> *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, 257.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* Nothing could be more contrary to Ortega that these words by the founder of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke: “You see, Sir, that in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess, that ... instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages.” Edmund Burke: *Reflections on the revolution in France*. Edited with an Introduction by Conor Cruise O’Brien. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1987, p. 183.

We must, therefore, resist the tendency to abandon ourselves or dissolve ourselves in the community, and seek, on the contrary, to form our own opinion and our own personal life. To outline this project, Ortega introduces a vocabulary that forms a central part of his philosophy. These terms include “heroism”, “solitude”, “vocation”, “authenticity”, and “self-absorption” or “being in one’s self” (“ensimismamiento”), as opposed to “being beside one’s self” (“alteración”).<sup>114</sup>

Ortega considers people refusing to live by repeating the gestures that custom and tradition have conveyed as *heroes*. They seek to establish the origin of their actions in themselves. As he writes in *Meditaciones del Quijote*: “When the hero wants, it is not ancestors or uses of the present that want, but himself. And this wanting him to be himself is the heroism.”<sup>115</sup>

This heroism requires that we move from the perspective in which we see things only as members of society, to the perspective in which they appear when we retreat to our solitude. “In solitude man is his truth,” Ortega writes, “in society he has the tendency to be a mere conventionality or forgery.”<sup>116</sup> If we want our life to be authentic, we will need that frequent retreat to the inside depths of ourselves. This is where a reflective activity takes place that involves examining all matters we usually term social to see what they actually are.<sup>117</sup> People can suspend their direct concern with

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<sup>114</sup> Williard R. Trask, the English translator of *El hombre y la gente* writes in a footnote: “Literally, ‘otheration’. The Spanish word has, in addition to the meaning of English ‘alteration’, that of ‘state of tumult’, ‘being beside oneself’. Throughout this chapter, the author plays on the root meanings of this and another equally untranslatable word, *ensimismamiento*, literally, ‘within-oneseif-ness’, in ordinary usage ‘being absorbed in thought’, ‘meditation’, ‘contemplation’. The chapter title in Spanish is *Ensimismamiento y Alteración*.” José Ortega y Gasset: *Man and People*. Translated by Williard R. Trask. Norton, New York and London, 1963 (first ed. 1957), p. 17.

<sup>115</sup> O.C., I, 816.

<sup>116</sup> *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, 202.

<sup>117</sup> See *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, 203. On the next pages we will compare some of Ortega’s ideas with those of John Stuart Mill, and this is a good occasion to begin, because Mill writes: “A world from which solitude is extirpated is a very poor ideal. Solitude, in the sense of being often alone, is essential to any depth of meditation or of character; and solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur, is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do without.” John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy with some of their Applications to Social Philosophy* (Ashley ed.) [1848], Book IV, chapter 6, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/mill-principles-of-political-economy-ashley-ed> (Accessed 28 October, 2020).

things, turn their back on the world, and “address their own inwardness”. That is “ensimismarse” (be inside oneself). And from this inner world people return to the outer, but as “protagonists”, that is, with a self they did not possess before, and with a project to dominate some things, and to impose their will on them, “molding the planet” after the preferences of their inmost being.<sup>118</sup> Of course, this preliminary solitude does not involve denying that our vocation can be built on dialogue with others’ opinions and remarks. We all know the tension that can occur between our subjective affirmation and this dialogue. But the important thing is that the modern world gives priority to the first dimension, the inner world.

Thus, Ortega offers us this proposal of solitude as an answer to the problem of finding a criterion to create ourselves. Our problem, in effect, once we have decided not to accept common conventions without first subjecting them to a critical examination, is how to justify to ourselves the biographical argument that we propose to follow in our life, how to choose our own being in such a way that we can trust we made the right choice. How, in short, to be the artists of ourselves?<sup>119</sup> Is it based on an arbitrary choice?

Ortega does not think so. He answers these questions by observing that our imagination presents us with many possible types of lives we can choose, but when we have them in front of us, we notice that some of them attract us more, claim us or call us:

This call we feel toward a type of life, this imperative voice or cry rising from our most radical background, is our vocation.

It gives us a proposal—not an imposition—of what we must do. And life thus acquires the character of the realization of an imperative. It is in our power to implement it or not, to be faithful or unfaithful to our vocation. But what we

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<sup>118</sup> See for all this “Ensimismamiento y alteración”, O.C., V, 531–550.

<sup>119</sup> In *Para un museo romántico* he writes that “the supreme art will be that which makes life itself an art.” O.C., II, 626. I think this idea of defining our identity by the choices we make is extremely important, especially when we currently see a trend in which people’s identity is characterized mainly by the injustices they have been subjected to, how much of a victim they have been. Of course, injustices must be strongly denounced, the problem is when the subject is seen as merely passive.



actually must do is not in our power. It is inexorably proposed to us. Therefore, all human life has a mission. The mission is this: the awareness everyone has of their most authentic being, which they are called on to fulfill.<sup>120</sup>

It is precisely because everyone must behave on the basis of their inner being and fulfill their own vocation that Ortega is decisively opposed to Kantian morality. This presents us with a duty that is unique and generic. But the truth is that everyone has their own duty, as inalienable as it is exclusive.<sup>121</sup> Thus, confronting Kant's criterion that one must always want what anyone else may want, Ortega insists that: "I cannot fully want but what arises in me as the desire of my entire individual person";<sup>122</sup> or, as he also writes in the same place: "Let us not measure, then, anyone but with themselves: what they are as a reality with what they are as a project. 'Become who you are'. Here is the just imperative."<sup>123</sup> The heroic ethics of the ancient Greek poet Pindar therefore contradicts Kant. And with this heroic ethics goes the conviction that "what is good in one man is bad in another."<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> *Misión del bibliotecario*, O.C., V, 350; and see also *En torno a Galileo*, O.C., VI, 481-483. In *Sobre la leyenda de Goya*, Ortega says that self is a task, a project of existence. The self is "the most irrevocable thing in us ... The *self* works in regions much deeper than our will and our intelligence, and it is, of course, not a 'wish or a desire to be such and such', but a 'need to be such'." O.C., IX, 806; and see also the article "No ser hombre de partido", originally published in *La nación*, Buenos Aires, 15-6-1930, O.C., IV, 306-313. We could say that we have here the problem to decide, and this is a complex experience for many of us, if our vocation (what we must be) is invented or merely discovered.

<sup>121</sup> And to differentiate Ortega further from Kant we must add what he said in the course *¿Qué es filosofía?*: "the ethics I will perhaps present to you in a course next year differs from all the traditional ones as it does not consider duty as the primary idea in morality, but illusion. Duty is an important but secondary matter; it is the substitute, the *Ersatz* of illusion." O.C., VIII, 363.

<sup>122</sup> *Estética en el tranvía*, O.C., II, 181.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Conversación en el golf o la idea del dharma*, O.C., II, 526. For the purposes of our subject this is a central text. Answering a proposal to become a member of a golf club, Ortega replies: "If you did not play golf, you would commit the same sin I would do if I played. We would both have rebelled against our *dharma*." "Your *dharma* is to play golf, like mine is a *dharma* of writing and conversation." The philosophical conclusion is that "it is a mistake to consider morality as a system of prohibitions and generic duties, the same for all individuals." "I believe that not only each trade, but each individual, has their non-transferable and personal decency, their ideal repertoire of actions and gestures due." *loc. cit.* I would say—and this is a very important precision—that to defend a legitimate pluralism of lifestyles we do not need to question the possibility of the existence of universal ethical principles, but only to admit that these by themselves do not allow us to choose between varying ideals of life. Many ethical theories have equated both problems, which in turn can lead to the conviction that since the idea of a lifestyle valid for everyone is quite unattractive, so is ethics with claims of universality. See for this problem Hilary Putnam: "The French Revolution

We should, therefore, discover our own good, be faithful to what we are (potentially) and what impels us to a type of life where our perfection or plenitude will be found. That is why solitude is important. But is this enough? No, reflection must be exercised on the experience of life. Life, after all, is a journey endowed, at least often, with a substantive perplexity: man “always finds himself with a latent task, which is his destiny. And yet, he is never sure exactly what it is about, what there is to do.”<sup>125</sup>

The truth is that our inner voice rarely speaks clearly. After all, the conflict between different alternatives, not knowing what our true vocation is, is a well-known experience. That is why a courageous experimentation may be necessary. It is in the implementation, in the energetic clash with the outside world, where, Ortega writes, “the voice of the inside emerges clearly as a program of conduct.”<sup>126</sup> And it is in this contact with the world that we will find pain and unhappiness (that is, mistakes), or satisfaction and enjoyment (a sign of success). These feelings are our instructors about the correctness of the choices that we have been making: “The insistent bad mood is too clear a symptom that man lives against his vocation.”<sup>127</sup> In fact, Ortega is more adamant: “whoever renounces being the person they must be, has already killed themselves in life, they are suicide on foot.”<sup>128</sup> On the contrary: “Happiness is a life dedicated to occupations for which everyone has a unique vocation.”<sup>129</sup> And this has an important consequence: “All evil stems from a radical evil: not fitting into one’s own place. Hence there is no creative evil. Every perverse act is a phenomenon of compensation that is made by a human being that is incapable of creating a spontaneous, authentic act springing from their destiny.”<sup>130</sup>

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and the Holocaust: can Ethics be Ahistorical?” in Eliot Deutsch (Ed.): *Culture and Modernity. East-West Philosophic Perspectives*. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1991, pp. 299–312; and, for the history of this moral ideal of authenticity, Charles Taylor: *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts) and London, 1992.

<sup>125</sup> *A una edición de sus obras*, O.C., V, 95. And in *Sobre la leyenda de Goya* Ortega says that “The self is an entity so secret, so arcane, that it often does not even appear clearly to oneself.” O.C., IX, 810.

<sup>126</sup> *Goethe, el libertador*, O.C., V, 148.

<sup>127</sup> *Pidiendo un Goethe desde dentro*, O.C., V, 133.

<sup>128</sup> “No ser hombre de Partido”, O.C., IV, 309.

<sup>129</sup> “Prólogo a *Veinte años de caza mayor* del conde de Yebes”, O.C., VI, 273.

<sup>130</sup> “No ser hombre de Partido”, O.C., IV, 309.

In our opinion, Ortega's aim with this thesis is to avoid a possible relativist consequence of his idea that developing our vocation is the only way to construct an authentic life. Because what would happen if our vocation were to be a thief? Ortega answers: "The man whose entelechy would be to become a thief *has to be* that, even if his moral ideas oppose it, repress his unchangeable destiny and ensure that his effective life is of a correct civility."<sup>131</sup> As there is a clear contradiction between morality and authenticity, Ortega asks a question in a footnote about whether this desire to be a thief is a manifestation of "authentic humanity".<sup>132</sup> But we could answer that according to his idea of human liberty, why not? If someone considers clearly that their humanity asks them to be a thief, who are we to question this internal call? Now, as we saw in our quotation, we have this optimistic answer: there is no creative evil, so making evil (in our case, being a thief) cannot be a real vocation.<sup>133</sup> Authenticity always creates good.

If going against our vocation puts us in a bad mood, we can affirm the opposite: when the continuous effort we immerse ourselves in makes us feel happy, we can be sure we are fulfilling our vocation.<sup>134</sup> It is true that people can renounce their authenticity, because, as we have seen, we are free, but the price of placing themselves outside of their destiny will be a feeling of interior disgust.

Although Ortega has given us a very coherent presentation of this ideal of human development, I would not say that the important aspect is the

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<sup>131</sup> *Pidiendo un Goethe desde dentro*, O.C., V, 130.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Pedro Cerezo Galán makes this clear: "There can be no wicked vocations" in "Páthos, éthos, lógos (en homenaje a Antonio Rodríguez Huéscar)", *Revista de Estudios Orteguianos*, 24, 2012, p. 105. Aside from what Ortega may have thought, I believe this can be disputed. Some would say, for example, that hunting for pleasure is a wicked vocation. Perhaps the ultimate reason for what we could call Ortega's optimism is the idea (which sounds like a biological foundation of morals) that "*Life is the cosmic fact of altruism*", *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, O.C., III, p 601; but this is quite doubtful, although I believe it is the kind of belief that allows Ortega to write that "morality ... is the very being of man when he follows his own mind and life-depending efficiency. A demoralized man is simply a man who is not in possession of himself, who is outside his radical authenticity and, therefore, does not live his life and because of that does not create or inflate his destiny." "Por qué he escrito <<El hombre a la defensiva>>", O.C., IV, 304.

<sup>134</sup> See *Las profesiones liberales*, O.C, X, 428.

original character of these ideas.<sup>135</sup> I want to underline that he is making his own an ideal characteristic of European modernity, a product of the best of Enlightenment and Romanticism, one that insists that each person must discover or create their identity autonomously; and, at the same time, Ortega is very conscious that this fidelity to oneself is achieved by dialoguing with our environment, addressing its requirements (the circumstance), but also having the courage to break with established customs and uses. In fact, this is an extremely important sign of being European, because, as Ortega says in *La rebelión de las masas*, “the European” is “a type that has put all their efforts and energy into the scale of individualism throughout their history.”<sup>136</sup> In fact, in the “Prólogo para franceses” to *La rebelión de las masas* Ortega uses this characteristic to define Europe. Thus, speaking of François Guizot’s *History of Civilization in Europe*, he says that “the man of today can learn there how freedom and pluralism are two reciprocal things and how both form the permanent entrails of Europe.”<sup>137</sup> In this same prologue he writes some words that John Stuart Mill could have made his own: “It was the so-called ‘individualism’ that enriched the world and *everyone* in the world, and it was this wealth that so fabulously proliferated the human plant.”<sup>138</sup> Ortega would have agreed perfectly with Mill when he writes in *On Liberty* that: “There is no reason that all human existence should be constructed on some one or some small number of patterns. If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode.”<sup>139</sup> And Mill continues on the following page: “different persons also require different conditions for their spiritual development ... The same things which are helps to one person towards the cultivation of his higher nature, are hindrances to

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<sup>135</sup> Although I think that one of Ortega’s merits is that he presents them in a very connected fashion.

<sup>136</sup> *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 493. It is true that on other occasions Ortega defines Europe as science, saying that everything else is common to the rest of the planet. See *Asamblea para el progreso de las ciencias*, O.C., I, 186.

<sup>137</sup> “Prólogo para franceses”, *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 358.

<sup>138</sup> “Prólogo para franceses”, *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 366 (the emphasis is Ortega’s).

<sup>139</sup> John Stuart Mill: *Three Essays. On Liberty. Representative Government. The Subjection of Women*. With an introduction by Richard Wollheim. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1975, p. 83.

another. The same mode of life is a healthy excitement to one, keeping all his faculties of action and enjoyment in their best order, while to another it is a distracting burthen, which suspends or crushes all internal life.”<sup>140</sup> It is, therefore, unsurprising that Ortega made clear that “Freedom in Europe has always meant a franchise to be who we truly are.”<sup>141</sup> Many years later, in a lecture delivered in 1953 entitled “¿Hay una conciencia cultural europea?” Ortega highlighted an implication of this commitment to creative individuality, the exceptionally dynamic character of modern European culture:

Suffering crises periodically belongs to the European culture, perhaps as its most characteristic feature. This means that it is not a closed culture, like the others, crystallized once and for all. That is why it would be a mistake to try to define European culture by specific contents. Her glory and her strength lies in the fact that she is always willing to go *beyond* what she was, beyond herself. European culture is a perpetual creation. It is not an inn, but a path that always forces you to walk. Now, Cervantes, who had lived a lot, tells us, as an old man, that the road is better than the inn.<sup>142</sup>

If all of the above represents a correct interpretation of Ortega’s thought, it must be recognized that it contradicts other statements he made

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<sup>140</sup> Loc. Cit. It is a pity that Ortega did not appreciate British philosophy in general. He wrote that “The English, who have done such important things in physics and in all human affairs, have so far shown themselves incapable of this form of *fair play* that is philosophy.” *La idea de principio en Leibniz y la evolución de la teoría deductiva*, IX, 1072. And in a footnote on the same page he affirms that the influence of Locke and Hume was the influence not of a philosophy but “of a series of very sharp objections to all philosophy.” Considering the specific case of Mill, Ortega writes that both Spencer and Stuart Mill “treat individuals with the same socializing cruelty that termites treat certain of their same genre, which they bait and then suck the substance out of. Up to that point the self-evident background on which their ideas danced naively was the primacy of the collective!” *Prólogo para franceses*, O.C., IV, 361. But this is a misunderstanding of Mill, because, quite apart from the fact that liberty can create human progress, Mill thought that the experience of liberty was valuable by itself, as a component of human happiness. See for this critique my article “Autonomía del yo y sociedad liberal”, *Telos. Revista Iberoamericana de Estudios Utilitaristas*, IX, 1, June 2000, 111–121. Some very interesting similarities between Mill and Ortega are mentioned by Andrew Dobson: *An Introduction to the Politics and Philosophy of José Ortega y Gasset*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, pages 59, 69–70.

<sup>141</sup> “Prólogo para franceses”, *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 357.

<sup>142</sup> *Cultura europea y pueblos europeos*, O.C., VI, 950. and see also “De Europa Meditatio Quaedam” O.C., X, 73–135. Ortega always thought that the true future was the unity of Europe. For him, it was highly unlikely that a community as mature as the one already formed by the European peoples would not come close to creating some type of state organization. See the prologue to the fourth edition of *España invertebrada*, and the “Prólogo para franceses” of *La rebelión de las masas*.

defending the idea of the existence of a national character that controls what a people (which I believe cannot be anything other than a set of individuals) makes of itself: “A people cannot choose between several lifestyles: either it lives according to its own, or it does not live. From an ostrich that cannot [sic] run, it is useless to hope that it will instead fly like an eagle.”<sup>143</sup> Or also: “The individual cannot orient himself in the universe except through his race, because he is immersed in it like a drop in a passing cloud.”<sup>144</sup> In a world characterized by massive migrations, where people seek to establish themselves in new societies offering them a better future or a fuller development of their identity, these expressions shock us. Ortega posited that we should be the owners of ourselves, why should we be the property of a people at the same time?<sup>145</sup>

Nevertheless, notwithstanding a possible contradiction with the general lines of his thought found in some texts, the crucial point is a belief by Ortega which, in our view, remains completely current: the belief that conquering a social situation that respects an individual’s decision to create their lives based on their own criteria is not permanent. It is always threatened, at risk. This is the problem of *La rebelión de las masas*. Julián Marías warns in the Introduction to his edition of this work that by “masses” in Ortega we must not think of a social class or of permanent social groups. Instead, we must think in terms of “functions”: “in principle, everyone belongs to the mass, as they are not particularly qualified, and they only emerge from it to perform a minority function when they have a relevant skill or qualification, after which they reintegrate into the mass.”<sup>146</sup> If things were so simple, there would not be

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<sup>143</sup> *España invertebrada*, O.C., III, 498. But we could contrast this text with the idea he presents on another occasion that when it comes to ethnic character, nothing is meant to be absolute and definitive: “The character of a people is nothing but the accumulation of its particular past up to now.” *Un rasgo de la vida alemana*, O.C., V, 341. We will see that for nations, future is far more important than past.

<sup>144</sup> *Meditaciones del Quijote*, O.C., I, 791; and see also the next page.

<sup>145</sup> I ask myself this question in relation to the following statement by Ortega: “There is no doubt: everyone belongs to a people, everyone is the property of a nation. Not that it should be like that, but that it is inexorably so, whether we want it or not. And the great question of every life consists of how, being so necessarily owned by a people, a puppet of a community, one also manages to be a person, an individual, an owner of oneself, the author and responsible for one’s own actions.” “La estrangulación de «Don Juan»”, O.C., V, 379.

<sup>146</sup> José Ortega y Gasset: *La rebelión de las masas (Con un prólogo para franceses, un epílogo para ingleses y un apéndice: Dinámica del tiempo)*. Introducción de Julián Marías. Espasa

many problems: medical patients (mass) should listen to their doctors (minority), who (now mass-turned), in turn, should accept architects' recommendations when building a house. But there is also the man-mass, who renounces the attainment of their individuality and seems unwilling to tolerate that project in others. Ortega thought that we had reached a situation in recent years that went against the ideal of individual development that we have seen in this essay; as if, when contemplating large cities and their urban sprawl, he became suspicious of running out of space to move according to our own internal wishes.<sup>147</sup> We would find ourselves in a situation in which people had no corner to retreat to or another place where they could be alone, and this would have been the consequence from many people demonstrating a totalitarian vocation, and, therefore, a willingness to invade those spaces. Ortega observes that there is "an epidemic delight in feeling like a mass, in not having an exclusive destination".<sup>148</sup> As he writes on the next page of the same text:

It seems many are again feeling nostalgia for the flock. They surrender themselves passionately to anything sheeplike within them. They want to march well together for life, on a collective route, wool close to wool and with a bowed head. That is why many peoples of Europe are looking for a shepherd and a mastiff.

The hatred of liberalism does not stem from another source. Because liberalism, instead of being a largely political matter, is a radical idea about life: it is believing that every human must be free to shape their individual and non-transferable destiny.<sup>149</sup>

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Calpe, Madrid, vigésima quinta edición, 1986, p. 25. I am not going to say that Marias is not right, but it is clear that, at least in other texts, the meaning of "masses" is quite different. For example: "I am not now speaking to the masses; I address myself to the new privileged men of this unjust society, to doctors and engineers, teachers and businessmen, industrialist and technologists." *Vieja y nueva política*, O.C., I, 725. They are the ones that could modernize Spain. The "masses" seem to be ordinary people here, in contrast to an elite of well-educated men; the ones that can develop a program to put Spain at the same level as the rest of Europe. And, in relation to the founding of the *Agrupación al servicio de la República*, it is remarkable that the explicit aim was "to mobilize all Spanish intellectuals to form a large band of propagandists for, and defenders of, the Spanish Republic. We call on all teachers of different educational levels, writers and artists, doctors, engineers, architects and technical people of all types, lawyers, solicitors and other men of law." O.C., IV, 662.

<sup>147</sup> See "Prólogo para franceses", *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 366.

<sup>148</sup> "Socialización del hombre", O.C., II, 830.

<sup>149</sup> "Socialización del hombre", O.C., II, 831.

These words are also relevant:

... people, society, increasingly tends to crush individuals, and the day this happens they will have killed the goose that lays the golden eggs. Instead of deifying the collective, the most important aspect would be for Europe, just as it created such wonderful techniques to dominate material nature, to also know how to treat social nature equally, and create some limits that allowed the collective's elemental forces to be subjected to the responsible man's will.<sup>150</sup>

Ortega's pessimism (which many of his contemporary circumstances make credible and reasonable) allows him to write that: "In our age it is the mass-man who dominates; it is he who decides."<sup>151</sup> Perhaps he was right in his own time. We must consider the triumph of fascism and Nazism. But both have now disappeared. Although this does not mean there are no evil germs in our society willing to impose their majoritarian will without any respect for minorities or the freedoms of others. Albeit in the form of populisms, of gregarious and standardizing nationalisms or of religious fundamentalisms, they are still here.

How can we defend the value of individuality in the face of these threats? Firstly, we would need to make everyone aware of the importance of this ideal summarized on the previous pages. Especially because there will always be demagogues, "impresarios of *alteration*" willing to harass people so they cannot think and doubt by themselves, and trying to ensure "they are kept herded together in crowds so they cannot reconstruct their individuality in the unique place where it can be reconstructed: solitude. They cry down service to truth, and in its place offer us *myths*."<sup>152</sup> In this regard, and with an expression that Ortega would have liked, pedagogy (which here is the unmasking of certain ideas or proposals as mere myths) is a way of doing politics.

Here we can add that Ortega's vision of liberal democracy is the complement of this ideal. We can understand this if we talk about Ortega's perspectivist theory, which means that: "To achieve the

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<sup>150</sup> "Conferencia en Valladolid", O.C., IX, 1436; however, this quotation is not from Ortega but from the press version (*El Sol*) of his lecture.

<sup>151</sup> *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 401.

<sup>152</sup> *Ensimismamiento y alteración*, O.C., V, 546.



maximum possible truth, individuals should not, as for centuries has been preached, supplant their spontaneous viewpoint by another exemplary and normative viewpoint, which used to be called ‘*sub specie aeternitatis* view of things’. Eternity’s viewpoint is blind; it sees nothing, it does not exist. Instead, they should seek to be faithful to the personal imperative that their individuality represents.”<sup>153</sup> At this level Ortega is quite outright: “The individual viewpoint seems to me the only one the world can be looked at from in its truth.” Or, similarly: “Each man has a mission of truth. Where my eye is, there is no other: what my eye sees of reality no other eye sees.” And the conclusion is that we (each of us as individuals) are as necessary as we are irreplaceable. There is a lesson to learn here: “Instead of quarreling, let us integrate our visions in a generous spiritual collaboration, and as the independent banks meet in the thick vein of the river, let us compose the torrent of reality.”<sup>154</sup> Consequently, each individual, each generation and each epoch turns out to be an instrument of knowledge, and we will obtain an integral truth by joining up or weaving together our partial viewpoints, what my neighbor sees with what I see, and so on. Ortega is so convinced of his theory that, when he discusses bolshevism and fascism, he writes of “the positive aspects of their respective doctrines which, taken separately, evidently represent partial truths. Who in the universe does not possess a tiny portion of the truth?”<sup>155</sup> However, this perhaps too generous concession must be balanced with the idea that there are those who see more than others. Some perspectives are more encompassing than others, and, more importantly, in the specific case of bolshevism and fascism, quite apart from the tiny portion of truth that they could represent, Ortega clarifies that they lack the most important factor, the desire to dialogue with other viewpoints, the will of coexistence: “Undoubtedly, whoever raises

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<sup>153</sup> *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, O.C., III, p. 648. And Ortega continues: “The same thing happens with peoples. Instead of considering non-European cultures barbaric, we will begin to respect them as styles of confrontation with the cosmos equivalent to our own. There is a Chinese perspective as justified as the Western perspective.”

<sup>154</sup> These quotations are taken from “Verdad y perspectiva”, *Confesiones de «El espectador»*, O.C., II, 162-163. We could refer to this thesis as “epistemological individualism” given that: “Reality gives itself up in individual perspectives.”

<sup>155</sup> *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 431.

his fist or holds out his hand to the wind means: ‘With this gesture I am making clear my enlistment in a party. I am, above all, a partisan man and, therefore, I am against the other parts of society that are not mine. I am a combatant, and with others I do not seek peace, but, with all clarity, frank struggle. To those who oppose me, those who are not from my party, even if they do not confront me, I do not offer connivance or agreement, but first fight them and defeat them, and then treat them as defeated.’<sup>156</sup>

The cited texts tell us, firstly, about the importance of the vision or perspective each of us may have, and, secondly, they propose an ethics of collaboration and integration of these viewpoints. If we use them to study the relationships between social groups, we will perceive that, unfortunately, these groups have a kind of natural tendency to create watertight compartments, to become increasingly locked in their own perspective, in their reduced horizon; thus losing all sensitivity to social interdependence.<sup>157</sup> But this tendency must be resisted at all costs. As we have just seen, in Ortega there is an extraordinary conviction of the importance of other viewpoints that must be considered. We must realize the mutual dependence of different groups and the need for coordination. In fact, Ortega writes in *España invertebrada* that “a nation is, ultimately, a huge community of individuals and groups that count on one another.”<sup>158</sup> And as he continues:

In normal states of nationalization, when one class wants something for themselves, they try to attain it by looking for an agreement with others. Instead of immediately satisfying their desire, they believe they are obliged to obtain it through the general will. They, therefore, make their private will follow a long route that passes through other wills in the nation and receives the consecration of legality from them. This effort to convince our neighbors to accept our particular aspiration is called legal action.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> *El hombre y la gente*, O.C., X, p. 282.

<sup>157</sup> See *España invertebrada*, O.C., III, 459.

<sup>158</sup> *España invertebrada*, O.C., III, 465. We could specify that this would be a “healthy nation”, because, unfortunately, there are other (and destructive) ways to be a nation. Civil wars could be an example.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

Where does this function of counting on others take place? In public institutions, in parliament. For Ortega parliament is the place of national coexistence, a place where we have to consider others: “The *Cortes* [the Spanish Parliament] is the national institution par excellence, because in it, the countless particularisms see themselves as compelled to face each other, to limit themselves, to be tamed and nationalized”.<sup>160</sup>

We have here a political ethics of dialogue. Anyone who does not want to do so will resort to what Ortega calls “direct action”, the imposition of their particular will. This is the practice of pronouncements or *coups d'état*, either in its military version or in versions more typical of today's times, where totalitarian visions are gradually imposed.<sup>161</sup> On the contrary, Ortega writes in *La rebelión de las masas* that liberal democracy is the prototype of “indirect action”.<sup>162</sup> Why is the adjective “liberal” important in “liberal democracy”? Because it implies that public power limits itself so that those who do not think or feel like the majority can live in the State. Liberalism, Ortega says, is, at this level, “the supreme generosity”.<sup>163</sup>

We would say that it is a position of supreme respect. It respects opposition because it recognizes the value of plurality and is willing to live with it. This is a central point because what is decisive for a nation to exist is not what happened yesterday, the past, but to have a program

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<sup>160</sup> O.C., III, 388. The square brackets contain my explanatory addition. At this level, deciding to live with others and to respect their public life is very important. See O.C., IV, 758.

<sup>161</sup> Recently Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have written a book, *How Democracies Die* (Penguin Random House, New York, 2018), about the danger of democracies sliding into autocracy when people deny the legitimacy of political adversaries. Authoritarian politicians sell the view that their adversaries are subversive and unpatriotic criminals, or that they form a threat to national security or the existing way of life.

<sup>162</sup> *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 420.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.* Ortega makes it clear that democracy answers the question of who should exercise political power by responding that it corresponds to all citizens. Liberalism, on the other hand, answers the question of the limits of political power, whether exercised by all people or by an autocrat. And its answer is that political power cannot be absolute, “but rather that people have rights prior to any interference by the State. It is, therefore, the tendency to limit the intervention of public power.” *Notas del vago estío*, O.C., II, 541-542. It is interesting to note here that the limits of the power that society or the State can exert over the individual were the main subject of Mill's *On Liberty*.

for tomorrow.<sup>164</sup> The resonance of the past is not enough to live together. We are brought together by what we are going to do tomorrow, the task we propose to do. And because of that, Ortega writes approvingly: “Renan said that a nation is a daily plebiscite.”<sup>165</sup> In *La rebelión de las masas* he speaks of the exceptional fortune of this idea, since it operates as a real liberation in us. Faced with a common blood, language and past that are like prisons, we discover that a nation is not something that exists, but something that is made.<sup>166</sup> It is better to build it together with a desire to respect and enjoy the plurality our neighbors represent and to coexist without a homogenizing will that would impose our way of doing or seeing things on others. This gives us the idea that liberalism (respect for others’ differences) can lead to democracy, because we want other people to speak their points of view. And, in turn, democracy allows those differences to flourish. Of course, this liberal democracy, in which the two elements mutually reinforce each other, would be an enviable situation.

Here we must add something equally important, as sometimes “liberal” has the meaning of opposition to the State’s economic intervention. This is not Ortega’s idea. He recognizes that a certain material standard of living is required to make it possible to participate in the cultural world (we could say to make the individual development discussed here possible). To underline this point, he quotes a French poet (he does not give their name):

When you have enough to pay the rent  
You can start thinking about being virtuous

And he comes to the conclusion that for this reason “the first thing to be done is to make the social economy more just.”<sup>167</sup> In another of his writings, “Miscelanea socialista”, he notes that socialism, by proclaiming

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<sup>164</sup> See *España invertebrada*, O.C., III, 442.

<sup>165</sup> *España invertebrada*, O.C., III, 457.

<sup>166</sup> See *La rebelión de las masas*, O.C., IV, 486.

<sup>167</sup> *La ciencia y la religión como problemas políticos*, O.C., VII, 135.

the interventionist principle, presents itself with Lasalle as the born enemy of individualist liberalism:

Lasalle launched an incontrovertible objection to it ... The objection is this: liberalism supports the State's abstention in relations between individuals and social groups to remain impartial and to place them on equal terms. But it does not realize the State is an old instrument that has been energetically intervening in social reality for centuries. If it suddenly pretends to abstain from this intervention, it only succeeds in increasing the inequalities it has been introducing for centuries. The State's only equitable position would be to intervene against its past intervention, to destroy privileges, because privilege means a favor done by the State.<sup>168</sup>

Our only comment is that this proposal Ortega seems to agree with does not actually counter "individualist liberalism". On the contrary, it helps make it possible.<sup>169</sup> Consequently, we would like to conclude with one last quotation: "for us liberty must mean two things: concerning the individual, extreme legality of their actions, negative liberty; concerning the State, the obligation to put the individual increasingly in a more perfect condition to make use of that liberty".<sup>170</sup> Rather than being a threat to liberty, democracy would be the mechanism that might improve it. The importance of the circumstance for Ortega can never be overemphasized; and, undoubtedly, anyone living in a democracy that approves its members' desire to be their own novelists is very fortunate.<sup>171</sup> If Ortega helps us to become aware of this and provides us with a vocabulary to vindicate it, we cannot doubt that reading his writings and dialoguing with him is worthwhile.

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<sup>168</sup> O.C., I, 565.

<sup>169</sup> This reminds us of Simone de Beauvoir writing about the project "to set freedom free"; that is, to build situations that allow people to effectively carry out their transcendence. It is clear that having leisure or economic security allows us to exercise our freedom to a greater degree. See Simone de Beauvoir: *The Prime of Life*. Translated by Peter Green. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 549.

<sup>170</sup> "Los problemas nacionales y la juventud", O.C., VII, 129. Of course, the different meanings of liberty have occupied philosophers for a long time, and in this context, we must remember Isaiah Berlin's essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" and all the discussions it generated.

<sup>171</sup> Ortega writes that "Man is a novelist of himself" in *Prólogo para alemanes*, O.C., IX, 137–138.

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# Jorge/George Santayana on the United States: A prophet in spite of himself

Daniel Moreno and José Beltrán<sup>172</sup>

**Abstract:** Santayana (Madrid, 1862-Roma 1953) has the particularity of being considered a classical philosopher both in the United States and in Spain. His life and work mark actually a bridge between both countries, and, in fact, between America and Europe. As a nomad and hybrid thinker, Santayana faced the intellectual and political temper of his age from a philosophical point of view that, in spite of himself, can be considered, in some way, as prophetic. This essay deals with Santayana's *aperçus* on the United States published as *Character and Opinion in the United States* one hundred years ago—we are going to check if his glimpses illuminate our own epoch—, and with an posthumous essay, entitled “Americanism” (1955), presented by Santayana with these words: “I don't think it will hurt the American people to be scolded a bit”. Santayana's criticism was directed at Americans, but we can say now that we all are Americans. We conclude that Santayana's words are always inspiring and in circumstances as serious as those we face at present, they can shed some light and also, why not, bring some comfort to us. To close our paper, we choose one of his most famous sonnets: “Cape Cod” (1894).

**Keywords:** criticism, industrialism, United States, philosophy, Santayana

## Santayana: nomadic and hybrid

The analysis of Santayana's geographical itinerary and his continuous transhumance reveals certain moral features, patterns, and ways of his being in the world. (Beltrán, 2008<sup>2</sup>). Thus, much has been said about the sense of essential uprootedness at the core of his life and thought, but one would have to determine to what extent his detachment—which at times may be deemed estrangement—is merely an accidental outcome, as critical views tend to hold, or rather, a deliberate attitude and an ethically and aesthetically cultivated stance. Certainly, Santayana's continuous comings and goings, departing and returning,

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staying and leaving, remind us the flight of migrating birds in search of the best season, albeit the seasons and the climate sought by Santayana are moral, not biological. Thus, behind the seemingly random progress of his life, an internal logic may emerge, an unveiling or unfolding of a certain kind of “cosmos” or extrinsic order within yet well beyond the intrinsic order that keeps the nature of things, to which he also pays due homage throughout his work. From this point of view, the ebb and flow of his written thought accompanies his outward journeying and traces a sort of speculative cartography that guides and determines his action, a rare contribution to the genre of guides for the perplexed. It could be said that in Santayana's work one can hear the echo of the ever-changing question about the place we are in. For authors such as Gianni Vattimo, the sense of displacement as a worldly experience is also a sign of late modernity, which in Santayana takes on peculiar characteristics, as will be seen, and can also be identified in thinkers such as Benjamin and Heidegger, whose aesthetic proposals are aimed at keeping the experience of uprootedness alive.

Besides metaphorically or symbolically appropriating features such as travel, nomadism or foreignness, and making them instrumental to the construction of his philosophical grammar, something which has been done at different junctures of the history of philosophy, the novelty and the value of Santayana's work lie in his making them the driving force and an inspiration that pervade a whole program of life and work. (Beltrán, 2009). A nomadic thought such as Santayana's would then be one that introduces successive vanishing points in its continuous epistemological incursions and ontological excursions, as a condition for the possibility of distancing, alienating, or even missing oneself, thereby reaching distances that allow one to get to know and recognize oneself through new meeting places, and founding new settlements, *loci* and spaces of consciousness with which to reinterpret the world.

In fact, to any casual observer, Santayana's appearance is decidedly multifaceted. Santayana, like the god Janus, had two faces: one looking to the past, the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the other looking to the future, the 20<sup>th</sup>; one looking to Europe and the other looking to the United States. Or

perhaps he was like the *Mona Lisa*: now a man, now a woman; now joyful, now melancholy. For some, Santayana is Don Jorge, while for others, he is George. These names compound in the hybrid *George Santayana*, a name that we often see in writing, but which grates at the ear whenever it is spoken aloud: Spanish speakers struggle with the *George*, and for English speakers, *Santayana*—with its four identical vowels that do not allow for the varying tones of English—is practically torture. As we will see, this is no minor detail. Bilingualism defined not just Santayana, but also translations of his work and his secondary bibliography.

Antonio Marichalar, as early as 1924, called Santayana “the English Spaniard George Santayana” (Marichalar, 1924: 167-177); more recently, Gustavo Pérez Firmat went a step further, viewing Santayana as a man who lived “on the hyphen,” as Pérez Firmat demonstrated in a chapter of *Tongue Ties* (2003) that he dedicated to the philosopher: “Saying Un-English Things in English” (Pérez Firmat, 2003: 23-43). Krzysztof P. Skwroński aptly described “Santayana’s In- Betweenness” in his book *Santayana and America: Values, Liberties, Responsibility* (Skwroński, 2007: 1-28). As for us, we prefer to characterize Santayana’s life and work as the incarnation of hybridity, in the sense that he could successfully combine—or, at times, simply juxtapose—diverse and even apparently incompatible realities and points of view; he did so with a sense of relief, rather than pain or distress; for him, there is only liberation and release, not nostalgia and alienation. It was not in vain that he made the interpreter Hermes his divine protector:

A traveller should be devout to Hermes, and I have always loved him above the other gods for that charming union which is found in him of youth with experience, alacrity with prudence, modesty with laughter, and a ready tongue with a sound heart. In him the first bubblings of mockery subside at once into courtesy and helpfulness. He is the winged Figaro of Olympus, willing to yield to others in station and to pretend to serve them, but really wiser and happier than any of them. [...] His admirable temper and mastery of soul appear in nothing more clearly than in his love-affair with the beautiful Maia. [...] The approach of Hermes awakes her and lends her life—the only life she has. Her true name is Illusion; and it is very characteristic of him, so rich in pity, merriment, and shrewdness, to have chosen this poor

child, Illusion, for his love. [...] Here is a kindly god indeed, humane though superhuman, friendly though inviolate, who does not preach, who does not threaten, who does not lay new, absurd, or morose commands on our befuddled souls, but who unravels, who relieves, who shows us the innocence of the things we hated and the clearness of the things we frowned on or denied. He interprets us to the gods, and they accept us; he interprets us to one another, and we perceive that the foreigner, too, spoke a plain language: happy he if he was wise in his own tongue. [...] May he be my guide: and not in this world only, in which the way before me seems to descend gently, quite straight and clear, towards an unruffled sea; but at the frontiers of eternity let him receive my spirit, reconciling it, by his gracious greeting, to what had been its destiny. For he is the friend of the shades also, and makes the greatest interpretation of all, that of life into truth, translating the swift words of time into the painted language of eternity. That is for the dead; but for living men, whose feet must move forward whilst their eyes see only backward, he interprets the past to the future, for its guidance and ornament. Often, too, he bears news to his father and brothers in Olympus, concerning any joyful or beautiful thing that is done on earth, lest they should despise or forget it. In that fair inventory and chronicle of happiness let my love of him be remembered (Santayana, 1922a: 259-264).

Interpreting, translation, borders, and being in no place and all places, living as a nomad or as someone in permanent transit with only a hyphen for a home—not quite *en vilo* (“in suspense”), which is how Pérez Firmat translates his “on the hyphen” into Spanish—occupying the space *between* people and *between* places, not in a dissolving void but in a non-location where one can exist. Santayana establishes himself not in an uninhabitable place, but in a habitable non-place: hybridity in its essence. He does this without any desire to proselytize. In his time, he would be viewed as odd, in the sense of out of the ordinary, but today, many have come to view him as a friend or a kindred spirit: at minimum, he is not considered far removed from a certain modern disposition—never in the majority, always in Juan Ramón Jiménez’s overwhelming minority—that was viewed as surprising in his time, but which is not abnormal today. There is no shortage of people comfortably living out their own hybridities in contemporary society.

What other thinker plays such a key role in the history of two different nations’ philosophy? Max H. Fisch (1951) included Santayana in his

*Classic American Philosophers: Peirce, James, Royce, Santayana, Dewey, Whitehead*, and, two decades later, Alfonso López Quintás (1970) included him in *Filosofía española contemporánea*. In both cases, the editors justified Santayana's inclusion, as he was a Spaniard and, at the same time, had been raised in the U.S. and wrote the entirety of his oeuvre in English. These pioneering editors were followed by John J. Stuhr, who included Santayana alongside Charles S. Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, John Dewey, and Herbert Mead in his *Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretative Essays* (Stuhr, 1987), which was released in several editions; by José Luis Abellán, who included Santayana in his monumental *Historia crítica del pensamiento español* (Abellán, 1989); and by Manuel Garrido, who gave Santayana a place of honor in both *El legado filosófico y científico del siglo XX* (Garrido, Valdés y Arenas, 2007) and *El legado filosófico español e hispanoamericano del siglo XX* (Garrido, Orringer, Valdés y Valdés, 2009).

### **Once upon a time... in the United States**

What explains Santayana's hybrid character? (Moreno, 2020: 9). How was his double link to the United States and Europe resolved? Santayana uses his American experience as a lens or prism to refract his reflection on the world he has lived in. From the present he was immersed in, he expands his gaze towards the past—so well summarized in *The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy* (Santayana, 1911) and in his *Essays on the History of Philosophy* (Santayana, 2020)—and the future. By dint of being extemporaneous, he is extraordinarily contemporary. The story of his experience takes on a fabled tone...

The chapter of *Character and Opinion in the United States* (Santayana, 1920; hereafter COUS), dedicated to the world of academia and written years after leaving university life as a professor at Harvard, could have started like a classic folktale: Once upon a time... a golden age in which “during some twenty years—from 1885 to 1910—there was at Harvard

College Harvard University an interesting congregation of philosophers” (COUS, 35).

Santayana was at the same time actively engaged in and privileged witness of that splendour where, without any doubt, chance and necessity must have met, the same moral substratum that explains the birth of a nation and got to coalesce in the microcosm of a corporate institution such as Harvard. “That the philosophers should be professors is an accident, an almost an anomaly” (COUS, 35), says Santayana. No doubt he was or at least felt an accidental tourist, even though his residency lasted four decades.

Harvard, of whose faculty Santayana was a member, participated in the moral milieu that oriented its mission on earth towards the future, exerting a notable effect on its philosophers, for it gave them a keen sense of social responsibility, because they were consciously teaching and guiding the community, as if they had been priests (COUS, 43). Their role was ambivalent, because they could be both genuine philosophers—like the rhinoceros—and popular teachers. Some of them were a true precedent for what today are considered academic stars, campus celebrities.

The term “social responsibility” is emerging again as one of the new brands or mantras to which we associate the university of the 21st century. Santayana observed transformations in university life, and at Harvard in particular, with which he felt uncomfortable for the atmosphere was not presided by intelligence but by obligation. Santayana’s words about university trends a hundred years ago could have been written today: “In the academic life and methods of the university there was the same incomplete transformation. The teaching required was for the most part college teaching, in college subjects, such as might well have been entrusted to tutors; but it was given by professors in the form of lectures, excessive in number and too often repeated; and they were listened to by absent-minded youths, ill-grounded in the humanities, and not keenly alive to intellectual interests” (COUS, 59).

Harvard philosophers adapted their teaching to an atmosphere of “intellectual innocence” meant for intelligent, ambitious students, able to “do things” (COUS, 49). The university days were followed by the hustle and bustle of business. And university reforms, aimed at expanding the scope of instruction and making it more advanced, helped to strengthen that bridge with a view to anticipating and forging a promising future. Santayana describes a transformation of the university that could have been written yesterday: the nostalgia produced by the loss of a sense of *universitas* (COUS, 56), the kind of universality associated to the pursue of knowledge, gives way to the description of market strategies that today are the common currency of our universities: professional and instrumental orientation, competition for the attraction of talent, and internationalization. There, “the professor of philosophy had to swim against a rather powerful current” (COUS, 60). But Harvard was a complex product of tradition and context, of place and moment: a local puritanical college that at least opened its windows, quite exceptionally, to two intense philosophers, lights rather than mirrors, of whom he feels as much admiration as the need not to be seduced by their theories; one was an empiricist, the other an idealist. Both William James and Josiah Royce, were forced (or bent, as Santayana felt they were) to reconcile the teaching of philosophy that distracted them from philosophy as a way of life.

This feeling, which Santayana narrates in fable-like fashion, provides a key to understanding his decision to leave the United States definitively. It also contains a moral that should not be underestimated: “Everyone was labouring with the contradiction he felt in things, and perhaps, in himself; all were determined to find some honest way out of it, or at least, to bear it bravely. It was a fresh morning in the life of reason, cloudy but brightening” (COUS, 62-63). Santayana was able to change the atmosphere, the place and the tradition. It is a story of liberation, a display of the calm that follows a storm.

Santayana describes very well the *milieu* that gave rise to the configuration of the prestigious Harvard University, from which Santayana wanted to free himself. There, those who do not resort to

generalization, like philosophers, resort to specialization, like pedagogues and scientists, whose knowledge is characterized more by what they ignore than by what they know, and whose research logic would end up invading university campuses and the educational system. A superior form of superstition also appears among them, “the notion that nature dances to the sound of some general formula or some magical spell”. Today, this superstition, which Santayana denounced, is very much present in the hegemony of algorithms, which have become both a global accounting industry and a scientific doctrine. What matters now is granting *account-ability*, no matter what for, before or even instead of *sense-ability*, that is, the provision of meaning. And this is just an example of our impatience—or rather, our anxiety—to know and control everything. Many of our problems are the result of our impatience and of our contradictions, and rather than solving them, we could well devote ourselves to dissolving them. The rest of our problems are due to countless undiscovered facts. The eagerness to comprehend everything—that *hubris* or excess that the Greeks had already unveiled—is as dangerous in philosophy as in art, holds Santayana, and he gives an example that suggests that it could have inspired Borges (who knew the philosopher's work and to whom he dedicated a biographical note): “an outline map of the entire universe, if it was not fabulously contoured, would not tell as much that was worth knowing about the outlying parts of it” (COUS, 30-31). Indeed, our speculation can only look at reality in a peripheral way in order to express it in human terms. That is why intense philosophers are not mirrors, but lights. Spinoza had already observed in one of his scolios that one does not desire something because it is good, but that one thing is good because one desires it. But the desire for truth must await favourable conditions to satisfy it. And those conditions were not yet present in the United States of the nineteenth century. In the fable about the United States—and Harvard is but a microcosm of it—Santayana recognizes the wise men under whose influence he was formed—apostles rather than serene philosophers—whose merits they owed to their inherited tradition and to the environment where they contributed to renew it.

One of those wise men was his mentor and Harvard colleague William James. For James, experience or mental discourse is the only substantive fact, the condition of psychological flow, since that flow itself was the fundamental existence. Using a metaphor from Heraclitus, which would later inspire sociologist Zygmunt Bauman to develop a whole perspective on “liquid life”, Santayana observes, “the sense of bounding over the waves, the sense of being on an adventurous voyage, was the living fact” (COUS, 71). This feeling is what summarizes the formula “radical empiricism”, by which, Santayana eloquently says, “the word experience is like a shrapnel shell, and burst into a thousand meanings”, which literature translates into something dreamy, passionate, dramatic, and meaningful. In the end, the experience—any subject would say—is nothing more and nothing less than what happens to us: what we live. Now, for Santayana, James' empiricism and pragmatism are only methods at the service of an agnosticism so open that it was in favour of credulity: that everyone may profess the faith they wish or are capable of.

Beyond belief, Santayana returns again and again to the realm of experience, and to relevant questions from his own experience in the United States. One of them is a question “which may be important in the future”, namely, “How has migration to the new world affected philosophical ideas?” (COUS, 139). Because a young country with an old mentality needs to evaluate the heritage received as well as to discover new forms of knowledge, new ways of thinking and new grammars to express reality. In Rortian terms, it is not a question of reaching “final vocabularies” that provide definitive meanings at the service of defined systems, but rather of appealing to tentative vocabularies to accompany the world in its evolution, in the (migratory) movements of thought and in their social practices, i.e., a provisional grammar that serves both as an auxiliary tool and as an inspiration to articulate our dealings with the world. For it is no longer so important to find the truth (as if it were a sort of “secret” that, once deciphered, could reveal its meaning), but what “truly” matters is to deal with reality (in its empirical concretions, in the field of experience). Here, he was in agreement with William James, since “the mind is indeed an organ of adaptation to reality, but it employs and forges reality” (Castillo, 2000: 19).



On the one hand, the climate of the New World has accelerated the disintegration of conventional categories, while on the other, it has favoured the impartial congregation and mutual confrontation of all kinds of ideas, producing “a kind of happy vigilance and insecurity” in intellectual matters. Santayana wonders if this fluidity of thought might not require, among others, the gift of imagination, which the philosopher has not stopped practicing.

And so, Santayana asks the reader, in Kantian mode, to put herself in the Americans’ shoes, so as to understand the circumstances of their life that inevitably lead them to form their feelings and judgments. Let’s note, however, that Santayana appeals to the singular American, knowing that he is a mythical or symbolic figure. “But to speak in parables is inevitable in such a subject” (COUS, 167). “To be an American is in itself a moral condition, and education and a career” (COUS, 168). If this is so, Santayana himself also became an American. “America is all one prairie, swept by a universal tornado. Although it has always thought itself in an eminent sense the land of freedom, even when it was covered by slaves, there is no country in which people live under more overpowerful compulsions” (COUS, 209). And even the best of American life—idealism, enthusiasm—is compulsive. In a rational society, passions are still present, but they are subject to mutual control, and the life of reason is a perpetual compromise.

### **Ultimate Statements on the United States**

That the United States, or America, was an almost obsessive subject for Santayana is shown by the fact that he still left among his manuscripts an unpublished essay on the United States as a testament to his long reflections on his adopted country, which at the time had already become an international power. The essay was entitled “Americanism” (Santayana, 1955: 1-26; hereafter A). It was a text more personal, in a way, than the other ones published, although it is not so strictly personal as his letters. Daniel Cory published it posthumously, and added this note, which we going to qualify: “The essay on ‘Americanism’ was

written sometime between 1935 and 1940. Santayana did not publish it at once, because he felt that perhaps some of his admonitions and strictures on our way of thinking and living were a little harsh, and he wanted time to reconsider the whole matter” (Cory, 1957, v). In fact, it can still be said, insofar as we are heirs to many of the approaches criticized there, surely some of Santayana’s comments still hit the target, hence their relevance today.

Santayana didn’t feel concerned directly with the questions discussed so arduously in the United States of his youth, and in the Europe of his maturity—even when those discussions drove those countries to wars. He usually took a *sub specie aeternitatis* stanc. To be sure, he did not get involved in any political movement, and he rejected many suggestions to support diverse pro-something or pro-somebody movements. But that neither means that he was indifferent nor, of course, that he was guilty of sympathy with these cause in any way although he didn’t write against segregationist in the US or against the Holocaust in the Germany of Hitler. In 1937 he accepted Sidney Hook’s judgment that “you express my entire conviction when you say that philosophical detachment does not signify political indifference.” (Santayana, 2004: 19). Reading his letters one can catch how profoundly the political *affairs* touched him, and realize that Santayana wasn’t an inattentive thinker in any way.

Santayana gave form during his large life to a political philosophy thought out through the *spirit*, when it manifests itself, alien and distant, but *not* indifferent. In order to be understood, even if not necessarily accepted, his only demand was to be read comprehensively, without demanding solutions from him that he could not furnish. He would say that the political questions of the day should be formulated to the philosophers who were inclined to answer them. Santayana is not the appropriate philosopher for doing that. And yet, I consider that he does indeed offer a conceptual framework upon which to build some solutions.

Santayana himself said his last word about the relation between philosophy—or, better, philosophers—and politics in the “Note” he wrote in 1941 to introduce “Philosophers at Court” (Santayana, 1953: 89), a work that remained unpublished until his death. Contrary to Plato, Santayana didn’t think that philosophers should become political leaders, it is enough if they propose ideals: “I am concerned less with Plato’s history than with the place of philosophers and philosophy in human society. I think that place important not in directing governments but, like poetry and the fine arts, in bringing inspiration to a head and giving it concrete expression.” Note that these statements were written in the middle of World War II.

So let us see what kind of inspiration we can get from “Americanism”, an astonishing essay in so many ways. Santayana wrote it almost one hundred years ago but he didn’t publish it, we think because he felt that the essay exposes his ideas too fully. We believe that, although he did not intend to assume the role of a prophet—far from it—he became one in some sense, as will be seen from now on and as the reader may have already noticed in the previous section.

In order to achieve an adequate point of view, Santayana goes back to antiquity, a world where everything was imagined on the human scale and everything reinforced and clarified humanity in human beings, the arts purified human spirit, and beauty and harmony dominated. It was a paradise, in a word. Then the Greeks tried to dominate the non-human nature by sketching naturalistic systems of the universe, still human in their terms, but already infinite, impersonal and aimless in their movement. The modern experimental science inherits this movement. It, like Doctor Faustus, wants power: strange knowledge, cheap riches, troubled pleasures, theft and exploration. So began the age of mechanism, an age that laughs at being cultured and refined. Santayana says: “The mechanized democrat [...] is amply sustained by social contagion and approval, by rivalry, by keenness to perform any chosen task, and if possible to break some record; also by a sense of technical mastery in controlling the unimaginable souls of his machines, even if it be in sport only and for no further purpose.” (A, 6-7) Modern science

was helped by modern idealism, which reduced the universe not only to a human scale but to a human locus: any world claiming recognition must appear to conscience, to spirit: “Materialism in life or in science and a complete absorption in mechanical arts could thus prove perfectly congenial to the idealist: they were merely one phase in the development of freedom” (A, 8-9).

This philosophy subordinates ideals to pragmatic ends; the spirit must work too by mastering, transforming and enjoying the material world. But, what happens with authentic ideals, with the idle, the aristocratic, the contemplative, with happiness? According to Santayana the situation is reversible. If we renounce transcendental idealism, “we should be merely awakening from the Satanic dream that we were creators and not creatures. Nature is the moving ground of experience and experience a play of moral counterpoint or conscious cross-lights upon the surface of nature. That we are creatures and not creators follows from the fact that we are born to die, are dependent on matter for our very existence, and are addressed in all our passions to our transitory fortunes in the material world” (A, 12). If industrialism/capitalism is Satanic, by rejecting Satan, we can conceive a divine possibility: “the possibility of abolishing all this modern business of industrialism, mechanical arts, and experimental science would not be excluded. Some day, no doubt, these things will be abandoned, since they are luxuries, and require a compulsory devotion in mankind at large to rather inhuman pursuits” (*Idem*). Here must be noticed that Santayana rejects industrialism as a whole, but I think he doesn’t mean to go back to wild nature. As the next quotes show, he has in mind the abolishing of Business, not industrial processes. It is Business that is Satan, not the industries that can make human life more comfortable.

Our world today presents the same features as that of Santayana, and even more pregnant. It is still true that: “There are plenty of sectarians in the United States, plenty of fanatics, propagandists, and dogmatists; but the American absorption in work—a work controlled and directed by the momentum and equilibrium of its total movement—causes all

these theoretical passions to remain sporadic, private, harmless, and impotent. Their social effects cancel and disinfect one another; they count and modify the balance of action in so far as they are forms of business; in so far as they are definitive ideas they evaporate in loud steam,” (A, 13) and: “The state must be addressed to Business, and Business must be managed by Brains. Wealth must circulate and be widely diffused; and if once the standard of material well-being is high enough, all else will be spontaneously added by the goddess of liberty” (A, 15).

### **Santayana, a prophet in spite of himself**

But not all are critiques of his world. Santayana is positive too; he looks to the future, to our future, if we agree with his test of rationality. His test of rationality establishes that each action is rational if it tends to liberate our native potentialities and renders our life more perfect after its own kind. That is to say, Santayana is not a dogmatist; for him each person has his own individual criterion of rationality. Moreover, that vital perfection is compatible with variety and true freedom in the realm of spirit, because variety is richness, and vital growth without freedom is nothing. The point is that each life should remain vital, perfect, and appropriate. *Vital* means fed by sap rising from its hereditary root, spontaneously, gladly and freely. *Perfect* means harmonious with itself, an order in which all the parts are included without being distorted—an ideal not easy to achieve, as we can see. *Appropriate* means capable of maintaining itself and feeding on its surrounding, by adopting for its vitality a type of perfection which circumstances render possible at that particular time and place. If vitality were lacking, our life would miss its unity; if harmony were not attained, there would be distraction and torment; if our structure were maladapted to our circumstances, our needs would be unprovided and our hopes would be in vain. In other words, Santayana’s materialism establishes that for the human soul there is a spiritual life possible, but that it is conditioned by the sort of commerce that the soul carries on with the body and with the world.

And Santayana's axiom establishes that every maxim, every institution, and the whole universe itself must be tested morally by its effect on the spirit, that it is to say, they will have to improve conscious fruition of existence in perception, feeling and thought. You cannot say more with fewer words. But thus is Santayana.

For him America has two elements: union in work and liberty of spirit. So, in the plane of matter, union in work will always be desirable, this is the secret of American strength and American competence. But matter is not the level on which the value of what survives can be judged. Moreover, unanimity can seldom be established, there will always be rebellious elements that will be called heresies, although a formative impulse of a new sort is active within them, and causes them to detest and seek to destroy the overruling force, physical or moral, which hopes to suppress them. Because of this, Santayana considered ironical that America learns to control matter if thereby it forgets the purposes of the soul in controlling it. The contribution of experimental science and industrial invention would be useful if it were incorporated in a life of reason adequate to the whole powers of our life, but it would be fatal if it succeeded in monopolizing reason, and substituted blind work for free imagination.

Santayana's conclusion cannot be more shocking: "If Doctor Faustus, in view of the wonders of nature open to experiment, sold his soul to the devil, he is not forbidden, when the secret is out, to cheat the devil who had morally cheated him, and to repent. Perhaps America, more innocently misled than that old reprobate, may more quickly turn to repentance" (A, 26).

Goethe's character, very much present in Santayana's writings, acquires enormous symbolic power and casts a pervasive shadow on his reflection on "Americanism". Santayana uses it as an expressive resource to explain the Faustian temptation to which the United States has succumbed, affecting the rest of the world. No doubt, this temptation favoured the accumulation of wealth, but when nepotism or routine govern the management of business, ruin is near (A, 15). As a

prophet against his own will, Santayana maintains that some respect should be shown for the living soul by allowing each temperament and philosophy to speak for itself. However, in his opinion, one can safely assume that civilization will continue to become more and more mechanized. In words that could have been uttered just now, he states: “We are still in Doctor Faustus’ laboratory” (A, 11).

### **... and a virus breaks into this story**

It turns out that, while we were composing these reflections, a virus, which has been spreading throughout the world in consonance with the expansion of our economic system, forced humanity to rethink its entire trajectory. Paraphrasing Santayana, one could even claim that the virus is forcing everyone to somehow repent, and to restore human values over short-term economic interests. There is evidence, for example, that the planet as whole has benefited from the decline in consumption and pollution. Perhaps we need both to earnestly rethink our model of society and to readjust its overall productive model.

The international seminar entitled “Harmony and Well-Being: Reflections on the Pandemic in Light of George Santayana's Philosophy”, convened by Richard Rubin, president of the Santayana Society, in which we participated online alongside with other academics, focused on these issues on May 13. Its contents were summed up by Hector Galvan (2020: 157-163). Our contribution concluded with the reading of the poem “Cape Code” after the following words:

“Dear attendants and dear friends, good evening to you all: It is a great pleasure to make ourselves present, if briefly, in this international meeting with you. Daniel and I would like to send you our warmest greetings from Spain. We hope that you and your beloved ones—relatives and colleagues—are keeping well and in good health. Please, allow me to share a few words that we have prepared as a way of expressing our best wishes for this gathering: In his text *War Shrines*,

Santayana makes the following statement: “it is part of wisdom to find a way of life to live well, rather than simply to deplore life”. And, he warns us, “we are not wrong to love (the world), only to appropriate it”. In the midst of this global pandemic, Santayana's words take on a much greater significance. Indeed, he adds, “to see life, and to value it, from the point of view of death is to see it and to value it with truth”. And therefore, “it is much better to live in the light of the tragic fact than to forget it or deny it and build on a fundamental lie” (Santayana 1922b). Once again, we can read Santayana from a contemporary lens. His words are always inspiring and in circumstances as serious as those we face at present, they can shed some light and also, why not, bring some comfort to us. Santayana's philosophy does not offer medicines, but it does allow us to think things differently, it provides us with another way of measuring the dimension of present events as well as the depth and stature of our humanity, and it invites us, like the Hindus do, to live the illusion without succumbing to it. It reminds us that we are fragile in a fragile and amazing world, a realm of beauty that is our host. That is why we must take care of our hospitable world, because a truly better—a healthier and a more democratic—world can only be a common world. Today we all depend on each other, and increasingly more so. And even if he does not provide answers for our predicament, in his poem “Cape Cod” (Santayana, 1894, 90-91) he left us with a timely and most relevant question: What will become of man? The echoes of that question now reach us with a new meaning: What do we wish to make of man? How can we achieve, in the current situation, a balance between health and economy that places the human factor and the human sense at the center?

#### CAPE COD

The low sandy beach and the thin scrub pine,  
The wide reach of bay and the long sky line,—  
O, I am sick for home!



The salt, salt smell of the thick sea air,  
And the smooth round stones that the ebbtides wear,—

When will the good ship come?

The wretched stumps all charred and burned,  
And the deep soft rut where the cartwheel turned,—

Why is the world so old?

The lapping wave, and the broad gray sky  
Where the cawing crows and the slow gulls fly,

Where are the dead untold?

The thin, slant willows by the flooded bog,  
The huge stranded hulk and the floating log,

Sorrow with life began!

And among the dark pines, and along the flat shore,

O the wind, and the wind, for evermore!

What will become of man?"

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## “The Good Europeans”: Nietzsche and the *Belated Nation Syndrome*•

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**Abstract:** Few texts can match the perspicacity about the sources of nationalism of the eighth section of *Beyond Good and Evil* (=BGE) –“People and Countries”–, in which Nietzsche focuses primarily on the narcotic properties of an exacerbated patriotism, one that aims to harden the spirit and, in the case of Germany, to pervert the healthy “development” of an individual’s interaction with the surrounding human, social and natural environment. Nietzsche believed that there was something profoundly childish, characteristic of one that has grown old but is unaware of his real age, in the circumlocutions that lead to an obsession with one’s own nation. This thinker argues for the possibilities of production and respect for differences that one might expect from the type of integration that results from the European synthesis.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, Nationalism, Europe, Culture, Plessner

Nietzsche’s judgment regarding the fabrication of nationalist exaltations was as implacable as that which he directed at Christian morality. What is more, his denouncement of the rhetorical construction behind what is usually understood as “fatherland” was joined with a call to resist the inability to incorporate into the national melody the bass pedal point of Jewishness that had accompanied European spiritual life for some eighteen centuries. In a letter to his sister Elisabeth in December of 1887, Nietzsche expressed his revulsion at being publicly and unjustly associated with antisemitic positions, arising especially

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from the connection with his brother-in-law Bernhard Förster and the turn in this direction taken by Ernst Schmeitzner, his former publisher in Chemnitz. Even during his lifetime, before the intense labour of censorship undertaken after his death by his sister, he was dismayed to find himself suspected of rejecting the Jewish element in culture and society.<sup>173</sup> His friend, Franz Overbeck, would state in his memoirs that neither one of them was able to take the issue of antisemitism seriously, seeming to them a “passing fad” and unworthy of the slightest reflection.<sup>174</sup> To Nietzsche, the patrioteering of the *Vaterländerei* suggested an attitude in which the medieval world and the 19<sup>th</sup> century overlapped and intermingled, creating a mood paradoxically similar to those “areas of darkness, leaden boredom and feverish over-excitation” that Eduard Hanslick would identify, together with its lighter, more pleasant fragments, in the seventh symphony of the master of Ansfelden, Anton Bruckner. Few texts can match the perspicacity of the eighth section of *Beyond Good and Evil* (=BGE) –“People and Countries”–, in which Nietzsche focuses primarily on the narcotic properties of an exacerbated patriotism, one that aims to harden the spirit and, in the case of Germany, to pervert the healthy “development” of an individual’s interaction with the surrounding human, social and natural environment. He perceived it as leading ultimately to a collapse of the cultural and civilisational “metabolism”: “German depth is often only a difficult, hesitating ‘digestion’”, we read in BGE (§ 244). One especially harmful element of the patrioteering style was its tendency to hijack the experience of the present, systematically shifting all the motors of meaning into an essentialist past to which the bright future ahead is made contingent. Like the Socrates of *Menexenus*, less known than that of the *Apology*, *Phaedo* or *Gorgias*, who claimed that the funeral oration of the rhetor hired by the city of Athens to honour those fallen in the war –by the philosopher’s own confession– made him feel “instantly [...] stronger, more noble and good” (235b), giving him a “sensation of respectability” (ibid.) that would last for three days, Nietzsche describes, with no shortage of ironic complicity, the effects

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<sup>173</sup> On this question in Nietzsche, see Schubel (2007: 143-152).

<sup>174</sup> Vd. Overbeck (2017: 30).

produced on his mood by the overture of *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, a piece to which, however –and this is important to note–, he would return again and again, always as if “hearing it for the first time”:

What flavours and forces, what seasons and climes do we not find mingled in it! It impresses us at one time as ancient, at another time as foreign, bitter, and too modern, it is as arbitrary as it is pompously traditional, it is not infrequently roguish, still oftener rough and coarse – it has fire and courage, and at the same time the loose, dun-coloured skin of fruits which ripen too late. It flows broad and full: and suddenly there is a moment of inexplicable hesitation, like a gap that opens between cause and effect, an oppression that makes us dream, almost a nightmare; but already it broadens and widens anew, the old stream of delight –the most manifold delight–, of old and new happiness; including *especially* the joy of the artist in himself, which he refuses to conceal, his astonished, happy cognizance of his mastery of the expedients here employed, the new, newly acquired, imperfectly tested expedients of art which he apparently betrays to us. All in all, however, no beauty, no South, nothing of the delicate southern clearness of the sky, nothing of grace, no dance, hardly a will to logic; a certain clumsiness even, which is also emphasized, as though the artist wished to say to us: “It is part of my intention”; a cumbersome drapery, something arbitrarily barbaric and ceremonious, a flirring of learned and venerable conceits and witticisms; something German in the best and worst sense of the word, something in the German style, manifold, formless, and inexhaustible; a certain German potency and super-plenitude of soul, which is not afraid to hide itself under the *raffinements* of decadence –which, perhaps, feels itself most at ease there; a real, genuine token of the German soul, which is at the same time young and aged, too ripe and yet still too rich in futurity. This kind of music expresses best what I think of the Germans: they belong to the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow –*they have as yet no today* (BGE, § 240).

This passage sketches a sentimental landscape that combines reticence with determination, a visible slackening of the will with an urge for domination. Like Christianity, the nationalist hubris causes us to lose “the centre of gravity that enables us to live” (*Posthumous Fragments* =PF XIII 11 [48]). Thus, begins the pursuit of leisure, which Nietzsche identifies as a mentality imported from North America, and which has as its motto: “Better to do anything at all than nothing” (*The Gay Science*=GS, § 329). As with the Europeanist Stendhal before him, we

find suspicions of a weakening of vital forces produced by this nationalist neurosis and Germany's responsibility in this context circulating through Nietzsche's work as late as 1888, shortly before his own definitive personal crisis:

Finally, at a moment when there appeared on the bridge that spanned two centuries of decadence, a superior force of genius and will which was strong enough to consolidate Europe and to convert it into a political and economic unit, with the object of ruling the world, the Germans, with their Wars of Independence, robbed Europe of the significance –the marvellous significance, of Napoleon's life. And in so doing they laid on their conscience everything that followed, everything that exists to-day–, this sickliness and want of reason which is most opposed to culture, and which is called Nationalism –this *névrose nationale* from which Europe is suffering acutely; this eternal subdivision of Europe into petty states, with politics on a municipal scale: they have robbed Europe itself of its significance, of its reason–, and have stuffed it into a cul-de-sac. Is there any one except me who knows the way out of this cul-de-sac? Does anyone except me know of an aspiration which would be great enough to bind the people of Europe once more together? (*Ecce Homo*=EH, "The Case of Wagner" § 2).

The above passage describes the peculiar defects of such "municipal politics", whose obsession with guaranteeing sovereignty in the short term ruled out any interest in the progressive unification of Europe. The nationalist spiral that elevates self-interest to the level of *inestimable* and *uncriticisable* suggests that these nationalist discourses should be associated with an "impoverishment of life" (*The Genealogy of Morals*=GM, III 25) produced by ascetic ideals, whose paradigmatic physiological manifestation is a "frigidity of the emotions, slackening of the *tempo*, the substitution of dialectic for instinct, *seriousness* impressed on mien and gesture (seriousness, that most unmistakable sign of strenuous metabolism, of struggling, toiling life)" (GM, III 25). One might expect that a people subjected to such influences would pass through periods of obtuseness and stupidity, signs of a "political infection" (BGE, § 251) that prevents one community from opening itself to others in a productive way. Antisemitism is a paradigmatic case of the intrinsic weakness of those nations that suffer from this affliction. The "European Buddhism" that has been identified with socialist ideologies, with its "belief in the morality of *mutual* sympathy" and in



the redemptive potential of community itself (BGE, § 202) would replay this spiritual itinerary. Nothing here suggests the tragic psychology of the one who says “yes to life” and shares the experience of being “*oneself* the eternal joy of becoming” (*Twilight of the Idols*=TI, 5, “What I owe to the ancients”), as the ascetic love of one’s own nation is felt as a firm will toward preservation that seeks to expel its more singular and contingent components. As Patrick Wotling has pointed out, Nietzsche’s symptomological analysis of European culture proves that it was more a *Bildung* and a *Civilization* than a true *Kultur*.<sup>175</sup> In the section of passages from BGE provided here, Nietzsche includes a confession of those moments in which he himself fell victim to the sentimental effluvia of the *Vaterländerei*, whose vain outpourings of emotion would contribute nothing to the promise of a future community spirit. No one could be saved from the virus by being inoculated with this machinery for the production of vaporous identities:

We “good Europeans”, we also have hours when we allow ourselves a warm-hearted patriotism, a plunge and relapse into old loves and narrow views –I have just given an example of it – hours of national excitement, of patriotic anguish, and all other sorts of old-fashioned floods of sentiment. Duller spirits may perhaps only get done with what confines its operations in us to hours and plays itself out in hours –in a considerable time: some in half a year, others in half a lifetime, according to the speed and strength with which they digest and “change their material”. Indeed, I could think of sluggish, hesitating races, which even in our rapidly moving Europe, would require half a century ere they could surmount such atavistic attacks of patriotism and soil-attachment, and return once more to reason, that is to say, to “good Europeanism” (BGE, § 241).

No one is safe from these violent outbursts, which seem to go hand-in-hand with the darker, more reactionary face of existence itself, both individual and collective. Without recurring to an abstract cosmopolitanism that lacks any real support, and perhaps without fully measuring the idealistic scope of his words, Nietzsche advocates erasing the attachment to the imagery of nationalism, scattered as it is with its marble cliffs and tempests of steel, landscapes that seek to stir

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<sup>175</sup> Wotling (1995: 327).

the most radical nihilism and the most ferocious destruction. This is especially advisable when allegiance to the fatherland involves suppressing all will toward identity, whenever a certain group or people does not coincide with the whole in every aspect. Indeed, there is a type of fault-line running through all of us both individually and collectively, to the point that it would be much more sensible to rise above this debate for the sake of loftier objectives. For once in Nietzsche's thought, the flight into patriotism gives impulse, as we will see, to the creation of a space in which human beings can at least breathe without burdensome prejudices. As even those who had turned their gaze to the *good Europeanism* fell victim to nationalistic temptations, for Nietzsche it was beneficial to advocate as much as possible a healthy, stateless militancy that would prevent certain collective ideals from being converted into a sort of Procrustean bed of existence. To supplement the previous passage from BGE, let us turn here to the section of *The Gay Science* titled "We, the homeless":

We "preserve" nothing, nor would we return to any past age; we are not at all "liberal", we do not labour for "progress", we do not need first to stop our ears to the song of the market-place and the sirens of the future –their song of "equal rights", "free society", "no longer either lords or slaves", does not allure us! We do not by any means think it desirable that the kingdom of righteousness and peace should be established on earth [...] We homeless ones are too diverse and mixed in race and descent for "modern men", and are consequently little tempted to participate in the falsified racial self-admiration and lewdness which at present display themselves in Germany, as signs of German sentiment, and which strike one as doubly false and unbecoming in the people with the "historical sense" (*The Gay Science*=GS § 377).

The "homeless" believe in the *present*, and not in the past or the future, which they cannot help but see as severely limiting to life itself. A belief in the special virtues of everything national is part of a perspective associated with the use of teleological devices that produce manipulated images of whatever they focus upon. This does not mean that history deserves to be condemned or removed from considerations regarding our access to a wide-ranging temporality. It is precisely this good "historical sense" which suggests that so-called "national differences"

be interpreted in terms of “distinct cultural levels” –as proposed in aphorism 323 of the second volume of *Human, All Too Human* (=HH): “Being a good German means to de-Germanize oneself”. In effect, Nietzsche understands culture, in this text especially, as a “transformation of convictions”, showing traces of something that might be seen as an antecedent of what decades later Adorno would refer to as “ethical violence”. This process is vividly manifested in images such as the following:

For when a nation advances and grows, it bursts the girdle previously given to it by its national outlook. When it remains stationary or declines, its soul is surrounded by a fresh girdle, and the crust, as it becomes harder and harder, builds a prison around, with walls growing ever higher. Hence if a nation has much that is firmly established, this is a sign that it wishes to petrify and would like to become nothing but a monument. This happened, from a definite date, in the case of Egypt. So he who is well-disposed towards the Germans may for his part consider how he may more and more grow out of what is German. The tendency to be un-German has therefore always been a mark of efficient members of our nation (HH, § 323).

Nations cease to be alive as such when they fall into an Egyptian-style hieratism, for it is then that they sacrifice what is best in themselves in the name of an “identity” that never materializes, but which resolves the doubts surrounding its existence by intensifying its authority. It is also characteristic for latecoming nations – such as Germany, to say nothing of Spain – to lack the tools necessary for diagnosing this pathological will to permanence, beneath which one suspects a clear rejection of contingency as the law of the land. In the words of Jose Luis Villacañas (which will allow us here to point out the debt that this paper owes to Plessner):

The belated nations have, as their principal symptom, the facility with which their populations and collectives rally together under absolutist banners, in consequence of their inability to live with an authority which is lesser, reversible, renewable, always aware of the functions of reason in order to orient themselves within the contingency of a time that has never the slightest contact with the absolute and which, precisely for this reason, upholds the singular so that it can administer the small non-transferable absolute of their lives however it sees fit, above all with peace and basic necessities assured, thus enabling the most absolute of all absolutes to be elaborated [...] (J. L.

Villacañas, “Epilogue. *La nación tardía* y nosotros. El sentido de un concepto” in Plessner, 2017: 237).

In the light of this evaluation one can observe the similarity between the anthropology of Plessner and Nietzsche’s analysis regarding the immaturity of peoples who take refuge in overly coherent narratives which do not respect the evolution demanded of all historical processes. It is especially such peoples who operate as collective subjects unaware of the “limits of community” and the narcissistic satisfactions that subjectivity finds in immature relationships with power, from whose seductions they lack the means to protect themselves. In such situations, the successive determinations of a people’s ethics present themselves not as evidence of an itinerary with no predetermined destiny or direction, but as indelible traces of an essence that must be defined and nurtured, and which form the axes of a nationalist political agenda. At the same time, given that nationalistic fantasies are usually associated with those historical contexts in which Nietzsche saw a widening of the territories covered by the democratic way of life, he felt it appropriate to focus on the deficiencies of this lifestyle. Thus, in BGE (§ 242) he affirmed that the democratization that haunted Europe like a ghost would engender “a type prepared for *slavery* in the most subtle sense of the term”, which would likewise oblige one to accept the fact that it was “an involuntary arrangement for the rearing of *tyrants*” (BGE, § 242), in homage to the traditional Hegelian dialectic of master and slave. It should be remembered, however, that this wave of democratization was an unequalled occasion for the unfolding of an increasingly fluid “physiological process”, through which the gradual liberation of human beings of a particular climate and station –of “every definite *milieu*”– explains “the appearance on the horizon of an essentially supra-national and nomadic type of human being, which, physiologically speaking, possesses as its typical defining feature the maximum amount of art and adaptive power” (BGE, § 242). The abandonment of “natural place” has as its consequence the uprooting of one’s own *habitus*, which, while promising admirable artistic and ethical achievements, constitutes a serious threat of destruction for those who have wilfully moulded themselves to this conscious non-belonging.

Few readers of Nietzsche have provided such a considerable echo of these pages as Hannah Arendt, who in the guise of the Rosa Luxemburg's correspondent in *Men in Dark Times*, would have the following to say about the price paid by stateless Jews after the totalitarianism of the Nazis, lacking a territory in which to build a home, a livelihood or a country:

[...] what only Nietzsche, as far as I know, has ever pointed out, namely, that the position and functions of the Jewish people in Europe predestined them to become the “good Europeans” *par excellence*. The Jewish middle classes of Paris and London, Berlin and Vienna, Warsaw and Moscow, were in fact neither cosmopolitan nor international, though the intellectuals among them thought of themselves in these terms. They were European, something that could be said of no other group. And this was not a matter of conviction; it was an objective fact. In other words, while the self-deception of assimilated Jews usually consisted in the mistaken belief that they were just as German as the Germans, just as French as the French, the self-deception of the intellectual Jews consisted in thinking that they had no “fatherland”, for their fatherland actually was Europe. There is, second, the fact that at least the East-European intelligentsia was multilingual – Rosa Luxemburg herself spoke Polish, Russian, German and French fluently and knew English and Italian very well. They never quite understood the importance of language barriers and why the slogan, “The fatherland of the working class is the Socialist movement”, should be so disastrously wrong precisely for the working classes. It is indeed more than a little disturbing that Rosa Luxemburg herself, with her acute sense of reality and strict avoidance of clichés, should not have heard what was wrong with the slogan on principle. A fatherland, after all, is first of all a “land”; an organization is not a country, not even metaphorically. There is indeed grim justice in the later transformation of the slogan, “The fatherland of the working class is Soviet Russia” – Russia was at least a “land” – which put an end to the utopian internationalism of this generation (Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*).

Arendt is focusing here on the risk resulting from the traditional Jewish disinterest in acquiring a solid social and civil status in the European nation-states. Far from embarking on that particular trajectory, they were a people characterized by their advocacy of new formulas for creating a civil pact that transcended differences in religion, culture and customs. The German soul, on the other hand, far from having a clear, orderly content, involved a great number of coordinates and tendencies,

fruit of the blending and crossbreeding typical of a “people of the centre” – of *Mitteleuropa* –, which proved to be unwieldy when taken as idealist guidelines. Figures as disparate as Kotzebue, Sand, Fichte, Jean Paul, Goethe... felt that they knew its specifics, but none was able to grasp its entirety:

The German soul is above all manifold, varied in its source, aggregated and super-imposed, rather than actually built: this is owing to its origin. A German who would embolden himself to assert: “Two souls, alas, dwell in my breast”, would make a bad guess at the truth, or, more correctly, he would come far short of the truth about the number of souls. As a people made up of the most extraordinary mixing and mingling of races, perhaps even with a preponderance of the pre-Aryan element as the “people of the centre” in every sense of the term, the Germans are more intangible, more ample, more contradictory, more unknown, more incalculable, more surprising, and even more terrifying than other peoples are to themselves: –they escape *definition*, and are thereby alone the despair of the French (BGE, § 244)

In effect, while there is no individual or narrative capable of conceiving the complete content of Germanness, it is on the other hand difficult to err in judging the German soul for its ability to incarnate a sort of baroque dialectical image, an almost allegorical essence predominated by galleries and passages, caves, hiding places and even dungeons, proper to “all that is obscure, evolving, crepuscular, damp, and shrouded” (BGE, § 244), a spiritual state symptomatic of a “disordered [...] physical economy” (BGE, § 244), that Nietzsche does not hesitate to articulate as an amalgamation that includes beer and German music. This permanent state of indetermination is what the German tends to view as the “depth” proper to a “*tiusche*” *Volk*, a deceptive image of the German people. Nationalistic self-absorption is perceived as a perversion of the spirit, as no population can know its own best characteristics (BGE, § 249). For there to be even the slightest reflection one must count on the Other. With regard to the contributions that Jews have made to European culture, Nietzsche does not let himself be carried away by any sort of idealization, but instead points out the conjugation of the infinite and the illusory, the same constellation that Carl Schmitt would dismiss summarily as “political romanticism”. In Nietzsche’s view, it is a question of the best and the worst, as from this

combination have arisen both the principles of Judeo-Christian morality and the decadence of the West:

What Europe owes to the Jews? –Many things, good and bad, and above all one thing of the nature both of the best and the worst: the grand style in morality, the fearfulness and majesty of infinite demands, of infinite significations, the whole Romanticism and sublimity of moral questionableness –and consequently just the most attractive, ensnaring, and exquisite element in those iridescences and allurements to life, in the aftersheen of which the sky of our European culture, its evening sky, now glows –perhaps glows out (BGE, § 250).

This text also denounces the inability of Germany to resolve the problem of the Jews,<sup>176</sup> a people that –as we read in § 205 of *The Dawn of Day*– felt that they had “crossed the Rubicon”, and “the only thing that remains for them is either to become masters of Europe or to lose Europe, as they once centuries ago lost Egypt” (*The Dawn of Day*, § 205). It is similarly argued that they had become accustomed to living in a state of permanent waiting, for the old Europe to fall into their hands like ripe fruit.

In the meantime, it is necessary for them to distinguish themselves in all departments of European distinction and to stand in the front rank: until they shall have advanced so far as to determine themselves what distinction shall mean. (*The Dawn of Day*, § 205).

History would be responsible for pushing aside this optimistic vision of the political future of Europe’s Jewish population, in which a key factor was the contrast between the factitious nature of the European nations, whose people – Germans in particular, as German society was incapable of assimilating its Jewish population – Nietzsche considered to have a deficit of strength and determination, and the fortitude of the Jewish people. Perhaps for this reason, the confused German soul would decide to transform its subordinate position with regard to an interior Other by

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<sup>176</sup> Regarding Nietzsche’s statements on the Jewish question, which have so often been twisted to fit a more clichéd interpretation, Félix Duque’s book *Los buenos europeos. Hacia una filosofía de la Europa contemporánea* will surely prove enlightening, especially part IV, “Nietzsche, ese ‘buen europeo’” (Duque, 2003: 95ss.).

distilling an intoxicating liquor of an intentionally nationalistic character:

That which is at present called a “nation” in Europe, and is really rather a *res facta* than *nata* (indeed, sometimes confusingly similar to a *res ficta et picta*), is in every case something evolving, young, easily displaced, and not yet a race, much less such a race *aere perrennus*, as the Jews are such “nations”. [...] It is certain that the Jews, if they desired –or if they were driven to it, as the anti-Semites seem to wish– *could* now have the ascendancy, nay, literally the supremacy, over Europe, that they are *not* working and planning for that end is equally certain. Meanwhile, they rather wish and desire, even somewhat importunately, to be insorbed and absorbed by Europe, they long to be finally settled, authorized, and respected somewhere, and wish to put an end to the nomadic life, to the “wandering Jew”; and one should certainly take account of this impulse and tendency, and *make advances* to it (it possibly betokens a mitigation of the Jewish instincts) for which purpose it would perhaps be useful and fair to banish the anti-Semitic bawlers out of the country (BGE, § 251).

This passage abounds in the sort of intimidation that would permeate the perception of the Jew by the German people, hindering the former’s useful integration. What should have been an earthly friendship gave way, in the best of cases, to a “stellar friendship” heralded by an earthly enmity,<sup>177</sup> a connection that was less than solid in terms of its immanence. Helmuth Plessner would address ideas similar to Nietzsche’s when he noted in *The Belated Nation; on the Political Seduction of the Bourgeois Spirit (1935-1959)* that, through a perverse type of mimesis, the German people, in their fear of foreignization, had developed characteristics attributed to the Jewish people, a tendency confirmed by “the fact that, although expressed in the biological terms of racial theorems and the science of heritage, they tried to assimilate the pre-Christian tribal mentality of their supposed adversary” (Plessner 2017: 200). The only thing achieved by this was an accentuation of the gap between Europe and the Jew, fomenting the emergence of antisemitic patterns. From this moment, the blurriness of the so-called German “identity” would be replaced by a master-slave dialectic for which it became crucial to prove the strength of Germany’s roots so as

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<sup>177</sup> Vd. GS § 279.



to compete against the Jewish people in the sphere of history and traditional authority. The seduction of the middle classes by these pseudo-spiritual constructs would add the anthropological supplement necessary to give impetus to the programmatic guidelines of an antisemitic ideology. In Nietzsche's view, France, with its capacity for cultural synthesis, provided a counter-figure to nations such as Great Britain, and certainly to the impotent and embittered Germany we have just described. Bizet's *Carmen* was seen in this context as a combination of North and South, in which both could discover each other reciprocally as a novelty and a source of renewed admiration. This was not meant to satisfy any teleological objective; rather, it circulated historically in accordance with the rhythm of life and the difference it offered, without the use of outdated categories:

[I]n the French character there is a successful half-way synthesis of the North and South, which makes them comprehend many things, and enjoins upon them other things, which an Englishman can never comprehend [...]. There is also still in France a pre-understanding and ready welcome for those rarer and rarely gratified men, who are too comprehensive to find satisfaction in any kind of fatherlandism, and know how to love the South when in the North and the North when in the South – the born Midlanders, the “good Europeans”. For them *Bizet* has made music, this latest genius, who has seen a new beauty and seduction–, who has discovered a piece of the *south in music*. (BGE, § 254).

It should be remembered that Nietzsche would not live to see the fall of this European laboratory of integration, the last bastion of Europe's cultural potential, into antisemitic barbarity, the greatest indicator of which was the Dreyfuss case (1894-1906). In any event, it was not the French example that stands out among the myopia and pragmatic clumsiness of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century European politicians, transitional figures – “*d’entreacte*” – bent on disaggregation, whom Nietzsche saw as primarily responsible for the long delay in the project of unifying Europe. The will toward union was, however, received with sense and sensibility by the Jewish population of Europe, that which in 1916 the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen – in his work *Germanness and Judaism* – would refer to as authentically German and European. At the end of the section of *Beyond Good and Evil* that we have been commenting on

here, there reappears the cultural and political synthesis extolled in its French model as a sort of treasure zealously preserved in the fragile silhouettes of “the more profound and large-minded men of this century”, European cosmopolitans at heart, to whom only age or weariness would be capable of leading to the wellspring of patriotism:

Owing to the morbid estrangement which the nationality-craze has induced and still induces among the nations of Europe, owing also to the short-sighted and hasty-handed politicians, who with the help of this craze, are at present in power, and do not suspect to what extent the disintegrating policy they pursue must necessarily be only an interlude policy –owing to all this and much else that is altogether unmentionable at present, the most unmistakable signs that *Europe wishes to be one*, are now overlooked, or arbitrarily and falsely misinterpreted. With all the more profound and large-minded men of this century, the real general tendency of the mysterious labour of their souls was to prepare the way for that new *synthesis*, and tentatively to anticipate the European of the future; only in their simulations, or in their weaker moments, in old age perhaps, did they belong to the “fatherlands” –they only rested from themselves when they became “patriots” (BGE, § 256).

The roster of illustrious 19<sup>th</sup>-century figures that Nietzsche was referring to included Napoleon, Goethe, Beethoven, Stendhal, Heine, Schopenhauer and Wagner. All of these had returned from the path toward the great synthesis focused on the notion of “fatherland” like an old man trying to recall the lullabies his wetnurse sang to him as an infant. Seeking the fatherland as a therapy for the failures of the soul was a symptom of weakness and boredom with regard to the wealth of possibilities that the present always has to offer. Nietzsche believed that there was something profoundly childish, characteristic of one that has grown old but is unaware of his real age, in the circumlocutions that lead to an obsession with one’s own nation. At this point, it seems fitting to revisit the interrogatives formulated by Félix Duque more than ten years ago in his essay *The Good Europeans; towards a Philosophy of Contemporary Europe*, one of which is the great unknown of a relationship with the Other that is not reduced to a desert of discrepancies and distinctions:

It would be useless –and undesirable– to question the validity and applicability of Nietzschean doctrines, as if these constituted something like

a recipe for producing “good Europeans”. We can, we must, learn to hold and “trim” with sobriety Nietzsche’s exaggerations, which are often so visceral. In any case, this same viscosity is admirable when it is turned against *nationalistic barbarity*, against the *patrioteering of the State*. His acumen in unravelling the hidden mechanisms [...] behind the rhetoric –somewhere between sentimental and bellicose– of the *flamantes* fatherlands of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whose governments –with their functionaries, academics and intellectuals– invented a mythical past in the name of which one must either kill or deserve the sentence of death. Admirable as well is his repudiation of racism in general and antisemitism in particular. It seems doubtful to me, however, that dominion over the Earth (for all that this *lordship* consists of freedom-based cultural creations offered as channels of orientation for “democratic” foundations) can be brought into conciliation with the beautiful, disquieting doctrine of *stellar friendship*. Is it perhaps possible that from solidarity there can arise, *a sensu contrario*, the feeling of a vitalizing *foreignness*, proper to distinguished individuals? Is it possible that compassion for one’s neighbour might be transformed into a reverential fear, a type of astonishment with regard to the close or distant friend? Such questions lie at the heart of the destiny of this small arm of land that is determined not to be Asian (Duque, 2003: 121).

I feel it is relevant to conclude this reading of the essay “Peoples and Countries” by calling attention to the possibilities of production and respect for differences that one might expect from the type of integration that results from the great European synthesis. The perspective that Nietzsche assumed for projecting the best face of this new Europe was based on a reading and interpretation that were outside the usual clichés, and therefore less likely to become products of mass usage. The league of “good Europeans” was made up of intellectuals, artists, readers and authors – and here we might recall the names listed above – who were noted in relation to the plural, blended culture to which they were heir, and to whose later transformation they would continue to contribute. As we may infer from the words of Félix Duque, it is doubtful that a given community of readers, magnificently represented by the dispersed Jewish people, would have the necessary articulation to drive a program of political organization, just as it is doubtful that the production of an aesthetic sensibility could overcome the channels by which evil, with all of its destructive power and

immense burden of injustice, threatens to cover the world like a loathsome fungus.

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The book series *Rethinking society. Individuals, Culture and Migration* publishes original papers, monographs, book notes and reviews of outstanding scientific quality on any cultural, historical, educational, philosophical, social and biomedical subject. Texts may be written in English, German, Spanish, French, Italian or Portuguese.

Submitted manuscripts must not have been previously published or be in the process of being published. After its publication in *Rethinking society. Individuals, Culture and Migration* authors can reproduce the text indicating a place of original publication. The manuscripts must be presented so as to ensure anonymity during the selection process. The evaluation of a manuscript will be provided by two external reviewers. If it has been accepted, the final proof will be sent to the author that must be corrected within a maximum period of six weeks.

Articles will not have less than 10.000 characters or more than 60.000 (15-30 pages). Monographs may be 200-300 pages long, book notes of three and reviews of five pages. The book notes and reviews will be about books published in the last five years.

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Short quotations (three lines) will be included in the body of the text in quotation marks (“ ”), long quotations will be indented and single-spaced with an 11-point font size.



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**Books:**

- *in case of one author:*

Eco, U. (2000), *Semiótica y filosofía del lenguaje*, Barcelona, Lumen.

- *in case of more than one author:*

Lacoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980), *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press.

- *chapter of book:*

Cortés-Ramírez, E., Gómez Alonso, J.C. (2020), “Edward W. Said (1935-2003) or the Critic towards the Orient: The Art of Refurbishing the Conflict through Cultural Rhetoric”, in Vladimer Luarsabishvili (ed.), *Out of the Prison of Memory. Nations and Future*, Tbilisi, New Vision University Press, pp. 84-124.

- *edition of book:*

Rodríguez López, B., Sánchez Madrid, N., Zaharijević, A. (eds.) (2021), *Rethinking vulnerability and exclusión. Historical and critical essays*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

**Articles:**

Albaladejo, T. (2019), “European crisis, fragmentation and cohesion: The contribution of ectopic literature to Europeaness”, *Journal of European Studies*, 49, pp. 394-409.