



philosophica

[305]

philosophica

serie arancio

diretta da Alfonso M. Iacono

comitato scientifico

Stefano Petrucciani, Manlio Iofrida

Gianluca Bocchi, Giuliano Campioni

Simonetta Bassi, Giovanni Paoletti, Alessandro Pagnini

Tyrants at Work
Philosophy and Politics in
Alexandre Kojève

Edited by
Marco Filoni and Massimo Palma



Edizioni ETS



www.edizioniets.com



Attribuzione - Non Commerciale 4.0 Internazionale
CC BY-NC 4.0

© Copyright 2024
Edizioni ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com
www.edizioniets.com

Distribuzione
Messaggerie Libri SPA
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

Promozione
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN 978-884676974-9
ISSN 2420-9198

PREFACE

(Free) Time is a Tyrant
En guise d'introduction (*again*)

«Simonides the poet came once upon a time to Hiero the tyrant. After both had found leisure, Simonides said...». This is how the dialogue *Hiero or Tyrannicus* by Xenophon begins, with a famous expression. Starting from this dialogue, between 1948 and 1954, Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève engage in a polite but clear dispute. From this opening, a fact emerges. Both the poet and the tyrant work. It is only in a rare moment of *scholè*, of leisure time, that Simonides and Hiero have the time and opportunity to engage, to discuss wisdom and power, philosophy and politics.

This time, this opportunity, is what allowed a bunch of scholars to meet in Rome in May 2023 at Link University and discuss Alexandre Kojève for two days. They delved into the many facets of his philosophical discourse, the unsaid and implications of his political thought, his actions, strategies, and practical performances. Meanwhile, unfortunately, many tyrants were at work – and so did the masters of war.

This volume collects, revised and reworked, the contributions from those two days in May. At the heart of it all is a precise and shared intention: to restore the depth and contradictions – theoretical and biographical, political and speculative – of an author who encapsulates the substance and surface of the twentieth century. An author who wrote a lot but published very little. A philosopher who was a bureaucrat, a partisan who became a Vichy advisor, stimulating and being influenced by some of the best minds of his century, not shying away from the worst. A thinker who staunchly defended the idea that both Simonides and Hiero, the tyrant and his advisor, should work. Perhaps because in the end there was a space similar to that of the beginning: a time freed from labour, a realm of freedom from being tyrannized by work. But if everything in Kojève is complicated, this thought of an ultimately non-tyrannical and not even human end is even more so. An idea, among other things, generated on Sundays, the only day when the functionary Alexandre Kojève did not work. And he wrote books destined for posthumous discoveries, as well as directing action.

Kojève signed only two books with his name on the cover in his lifetime: one is very famous – the Hegelian seminar of the Thirties, compiled by Raymond Queneau –, the other one appeared just before he died – the beginning of a historiographical project on pagan philosophy. Alongside some articles, some reviews which were published in very different places, and many working notes known only to insiders, there are thousands of pages destined for oblivion or research. And research, after so much Kojévian mythology, has recently opened

up. Many have begun to delve into archives, translate unpublished works, and seek new sources.

Many of the contributions in this book start from this need: to study the entire corpus of Kojève, combining hermeneutical and philological approaches, reconstructing the biographical path with an investigation of intellectual alliances and hostilities. It is necessary to read the unpublished works (especially the long manuscript known so far as *Sofia*) together with the posthumous treaties, the passages from the always cited *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* with administrative documents. To reveal inconsistencies along with obsessions. The result is an even more complicated profile, a crystal of twentieth-century history, a crossroads between East and West at the height of totalitarianism and the Cold War, when a man floated wisely on the surface of the Iron Curtain, perhaps protected, perhaps very clever, certainly in control of what he could say, what he could make understood. At the border between public writing and private provocation.

The volume is divided into two sections: the first, *Wisdom Doesn't Work. Philosophy and Idleness*, contains contributions on the metaphysical perspective of wisdom, idleness, and the humour that characterizes it. The second, *Working for Tyrants. Politics and Thinking Politics*, brings together essays on Kojève's political thought and action, his political friendships and enmities.

The reader will find essays in English, in French, some quotations in German, titles in Russian or Hebrew. Kojève was a man who spoke and thought in many languages – there is no need to reduce his reception to a single one.

Our thanks go to all those who participated for their scientific and personal contribution.

Ce n'est qu'un début.

Marco Filoni and Massimo Palma
December 2023

PART I

WISDOM DOESN'T WORK
PHILOSOPHY AND IDLENESS

NOTES ON ALEXANDRE KOJÈVE,
FROM ATHEISM TO THE «AESTHETIZATION OF TRUTH»

Elettra Stimilli

In the *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Alexandre Kojève interprets Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the narration of the origin of human being. In a letter to Kojève in 1955 Schmitt clarifies that everything that Kojève does with Hegel's is nothing but an «atheistic anthropology»¹. Starting from this definition, my aim is to go back to the origins of this atheism. That is: in the first part of my paper I will focus on the Kojève's text on *Atheism*. Then, I will face his famous interpretation of Hegel.

If Kojève's lectures on the *Phenomenology* could be interpreted as an atheistic anthropology, as stated by Schmitt, it's crucial to focus the text on atheism he wrote in Russia in 1931 and published in French translation only in 1998, three decades after the author's death. Marco Filoni and I edited the Italian translation published in 2008.

According to Kojève, atheism is a philosophical problem and not simply a secular response to the religious problems. The denial of God's existence does not come from a pacified condition, from the silence on the religious problem. Rather, it faces the very question on negation which essentially characterizes human life.

The text on atheism is influenced by the theology inherited from Russian philosophers and from the Oriental studies. But also the impact of Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenological reflections is crucial in Kojève's work.

I refer, for example, to the public lecture given by Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiburg on 29 July 1929, which was published many years later with the title *Was ist Metaphysik?*, but that was already well known in the Thirties. The fundamental philosophical question in this text is precisely the problem of negative, the «nothing» which is more original than 'not' as logical negation.

Heidegger's text does not address the problem of atheism. On the contrary, he refers to the biblical doctrine of the creation from nothing, beginning so a dialogue with theology. But also others fields of research were involved in this discussion. In the same year Alexandre Kojève writes *Atheism*, Rudolf Carnap takes part in the discussion criticizing the way Heidegger introduces the noun 'Nothing' into his discourse. From Carnap's point of view, the entire Prolusion is a classic example of a meaningless metaphysical discourse.

¹ «Everything crucial appears on page 215 of your *Introduction a la lecture de Hegel*». Here Kojève says: «Briefly, Man who seeks to understand himself thoroughly and completely as Spirit cannot satisfy himself except with an atheistic anthropology» (*Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, Gallimard, Paris 1968, p. 215). Cf. the letter of May 9, 1955, in Kojève – Schmitt (1955-1960: 95).

I think that Kojève's text on *Atheism* constitutes a sort of close dialogue with Heidegger's Freiburg Proclusion. It is not by chance that he quotes this text in some key passages. The atheist denial of the God's existence reveals the question of nothing, so crucial in the Heidegger's Proclusion.

In order to understand the philosophical approach to atheism proposed by Kojève, it is fundamental to focus on the perspective of the pre-categorical givenness of the categorical forms, the pre-categorical given first elaborated by Husserl and then taken up by Heidegger. According to Husserl, the logical form of judgement has a pre-logical foundation, which is «what is originally given» (§ 24, *Ideen*, I). This fundamental issue posed by Husserl in phenomenological terms was taken up and translated by Heidegger in ontological terms. In *What is Metaphysics?*, Heidegger affirms that not only being, but also nothing is originally given and not simply constructed in a logical judgement.

Starting from this perspective, Kojève analyses atheism focusing on the ontological truth of the atheist's position, albeit contradictory from a logical point of view. The atheist denies the existence of God and asserts that beyond the world there is nothing. The paradox of this position lies in the fact that, although the nothing does not exist from his point of view and therefore cannot be given as an object, it is expressed, or rather its givenness is expressed in the absence of givenness.

Then, what is at stake in the atheist's position, is not just the rejection of the divine, but something even more problematic: that is, the paradoxical and constitutive possibility of the human being to reveal the presence of what is absent. This givenness of nothing is a 'fact'.

Kojève's interpretation of atheism is developed from an anthropological point of view. Atheism is not an animal condition. It originates as human problem or, rather, it is at the origin of homination.

The anthropological assumption at issue in atheism is not about what human beings are, but about the origin of the human experience of negativity: the negative from which the atheist can assert that beyond the world nothing is given.

According to Kojève, the first human experience of negative is the experience of death, expressed through the mood of the fear for one's own end. If human beings were able to have an unambiguous animal-like defense reaction in face of death, they could not be atheists, nor could they express their condition in the different ways allowed by the human language. There is not a single way to express the fear of death through human language, nor there is a unique name that can simply describe the animal cry. The human word can only replace the animal cry. This substitution is like a leap into the void, into that nothing that characterizes the atheist experience and, more originally, the human life.

In this sense, the givenness of nothing, from which Kojève's reflection on atheism starts – that is, the fact that beyond the world nothing is given –, is not simply an absence of the given, a substantial nothing, so to speak. The experience of the atheist, that takes shape in the givenness of an absence, brings to light the constitutive and paradoxical possibility at the origin of the human being: the possibility to reveal the presence of the absent.

This is the question Kojève addresses also in his lectures on Hegel. In his lectures at the École pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, which took place from 1933 to 1939, Kojève not only read the *Phenomenology of the Spirit* as a modern narration on the origin of human beings; but also – as Carl Schmitt argues – in terms of an ‘atheistic anthropology’ underlying Hegelian Science. In this sense, what is at stake in Hegelian *Phenomenology* is not the deification of human being in absolute knowledge, which would follow the death of God; but rather the human finitude without God.

According to Kojève, this condition is connected to the obscure drives that human beings share with animals, but which become anthropogenic, in as much as they do not find satisfaction in the attainment of what they need. Because they are desires, desires for desires, desires for nothing.

The «desire of desire» as desire for nothing reveals the constitutive and paradoxical possibility that lies at the origin of the human being, namely the possibility to express the presence of what is absent, connected to the «givenness of nothing» inherent to the experience of the atheist. In the case of anthropogenic desire, it is at stake the animal, «internal» to human being, in the other case it is at stake what is «external», though denied as divine.

An ontological lack seems to be at the origin of the human species, a gap, an absence to be filled. This, after all, is the most famous interpretation of Kojève’s concept of desire. But this lack appears also as an opening in so much it is not only an absence, but the presence of an absence.

According to Kojève’s reading of Hegel, this presence of an absence is inscribed in the nature of human desire as transformation of the biological plane common to living beings through a movement that converts the desired into another desire – not a thing, but the very existence of another in the absent form of his desiring. This implies a constitutive sociality of human reality that moves from the plurality of desires. This sociality is fundamentally associated with a conflictual tension specific of human beings as «political animals».

According to Kojève, which reads Hegel, human desire is a ‘desire for recognition’ and ‘politics’ is the concrete situation, in which the other arises as the real possibility of my negation; that for which to risk life in view of a self-determination. It is the life and death struggle, the struggle for recognition: according to Kojève, a «struggle for pure prestige». It is the Hegelian Master and Slave dialectic at the core of the Kojévian reading of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. An existential foundation of polemicity inherent in social relations characterizes his interpretation and shows a deep affinity with Schmitt’s definition of the «political» expressed in the famous distinction of friend and enemy.

The point for me here is that the short-circuit between desire and death, that characterizes his Hegel interpretation, is also present in the text on *Atheism*. Here, death as the original experience of human finiteness and therefore as the givenness of nothing and denial of God, is not the simple end of human existence, but potentially always also present as latent ‘possibility of mutual murder’. In the Hegelian anthropogenic framework of the struggle outlined by Kojève, this latent destructibility is rooted in the antinomian structure of desire, which characterizes the Hegelian concept of History and of modern institution of the State.

Within this framework, however, an aspect emerges that should not be underestimated. The desire of desire does not end in the conflictual search for a recognized identification, because the nothing from which it originates exceeds the closed space of recognition circumscribed in the agonistic area. It constitutes, rather, its condition of possibility. And then how to interpret the end of history at the heart of the Kojève's perspective? As it is well known, in Kojève's reading, at the end of history, when human desire is fully and definitively satisfied, «post-historical animals of the species *Homo sapiens*» appear. They become content with an immediate enjoyment, they are content with the enjoyment of the well-being to which the globalized state has accustomed them, transforming the right to kill, which is at the origin of recognition characteristic of the classical sovereign power, into a biopolitical power – as we would say today – the power to let live.

As it is well known, the Kojévian paradigm has had some success in the so-called postmodern era especially between ex-Communist who became disillusioned with Marxism or between liberal conservationists, often to confirm the end of any possible change in a totally self-centered view of the so-called Global North.

Among the participants to such discussion, there is Jacob Taubes, the original interlocutor of Carl Schmitt, which proposes an eccentric and unaligned position. Taubes had invited Kojève to Berlin in 1967 at the glowing Freie Universität during the student movement's protests. As Taubes notes in the provocative story of his relationship with Carl Schmitt, Kojève comes to Berlin from Peking and, when he proposed him to book his return trip, he said to have the intention to go to Plettenberg by Schmitt, because there is no one else in Germany worth talking to. This is the story.

In the summer semester of 1982, Taubes organizes a seminar on «The Aesthetics in Posthistory». The text of the seminar appears posthumously in a *Festschrift* for Margherita von Brentano (Taubes 1982). The title of this text is *The Aesthetization of Truth in Post-histoire*.

The interruption of the progress of history, the interruption of history as progress, is at the core of the perspective of the end of history. This perspective takes seriousness out of history, leaving a nihilistic conception of life: that is, an aesthetization of truth, in Taubes' words. Taubes outlines the perspective of the end of history revealing how truth, meaning, and purpose have never been intrinsic to the world and to history. They have always been human creations – works of art. Tracing the development of this idea from Nietzsche to Heidegger, Taubes focuses on the aesthetic conception of the world that Kojève, in the famous note added to the text in 1962, attributed to the Japanese and saw as a possible future for all.

Now, in conclusion, my question is: is the aesthetization of truth still our experience today? We cannot deny that we are still in the age of the «society of the spectacle», to use another famous expression. But, can we still talk about the end of history? Many events seem to disprove this, not last the wars going on. And then how could we interpret this contradiction?

Perhaps, on one side, we can say that aesthetization of truth is still our experience (just think of the use of new technologies related to Artificial

Intelligence); on the other site, however, something new emerges, something that does not end in the end of history. It seems to me that what is at the end, today, is the idea of a unique and one directional history, which characterizes the Hegelian perspective. Today, what definitely emerged as simulacrum, as a bad work of art is the history as unique narration of the events. Despite all difficulties, I think that the time is ripe for different histories and different narrations. Finally the opacity that, according to Kojève, characterizes the capacity of negation at the origin of human condition, is no longer conceived as a lack to be filled. Maybe such opacity begins to find new forms of expression, the expression of new voices, the voices of the excluded from the one dominant modern narration of history. So I hope at least.

References

- Kojève, A. (1962²), *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel. Leçons sur la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit professées de 1933 à 1939 à l'École des Hautes Études, réunies et publiées par Raymond Queneau*, Gallimard, Paris.
- Kojève, A. (1998), *L'Athéisme*, Gallimard, Paris.
- Kojève, A. – Schmitt, C. (1955-1960), *Correspondence*, «Interpretation», trans. Erik De Vries, Fall 2001, vol. 29, pp. 91-115.
- Taubes, J. (1982), *Ästhetisierung der Wahrheit im Posthistoire*, in *Apokalypse und Politik. Aufsätze, Kritiken und kleinere Schriften*, ed. by Martin Tremml and Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink, Brill, Berlin 2017, pp. 308-317.

CONTENTS

- (Free) Time is a Tyrant. *En guise d'introduction* (again)
Marco Filoni, Massimo Palma 5

Part I

Wisdom Doesn't Work. Philosophy and Idleness

- Out of Work: Kojève's Philosophy of Inoperativity
Isabel Jacobs 9
- Kojève's Concept of Recognition.
From Ontology to Politics, and Back
Ovidiu Stanciu 23
- Notes on Alexandre Kojève, from Atheism to
the «Aesthetization of Truth»
Elettra Stimilli 33
- Les malheurs de la Sophia:
sagesse et humour chez Alexandre Kojève
Dimitri Tokarev 39
- The Intrusion of Play into Time.
Alexandre Kojève's Ludic Philosophy of History
Danilo Scholz 47

Part II

Working for Tyrants. Politics and Thinking Politics

- Kojève's Case for a Multipolar World
Kyle Moore 65

Globalization and Politics from Alexandre Kojève to Eric Weil <i>Edoardo Raimondi</i>	75
Kojève's Post-Communal Politics <i>Jorge Varela</i>	87
Corollaries to the New Nomos. Marginalia to the Kojève-Schmitt Controversy <i>Massimo Palma</i>	95
L'«autorité du père» en question dans la philosophie de Kojève <i>Rambert Nicolas</i>	105
Posthumous Chronicles of Philosophy, Politics, and Espionage. Alexandre Kojève and the KGB <i>Marco Filoni</i>	127

Appendix

La philosophie e le Parti Communiste (1929)

Introduction. Entre héritage russe et texte programmatique <i>Rambert Nicolas</i>	139
La philosophie et le Parti Communiste <i>Alexandre Kojève</i>	151
About the contributors	159

Edizioni ETS

Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa

info@edizioniets.com - www.edizioniets.com

Finito di stampare nel mese di maggio 2024