

CRISES AND REVOLUTIONS PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES TO THEIR INTERDEPENDENCE IN THE CLASSIC WORK OF ROUSSEAU, KANT, TOCQUEVILLE, CASSIRER AND ARENDT¹

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ABSTRACT

It is the sole topic of conversation throughout Europe. An economic crisis with an underlying crisis of values is devastating everything, while politics has nothing to say. An attempt was made to base the European Union on a single currency, and the resulting traders' Europe prevented the desired political project from bearing fruit. Instead of comparing different legal systems before creating a constitution for citizens, we have seen the birth of a new "idolatry" that is connected with a perverse fatalism. Only macroeconomic figures are considered to be important, while citizens have to suffer because of the actions of a few unscrupulous people who worship profit as well as having legalised usury. Given this situation it is necessary to take all types of precaution, and that is why it is a good idea to see what classical authors have to say. The Enlightenment seems to be a failed project that urgently needs to be restarted. It may be enormously useful to re-read Rousseau, as Cassirer did during the rise of Nazism so that it could be fought on the basis of the history of ideas. His discourse on inequality could not be more relevant now. And the same consideration applies to the genealogical study of the French revolution by Tocqueville. That was the revolution par excellence which Kant described as a symbol of the moral progress of mankind.

Keywords: Crisis. Revolution Philosophical. Rousseau. Kant. Tocqueville. Cassirer. Arendt.

'Despotism [...] takes away from citizens all common feeling, [...] all occasion for common action. It walls them up inside their private lives. They already tend to keep themselves apart from one another: despotism isolates them; it chills their relations; it freezes them. In these kinds of societies, where nothing is fixed, everyone is constantly tormented by the fear of falling and by the ambition to rise. Money [...] transform [s] the status of individuals, [...] Thus, there is virtually no one who is not constantly compelled to make desperate efforts to keep it or to make it. The desire to enrich oneself at any price, the preference for business, the love of profit, the search for material pleasure and comfort are therefore the most widespread desires. [...] Despotism alone can furnish these passions with the secrecy and shadow which make greed feel at home, and let it reap its dishonest profits despite dishonour.'
(Alexis de Tocqueville, Preface to *The Old Regime and the Revolution*).

Fritz Lang's "Moloch" in his film "Metropoli and the perverse consequences of economic idolatry

Despite being a great admirer of Adam Smith (whose celebrated "invisible hand" watches over the smooth running of the markets while everyone pursues their own interests), Immanuel Kant distrusted what he himself called the *mercantile spirit*. In the *Anthropology* he describes as something "unsociable in itself" (Anth, AA 07: 315n.), that same "mercantile spirit" which his third *Critique* declares not very favourable to civil rights, since "the mere

commercial spirit, and with it abject greed, accustoms the people to think in a debased way” (KU, AA 05: 263). In *Towards Perpetual Peace* he says, “Sooner or later, the commercial spirit will take control of all peoples”, adding that “the power of money is the most reliable of all powers – *or means* – [my italics] under the power of the State” (ZeF, AA 08: 368).

It would be interesting to hear Kant’s opinion of the present situation in Europe, where usury obeys its own rules and where money, far from being an instrument of the State for providing essential services to its citizens, is rather an end in itself and has become a seemingly irresistible power. This power threatens to destroy the States themselves, setting up a new idolatry full of absurd superstitions which, of course, benefits only a small new priestly caste that uses its dogma to subjugate the rest of society. This type of omnipresent and all-powerful “economy” has become a new and terrifying Moloch at whose altar the future well-being of citizens is sacrificed, just as new-born babies were sacrificed to the mythical Phoenician deity or, even more pertinently, just as the brilliant film-maker Fritz Lang’s monstrous Moloch gobbles down the workers in his legendary film *Metropolis*³ to keep the machinery working. I recommend you to look again at those images and to reflect on how our single currency, the sacrosanct Euro, is swallowing its supposed beneficiaries, who are condemned to suffer growing penalties and sacrifices in order to maintain it.

Cassirer and his fight against Nazism from the perspective from the perspective of a European history of ideas

In my opinion, the political project of the European Union has failed spectacularly. We can no longer even refer to the famous “Europe of merchants”, because they too have ceased to have any role, given that neither commerce nor the financial speculation of the stock-market casinos matters any longer. Far from fostering a European cultural identity that would take full advantage of its linguistic plurality and explore the common cultural archetypes of Europe’s inhabitants (perhaps with less emphasis on religion and the Christian heritage and more on the artistic, literary, scientific and philosophical legacy shared in some way by all Europeans), what we are witnessing is an outbreak of nationalism tinged by the economic situation of this or that country. The north of Europe cannot continue to pay for what they call the “South’s *fiesta*” – so goes the legend. Now, instead of praise for the healthful Mediterranean diet, we hear only about the inherent idleness of those who think only of *fiesta* and *siesta*.

For example, by the mere fact of sharing a national identity and a corresponding passport, all Greek citizens are denigrated for having enjoyed scandalous privileges (as if these could be shared out proportionately), when in reality they are being asked to pay for the embezzlement of certain reckless managers who have acted with utter impunity both in the public and private sectors. An attempt is being made to persuade the Spanish people that, by the mere fact of being Spanish, we have been living beyond our means, and that we must now shore up a banking system ruined by unscrupulous management, instead of analysing the deep roots of the so-called “housing bubble” and following the trail of vanished money that is now demanded from all tax-payers, who were not present when the colossal profits made by some were being handed out.

It never harms to re-read certain classics of thought; and sometimes it is indispensable to do so. This is what Cassirer, for example, understood when he wished to combat the barbarity of Nazi totalitarianism and decided to use the history of ideas as a form of political teaching. Jean Starobinski makes us consider this overlooked facet of Cassirer with these words: ‘To present the tableau of the European Enlightenment at a time when the ideas of Nazism had a free rein, to rediscover in Rousseau the thought that inspired Kant, Goethe and the republican idea, meant turning inside out the myths that drove the masses at that time and which saw philosophers and historians in the universities eager to propagate them’.⁴ Certainly, Cassirer wanted to confront the appalling politics of his time with the valuable and immortal ideas that had budded in Europe in the 18th century.

The bleak topicality of Rousseau’s reflections on inequality

I would like to join Cassirer and invite you to read some passages from Rousseau’s work, bearing in mind the present rules of the game they wish to impose on us with the pretext of an economic crisis whose chief instigators seek to attribute to an unswerving and impersonal destiny. ‘Under bad governments,’ we read in *The Social Contract*, ‘equality does not cease to be apparent and illusory, serving only to maintain the poor in misery and the rich in usurpation.’ Rousseau adds, ‘The laws are always useful for those who have and harmful for those who have not, so that the social state is beneficial for men as long as everyone possesses something and no one has too much of anything’.⁵ In his *Political Fragments*, Rousseau writes as follows: ‘As soon as a man is compared to others, he necessarily becomes their enemy, because then everyone, desiring in his heart to be the most powerful, the

happiest, the richest, cannot help but see anyone else as a secret enemy who, harbouring this same project in himself, becomes an obstacle to the achievement of this goal'.⁶ All this produces artificial and superfluous needs that drive us to possess more and more – at the cost of others, of course. 'The usurpations of the rich, the banditry of the poor, the frantic passions of everyone smother natural pity and make men greedy, ambitious and disloyal.' – Thus Rousseau passes judgment in his *Discourse on Inequality*.⁷

The social contract between rich and poor is sealed in a staggeringly topical way, amid the *economic* crisis that is currently undermining the pillars of the European welfare state, and yields to the implacable logic of inordinate and unjustifiable profits. As Rousseau writes, 'You need me because I am rich and you are poor. I shall allow you to have the honour of serving me, on condition that you give me the little you have left for taking the trouble to give you orders'.⁸ 'Money is the seed of money, and the first Euro [the first *pistole*] is sometimes harder to earn than the second million'. Rousseau points out that usually 'the wealth of a nation promotes the opulence of a few private individuals to the detriment of the public and the treasure of millionaires increases the citizens' misery'.⁹ Going a step further in his merciless analysis, Rousseau maintains that the rich and powerful 'only appreciate the things they enjoy as long as others are deprived of them and, without changing their status, would cease to be happy if the people ceased to be miserable'.¹⁰ A solid conviction underlies this implacable analysis of Rousseau's, which he expresses in his *Confessions*: 'I realised that everything depended radically on politics and that no people would be anything but what its government made it'.¹¹

Kantian prescriptions from the Enlightenment for difficult times

In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant underlines that dependence with words which, by the way, describe current members of certain European governments to a tee. Political leaders, says Kant, 'find it very easy to predetermine the decline and utter disintegration of the state since they themselves are the authors of that destiny. Insofar as leaders of the people overwhelm their constitution with so many burdens that the State is rendered incapable of subsisting by itself. Their stubborn persistence in maintaining a constitution devised by themselves, and which is clearly unsustainable, allows them to predict that outcome with absolute infallibility'.¹² Sometimes, when referring to political leaders, Kant's rhetoric even surpasses that of Rousseau himself. Here is an example: 'Although man is merely a trifle for

omnipotent nature - and the leaders of his own species regard him as insignificant and treat him as such, exploiting him like an animal, using him as a mere tool for their purposes or pitting him against others in their wars so that men kill each other – this is not a trifle, but rather the subversion of the *final end* of our universe'.¹³

Even a text as apparently far removed from political reflections as the *Critique of Judgment* contains significant clues to Kant's political thought, as Hannah Arendt made clear. She invites us to consider, for example, paragraph 40 of the third *Critique*, where Kant speaks of a communal sense, defining it as a faculty of judgment 'that takes account of the merely possible rather than the actual judgment of others, thus putting ourselves in the place of any other man. [...] In itself there is nothing more natural than to abstract from stimulus and emotion, when seeking a judgment that is to serve as a universal rule'.¹⁴ Arendt considers the principles Kant sets out in this paragraph to be fundamental to our political life. These are: 1) to think for oneself; 2) to think by putting oneself in the place of any other person; 3) to think always in agreement with oneself. The first is the maxim of the mode of thinking *free of prejudice*; the second is the mode of thinking *broadly*; the third is the mode of thinking *consecutively*. The broad mode of thinking is opposed to the "narrowness of gaze", rising above the private and subjective conditions of judgment and reflecting from a universal and cosmopolitan viewpoint.

The despotism that Tocqueville discerned

These Kantian prescriptions recommending cosmopolitanism and favouring an Enlightenment that encourages us always to take others into account when we think and, of course, to think for ourselves without the aid of another paternalistic vocational tutor, fit an age such as ours like a glove. In these times, it is unquestionably useful to bear in mind the etymological sense of the word "crisis" and to subject whatever is happening to a thoughtful critique. In this way we may judge this new dogma that wish to impose themselves upon us as if they constituted something resembling a new religion, whose only idol is money. However, this money is not the key to a system of production that generates wealth, employment, goods and services, but rather the absurd goal of a speculative game in which a pitiless reverence attends the enrichment of the few, an exclusive minority, at the cost of impoverishing the vast majority, who see their most fundamental rights diminished along with hard-won social advances obtained during the last century.

Another of Kant's prescriptions we would do well to heed in these times is the role of *publicity*. This would be a tremendously useful criterion for discriminating whether or not a rule is fair or conforms to law or for judging, in general, that 'all actions are unjust which refer to the rights of other men whose principles cannot withstand being made public'.¹⁵ A maxim that needs secrecy to achieve its goal is evidently unjust and would, if made public, elicit universal rejection. Nonetheless, we have seen the reaction to the *WikiLeaks* disclosures: instead of analysing the rackets that were brought to light, people tried to discredit the messenger. In the face of this way of administering justice, it is unsurprising that scepticism about the democratic system is spreading, because labels are not enough. Although it may seem paradoxical to us, Kant recognises only two forms of governance: republican and despotic. Thus democracy could transform into the second type, while even an autocratic regime could fulfil the Republican spirit, provided it made laws 'as if they could have issued from the united will of an entire people and each citizen were considered as having expressed his agreement with such a will'.¹⁶

Tocqueville was able to appreciate the virtues of democracy, which could foster 'a society in which everyone, regarding the law as his own work, submits to it without strain'. But Tocqueville also glimpsed its possible dangers: "If I imagine with what new features despotism might implant itself in the world, I see a huge crowd of similar men who turn ceaselessly around on themselves in search of small and vulgar pleasures with which to satisfy their souls. Each, separated from the rest, lives removed from the destiny of the others. Above them all an immense tutelary power is raised which takes exclusive charge of ensuring their happiness and watching over their fate. [...] It seeks only to fix them irrevocably in childhood. It wants citizens to enjoy themselves, provided they think only of enjoying themselves. [...] Can it not free them completely from the trouble of thinking and the burden of living?".¹⁷ This paternalistic despotism that Tocqueville imagines, whose dismal consequences we see in the passage placed at the head of this article, are not necessarily to be associated with an autocratic government; lamentably, they may be found in any democratic system.

The disregarded key economic factors of the French Revolution

Another theme I would like to deal with here is whether there exists any relation between economic crises and political revolutions. We usually forget the economic factors

that preceded the symbol par excellence of the French Revolution: the storming of the Bastille. On that day, 14th July, a discontent crystallised that had scant political motivation. ‘On 28th April 1789, a riot broke out against a wallpaper manufacturer, a man called Réveillon, because he had said that a worker could live very well on 15 centimes.’ His house was looted and there was a violent confrontation with the police, As Albert Soboul says in his *A Short History of the French Revolution* ‘the economic and social motives of this first revolutionary day are obvious; it was not a political riot. The mobs had no precise points of view on the political events. What drove them to action were rather motives of an economic and social kind. To resolve the problem of poverty, the people considered the simplest thing was to appeal to the law and apply it rigorously’.¹⁸

Of course, today it would also be enough to invoke the law in order to prosecute the high-flying delinquents who have looted entire countries with financial engineering operations and taken the money to tax havens, often with the connivance of politicians who, when they face justice, end up being pardoned by their co-religionists in power, while those who had to take out mortgages for the rest of their life to buy a roof over their heads lose their house, but retain their indebtedness to the bank.

Soboul’s interpretation has a modern day ring to it. Speaking of the crisis in society under the *Ancien Régime*, he remarks that, ultimately, ‘the privileged tried only to increase their income, without bothering to solve the problem, and the doctrines of economists frequently gave them the arguments they needed to hide, beneath the appearance of public welfare, their shady dealings’.¹⁹ It might be said that this refers not only to the early stages of the French Revolution, but also to the situation currently experienced by some European Mediterranean countries such as Greece, Portugal, Spain or Italy. As Soboul tells us, ‘Financial hardship was one of the most important causes of the Revolution. The vices of the fiscal system, inequality of taxation and a bad tax collection system were the chief causes of the prevailing poverty. Public debt increased catastrophically and, given the *impossibility* of covering the deficit by raising taxes, a public loan was required’.²⁰ Perhaps for this reason, François Hollande is the only European leader to have brought in a special tax on large fortunes, whereas France’s neighbouring countries turn a blind eye to the tax evasion of big capital and the incalculable fiscal fraud of those who rule the financial roost, while at the same time the latter advocate greater labour flexibility and the eradication of the most basic services.

“Treaty of Versailles” or “Marshall Plan”? The European Union’s dilemma

Even the dates lend a certain symmetry to that period and our own. ‘The 18th Century,’ writes Soboul, ‘had been one of prosperity, but its economic peak came at the end of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s. After 1778 a period of contraction began on the heels of an economic decline, which culminated a misery-generating cyclical crisis’.²¹ Necker, Louis XVI’s finance minister, ‘did not realise there was a political and social crisis; he did not pay enough attention to the economic crisis’.²² ‘The economic crisis led the masses to mobilise; their acquisitive power had diminished and unemployment had risen at the same time as the cost of living had increased.’²³ In Spain, a quarter of the active population is without work and among young people almost half are jobless.

We are witnessing what we might describe as an “ultra-conservative neo-liberal counter-reformation”. In the grip of a savage neo-liberalism, nurtured by the single thought that triumphed after the fall of the Berlin wall and the failure of real socialism, immersed as we are in what Fukuyama described as the end of history, our political leaders are beginning to dismantle public spaces - perhaps irreversibly. They are halting investment in health and education, while ceaselessly pumping money out of the public coffers into private hospitals or state-assisted educational establishments which, on top of everything else, generally subscribe to the same ideology as those who sponsor them so generously with everybody’s taxes. Just as expected, Germany is said to be bent on imposing upon certain European countries conditions as ominous as those that led the Weimar Republic to the brotherly hatred of the Treaty of Versailles, when what is really needed is to promote a kind of new “Marshall Plan”. This would tend to restore a minimum of social cohesion among European citizens and at the same bring the respective national legislations into line, not by choosing what is most detrimental in each case, as tends to happen, but rather what is most favourable to its supposed beneficiaries.

However that may be, we should pay heed to what Hannah Arendt tells us in *On Revolution*: ‘If we want to learn what a revolution is, its political significance for the world we live in, its role in modern history, we must turn to those historical moments when revolution made its full appearance, assumed a kind of definite shape, and began to cast its spell over the minds of men’.²⁴ We do not know whether we find ourselves today at one of those moments and whether the crisis of values in which we live, disguised by the economic crisis, may give rise to a social transformation that will usher in new models of community. In any case, ‘the French Revolution was determined by the exigencies of liberation not from

tyranny but from necessity, and it was actuated by the limitless immensity of the people's misery and the pity this misery inspired'.²⁵

Political climates and philosophical responsibilities

In 1944 Cassirer gave a lecture on *Philosophy and Politics*, in which he stressed the very Kantian theme of the interaction between theory and practice. He expounded something he would take up again in *The Myth of the State*: philosophy has to account for itself as being indirectly responsible for certain political climates, as happened in the case of certain thinkers who had created a favourable atmosphere for the consolidation of Nazi totalitarianism. Crises of thought may generate political or social upheaval. The great historico-political problems cannot be resolved without examining the fundamental questions from a philosophical perspective, whenever the inevitable interaction between the structure of ideas and the configuration of our socio-political reality occurs. In Spain, the economic crisis is serving as a pretext for changing a social reality, monopolising Berlusconi-style the public media and revising laws such as that governing abortion. But it is obvious that all of this is very different from obeying some mysterious, impersonal and irreversible *fatum*, as they wish to make us believe. The truth is that it corresponds to specific interests and a very concrete ideology.

I think Cassirer is right and we must hold philosophy to account, attributing to it more or less direct responsibility for the genesis of this or that political climate. Having been present when the end of history was proclaimed and witnessed the implacable hegemony of the single thought, after a convulsive and ephemeral postmodernity that wandered directionless for a time, it would be a good idea to recover some values that might form a solid substrate for European identity. Such values gestated with Stoicism, flowered throughout the Renaissance and crystallised in the ideals of the Enlightenment. They were embodied, for example, in inalienable human rights that aspired to be universal. Condorcet expressed it well when he said that it is not enough for primordial and irrevocable rights to live in the writings of philosophers or in people's hearts; they must be read in their social specificity and there is no doubt that philosophy can help to write the score of such a materialisation. But it is not always, or even chiefly, that this task falls to philosophy in reality: it usually depends above all on those who interpret those philosophical scores and devote themselves to politics.

We have not yet seen the terrible politico-social consequences that the economic crisis we are living through will generate. Supporters of the single thought and neo-conservatism will be very keen to convince us that such a situation was inevitable and that we must submit without further ado to the perverse consequences of the mess brought about by said crisis, *as if* it were a question of the fateful decree of an inexorable destiny. However, a Neo-Enlightenment style of thinking, aware that the Enlightenment is above all an unfinished project and that it behoves us to recover the values implicit, for instance, in the American and French Revolutions, would tend, of course, to motivate an analysis of the most immediate causes of this crisis so that we may take careful note and penalise those who are directly responsible for, even when this would involve changing certain rules of the game that seem immutable and returning to old ideals such as “thinking for oneself”, which were voiced in Diderot’s *Enciclopedia* and which Kant turned into an Enlightenment motto. It depends on us whether one or other current of thought predominates, whether we indeed face the end of history – in more than one sense – and allow ourselves to be pulled along comfortably by stereotypes, or whether we take the trouble to re-think, among all of us, a reality that does not necessarily have to be like this, as some characters claim in the last Costa-Gavras’s film *Le Capital* regarding the hidden sources of responsibility of the global economical crisis.²⁶

Notes

¹ This article is part of the European programme ENGLOBE. *Global Enlightenment and History* (Marie Curie Initial Training Network: FP7-PEOPLE-2007-1-1-ITN <http://www.englobeitn.net>). Its theses were presented at the IV Congreso Iberoamericano de Filosofía (held in Santiago de Chile from 5th to 9th November 2012).

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Editor in Chief of Journal *Isegoria* <http://isegoria.revistas.csic.es> and *Con-Textos Kantianos (International Journal of Philosophy)* <http://con-textoskantianos.net>

³ Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcEPY5Ga9F0> (accessed on 15th May 2014).

⁴ Introduction to E. Cassirer, *Le problem Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, Paris, Hachette, 1987.

⁵ *Complete Works*, III, 367n.

⁶ *Complete Works*, III, 478.

⁷ *Complete Works*, III, 175-176.

⁸ *Complete Works*, III, 273.

⁹ *Complete Works*, III, 523.

¹⁰ *Complete Works*, III, 189.

¹¹ *Complete Works* I, 104.

¹² SF, AA 07: 80.

¹³ SF, AA 07: 89.

¹⁴ KU, AA 05: 294.

¹⁵ ZeF, AA 08: 381.

¹⁶ ZeF, AA 08: 297.

¹⁷ *Democracy in America*, vol. II, Part IV, 6.

¹⁸ *La Révolution française*, chapter 2.2.3, Paris, Gallimard, p. 80.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 98.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 128.

²² *ibid.*, p. 138.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 151.

²⁴ “The Meaning of Revolution”, in: Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York, 1962, pp. 43-44.

²⁵ “The Social Question”, in: Id., *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²⁶ Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Costa-Gavras> (Accessed 15th May 2014).

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Recebido / Received: 24/06/2014
 Aprovado / Approved: 13/11/2014

ethic@ - Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brasil, v.13, n.2, p.303-314, jul./dez., 2014.