

The Achronic Function of Philosophy and Europe

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Abstract: The article takes inspiration from the Husserlian definition of the archontic function that European philosophy must exercise for the entire civilization, to show how much such an assumption, in terms of the philosophy of history, conditions the very idea of Europe. Only by radically deconstructing such a philosophy of history can be imagined a just Europe, with an operation that is not possible without Marxism, and yet which must push the critical instance that is its own beyond the limits in which it has exercised in the past. Only at these conditions European philosophy can have an archontic function for the civilization as a whole.

Keywords: Philosophy of history, no contemporaneity, pluritemporality, stratification, dependency theory

Edmund Husserl, in *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, an unfinished work where he attempts to overcome the crisis of modern science by positing philosophy as universal science and the full manifestation of reason, offers a definition of Europe, not as a geographical expression, but as a spiritual essence (in this sense 'the English Dominions, the United States, etc., clearly belong to Europe'):

Here the title 'Europe' clearly refers to the unity of a spiritual life, activity, creation, with all its ends, interests, cares, and endeavors, with its products of purposeful activity, institutions, organizations. [...] [We must] exhibit the philosophical idea which is immanent in the history of Europe (spiritual Europe) or, what is the same, the teleology which is immanent in it, which makes itself known, from the standpoint of universal mankind as such, as the breakthrough and the developmental beginning of a new human epoch—the epoch of mankind which now seeks to live, and only can live, in the free shaping of its existence, its historical life, through ideas of reason, through infinite tasks. [...] [It's] a supranationality of a completely new sort, [...] [a] spiritual shape [...] a new spirit, [...] aimed at infinite tasks, dominates humanity through and through, creating new, infinite ideals¹.

According to Husserl, what constitutes 'the primal phenomenon of spiritual Europe' is precisely the 'breakthrough of philosophy in this sense, in which all sciences are thus contained'². This origin founds and constitutes European spiritual unity, whose specificity is not to be a type of humanity among others, but to coincide with the very essence of humanity. Philosophy should constantly remind us of this:

Within this ideally directed total society philosophy retains its guiding function and its particular infinite task: the function of free and universal theoretical reflection, which encompasses all ideals and the

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¹ Husserl 1970, pp. 273-74-89.

² Ibid., p. 276.

total ideal, i.e., the universe of all norms. Within European civilization, philosophy has constantly to exercise its function as one which is archontic for the civilization as a whole³.

The Husserlian conceptual syntax establishes a close link between Europe, philosophy, humanity, epoch and spirit, presupposing a *Weltgeschichte*, a philosophy of world-history that establishes precise hierarchies. The following lines serve as sufficient proof :

There is something unique here that is recognized in us by all other human groups, too, something that, quite apart from all considerations of utility, becomes a motive for them to Europeanize themselves even in their unbroken will to spiritual self-preservation; whereas we, if we understand ourselves properly, would never Indianize ourselves, for example⁴.

We find the paradigmatic form of this *Weltgeschichte in Hegel's philosophy of history*: a unidirectional and progressive time, whose partition into epochs describes the 'journey' of spirit following the path of the sun, from East to West. The path is one-way, as Husserl says: «if we understand ourselves properly, would never Indianize ourselves».

The Orient for Hegel is the otherness from which the European spirit arises, where spirit is still immersed in nature, the beginning of a journey that must cross the Greek, then Roman, *Reich* to attain full freedom in the Christian-Germanic one. In this way, Hegel sets the boundaries of Europe, the inside and the outside, repeating (the word *Reich* clearly indicates it) the partition of history proposed by Joachim of Fiore in the *Concordia*, according to which the Trinity shows itself in the course of three different historical ages, the last of which, the age of the Spirit, denoting when the completion of time will be accomplished.

This philosophy of history, with its unidirectional, progressive and Eurocentric properties, builds a space of interiority and its relative 'other', the East, which is nothing but the specular inverse of the West: the inverse of freedom and spirituality, which nevertheless contains it in potentia like the seed of a flower. However, in Hegel there is also a second absolute otherness, represented by Africa, the other of the spirit: nature, immediacy, animality. For Hegel, Africa is the 'state of absolute barbarism', that is, a place that does not belong to the *Weltgeschichte*, but to animality:

Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained — for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World — shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself — the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night⁵.

In other words, as Bloch comments on nature for Hegel, Africa is an absolute preterite.

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3 Ibid., p. 289.

4 Ibid., p. 275.

5 Hegel 2001, p. 109.

In this view, Europe is the apogee of a philosophy of history that puts together the Greek, Roman and Christian legacies, starting from an "eastern" origin that is actually the closest exteriority, even geographically: Judaism.

The same syntax lies behind the embryonic *Weltgeschichte* found in Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, although limited to modernity. The passages on the revolutionary role of the bourgeoisie famously depict its incessant movement in the form of a continuous revolution of all living conditions, but also by a continuous expansion throughout the globe and penetration of ever new realities by dragging in the 'the most barbarian, nations into civilisation'⁶:

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West⁷.

According to Marx and Engels, this path will lead, following the Industrial Revolution, to produce within bourgeois society not only 'the weapons that bring death to itself'⁸ but also 'the men who are to wield those weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians'⁹. The specter that roams around Europe will soon become a reality produced by the necessity of historical development itself: communism as Europe's destiny.

If in Hegel the *Weltgeschichte* is commanded by the rhythm of the spirit, in Marx the motor of history is class struggle, the contradiction between productive forces and relations of production that, in the famous 'Preface of '59', will give rise to a mimesis *en matérialiste* of Hegelian *Stufenfolge*, of the kingdoms of the spirit as a succession of modes of production:

In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society. The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society

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6 Marx Engels 1970, p. 36.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid, p. 38

9 Ibid., p. 39

create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation¹⁰.

This succession marks progressive epochs in the history of humanity: asiatic, ancient, feudal, capitalistic and ... communist. And yet, it is not a question of spiritual kingdoms, nor of spiritual principles that succeed one another by tracing a path to freedom (or, better, of the becoming freedom of necessity), but modes of production, that is, specific configurations of productive forces and relations of production. In other words, the difference in the analogy should not be forgotten: the fundamental Marxian move consists in showing the Hegelian kingdom of freedom as the surface-effect of capitalist society, of the circulation of commodities, behind which lies the hell of production and exploitation.

Marx and Engels seem to locate the true kingdom of freedom in a further step: communism closes the prehistory of human society and opens up history. Engels explicitly describes communism as the manifestation of this kingdom:

[in communism], for the first time man, in a certain sense, is finally marked off from the rest of the animal kingdom, and emerges from mere animal conditions of existence into really human ones. The whole sphere of the conditions of life which environ man, and which have hitherto ruled man, now comes under the dominion and control of man, who for the first time becomes the real, conscious lord of nature, because he has now become master of his own social organisation. The laws of his own social action, hitherto standing face to face with man as laws of nature foreign to, and dominating him, will then be used with full understanding, and so mastered by him. Man's own social organisation, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action. The extraneous objective forces that have hitherto governed history pass under the control of man himself. Only from that time will man himself, with full consciousness, make his own history-only from that time will the social causes set in movement by him have, in the main and in a constantly growing measure, the results intended by him. It is humanity's leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom¹¹.

In the 'Additional Considerations' to the third book of *Capital*, written in 1895, the old Engels proposes, *bel et bien*, an all-European philosophy of history that takes place between an Origin, primitive communism, and an End, true communism. As Maria Turchetto writes:

Engels revisits [...] a history of humanity marked precisely by the development of productive forces and the expansion of exchange: a path [...] from a hypothetical 'primitive communism' to the unfolded

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¹⁰ Marx 1999, p. 2.

¹¹ Marx Engels 1987, p. 270

communism apogee and 'end' of history, through a sequence of modes of production [...] interpreted as 'development stages': the mythical primitive communism, in fact; the ancient mode of production based on slavery; the feudal mode of production; the unlikely 'simple commodity society' and capitalism in the (certain) expectation of socialism and communism¹².

The Asian mode of production is not even mentioned, which suggests that Engels himself found it difficult to place into this scheme.

It is interesting to note how the most awaited 'son' of Europe, at the apogee of his historical development, fullness and transparency of times, was born elsewhere, mainly in Asia and in Latin America, resulting from peasant 'barbarism' rather than industrial civilization.

More recently, a number of scholars from a variety of intellectual and geographical backgrounds, grouped together in the generic category of 'postcolonial studies', have proposed a critique of singular time and of universal history as the ideology of colonialism and imperialism. Edward Said's *Orientalism* criticised the classic division of the Orient and the Occident, a division constructed from the point of view of the West and which casts the Orient as the latter's prehistory. Ranajit Guha, founder of *Subaltern Studies*, showed how Hegelian *Weltgeschichte* constitutes an absolute limit, both in spatial and temporal terms, between the space of civilisation, Europe, and the space of barbarism, the colonised continents. Chakrabarty and Chaterjee provide a critique of the temporality of modernity founded on the repression, in the service first of colonialism and then of nationalism, of all heterogenous temporalities. In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty proposes a critique of historicism (term that indicates in Chakrabarty generically a philosophy of historical progress) as an ideology of progress centred on the idea of a capitalism and modernity that would constitute the *telos* towards which non-European temporalities would tend. The colonized are therefore thought in the form of a 'not yet', that is, always as a 'figure of lack', of a still - incomplete transition to modernity.

Chakrabarty sees a sort of paradigm of this prejudice in the essays by Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* and *On Representative Government*:

According to Mill, Indians or Africans were not yet civilized enough to rule themselves. Some historical time of development and civilization (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they could be considered prepared for such a task. Mill's historicist argument thus consigned Indians, Africans, and other «rude» nations to an imaginary waiting room of history. In doing so, it converted history itself into a version of this waiting room. We were all headed for the same destination, Mill averred, but some people were to arrive earlier than others. That was what historicist consciousness was: a

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¹²Turchetto.

recommendation to the colonised to wait¹³.

A model of history of this kind is implicit in the stages of Rostow's economic development (*The stages of economic growth*), a sort of 'general theory of modernization' according to which there would be necessary phases of development through which each society would pass, phases that establish the gradation of delays of the rest of the world compared to Europe and the United States. A fundamental criticism of this position was conducted by so-called 'dependency theory'. Maria Turchetto summarizes the fundamental traits of the critique as follow: if 'for Rostow [...] underdevelopment is fundamentally delayed development, [...] for the dependency school the underdevelopment is peripheral collocation in the world-system. The capitalist world, in fact, is not a sum of states but a system of interdependent states and hierarchically placed in central and peripheral positions'¹⁴.

However, the most radical criticism of this model of history, which dominates the ideological landscape even today (for example, in defining the peripheral countries as 'developing'), was offered to us by a conference by Ernst Bloch held at the Academy of Sciences of the GDR in 1955. The polemical objective is the Eurocentric philosophy of history explicitly denounced as the ideology of colonialism, but it also undercuts orthodox Marxism, the *Histomat*, with its idea of linear and stadial progress, as expressed by Stalin in *Dialectical Materialism and Historical Materialism*. The attack that Bloch brings to this conception is complex and articulated. I will try to summarize it in some points:

- 1) criticism of the identification of temporal succession and progress;
- 2) criticism of temporal homogeneity of structure and superstructure;
- 3) criticism of the conception of a progressive order of the phases of the superstructure;
- 4) insufficiency of the partition of the history in epochs and stages;
- 5) criticism of the nature-history vector.

It is not our aim to go into the Blochian analysis¹⁵, but rather to take up its key concept: to think progress, a concept which Bloch does not renounce, a conception of historical time as *multiversum* is necessary. Progress must be thought of as a chariot pulled by multiple horses. Bloch writes:

The firmer the refusal of a purely Western emphasis, and of one laid solely upon development to date (to say nothing of discredited imperialism), all the stronger is the help afforded by a utopian, open and

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¹³ Chakrabarty 2000, p. 8.

¹⁴ Turchetto. See also Turchetto 2017, pp. 201-2013.

¹⁵ Per un'analisi di questo testo rinvio a Morfino and Thomas 2017.

in itself still experimental orientation. Only thus can hundreds of cultures flow into the unity of the human race; a unity that only then takes shape, in nonlinear historical time, and with an historical direction that is not fixed and monadic. For the very sake of the human race, Africa and Asia join in the polyphonic chorus of a polyrhythmic advance of progress towards this unity – admittedly beneath a sun which first arose, actively and in theory, in Europe, yet one which would shine upon a community that is really without slavery. In all its revolutions, the Western concept of progress has never implied a European (and of course not an Asiatic or African) vanguard, but a better Earth for all men¹⁶.

This plural conception of historical time allows Bloch not only to replace the notion of the Orient as prehistory with the actuality of China, India, and Africa, but also avoids thinking these cultures through the *telos* of the civilisation of man, and restores to them the 'concept of the pride of people in national cultures not mediated by Europe'.

The concept of *multiversum* is a fundamental methodological warning against a philosophy of history that poses Europe as a *telos* and measure of historical development, and it allows us to appreciate the complex intertwining of times, relationships, interactions and power balances, which have produced this imaginary representation of Europe.

However, *multiversum* does not simply mean a multilinearity, i.e. to think the time of Europe between other times; it means, more radically, to affirm the non-contemporaneity of the space of European interiority, to use another Blochian concept, its *Ungleichzeitigkeit*. Bloch used this to think about the rise to power of Nazism, declaring Germany, following the Marx of 44, die *klassische Land der Ungleichzeitigkeit*. To think of German society, Bloch said, it is necessary to 'make the turbulent Now broader', it is necessary to adopt a 'multi-layered dialectic', a multispatial and multitemporal one. And this is no less true for Italy, if we take into consideration the 'southern question'. In other words, we are allowed to think different temporalities within Europe, and to think the various European states in their non-contemporaneity, applying the dependency model in the same European space, i.e. not thinking of the times of these regions by comparing their rhythm of development with some imaginary, fundamental rhythm, but thinking of them as 'a system of interdependent and hierarchically placed states'.

However, to deconstruct the imaginary spiritual unity of Europe, I will use another concept of the Marxist tradition, that of Gramscian stratification.

Formulated in the theory of 'spontaneous philosophy' and contained, according to the Sardinian communist, in everyday language, common sense, and popular religion: philosophy, to the extent that it contains a conception of the world, is 'unaware'. In Gramsci, there is certainly

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¹⁶ Bloch 1970, pp. 140-1.

a temporal arrow, a 'philosophy of history', which traces a path from spontaneous philosophy to 'critical awareness'. However, what is most interesting is the form of this spontaneous philosophy: its being 'broken and occasional'. Thinking 'without critical awareness, in a broken and occasional way', writes Gramsci, means 'to "participate" in a conception of the world that is "imposed" mechanically by the external environment, that is, from one of the many social groups with which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his own entrance into the conscious world'¹⁷. Here the concept of stratification comes into play:

We are always conformists of some conformism, just as we are always mass-men or collective-men. The question is this: which historical type of conformism, which kind of mass-men are we a part of? When the conception of the world is not critical and coherent but random and disrupted, it belongs simultaneously to a multiplicity of mass-men. Our personality is composite in a bizarre way: there are elements of the caveman as well as principles of the most modern and advanced science, prejudices of all previous historical phases (which are strictly localistic) and intuitions of the future philosophy which will be typical of humankind unified worldwide. To criticize one's conception of the world therefore means to make it unitary and coherent and to raise it to the point of the most advanced view of world thought. It therefore also signifies criticizing all the philosophy that has existed until now, inasmuch as it has left consolidated stratifications in popular philosophy. The beginning of critical thinking is the consciousness of what really is, that is, to 'know thyself' as a product of historical process held so far that has left in one's self an infinite number of traces without the benefit of taking stock. Such an inventory must be done¹⁸.

Multiversum and stratification are only two sides of the same coin, because stratification is nothing but the deposit of the continuous intertwining of times in boundaries that are inevitably porous. There are no pure identities, Freud in *Moses and monotheism* says it clearly, there are only continuous intertwinings that deposit traces, stratifications. As Gramsci puts it, it is necessary to make an inventory of these layers of time, above all those whose effects are to be fought at the political level, if we want to build a Europe ready to live up to its claims of class, race, and gender privileges. No project of a just Europe is imaginable unless we are aware of the extent of colonialism and its violence, the treatment of slaves, racism and its massacres inside and outside Europe, fascisms, not only Italian and German, but Spanish, French and East Europe, and, last but not least, sexism.

And yet, to formulate such a project, it is necessary to understand the structural nexus that links racism and sexism to the very

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17 Gramsci 1975, p.1375-1376.

18 Ibid., p. 1376.

development of capitalism. As Silvia Federici writes:

[...] Marx's belief in the development of capitalism as a unifying factor for the global population and the levelling out of social inequalities is wrong: he has not been able to understand that capitalism is structurally racist and sexist. Because it is not an anomaly or a temporary period during a phase of its development. Capitalism, or rather capitalist accumulation, is an accumulation of hierarchies and inequalities intrinsically necessary for the organization and division of labor in production. And these are necessary to the capitalist for his accumulation of unpaid work, which does not exist only during the paid workday. Because, by means of a wage that allow to live a family, capitalism succeed in exploiting workers without wage (of whom women are a big part) in the entire productive economy¹⁹.

Of course, ecologism is part of the project for a just Europe. But no true ecologism is possible without understanding the structural link between capitalism and the destruction of nature. García Linera rightly attacks the so-called 'white ecologism', for which:

the nature that is worth saving or protecting is not all nature, but only that 'wild' part that is sterilized of the poor, sterilized of blacks, sterilized of peasants, sterilized of workers, sterilized of Latinos, sterilized of Indians with their annoying social and labor problems²⁰.

A few years ago, in *Specters of Marx*, Derrida admonished us: no future without Marx, no promise of justice without Marx²¹. I would add: no just Europe without Marx! But this Marx must be read 'against the grain', pointing to a theory capable of a radical critique to every form of Eurocentrism, racism, sexism and 'white ecologism' (to use the expression of García Linera), and of coming to terms with the legacy of its own theoretical and ideological history, including the history of real socialism (to which we must apply the blochian categories of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* and *multiversum* precisely to avoid reconstruction in terms of philosophy of history). If, as Husserl argued, 'the function that philosophy must constantly exercise within European humanity is an archontic function for the civilisation as a whole', this function can only be performed by a Marxist philosophy capable of going beyond itself, without, however, losing the force of its class analysis.

Of course, the forces that today are inspired by such a promise are squashed between a market and finance Europeanism, dominated (especially after the 2008 crisis) by austerity policies, and a reactive anti-Europeanism traversed by nationalist, fascist, racist, sexist and homophobic traces. What is to be done? It is a matter of continuing to interpret the world, denouncing injustices, waiting to be able to change

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19 Federici 2019.

20 García Linera 2017.

21 Derrida 1994.

it. And yet this expectation cannot and must not be messianic, an expectation of an event that interrupts the homogeneous and empty timeline, of a God who 'comes like a thief in the night'. The interpretation, the theory, must not be configured as an announcement of an Event, it is not a prophecy of a *novum* to-come, but must be conceived of as an analysis of a conjuncture. In this sense, it is necessary to rely on Althusser rather than on Derrida.

Althusser made two assumptions that seem to anticipate Derrida on this point: the impossible contemporaneity of the present and the omni-pervasiveness of the ideological. Like Derrida, Althusser rejects a metaphysics of time built on the dual axis of linear succession and contemporaneity: the present, the actual moment, is never a full present, but is always constituted by the intertwining of temporalities. And, like Derrida, Althusser rejects a conception of spectrality destined to dissolve itself into a transparent present: ideology is eternal like the unconscious, permeating reality as a trace of the various practices of bodies. However, at the intersection of these two theses, we find in Derrida a messianism without the horizon of the wait, a communism to-come, a democracy to-come, a new international that arises from the deconstruction of all historical institutions in which Marxism was embodied (the party, the cell, the trade union, the State); in Althusser, we find a theory of conjuncture as the conjunction of different real and imaginary times, in which the categories of historical materialism are not simply dismissed as ontology, but are criticized insofar as they imply a philosophy of history that indicates a linear time concluded by an *eschaton* and marked by a teleology. In Althusser, the concept of conjuncture is not meant to open the space of an unthinkable event, but rather to think how to transform circumstances into forces, as Gramsci says about Machiavelli, to gather forces by implementing a strategy capable of defeating the forces of the opponent field. In this sense, the forms of organization are not obstacles for inheriting the spirit of Marxism. Instead, these forms are that for which, alone, this inheritance can have a meaning. Machiavelli's *occasion* has a different nature from Derrida's event: occasion is opaque to the extent that it is the effect of a complex interweaving of real and imaginary times and not the link of a linear, predictable chain, and yet it can be anticipated.

This concept of occasion comes from Althusser's reading of Machiavelli, an author forced to think the impossible and necessary task of the Italian national unity. This concept can be useful to think about the future of Europe, of a just Europe, that means, of a socialist Europe, as impossible and necessary a task for us today as was for Machiavelli the national unity of Italy. This interpretation could be inspiring to the extent that it underscores the necessity to analyse circumstances, not as a set of objective facts to which the theory is external, but as a field of forces that defines a space of possible interventions in the ideological conjuncture, in spatial and power relations within the imaginary, and at the same time in the political conjuncture as a project capable of articulating these

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forces, i.e. the struggles actually taking place. Of course, there is no a priori guarantee that this articulation is possible, nor that, once built, it can defeat the opposing forces. Yet, its construction is all the more urgent in the face of a global situation that increasingly confirms the truth of the alternative posed by Rosa Luxemburg in the early twentieth century: socialism or barbarism.

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