

# Romantic bureaucracy

## Alexander Kojève's post-historical wisdom

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Alexandre Kojève became famous primarily for his discourse on the end of history and the post-historical condition – the discourse that he developed in his seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* at the École des Hautes Études in Paris between 1933 and 1939. This seminar was regularly attended by leading figures of French intellectual life at that time, such as Georges Bataille, Jacques Lacan, André Breton, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Raymond Aron. The transcripts of Kojève's lectures circulated in Parisian intellectual circles and were widely read there, by Sartre and Camus among others.<sup>1</sup> The end of history as it is understood by Kojève is, of course, not the end of historical processes and events. Rather, Kojève believed that history is not merely a chain of events but has a telos, and that this telos can be achieved, and actually is already achieved. According to the Platonic–Hegelian tradition in which Kojève situated his discourse, this telos is wisdom. Kojève understands wisdom as perfect self-transparency, self-knowledge. The Wise Man knows the reasons for all his actions; he can explain them, translate them into rational language. The emergence of the Wise Man, of the Sage, is the telos of history. At the moment at which the Sage emerges history ends. Here one can ask: but why is history needed for the Sage to emerge? Indeed, one can assume that it is possible to become a Sage at any moment of history – it is enough to decide to practise introspection, self-reflection, self-analysis, instead of being exclusively interested in the outside world. From the very earliest of times until now we have heard often enough the requirement to initiate metanoia – to turn our attention from dealing with the everyday world towards introspection.

However, Kojève, following Hegel, does not believe that such a shift is possible under ordinary circumstances, that it can be effectuated by a simple decision to switch one's attention from the contemplation of the world to self-contemplation. Such a voluntary decision would be possible only if 'the subject' were

ontologically different from the world and opposed to the world, as Plato or Descartes believed it to be. But Kojève develops his discourse in the post-metaphysical, post-religious age. He wants to be radically atheistic; and that means for him that under 'normal conditions' man is a part of the world and human consciousness is completely captured by the world. 'The subject' does not have the ontological status and resources of energy that are needed to turn it from being immersed in the world to contemplation of itself – to effectuate phenomenological *epoché* in the Husserlian sense. Self-consciousness can emerge only when man finds himself opposed to the world. And one is opposed to the world only if one's own life is put at risk – and is endangered by the world. There must be a specific force that opposes the 'human animal' to the world and turns it against the world by turning the world against it. It is, precisely, this force that produces the transition from nature to history. History opposes man to nature. So one needs history to constitute the 'self' and at the same time to turn human beings' attention to the self. Only a historical human is able to have self-consciousness and that means to be human in the full sense of this word.

Indeed, Kojève begins his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* with the following statement: 'Man is Self-Consciousness'. And then he writes that 'it is in this that he is essentially different from animals, which do not go beyond the level of simple Sentiment of self'.<sup>2</sup> However, this animalistic sentiment of self is crucial for the development of human self-consciousness because it is precisely this sentiment that initially opposes man to the world and constitutes it as an object of contemplation and knowledge:

The man who contemplates is 'absorbed' by what he contemplates; the 'knowing subject' 'loses' himself in the object that is known... The man who is 'absorbed' by the object that he is contemplating can be 'brought back to himself' only by a Desire; by the desire to eat, for example.... Desire

is what transforms Being, revealed to itself by itself in (true) knowledge... revealed to a 'subject'... The (human) I is the I of a Desire or of Desire.<sup>3</sup>

Desire turns man from contemplation to action. This action is always 'negation'. I of Desire is emptiness that negates and destroys everything 'external', everything 'given'. But the Self-Sentiment is not yet Self-Consciousness. Self-Consciousness is produced by a specific type of desire: the 'anthropogenetic' desire that is desire not of particular things but the desire of desire of the other: 'Thus, in the relationship between man and woman, for example, Desire is human only if the one desires, not the body, but the Desire of the other.' It is this anthropogenetic desire that initiates and moves history: 'human history is the history of desired Desires'; 'the Desire that generates Self-Consciousness, the human reality ... is, finally, a function of Desire for "recognition"'.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Kojève refers to an initial battle of Self-Consciousnesses that is described by Hegel. Two Self-Consciousnesses battle (they are actually constituted as Self-Consciousnesses through that battle) – and one of them wins the battle. Then the other Self-Consciousness has a choice: to die or to survive and work to satisfy the desire of the winner. Thus we see two types of human emerge: masters and slaves. Masters prefer to die rather than work for other masters; slaves accept work as their fate. At first glance, Kojève prefers (in Nietzschean spirit) the dying master who sacrifices his life to glory to the working slave. He describes history as moved by the heroes pushed to self-sacrifice by this one specifically human desire, the desire for recognition.

Kojève writes: 'Without this fight to the death for pure prestige, there would never have been human beings on earth.'<sup>5</sup> The animal self-sentiment reveals itself as nothingness, emptiness. But this nothingness remains infected by being because it wills something 'real'. However, the desire that wins recognition from another desire is completely liberated from anything 'real': here emptiness desires another emptiness, nothingness desires another nothingness. Thus 'the subject' becomes constituted. This subject is not 'natural' because it is ready to sacrifice all its natural needs and even its 'natural' existence for an abstract idea of recognition. But being non-natural this subject remains historical. It remains historical in so far as it is constituted by the desire of historical recognition; and so is dependent on the historical conditions of this recognition. That means that the project of Wisdom becomes a historical project: to know oneself one has to know history and its forces,

one has to make transparent the totality of the society in which one lives – otherwise one cannot know oneself because the object of this knowledge is desire for recognition (constituting my true I) and this desire is necessarily structured by the society in which the subject desires to be desired.

### Soloviev and Stalin

It is frequently pointed out that Kojève was influenced by Heidegger, in his conviction that it is 'being towards death' that makes humans self-conscious. In *Being and Time* Heidegger associates authentic existence (that is, actually, self-consciousness, because in this mode the human being does not lose itself in the external world) with the anticipation of death: the possibility of impossibility, the disappearance of everything, of pure nothingness. However, in his manuscript, *Sofia, filo-sofia i fenomeno-logia* (*Sophia, Philo-sophy and Phenomeno-logy*), Kojève criticizes Heidegger for failing to indicate how the discovery of being towards death actually happens.<sup>6</sup> Kojève writes that Heidegger is the only important bourgeois philosopher of his time because he thematized the death and finality of human existence.<sup>7</sup> However, according to Kojève, Heidegger ignores the phenomenological horizon in which the subject opens itself to the possibility of its own death being understood as total disappearance of everything. Of course, Heidegger practised the phenomenological analysis of the opening to the possibility of radical nothingness through the experience of anxiety or, later, radical boredom.<sup>8</sup> But, speaking about phenomenology, Kojève means Hegelian and not the Husserlian type of phenomenological analysis. Accordingly, he believes that death shows itself as a possibility of human existence through the experience of the revolutionary struggle alone – the struggle for life or death. In (for him, typically) an ironical way, Kojève writes that Heidegger took from Hegel death without revolutionary struggle; while Western Marxism took the idea of struggle without death.

However, to a far greater extent than he was influenced by Heidegger, Kojève was influenced by Soloviev. In fact, Kojève started his philosophical career by writing a dissertation on the work of Vladimir Soloviev, who was the most prominent and influential Russian religious philosopher at the end of the nineteenth century. Kojève wrote this dissertation (in German) at the University of Heidelberg in 1926, under the title 'Die religiöse Philosophie Vladimir Solowjeffs', signed in his original name Alexander Kozhevnikoff. This dissertation, supervised by Karl

Jaspers, was published in a very limited edition in Germany in the 1930s, and was later translated with some minor changes into French in 1934, in the *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse*. The original version of the dissertation can be found in the library of the University of Heidelberg (with handwritten remarks by Jaspers or some of his assistants). In his writings, Soloviev thematizes the erotic dimension of philosophy that he understands as love for *Sophia*. Soloviev believed that the goal of the philosopher is to achieve recognition and love of *Sophia*. In fact, he believed that he achieved this love – he speaks about three meetings with *Sophia*, love letters from her.<sup>9</sup> Here one can see the origin of the Kojévian notion of anthropogenetic desire as desire of desire, desire of recognition. The title of the 1940–41 manuscript, *Sophia, Philo-sophy and Phenomeno-logy*, clearly refers to the Solovievian ‘sophiological’ discourse.

The most important point that Soloviev makes in his Sophiology is this: he speaks about the whole of mankind as the body of *Sophia*.<sup>10</sup> This means that recognition by *Sophia* is the same as recognition by mankind as a whole. The philosopher who enters the social body transforms it into the body of love. In other words, his desire for *Sophia* becomes satisfied only if and when everyone becomes recognized by everyone. Soloviev names the society that results from this all-inclusive mutual recognition the ‘free and universal theocracy’. It is not difficult to recognize here the origin of the Kojévian notion of the ‘universal and homogeneous state’. However, Kojève proposes an atheistic, secular reading of Soloviev. The universal recognition is an effect not of divine grace but of the telos of the historical process. It is achieved not through the grace of *Sofia* but by violent, revolutionary action – by the battle for life or death. The history of emancipation is the history of the struggle of slaves for recognition and at the same time the growing rationalization of society: the social hierarchies whose origin lies in the irrational past are gradually overcome and society becomes more and more rational, egalitarian and transparent. Here the Kojévian narrative coincides with the Hegelian–Marxian narrative, although the struggle for universal recognition is, of course, not the same as the class struggle. Kojève aims at a synthesis between master and slave: the synthesis that produces the citizen. Kojève describes this synthesis through the figure of the ‘armed worker’, who, although he is still working as a slave, is ready to fight and die as a master.

In his *Introduction*, Kojève reminds the reader that according to Hegel the end of history is announced

by the emergence of the figure of Napoleon. Napoleon is a self-made individual, but at the same time he is universally recognized. And the Napoleonic state is already a universal and homogeneous state.<sup>11</sup> Napoleon is, though, not a philosopher; his struggle for recognition does not coincide with the love of knowledge, of Wisdom. Rather, it is Hegel whose love for knowledge is satisfied when he looks at Napoleon. The Sage emerges here as duality (Napoleon and Hegel) and thus remains imperfect. Kojève therefore directs his expectation towards the Soviet Union, and particularly to Stalin, to realize the end and fulfilment of history.

Stalin is seen by Kojève as somebody who not only searches for universal recognition but also works to implement a certain philosophical idea. Stalin is a master, or, rather, a tyrant, but he uses his power primarily not for the satisfaction of his private desires but to serve an idea.<sup>12</sup> To better understand the evolution of Kojève’s idea of the end of history it is thus helpful to look at his interpretation of the Stalinist Soviet Union. Kojève addresses Soviet society and ideology most explicitly in that part of the introduction to *Sofia, filo-sofia i fenomeno-logia* with the title, ‘Perfect (or Absolute) Knowledge, or the Ideal of “Awareness” (*soznatel'nost'*)’.<sup>13</sup> He begins his analysis of Soviet ideology by stating that the predicate *soznatel'nyi* (conscious, aware) emerged and became widespread as an immediate effect of the socialist revolution in Russia. Kojève cites popular formulas like *soznatel'nyi proletariy*, *soznatel'nye grazhdane* (conscious proletarian, conscious citizen). And he writes that from the perspective of Marxism–Leninism–Stalinism, self-awareness is the ideal for the whole of mankind. As an example of such self-awareness, Kojève describes a worker who buys a bottle of vodka, and when he is asked why he did so says because he wants to get drunk. In other words, the *ne-soznatel'nyi* (non-selfconscious) worker sees his immediate desire to drink the vodka as the ultimate source of his action, whereas a *soznatel'nyi* (self-aware) worker can analyse the social context of his action: the production and distribution of vodka, the role of money, social and cultural conventions regulating the general consumption of vodka, and so on. A transition from *ne-soznatel'nost'* (non-awareness) to *soznatel'nost'* (awareness) is the transition from animal desire to logos. The social manifestation of logos is conversation, discussion. That is why socialism is based on discussion, conversation: on the permanent discursive analysis of all aspects of social life. Kojève writes that the *soznatel'nyi* (self-aware) worker, in the

sense in which Soviet ideology tries to create him, is actually a philosopher. The universal and homogeneous state in which the Sage can emerge and live is none other than Communism. Kojève writes that the scientific Communism of Marx–Lenin–Stalin is an attempt to expand the philosophical project to its ultimate historical and social borders.<sup>14</sup> Here Kojève also stresses the atheistic character of Marxism–Leninism–Stalinism that does not wait for the second coming of Christ at the end of historical development and does not accept so-called ‘sacred human rights’. In other words, Kojève sees the end of history as the moment of the spread of wisdom through the whole population – the democratization of wisdom; a universalization that leads to homogenization. He believes that the Soviet Union moves towards the society of wise men in which every member will have self-consciousness.

But even if the Soviet Union was not yet a society of philosophers it was, according to Kojève, at least ruled by philosophers. Indeed, Kojève believed that the Hegelian–Marxist–Stalinist project was the true interpretation and actual realization of the political goal of philosophy as formulated by Plato: the philosopher has to rule society as a king. Kojève subscribes to this Platonic requirement but he is sceptical about the way that Plato proposed to achieve this goal: the philosopher has to practise contemplation of the Good and then educate the King, leading him to true knowledge. In one of his letters to Leo Strauss, Kojève writes:

This genuinely Platonic conception was tried by ‘monks’ for a thousand years (both Christians and Muslims), and degenerated into Bayle’s Republic of Letters, which remains ‘alive’ to this day. Genuine politicians (statesmen) were always opposed to this ... namely, what Plato may really have meant was of no concern to them, and what they (mis)understood of Plato was naturally ‘utopian’ (because it could only be carried out by a ‘super-human’ tyranny). That is how it stood until Hegel–Marx: for they did not want either to destroy the Academy (= ‘monasteries’) or to render them inactive and ineffectual, but wanted on the contrary to transform them into a ‘polis’. For Hegel/Marx (but by no means for Plato), the philosophers ought indeed (and hence can) become ‘Kings’ [naturally not the other way around, which would be ‘utopian’; whereas the philosopher’s becoming king is not at all utopian – in so far as this ‘becoming’ is a revolution].<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the philosopher can and should become a tyrant – a revolutionary leader and illegitimate king.

That is why Kojève was interested in the figures of modern tyrants such as Napoleon, Stalin, Salazar and Mao. He wrote a long commentary to the book by Leo Strauss on tyranny.<sup>16</sup> The end of history is nothing other than a revolution that brings to power the philosopher: the tyrant who creates the universal and homogeneous state.

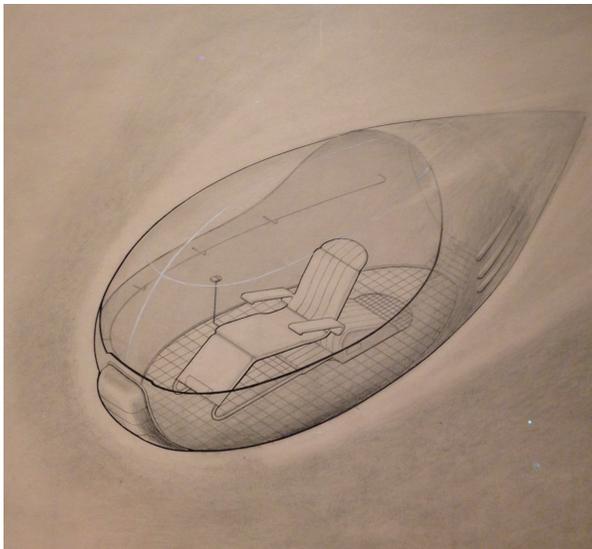
### The ineffectiveness of persuasive speech

For Kojève, the necessity of revolutionary violence follows from the ineffectiveness of persuasive speech. Already in his analysis of Bayle’s *Encyclopedia* (to which he indirectly refers in this letter to Strauss), Kojève demonstrates that the philosopher cannot overcome the plurality of particular opinions by means of persuasive speech alone – by the speech that pretends to be ‘true’ speech.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, throughout its history philosophy tried to operate by persuasion. It measured its effectiveness by the influence that it exercised on listeners or readers. But there is no evidence that is evident enough to compel readers to abandon their own opinions and begin to accept ‘evident speech’ as ‘true speech’. The hope that motivated philosophy for centuries – the hope to produce such an intense light of evidence that it would be impossible for anybody to reject this evidence, to turn one’s back to this light, to remain unpersuaded – this hope demonstrated itself as futile and ruinous for philosophy. As a result philosophy degenerated into literature; philosophy began to reproduce the plurality of opinions instead of overcoming it.

The end of history is the end of persuasive speech; or, rather, the end of belief in the ability of speech to persuade. But if the philosopher abandons his hope to persuade, would it mean that he would also abandon any hope of influencing the course of the world? Kojève’s answer is: ‘no’. Philosophy is not only literature but also a kind of technology. It can produce things that function, beyond any persuasion. For example, a car should not persuade; it simply runs.<sup>18</sup> And humans are compelled to accommodate themselves to a world in which cars run – independently of being persuaded or unpersuaded by the philosophical and scientific theories on which the construction of the car is based. So one can say that the shift from history to post-history is the shift from persuasion to accommodation. The philosopher–tyrants create the state machines to which humans have to accommodate themselves – simply because these state machines are there and function. Persuasion becomes irrelevant. Traditional philosophy becomes literature. However, the post-historical state created

by the philosopher-tyrant is by no means silent – on the contrary, it is still based on language. As we saw earlier, Kojève insists on the central role of language in his interpretation of the Stalinist Soviet Union.

Indeed, Kojève believes that ‘Human beings really act only in order to be able to *speak* about it (or to hear it spoken about) ... conversely: one can *speak* only about action; about nature one can only be ... [mathematically, aesthetically, etc.] *silent*.’<sup>19</sup> The post-historical, universal and homogeneous state is here not an exception. This state speaks. In fact, for the first time in history, it speaks the true language, the language of knowledge. But that does not mean that it speaks ‘evident language’. Kojève insists that the truth of speech cannot be defined as a relation of this speech to the outside ‘reality’, be it temporal (then every speech is a mere opinion) or eternal (then the truth is ‘not relevant for praxis’). Rather, according to Hegel, the truth of speech is guaranteed by its



completeness, and its completeness its ‘proven’ by its circularity: ‘whoever has said everything can only repeat himself, and no one can contradict him.’<sup>20</sup> In other words, post-historical speech is true because it runs. It always runs a full circle and thus repeats the circle that was for the first time described by Hegelian philosophy. This circular running makes every individual statement irrefutable and irrelevant at the same time. It is irrefutable because it is always already included in the full circle. And it is irrelevant because only the full circle is relevant. Thus, the language of the post-historical state is not persuasive but dissuasive.

The Hegelian full circle of philosophical speech includes every individual speech but excludes every pretence of such a speech to present an autonomous evidence or particular truth opposed to the totality

of the circle. If the modern state is a kind of a car, then circular speech functions as its motor. The individual philosophical position becomes impossible; it is impossible because it is already included. The only position that remains possible is the position of the maintenance of this motor as such, maintenance of the circular speech – a position that repeats the position of Hegel. It is a position not of a philosopher any more but of a Sage. Indeed, Kojève understands his own discourse as merely a repetition of the Hegelian discourse and he thus positions himself as a Sage. The Sage occupies himself with the truth. Thus, he takes the position that was earlier occupied by the philosopher. But the Sage does not produce his own kind of persuasive speech. Rather, he is occupied by the smooth running of the circular, dissuasive speech. In this sense, the Sage is more a worker, a technician of speech, than an ‘original thinker’. The mastery of language belongs to the past: after the end of history this mastery is situated in the realm of literary entertainment.

The emergence of the Sage and the merging of the universal and homogeneous state are interdependent. The self-consciousness of the Sage is circular because it includes all the others as possibilities of his own existence and thinking. But the possibility of including everybody in the circular movement of one’s own self-consciousness is only given to the Sage if he is a citizen of the universal and homogeneous state in which the desires of everybody are already recognized. Only then can the Sage see himself as one among many, included in the general circulation of desire and speech.<sup>21</sup> Wisdom is the combination of citizenship in the universal and homogeneous state and the circularity of knowledge.<sup>22</sup> Kojève sees himself as having come into a world in which Wisdom is already realized; in which philosopher-tyrants are already successful. There remains, however, a question that troubles the post-historical Sage: what is the mode of existence of post-historical humankind? And, especially, what is the mode of existence of the Sage himself?

It is not enough to say that human speech has become circular. The question concerns the material, corporeal aspects of the post-historical mode of existence. The historical human is passionate. He or she desires recognition, desires the desire of the other. It is this desire for recognition that unites the philosopher with the rest of humankind. Kojève is not ashamed to concede that it is impossible to distinguish between the ‘genuine’ love of Wisdom and desire for recognition and fame. To be able to

do so means to be able to look into the soul of an individual philosopher – but only God can do this.<sup>23</sup> That means that from the atheistic, materialistic point of view, it is impossible to distinguish between the search for knowledge and the pursuit of ambition. In fact, it is this impossibility that connects the philosopher to the people. In class society, masters fight against other masters for domination and slaves fight against their masters for freedom. That means that in class society everyone is moved by the desire for recognition, everyone is moved by ambition. In this respect, the philosopher is like everybody else; even if he may be exceptional in his love of Wisdom that is not necessarily shared.

However, after the end of history and thus also the end of the struggle for recognition, human beings lose their ambition: they return to nature and become human animals again. In fact, Kojève understands the revolution Rousseauistically, as a return to Nature. Rousseau believed that historical violence is caused by the struggle for prestige. It is ambition that makes people unhappy and belligerent. Thus, a return to nature would end the era of violence and make people happy again. It seems that at a certain point in time Kojève shared this hope for happiness, even if, in a truly Hegelian manner, he believed that human ambitions should not be simply Rousseauistically rejected but, rather, historically satisfied. However, the final effect remains the same: after being satisfied the desire for recognition disappears.

The echo of Rousseauistic optimism can be found in the famous footnote 6 to the first edition of Kojève's *Introduction*. In this footnote, Kojève asserts that after the end of history Nature survives. 'Man' will cease to be opposed to 'Nature' because the desire for recognition that opposed humans to Nature will be satisfied. Kojève refers to Marx who predicted that the historical realm of necessity that opposed humans to nature and one class to another class will be substituted by the realm of freedom, which will open to humankind a possibility to enjoy 'art, love, play etc.' in the harmony with nature.<sup>24</sup> However, later Kojève realized that this idyllic vision excludes the actual telos of historical development: Wisdom. Life in harmony with nature leaves no room for the Wise Man. In the extension of this footnote written for the second edition of the *Introduction*, Kojève accepts his previous error and concedes that the disappearance of historical man also makes also traditional notions of art, love and play obsolete:

Hence it would have to be admitted that after the end of history men would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs, would perform their musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas, would play like young animals and would indulge in love like adult beasts.<sup>25</sup>

But, most importantly the human animal would lose language which is the only medium of Wisdom: discourse, Logos will disappear:

Animals of the species *Homo sapiens* will react by conditioned reflexes to vocal signals... What would disappear is not only Philosophy or the search for the discursive wisdom, but also the Wisdom itself. For in these post-historical animals, there would no longer be any understanding of the World and of self.<sup>26</sup>

The Kojévian notion of the post-historical human animal became famous and controversial.<sup>27</sup> Here, it is helpful to read the chapter of *Sophia* dedicated to 'Discussion of the Marxist "Critique of Ideology" and Freud's "Psychoanalysis"'.<sup>28</sup> In this chapter, Kojève states that both Marx and Freud practise the critique of society and ideology in the name of animal desires, such as hunger and sexual desire, which have a private, 'intimate' character. They put the human animal and its animal needs at the centre of human existence and analyse political and cultural formations as manifestations of the animal in the human. At first glance, one can see in this strategy a programme of return from humanity to animality; the victory of animal needs over human aspirations. But Kojève asserts that such an analysis overlooks the non-traditional treatment that the human animal gets through Marx's and Freud's discourses. Here the unity of the human species becomes radically dissolved. The individual human animal ceases to be a representative of the species. Marxism understands economic 'class interests' as being very specific – and conflicting – ones. Ultimately, one may say that every human group and even particular individuals have specific and incompatible economic interests. For Freud, sexual desire always takes a very individual turn depending on a specific biography of the psychoanalysed individual. So for Kojève, Marxism and psychoanalysis lead to the radical fragmentation of society and, ultimately, the individualization of human beings on the most fundamental, animal level of their existence. This analysis of the animal in the human is important for the correct understanding of Kojève's famous account of the return of humans to their animal mode of existence at the end of history.

Humanity becomes an assembly of animals without a species, or, rather, of animals as unique representatives of their species. The individual needs of these animals are recognized but they cannot claim any wisdom, or even any language, in the traditional sense.

However, if speech will not repeat itself any more, then history will be repeated. Instead of language making a full circle, history becomes circular: the forgetting of the previous circle will produce a new one. That would mean the collapse of the Hegelian–Marxian project. To keep the post-historical condition stable one needs a Sage who would keep the machine of circular ‘true’ speech running. That means the figure of the Sage is as crucial to the maintenance of the universal and homogeneous state as the emergence of this state is crucial for the emergence of the Sage. But to be able to maintain and run the machine of circular speech, the Sage has to be an ‘outsider’ to the post-historical order. In other words, the Sage cannot be a post-historical animal pursuing his private, particular animal desires. But how is such ‘outsiderness’ possible? The philosopher was moved by the desire of recognition that opposed him to the world. But the post-historical human animal is again immersed in nature, in the world. Thus, Kojève has to define a possibility for the human being to oppose nature even after the end of history – otherwise the end of history will not coincide any more with the emergence of the Wise Man, of the Sage. Kojève has to define not merely logical but material ‘real’ conditions under which the figure of the Sage can be constituted.

Thus, the quest for Wisdom as eternally repeatable speech leads Kojève to the more precise analysis of repetition as such. What is the true, eternally repeatable speech? It is obviously ‘empty’ speech – because it does not relate to any temporal event or eternal (mathematically defined) essence. The referent of this speech is the speech itself. But, according to Kojève, every speech is carried by a ‘body’ and has certain actions of this body if not as its referent then, at least, as its support. Therefore, in the case of empty speech these actions should also be empty. In other words, the post-historical action opposing the Sage to the world should also be an empty action – a post-historical re-enactment of a historical action. Only a re-enactment of an action that reproduces merely its form, separated from its content, which is defined by a particular historical context (Walter Benjamin speaks here about the ‘loss of aura’), would produce genuinely empty action. Thus, the

post-historical desire that is able to oppose us to the world is diagnosed: it is the desire for re-enactment, repetition of an empty form. This desire opens the way for Wisdom that is barred by natural or animal desires because the desire for repetition of an empty form is similar to the desire for recognition – it is an ‘unnatural’ desire directed towards emptiness, nothingness. But the question remains: how widespread and reliable is this desire? In other words, to what degree is there a certainty that this desire will, indeed, produce the Sage?

### **The empty form of art and state**

First, the desire for the repetition of an empty form should not be confused with Nietzsche’s ‘eternal return of the same’ or with the Freudian concept of the death drive. The Nietzschean Eternal Return is what happens to the human beyond its will, the ontological condition of its existence; while for Freud the desire for repetition is also unconscious and compulsive. It is, of course, not what Kojève (for whom the human, one should not forget, is self-consciousness) is interested in. He is interested in the conscious choice of empty form versus animal desire. Now, one can see European modern art as a cultural practice directed towards the production of empty signs, pure forms, devoid of any content. The artists of Russian Suprematism or Zurich Dada asserted that their art refers to Zero, nothingness. Of course, they understood their practice as destruction of old artistic forms. However, in the 1930s, Clement Greenberg already defined modernist art not as a destruction but as a reproduction of traditional art. In his famous article ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, Greenberg defines the avant-garde as mimesis of mimesis: the avant-garde reproduces the artistic form of traditional painting instead of reproducing its content.<sup>29</sup> Kojève himself writes on the art of his uncle Kandinsky as dealing with pure, autonomous forms detached from every content.<sup>30</sup>

However, these European practices seemed to Kojève to be too individualistic. Instead, Kojève uses Japanese culture as a proof that the desire for empty form can be culturally normative. Indeed, Kojève argues that Japanese culture is able to aestheticize the ‘historical’ forms of human behaviour and to practise them as pure forms after they have ceased to be historically relevant. Here, indeed, one can see, if one will, a difference between Japanese and European culture. After the French Revolution the sacral, ritual objects and things used by kings and the court were also aestheticized. They were put out

of their historical use, separated from their 'content' and offered to contemplation as pure, empty forms; turned into museum items. But the forms of human behaviour – and human life in general – were not aestheticized to the same degree. What Kojève wanted to show was precisely this: Japanese culture aestheticizes not only objects but also actions. Accordingly, it is able to consider not only certain things and events, but rather the totality of human life as artwork, as empty form. Japanese culture thus gives humans the possibility to aestheticize life in its totality, as an empty form. Kojève ironically characterizes this commitment to life as a pure form of snobbery. Snobbery is, of course, not the same thing as desire for recognition – snobbery cannot be universal. Nonetheless, at the same time snobbery, as understood by Kojève, is a very serious matter. It means not only the ability to re-enact the tea ceremony or Noh theatre, but also the readiness for self-sacrifice in the name of pure form. Kojève speaks, indeed, about the ability of the Japanese to commit 'gratuitous' suicide using 'airplane or torpedo' instead of the *épée* of the samurai.<sup>31</sup> Now, the kamikaze action cannot be really seen as *divertissement*. To aestheticize one's own life, to see it as a form, means to see it from its end, from the perspective of death.

The Kojévian post-historical human animal reminds one very much of the Nietzschean 'last man'. In his letters to Kojève, Strauss repeatedly points out that the post-historical condition is most aptly described by Nietzsche as the realm of the 'last men' incapable of any strong passion or action:

My general reaction to your statements is that we are poles apart. The root of the question is I suppose the same as it always was, that you are convinced of the truth of Hegel (Marx) and I am not. You have never given me an answer to my questions: a) was Nietzsche not right in describing the Hegelian-Marxian end as 'the last man'? and b) what would you put into the place of Hegel's philosophy of nature.<sup>32</sup>

In his book on the end of history Francis Fukuyama, who was a student of Strauss but influenced by Kojève, also paints a dark image of humanity after the end of history: a humanity that has lost its desire for glory and recognition.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Kojévian 'human animals and Nietzschean last men seem similar at the first glance: both are domesticated and docile. However, there is a fundamental difference between them. Nietzsche believes that the last man is crippled by wisdom and knowledge, which suppresses his instincts, passions and drives. That is why

Nietzsche speaks about the 'monstrous influence' of Hegel who turned the generations after him into 'late comers'.<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche distrusts Wisdom because he associates it with careful calculation and the avoidance of risk-taking, with moderation and lack of true ambition. He believes that it is Wisdom that paralyzes the human will, which turns Man into the 'last man', whereas Nature is the source of vital energies that liberate Man from the dictate of reason. For Nietzsche all the forces that are truly creative are forces of nature operating in and through man. The dominating order is imposed by Apollonian forces that operate through the masters: it reflects the will of the masters and serves their pleasure. This order is permanently endangered by Dionysian forces that try to dissolve it. The battle between Apollonian and Dionysian principles is an eternal battle. But both Apollonian and Dionysian forces are endangered by reason and slave morality. When Apollonian and Dionysian principles lose their power, humans become weak and history becomes non-tragic, flat, boring. Nietzschean 'last men' are slaves without masters. They are wise, and that means they are cautious, moderate and – yes – satisfied.

In other words, Nietzsche has worried that after the end of history the masters will become not masterly enough – not enough driven, explosive, aggressive. Kojève has a different, opposing set of worries. He is concerned by the possibility that after becoming the master, the slave may cease to be the slave. In other words, he sees the danger that the post-historical human capitulates before nature in general and his own nature in particular. Instead of serving and working, the post-historical human begins merely to enjoy and to consume – forgetting and abandoning its former discipline and asceticism, its pathos and ambition. Indeed, Kojève sees the source of moderation and aversion to risk-taking precisely in 'natural' desires, because every natural desire can also be satisfied by nature. Nature can be opposed only by an unnatural desire to subject it to idea and plan, to transform it by systematic work. Thus, for Kojève the revolutionary subject is not a desiring, explosive human, breaking the dominating order in the name of 'liberation' of the body and its natural desires, alterity or suppressed unconscious drives, but a 'monk' or an ascetic philosopher who left a monastery, nunnery or an academy to change the world by action and work. The modern tyrant is the slave who remains the slave after becoming a master – the same revolutionary subject who came to power with the goal not to satisfy natural, animal desire

but to serve an idea, to realize a plan. For Kojève that is the crucial difference between the old, pre-biblical, pre-Christian type of tyrant (who uses power to satisfy personal desires) and the modern type of tyrant like Napoleon, Stalin, Salazar or Mao. In his commentary to Strauss's essay on tyranny, Kojève stresses that the modern, 'post-biblical' tyrant is such a slave realizing a certain abstract idea, working for the implementation of a certain philosophical goal.<sup>35</sup>

Thus the actual goal of Kojévian discourse is to open the possibility of this paradoxical figure: a Sage who after the end of history would be still able to serve, like a slave, the machine of eternally circular speech. Such a figure is, of course, possible if one remains in the religious perspective. Hegel speaks about the Christian era as an era of universalized slavery, universalized servitude. In the context of Christianity, the King is also a slave of God. But if the heavens became empty it is only emptiness that remains to be the 'transcendent master'. So the only way to remain a slave at the end of history is to become a slave of emptiness, of empty form. Thus, at the end of his philosophical development, Kojève found his way back to a certain Buddhism. Yet it was not a contemplative, Eastern Buddhism, but a Western, active, working and speaking Buddhism. To commit oneself to emptiness as one's ultimate master means to act in the name of the pure, empty form in the middle of the world that is interested only in natural content.

### **Bureaucrat of the state to come**

Of course, one can see a certain kind of modern art as well as certain Japanese rituals as manifestations of emptiness in action. But I would suggest that the actual figure that Kojève had in mind is the figure of the bureaucrat. There is a long tradition of opposing 'dead' bureaucratic formalism to life, and seeing in life (and living bodies) the revolutionary potential directed against the 'dead' machine of the state and its 'empty' rituals. It is obvious that Kojève does not share this attitude. For him, the post-historical bureaucracy is the heir of revolutionary philosopher-tyrants who dominated the populations of their countries and changed the conditions of their existence. The bureaucracy upholds and executes the laws that were imposed by these tyrants. The Sage who acts as an adviser and functionary of the law, upholding bureaucracy, has access to Wisdom only if he rejects all the 'contents' that can corrupt the empty form of law. Thus the Sage is still opposed to nature – not as a revolutionary but as a defender of the empty

form of law imposed by the revolution, against its corruption through particular interests and contents. On a practical, political level that means primarily opposition to the concept of the nation-state.

Indeed, this opposition defined Kojève's political writings and activities until the end of his life. He saw himself as a bureaucrat of the universal and homogeneous state, of the non-existing, empty state to come. Kojève actively worked on the creation of the European Union, which was originally supposed to transcend national states. And he believed that whoever serves this goal will be historically victorious. Thus, Kojève writes:

If the Westerners remain capitalist (that is to say, also nationalist), they will be defeated by Russia, and *that* is how the End-State will come about. If, however, they 'integrate' their economies and policies (they are on the way to doing so), then they can defeat Russia. And *that* is how the End-State will be reached (the *same* universal and homogeneous State). But in the first case it will be spoken about in 'Russian' (with Lysenko, etc.), and in the second case – in 'European'.<sup>36</sup>

Now, whatever can be said about the realizability of the project of the universal and homogeneous state one thing is clear: today this state is as far from us as it was at the time in which Kojève worked for its realization. If Kojève was a bureaucrat he was a Romantic bureaucrat – serving the state that remained a pure idea. In this respect, Kojève is not so distant from Vladimir Soloviev, who believed himself to be a member of the 'Universal All-United Church' that did not exist then and does not exist now.

But does it mean that Kojève was wrong with his diagnosis of the end of history? I do not think so, but this diagnosis should be correctly understood. If the philosophical project is the search for the common truth that would be able to unite humankind, this search is, indeed, abandoned in our time. Today, everyone insists on his or her own opinion and reacts to any attempt to change this opinion as propaganda, indoctrination and totalitarian oppression. The end of persuasive speech that Kojève diagnosed before World War II is in our time a reality that is obvious to everyone. But that does not mean that the unity of humankind as such became impossible. The principle of the new post-historical, post-philosophical politics is the principle of inclusion. Here Kojève was right. To be truly inclusive the form of the state – and all other state-like institutions – should be empty. That means that the realization of the universal state presupposes the process of the progressive emptying

of its form. Here, again, art is a good illustration. A typical global art exhibition of our time is an exhibition that includes all the possible art forms and attitudes, cultural and ethnic identities, sexual orientations, and so on. It has nothing to do with the time of the historical avant-garde as artists tried to define the universal art forms that would correspond to their own time. Today, the form of an art exhibition tends to be an empty form that can contain any artistic method and attitude. Meanwhile, individual artworks are also produced as 'open' ones, which means not having any specific message and open to all possible interpretations.

The same can be said about the political activism of our time. As a rule it is directed towards inclusion in the existing system of political representation of the people, who are currently excluded from this system; or towards better and more general access to information; or towards better access to economic opportunities, and so on. Thus, today's political activists operate de facto in the name of the universal and all-inclusive state that is empty and not based on any commonly shared values or truths. In this respect, they continue the post-historical politics that Kojève started before World War II: the project of opposing the world as it is, not in the name of an Idea, but rather in the name of the state as universal, all-inclusive, empty form, or in the name of Romantic Bureaucracy. Kojève died from a heart attack during a meeting of the European Commission in 1968. It was, of course, a truly Romantic death. Kojève was the Arthur Rimbaud of modern bureaucracy: a philosophical writer who consciously became a martyr of the post-historical bureaucratic order.

## Notes

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1. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the 'Phenomenology of Spirit'*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY and London, 1980.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
6. This is a manuscript of about 1,000 pages (handwritten in Russian) that was produced by Kojève in the years 1940–1941 in occupied Paris. The manuscript was given to Georges Bataille by Kojève, before Kojève left Paris after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Currently it is to be found at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Another – probably typed – copy of the same text was given by Kojève to the Soviet embassy in France to be sent to Moscow, along with a personal letter to Stalin. (Kojève was probably

considering return to the Soviet Union at that time.) But this copy was probably burnt. The Soviet embassy was set on fire after the German attack on the Soviet Union.

The two main parts of the manuscripts are entitled:

- (1) 'Non-human presuppositions of human existence' and
- (2) 'Human existence'. The second part repeats in its main aspects the content of the Kojévian lectures on Hegel's *Phenomenology* – albeit in a much more detailed form – and includes a very interesting phenomenology of the bourgeois form of existence.
7. Kojève, *Sophia, Philo-sophy and Phenomeno-logy* [manuscript], p. 500ff.
8. Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (1929/30), trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1995, p. 74ff.
9. Soloviev described his meetings with Sophia in the poem 'Tri svidaniya' (Three meetings), in Vladimir Solovyov, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Brussels, 1966, vol. 12, pp. 80–86.
10. Vladimir Solovyov, *The Meaning of Love*, Lindisfarne Press, Hudson NY, 1985; *ibid.*, p. 105ff.
11. Kojève, *Introduction*, pp. 69–70.
12. The Kojévian interpretation of Stalin and Stalinism was further developed by Georges Bataille. In *The Accursed Share* (vols 2 and 3, Zone Books, New York, 1999) Bataille analyses the notion of sovereignty and writes: 'Today, sovereignty is no longer alive except in the perspective of Communism' (p. 261). According to Bataille, under Communism sovereignty takes the form of the 'sovereign renunciation of sovereignty' (p. 322). Stalin is paradigmatic for this new kind of sovereignty because he denies himself pleasure, leisure and the satisfaction of desires in the name of serving the idea of Communism (pp. 323f.).
13. Kojève, *Sophia*, pp. 4ff.
14. *Ibid.* p. 21.
15. Alexandre Kojève, 'The Strauss–Kojève Correspondence', in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny: Corrected and Expanded Edition, Including the Strauss–Kojève Correspondence*, ed. Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013, pp. 302–3.
16. Alexandre Kojève, 'Tyranny and Wisdom', in Strauss, *On Tyranny*.
17. Alexandre Kojève, *Identité et Réalité dans le 'Dictionnaire' de Pierre Bayle*, Gallimard, Paris, 2010, pp. 101ff.
18. 'Notre science est vraie (globalement!) parce que les automobiles marchent', Kojève, *ibid.*, p. 107.
19. Kojève, 'The Strauss–Kojève Correspondence', p. 255.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
21. Kojève, *Introduction*, p. 95.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
23. Kojève, *Tyranny and Wisdom*, in Leo Strauss, *On Tyranny*, p. 161.
24. Kojève, *Introduction*, pp. 157–9.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
27. See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2004, pp. 5–12.
28. Kojève, *Sophia*, pp. 500ff.
29. Clement Greenberg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, in *Art and Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1989.
30. Alexandre Kojève, *Die konkrete Malerei Kandinskys*, Verlag Gachnang und Springer, Bern, 2005.
31. Kojève, *Introduction*, pp. 161–2.
32. Strauss, 'The Strauss–Kojève Correspondence', p. 291.
33. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Penguin Books, London, 1992, pp. 300ff.
34. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, in *Untimely Meditations*, edited by Daniel Breazeale, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 104 (trans. amended).
35. Kojève, 'Tyranny and Wisdom', pp. 172ff.
36. Kojève, 'The Strauss–Kojève Correspondence', p. 256.