

HOW DOES THE KANTIAN IDEA OF HISTORY ANTICIPATE, IN 1784, ITS OWN REALIZATION?¹

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1. Introduction

Kantians may be annoyed by the fate of the Kantian philosophy of history in the general public. Since Kant is an immense name in the intellectual history of Europe, his project of cosmopolitan peace serves as an easy and recurrent reference to punctuate the great events of the current events. Thus, at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, mass-media journalism concluded that the pacific predictions of Kantianism were successful and with the crisis that is stalling Europe today, begins to deplore the unrealistic idealism of a dream of world peace. In both cases, whether it is to judge the Kantian project prophetically or to regard it as utopian, the error of appreciation is the same (and it is moreover regularly done by the beginner students): *one reads Kant empirically*, as if it were a linear narrative ranging from ascertainable material causes to quantifiable effects, a history that would make cosmopolitanism the automatic result of a legal arrangement of relations between nations, a sort of predictable history of the most desirable European performances.

To fight against this naively positivist reading, we must begin by showing how the Kantian writing of history was, *from 1784, a transcendental writing*. This exploration will develop on three levels of analysis:

- History elaborates an anthropology which does not conceive the development of humanity as a result, but as a vocation.
- Because the idea of history is itself a product of history, the history that men can do is up to the intelligibility they are able to give it.
- The cosmopolitanism announcing the passing of civilization by moralization, we venture to advance the idea of a sense of European culture according to the spirit of Kantianism.

And it is motivated by this underlying question: Do we find that the state of mind of Europeans today anticipate the realization of his idea of a universal history, in the way that Kant could anticipate it in 1784?

2. The Historicity of Human Life in the 1784 Text

2.1 *The historicity of history*

Let us ask ourselves, first of all, what makes the historicity of history in the text of 1784. The answer is without mystery, it is the way in which the human species reveals itself to itself as a

¹ This essay was originally presented at the SEKLF Congress in Mainz DE, 28 Sept. – 2 Oct. 2015.

set of dispositions or skills; as such, history is an anthropology, it presents in a dynamic and chronological way what *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View* calls “the character of the species”. Therefore history has for its own object the existence of a universal human identity, which the human race reveals in the itinerary of a collective experience. Such a story is philosophical, not a science of facts (the history of a particular nation or age), but a sort of universal scheme which is the condition of all writing of human culturality. Indeed, the need for clothing and food, as well as conflictuality and war, are peculiar to any community: it is linked to the movement of life, the vitality of life in a given species, ours in this case.

But history also responds to a critical questioning that the *Critique of Pure Reason* has defined as the interest of reason which is both theoretical and practical: if I do what I ought to do, what may I hope? (A805/B833), a theoretical-practical interest that ultimately relates to the question: “What is man?” (*Logik* 9: 25).

The text of 1784 addresses itself to history as posing a problem for reason, not only from the theoretical point of view (that of a knowledge of the facts), but from the metaphysical point of view: to ask the question of whether human action collective is unintelligible and insensate calls into question the action of reason, a reason which is not regarded, as like in the great critical works, as a set of principles and operations purely mental, but as living and carnal reason inscribed in corporeality and in human psychology. If human action is only violence, immoderation, and incoherence, no self-recognition of reason in history is thinkable. The issue is metaphysical insofar as it questions the *raison d'être* of human existence as a natural reality, engendered by nature, the *raison d'être* of its earthly existence (ninth proposition): “why should men exist?” will question the *Critique of Judgment*, and we know that the young Hegel will treat this same question both theologically and philosophically by the schema of the Incarnation of the Spirit in sensory life. In 1784, the Kantian message associates, for its part, the question of man with that of hope: the hope of finding a sensible direction for the overall manifestations of the human species, an orientation which is for it both a self-knowledge and a vector of historical self-fulfillment.

It is therefore from life that inquiry begins, and more precisely from what makes generic human life an *originally historical life* because it belongs to a living one capable of reason. When one says of an individual that he is endowed with reason, one imagines reason as a faculty which lives in him and of which he is the owner as he is of a personal patrimony. But to say of the human race that it is endowed with reason, it is, for Kant, to give it as characteristic a lack, an incompleteness collectively lived. This incompleteness is the specificity of living humanity, the mark of an experience overflowed by its own possibilities, just as *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View* shows in the potential multiplicity of the uses of the hand the feature of a rational being.

In the case of the historical human species, reason is not represented as a power to manage property and to calculate interests, but as the sole resort for organizing and regulating the possibilities that go beyond naturalness (beginning of the second proposition): beyond the limits of instinct, human action opens up perspectives that nature does not know or govern and that demand a practical rational legislation. Reason thus characterizes what is metaphysical, supra-empirical in man, a transnatural dimension in what consists the original substance of human historicity. Is properly human, on the historical level, that the responsibility for the possible is incumbent upon reason; what distinguishes reason from intelligence, which is limited to increasing the efficiency of reality.

There is thus a primordial historical solidarity of the human race which one could call the “solidarity of the uncompleted”,² since humanity is by nature compelled to invent culturally

² Which fits with the “solidarity of the shaken”, according to Jan Patočka.

the means of its existence. History is universal because humanity is historically transhistorical just as it is naturally trans-natural: a people is both a particular story and a figure of the possibilities of universal human identity. An anthropological imperative forces our species to become all that it can be, and this is a collective “müssen”, not an individual “sollen”. Universal human history is history of the humanization of humanity.

2.2 Vocation

We must now identify the specific mainsprings of social historicity. A surprising formulation in the 1784 text stops the attention; it states that the historical humanity has to make itself worthy of life: nature has wanted “that it works to rise to the point where, by its conduct, it becomes worthy of life and well-being” (*IaG* 8: 20). In other words, a life reduced to mere survival is impossible for it, human vitality is forced to a continual conversion of the means of survival into mainsprings of a historicized and culturalized life. The transition from survival to life as “work”, the product of man by man, corresponds to civilization, the building of which will be a legacy that will continue from one generation to the next, in the manner of an endless route (idea expressed by the image of a building built over the centuries). The civilization of natural dispositions transfigures human desire by changing it from the appetite for well-being to the wish for “living-well”, a transformation driven by *Selbstschätzung*, self-esteem, which makes thus the originally human desire, as Hegel will say, a desire for recognition.

It may seem absurd that the individual should deserve his life, as if he could deserve his health, physical strength, intelligence, or literary skills, but everyone can recognize in his heart of hearts that he has the concern to promote the life that he bears with oneself as an object of respect (cultural, aesthetic, intellectual or ethical respect). Thus, history realizes the condition of all human morality in the eyes of Kantianism: one can only work to make oneself worthy of happiness; never will happiness be given to it, and the desire to reach it magically by natural or artificial means is a politically dangerous illusion. There appears an anthropological rigorism and a tragic realism whose depth has not always been perceived and which perhaps finds its full intelligibility today. In any case, in the light of this anthropological realism, we must understand the historical function of socialization and of the birth of power.

It is, indeed, in a social context that the need to make oneself worthy of life finds a possible deployment. Kantians are well acquainted with the image of trees in a forest, an image which, in the fifth proposition, expresses social competition: each one, it is explained, tries to get above the other for the air and the sun and, consequently, the trees grow beautiful and straight. Not one against the other, but one above the other, a precision that makes all the difference between the vital competition (one acts against the other while trying to destroy it) and the social competition or sport (it is seeking to transcend the other that one raises oneself).

This emphasis on the forced surpassing of oneself highlights the fact that society is a historical mainspring of the transformation of appetites into abilities, skills and talents. Self-development is carried out through self-transformation. This is a reading that is closer to the concerns of our time than the optimistic liberalism of Eudemonist theorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Liberal hedonism makes the appetite the mainspring of the appetite, the interest correcting the interest to lead it to a secure and guaranteed satisfaction³. But for Kant, it is not the appetite, but the resistance (*Widerstand*) opposed to the appetite that compels it to transform itself by cultivating itself. The desire for possession, for power and for glory (*IaG* 8: 21) are not the goal, but only the source of frustrations that will turn them into social skills and civilized skills. History is not a linear accumulation of means going from a well-being

³We can think here of John Locke’s “a secure enjoyment of their properties” in the *Second Treatise of Government* and of Alexis de Tocqueville’s description of the “Self-Interest Rightly Understood” in *Democracy in America*.

to a greater well-being; it describes the way of the cultural sublimation of appetites, a sublimation that makes human potentialities (*Anlagen*) appear and take shape, potentialities which would remain hidden if social life was only the avoidance of suffering.

The depth of Kantian humanism may lie in this way of historically treating humanity as a vocation, as a destination to be, a finality in the making, drawn forward by its own incompleteness (*IaG* 8: 30), and not the effect of successive conditionings. In our time, the human sciences have accustomed us to treat culture as the result of a set of causes and to think history as an effect of previous determinisms; but the Kantian vision of history is not historicist, so that the representation of humanity as a vocation to become oneself by transformation of oneself is not familiar to us.

3. The Intelligence of History

So, in order to regain its full philosophical legitimacy, the starting question will be asked in another way: how could the 1784 writing foresee the realization of its own way of writing history?

It can be seen from the outset that Kant does not leave history to forces external to human intelligence, nor to unknowable mystical forces or uncontrollable material forces; because this would consist in explaining causes that are not understood by causes of which we are ignorant and introducing “a hyperphysical hypothesis” in the manner of a “lazy reason” (*ignava ratio*), as explained in the first *Critique* (A773/B801): it would be, in other words, to use a magical causality that removes the questioning instead of facing the uncertainty. It must therefore be recognized that the writing of history is itself a product of history and that it is clearly, in this case, a product of the Age of Enlightenment, year 1784. That the intelligibility of history is the work of human intelligence, this is a very critical view in the critical sense: for if men can hope to contribute to the course of history (*Geschichte*), it is because they will never do more than the history they understand (*Historie*), so that their understanding of history is the condition of possibility of their collective action.

3.1 Methodology

Hence the critical transparency of Kantian methodology in the 1784 writing. This is a rational inquiry that is hypothetical, an attempt (*Versuch*) to find a coherent organization in a chaos of facts and that writes history according to an Idea which it makes a regulating principle, that is to say a method of interpretation. The methodological precaution which warns against any confusion between an interpretation (of the facts) and a fiction (which would replace the reality) is not without a certain scientific greatness. The ninth proposition notes that reconstructing the course of history from an encompassing point of view may remind you of a “novel” (*Roman*). When we know today in Europe how much the intelligentsia has contributed to giving the imaginary of a fully explainable history a politically totalitarian function, we are retrospectively grateful to Kantianism for the rational prudence it lets the unification of facts in a global system have only a heuristic function, intended to give at one time the self-awareness of the vision of the future it was able to give itself.

Especially since the mode of writing must correspond to a self-education of the human race. The intelligibility of history is pedagogical, peculiar to a species that will develop on the mode of trials and errors, ranging from rectifications to rectifications, learning at its own expense the necessity of the self-transformation which is peculiar to its being in development. What it could know of itself through reflection, it learns from history, suffering and failure. History is thus the *Bildungsroman* of humanity, and the Enlightenment is the moment of awareness of this state. The human race learns the history it makes through the hardships it undergoes, so it can access a rational understanding of its historical condition, a self-knowledge

torn by suffering. And since it is by undergoing its history that humanity learns the history of which it is capable, since access to reason, too, is through a self-transformation, the writing of history by the Enlightenment philosophy is the moment of a conversion from the pain of the failure into historical intelligence.

On this basis we can realize the Kantian way of understanding history from the future and not from the past. A subtle critical invention, not only because it brings history into modernity, but because it prohibits in advance any historicist conception of progress, which makes it the result of a process rather than a task to carry out. The most common misconception about the Kantian concept of progress in 1784 is to regard the stages of history as following one another (*Stufen*) in a continuity without interruption: Humanity would thus pass from the stage of rusticity to that of civilization, hoping to add to it the transition to moralization after the intellectuals and politicians have read the Kantian philosophy of history and that they will prepare the path supposed to go from the happiness of being civilized to the happiness of being moralized. This is a naive reading, characteristic of an incorrigible eudemonist progressivism which posterity has unfortunately preserved and spread.

But reflective finality is that delivers the true intelligence of history and about this methodology, Kant informs us as early as 1784. The beginning of the eighth proposition is explicit: to explain history by an ideal finality and to impose on the facts to conform to it would be a delirious attitude (*schwämerisch*), if it were not a process that criticism later will qualify as reflective since it uses of teleology as a method of inquiry to discover in experience the traces, signs or clues (*Spuren*) of a direction capable of making intelligible the march of history. To analyze its function more precisely, we must now approach the second aspect of the intelligence of history and analyze what constitutes its intrigue.

3.2 *Intrigue*

The text of 1784, in fact, constructs history as a narrative engendered by an intrigue: this intrigue is named by Kant a problem (*Problem*). Having made his reader understand what the historical condition of the human race consists in, he focuses the analysis on the main test that awaits our species, and he then points out what makes the intrigue of human history is to political nature.

We have seen that the development of human potentialities is social because it is caused by a natural conflictuality that only a political organization is able to regulate, that is to socialize and civilize. Every society, therefore, needs a government capable of ensuring that the resistances mutually inflicted by the individuals become creative of a fruitful development. As the image of trees in the forest means, only civilized freedom, and not anarchic freedom, is a creator of a human development of human dispositions.

However, to the extent that this civilization of freedoms is done by the frustration and the impediment continually provoked by the discord,⁴ one can speak of a pedagogy of the dressage (man being “an animal which needs a master”), to designate that stage of human development which is that of a discipline of instincts, forced by force to abandon their natural tropisms. Politics finds here its specific role: it is the institutional condition of the discipline of wild liberties.

Nevertheless, if politics is the very instrument of this civilization or “politization” of habits it is at the same time the greatest problem that arises for the human species, because it reveals itself, in the essay of 1784, as an insoluble problem. There lies the knot of the intrigue: politics cannot be the solution for the historical destination of humanity. The stakes being high, it is important to understand why.

⁴ *Unverstragsamkeit für die missgünstig wetteifernde Eitelkeit (IaG 8: 21).*

In political terms, the natural conflict that exists between individuals means that the State is born from the reciprocity of violence and counter-violence. The State is born in the force, and the political history of humanity begins with violence. As a result, the 1784 text raises a real legal, political and philosophical problem: the problem of the relationship between law, morality and politics. This is a problem that in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century will provoke the theories of political power (of the *Herrschaftsgewalt* in Germany), which represent the State as an irresistible force, sovereignly unifying, creating the law and order. But the problem raised by Kant now resurfaces: if the political power is creator of right, it is impossible for him to regulate itself by the right, all right being only the product and the expression of its domination. Unless we consider that the supreme power is self-limiting, which amounts to making it a moral power (thesis adopted by some French positivists⁵). Now it is precisely the impossibility of this moral solution that the text of 1784 puts forward in the sixth proposition. He who stands above the law should probably be moral, but he will always be a man and, in this case, a man of power. There is therefore no solution to the problem of political sovereignty.

One can only express wishes: the sovereign should have a good will, a right constitution and a great experience of the world, but that is a mere hope) and postpone the solution of the problem for a long time. In 1795, *Towards Perpetual Peace* would provide the solution by the publicity of political decisions to avoid having to believe in an implausible moral solution. For the moment, in 1784, politics is indeed an obstacle to the possible moralization of human history.

If the morality of sovereigns is not the solution, how can the intrigue of human history be unraveled? To try to understand it, we must analyze the third and last of our opening questions: how could a cosmopolitan idea of world history think of its own realization and with which actors?

4. Actors of Universal History

4.1 War

The aporia of politics finds a decisive degree of severity with war, and this is what leads to the change of scale in the questioning about history in the text of 1784. Because with war the natural conflictuality brings on the world level the conditions of development of the human species? Thus the war brings into play hostilities that go beyond the scale of Nation-States, and the antagonisms, which are however the occasional natural causes of the appearance and the development of the possible humans, produce with the inter-state wars nothing but destructions and havoc that threaten to annihilate the civilization engendered in the bosom of States. Kantianism asserts here a cosmic-dimensional political intuition when it sees in war not an accident, not a simple breach of peace, but a worldwide situation of global distress and ruins, in which security is no longer assured for any State.

War is always global, even when it is local, because it imposes on the presence of the world of the human race a change of regime which makes of death and not of life the goal and the solution of the confrontations. It is always through the threat that the war reigns, either factually or potentially. Unlike the struggle, whose fourth proposal is the instrument of social benefits and civilizing talents, war does not promote life, it only annihilates it.

Therefore is war that gives human history a cosmic dimension, which in turn calls for a cosmopolitan solution. So it is not absurd to wonder whether the most acute problem for the

⁵ "It is of the moral value of the rulers and, in contemporary democracies, of the moral value of the people themselves that it is necessary to wait for the guarantee of moderation of the State, that the law, alone, would remain powerless to assure" (Malberg 1920:242).

thought of history in 1784 is not to discover a meaning to the nonsense of war, wars being perceived as nonsense for reason, for politics and for the question of man.

The seventh proposition brings to the existence of war an intelligibility similar to that of the existence of States, that is to say, a historical intelligibility which can be summarized as follows: war gives to human history the mission to suppress the war. In this way, by analogy with the birth of each state in particular, war violence can appear as the prehistory of a world history of humanity, a planetary history it makes necessary.

Is the political aporia nevertheless resolved? The question may receive several answers from “kantologists”. We hypothesize, for our part, that the text of 1784 seeks a solution in the change of mentalities. If this hypothesis is not false, the moralization of the minds, presented as the indispensable overtaking of their simple civilization comes to announce the history that is to be made, a story that must be the work of men and whose message can be received and understood by enlightened minds.

To support this hypothesis, it is necessary to advance on the somewhat enigmatic field of the moralization of morals. Can we do it with caution? It must be tried, knowing that any interpretation will be debatable.

4.2 From Civilization to Moralization: The Cosmopolitan Idea

The last part of the seventh proposition is explicit concerning the moral and political necessity of not stopping human history at the stage of civilization, and the reference to Rousseau (whose harsh criticism of the artificial productions of an inegalitarian progressivism is well known) shows how important the challenge is. However, Kant does not seek, as Rousseau did in his *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men* to write a genealogical history of the civilization of injustice and he does not mean to seek, like him, in a mythical past the model of a pure ethics; he suggests, on the contrary, a history of the future of ethics, the way of a moralization capable of joining what is required by the pure morality, a progressivity of the change of minds allowing the future to rectify the present.

Kant conceives of these perspectives as a philosopher when he describes, as he puts it himself, history as it “should be”, in other words, future history considered from a cosmopolitan point of view, oriented towards the building of a League of Nations, a history set to a goal that gives it meaning. However, the realization of a “sense” of history can be understood in two very different ways and can give rise to a conflict of interpretations:

- It has a purely instrumental meaning if it is to “produce” a League of Nations as one would produce an object according to a mechanical and industrial design where the end serves to determine the choice of means. If we stick to this, the realization of peace will remain in the field of civilization and its role will be to protect its continuity. But we notice that Kant expects neither from sovereigns, nor from a providential man, nor from any power, the pragmatic realization of a cosmopolitan state of the world,(and that) doubtless because the realization of an Idea cannot obey to the schema of the fabrication, unless we remain in the games of power which characterize the civilization of morals. We must therefore think differently of the transition from civilization to moralization to associate it with the realization of a League of Nations which is the becoming-end of an end.
- But the sense of history, just as the meaning of an institution is not instrumental when it acts as a call to hear and not as a result to obtain. It is of mental nature and leads the minds to adhere to an orientation that arouses their responsibility rather than their calculations. The distinction between these two registers can be clarified by an example.

When a monument of the past is destroyed maliciously (a temple, a tomb, a palace, or rare documents, etc.), we are surprised at the emotion provoked in the public while the realities destroyed were not any more use. It is because the emotion is not aroused by the destruction of the functionality of the object (its practical utility), but by the intention of destroying the sense of the culture that created it.

Now it seems that this meaning is what Kant gives to a future League of Nations: it is what makes Europe more than a civilization, a culture; a culture identifiable by its moral orientation in that it shows, in fact, a capacity to act through meaning, to “be capable of the idea” in Kantian terms (*Refl* 15: 1356, 1372; see also Castillo 1990: 245-246), to decide by “the representation of a law” according to the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, to adhere to the legal concept of cosmopolitanism according to the *Idea for a Universal History From a Cosmopolitan Point of View* or to be enthusiastic about the idea of law in the second part of *The Conflict of the Faculties*. According to this interpretation, this is what gives meaning to its history, which can trigger the self-mobilization of European civilization in favor of a cosmopolitan future, what Kant calls the achievement of a *Bestimmung*, of an realizable destination as its internal cultural end.

As such the achievement of a League of Nations can be understood as a self-fulfillment of Europe. And this is the meaning of this story, the feeling of belonging to the same story according to the spirit, which can still be shared with the most distant generations, as explained in the ninth proposition. When the historical documents will be unreadable or lost, only the meaning that the Enlightenment may have left as a legacy may still arouse, in the future, the fidelity to its future.

To justify this reading of the text of 1784 according to the spirit of Kantianism as well as according to the letter, let us give a moment to the other interpretation, the instrumental interpretation of the cosmopolitan end of history, which enjoins to find the legal, economic and political means to achieve a general security situation of States. In this case, the progress towards peace will use the means of civilization to realize the final stage of the civilization of minds that will not end to happen, according to the asymptotic model of an endless progression. The forced dressage will be abandoned for a discipline caused by other motives. It may be supposed that the history of war gives way to the history of money, the political constraint receding behind the commercial motives which in turn guide the rules of propriety and civility.

This scheme of progress by trade comes to us also from the Enlightenment. Applied to Europe today, it proves realistic, but a little disappointing. The cosmopolitan Idea suffers some disenchantment. That is why we will conclude by an act of faith in the Cosmopolitan Idea, faith being the other way to be embarked towards our destination. This faith is certainly not a miracle of the will, but the fruit of the conversion of mentalities by dint of disappointments and failures.

The passion for domination, money, and reputation show their power to harm and their powerlessness to bring happiness, they increase the danger of the world and end up destroying civilization by the means of civilization, the progress by the means of progress. Then the true meaning of cosmopolitanism appears, the sense of its finality, namely that cosmopolitanism no longer appears to us as a means to live well and live in peace, but as a state of the world for which we are responsible. Thus the transformation of mentalities is effected, changing them from the desire for efficiency to the need for responsibility (Castillo 2015). Tomorrow’s tasks may thus verify the sense attributed by Kant to European culture: the choice to understand its vocation and its place from the point of view of the history of the world.

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