THE JAPANESE END: JAPAN IN ALEXANDRE KOJÈVE’S END OF HISTORY

Aingeru Aroz Rafael
Faculty of Philosophy, Autonomous University of Madrid (Spain)

Keywords: end of history, Hegel, Japanese formalism, Bataille, messianism, Taubes.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: istorijos pabaiga, Hėgelis, japoniškasis formalizmas, Bataille, mesianizmas, Taubes.

Two Footnotes on the End of History

Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968), one of the most influential interpreters of Hegelian philosophy in French contemporary thought, delivered from 1933 to 1939 an important series of lectures in Paris, which were compiled and published in 1947 by Raymond Queneau (one of his most famous disciples, together with other thinkers like Jacques Lacan and Georges Bataille), under the title of Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit.

One of the most controversial points of Kojève’s reading of Hegel was his thesis about the end of history, which is principally explained in two footnotes (Kojève 1980: 158). In the former, Kojève describes how, since the publication of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit, namely the realization of Wisdom, Man stops changing his essence (Man is the only animal who can change its own essence and thus produce History) and the Homo sapiens species arrives to the conclusion of its human adventure.

Action, which in Hegel (Kojève’s Hegel) means Man negating Nature, negating himself and thus creating World and History, finishes when Spirit
(Geist), after having walked the long road of History, comes to know itself. That happened, in political terms, with the formation of the Napoleonic State, and, in terms of thought, when Hegel himself, who had indeed seen Napoleon entering Jenna during the invasion of Germany, wrote his Phenomenology of Spirit, which is the ultimate philosophical book, a Book that thinks and overcomes the whole activity of Spirit, achieving Absolute Wisdom and thus finishing the history of Philosophy, which means finishing the history of Spirit thinking itself.

In Kojève’s first note about the end of history, only Action in the “strong sense” disappears, only the Action of Man negating Nature and negating himself, and thus producing History and making Spirit progress, ends. Notwithstanding, Action with No Use, Action which does not make Spirit progress in its dialectical path towards Absolute Wisdom, for instance love, art or play, do not disappear. Love, art and play, according to this first footnote, do not work in perfect dialectical terms and thus can survive after the dialectical movement of Spirit comes to its end, namely after the end of history:

What disappears is Man properly so-called –that is, Action which negates the given <…>. In fact, the end of Time and of History <…> simply means the cessations of Action in the strong sense of the term

(Kojève 1980: 159).

The fact that, in this first note, only Action “in the strong sense” finishes is not an unimportant remark, since, as we will see, in the footnote included in the second edition, Kojève corrected himself and, then, even Action with No Use, disappear in the post-historic period and the post-historic Human Being, which then becomes, in Kojëvian-Hegelian terms, an Animal –a living being which does not change its own essence in the negating Action of History.

In fact, when the second note was written, Kojève stated that he had understood that, what in 1946, in the time of his first footnote, was just a hypothesis, twenty years later had already become a reality. Kojève, after World War II, travelled the world as one of the chief planners of the European Common Market, working for the French Ministry of Economic Affairs, after which, in 1968, the year of the re-edition of his Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, he realized that Man had completely disappeared in one country.
This country is the United States, where, according to Kojève, Action, neither in the strong sense of the term nor in the weak sense, exists anymore and Man has thus perfectly returned to Animality. History has disappeared in America, where the Desire of the re-animalized *Homo sapiens* species is satisfied with no need of historical struggle, with no need of historically meaningful Action of Man, that is to say Man does not need to negate the Other or Himself anymore.

The reader of Kojève does not exactly know where his sarcasm finishes and where the serious stuff starts; our task, though, is not to judge Kojève’s seriousness (or his total lack of it). What interests us in our research is to understand why he mentioned Japan in the 1968-year footnote, just after speaking about the American re-animalization of Man. Because he found, indeed, another possibility for the end of history in the country that Roland Barthes, two years after, called “the Empire of Signs”.

According to Kojève, thanks to the “snobbery” of Japanese civilization, Man has survived detaching “form’ and ‘content’, doing so no longer in order actively to transform the latter, but so he may oppose himself as a pure ‘form’ to himself and to others” (Kojève 1980: 162). Therefore, Action and Negativity may actually exist after the end of history, and here Kojève must be thinking of Action and Negativity (and Man, and Time, because in Hegel these concepts are inevitably related) in what we will call “weak potentiality”, which is unthinkable in strict Hegelian terms. This weak potentiality is Action with no historical meaning, Action that still remained in his first footnote, but disappeared in his radical interpretation of the American End of History.

What kind of Action can this be, and why Japanese snobbery, which for him is the main characteristic of Japanese culture, has made this weak Japanese end of History happen? The answer to these questions, we believe, must be sought, rather than in Japan itself, in Kojève’s own thought, that is to say in his interpretation of Hegelian dialectics and in his close relationship with the thinker of Negativity with No Use, Georges Bataille.

**Negativity with No Use and the Kojève-Bataille Dialogue**

The paradox of Man surviving in Japan (opposed to the American re-animalization of Man) thanks to the “pure formality” of Japanese culture
has been usually read as one of Kojève’s frequent jokes¹, but, however im-
portant the sense of humor may be in this thinker, we believe that a much
more relevant issue becomes evident in Kojève’s Japanese end of history. As
we mentioned above, in order to understand what makes him to use these
terms and what is actually put at stake here, the dialogue with one of his
closest disciples, Georges Bataille, must be re-read.

In fact, the whole work of Bataille could be described as an attempt
to escape from Hegelian dialectics and the metaphysic way of thinking
through experiences in which Negativity is “unemployed” (“sans emploi”),
like in art, erotism and sacrifices or ‘ecstatic’ rituals. For instance, Bataille
remarks in a letter to Kojève in 1937, “if action (‘doing’) is – as Hegel says
– negativity, the question arises as to whether the negativity of one who has
‘nothing more to do’ disappears or remains in a state of ‘unemployed ne-
gativity’” (Bataille 1997: 296). However, Kojève replied that this negativity
of no use is unacceptable from a philosophical point of view – in fact since
Aristotle it is well known that existence is a passage from potentiality to act:
as negativity is perfectly overcome in the dialectical process (Aufhebung),
there cannot be a remaining ‘unemployed negativity’.

Notwithstanding, in contrast to this orthodox metaphysical approach,
Action would actually survive in the Kojèvian end of history of the 1946
note (in which only Action in the strong sense disappears after history) and
it is probably not mistaken to see Kojève much closer to his disciple Bataille
in the footnote of the second edition, in which Japan virtually becomes the
Empire of “negativity with no use” and “Action in the weak sense of the
term”, which save human being from becoming an animal.

The Time of the End and the Kojèvian “As If”

We believe, indeed, that the reason of this change in Kojève’s position
has much to do with a principal element in the whole Western philosophy
of history which metaphysics traditionally obliterated. In fact, Derrida was
probably wrong when he saw in the Kojèvian Japanese end “an even more
eschatological end than the American” (Derrida 1994: 71), since the Japa-
nese end is actually not an ‘eschaton’, an end of time: if some sort of negativi-
ty remains, in Hegelian terms temporality must somehow also survive.

Agamben pointed out in *The Time that Remains* that messianic time is not an end of time, but a time of the end (Agamben 2005: 62) and we believe indeed that the Japanese end is a *messianic time of the end*. However orthodoxy Aristotelian and Hegelian could have Kojève been in the letters to Bataille, in his thesis about the end of history an important messianic element contained in the whole Western tradition becomes visible and demonstrates how the end of the history of Spirit, or put it in other words, the goal of the dialectical work of Negativity in the strong sense of the term, does not mean a complete end of time.

An unemployed negativity of a messianic weak potentiality (not far from the Bataillean “*négativité sans emploi*”) could remain even when the Calvary of Spirit’s strong Action (which is how History is called in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*) comes to its end, because as Walter Benjamin already knew, “the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of historical *dynamis*” (Benjamin 1986: 313), so Action in a weak sense, as it is the one of the Japanese end of history, can survive even after historical potentiality is finally actualized in its *telos* or *Zeil*.

A good key for understanding how messianic (and how little apocalyptic) this end is and what kind of messianism is contained in Kojevian thought, can be found in what can already be called a contemporary classic on Messianism, Jacob Taubes’ *The Political Theology of Paul*. Taubes, indeed, explains that in 1967 he invited Kojève to the University of Berlin for a lecture on Hegelian philosophy, where the latter stated that history had finished and all we can do thereafter is a repetition in an “as if” form (Taubes 2004: 170). Repetition “as if” (history repeated only in its forms, without any historical content) is probably the key concept for understanding what kind of end of history is the Japanese one.

In fact, we think that Man surviving after History thanks to “Japanese snobbery”, pure formality or, as Kojève said in Berlin, thanks to repetition “as if”, belongs to what Taubes and Agamben have called ‘weak messianism’, an aesthetization completely different from the “as not” of the strong messianism in Saint Paul, described in *The Political Theology of Paul*: Kojève’s “as if”, so similar to Adorno’s “als ob” in the Finale of *Minima Moralia* (Adorno 2005: 247), reflects how a negativity with no use, an unemployed *dynamis* have always been present in Western Metaphysics.

Long would be explaining why Japan, country which Kojève did not actually know very well, emerged in his footnote as the Kingdom of Negati-
vity of no use\textsuperscript{2}, but what is important here is that it is portrayed as an empire of snobbery, namely of forms, where, in the Kojèvian text, the metaphysic tradition seeks a time that remains, not a \textit{pleroma} like the one in Saint Paul, in which God “will be all in all forms”, but a “\textit{désœuvrement}” or \textit{inoperativeness} in which \textit{forms will be all}.

References


Abstract

This paper tries to analyze the idea of the End of History in Alexandre Kojève’s major work, \textit{Introduction to the Reading of Hegel}, and especially what he calls “the Japanese End of History”, opposed to the American one. Following the tendency of his time (Kojève’s text is contemporary to Roland Barthes’ \textit{Empire of Signs}), Kojève imagines Japan as a culture of pure formality, where what matters is form, rather than content. In his interpretation of Hegelian Philosophy of History, Kojève states that History has already finished in the United States, where, in metaphysical terms, Man has returned to Animality. However, History could have another end, and Kojève actually believes to have found it in Japan, where Man has survived to History, in an Action which has no longer a content (two of the examples he chooses are Noh theatre and Ikebana). Re-reading Kojève’s work, which has often been understood as one of his famous jokes, actually demonstrates how some of the most important points

\textsuperscript{2} I studied in my M.A. thesis the inscription of the concept of Japan of contemporary European thought in the Hegelian Philosophy of History (\textit{The Empire of Negativity: A Study on the Place of Japan in the European Twentieth-Century Thought}, 2007 –unpublished thesis).
in the whole metaphysical tradition of Philosophy of History come out in this Japanese End. Kojève's text is indeed an excellent example of the image of Japan in the contemporary European thought.

**Santrauka**