

The reversal of authority

Alexandre Kojève, *The Notion of Authority (A Brief Presentation)*, trans. Hager Weslati, Verso, London and New York, 2014. xxxiv + 107 pp., £14.99 hb., 978 1 78168 095 7.

Since the publication of Arendt's essays on authority, the debate around authority has been mostly dominated by her diagnoses of its crisis. A different but recurrent stance views authority as synonymous with state institutions, either dismissing the particular legitimating force of authority or attributing it to any expression of power. Notwithstanding the shift enacted to current debates by Agamben's own recent take on authority, the publication of Kojève's *The Notion of Authority* brings fresh air into what had almost become a monophonic field, even if the essay itself was first written in 1942 (but first published in French in 2004), and is invested with a positive ignorance of the succedent literature.

Kojève is best known for, and read through, his classes on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which terminated some months before the deflagration of World War II. His considerations on authority were written during the conflict, prior to the publication of the manuscript that resulted from the classes (what later became the introductory text was the only published excerpt of the book thus far). Kojève started lecturing in the continuation of Koyré's 1932 classes on the religious philosophy of Hegel, taking seriously Koyré's final suggestion that Hegel's philosophy required the end of history. Kojève built most of his historical argument on the use of Hegel's *The German Constitution* to read the *Phenomenology* as a depiction of the path through which Napoleon became the provider of the historical end of history.

Although it became the most famous element of Kojève's thought, no serious consideration of the multiplicity of ends of histories across and within his works has yet been given. And although Kojève is currently overcredited with declarations of the end of history, in his considerations on authority we can find two main passages at which considerations on the end of history may be at play: one external, another internal. The external appears in his claim that law constituted the cadaver of authority – most of his other considerations on law in *The Notion of Authority* are directed at the dismissal of law as a form of authority. Nevertheless, in 1943 he decided

to write his *Outline of a Phenomenology of Right* (a book that was certainly already planned by the time he wrote *The Notion* but most likely still in an embryonic state). *Outline* presented law as leading to the creation of the universal and homogeneous empire, arrived at through the resolution of the anthropogenic battle for recognition, to be arrived at by the end of legal history. (I believe some odd readings of Kojève result from the English adaptation of Kojève's *anthropogénique* into 'anthropogenetic'.) Such an end of history would mean a burial of authority, and the later project certainly entailed a different course than the one pursued in *The Notion*.

The internal suggestion of the end of history first requires a consideration of the book's title. The original French edition carries the title *La notion de l'autorité*. Though the English adaptation of the title conveys most of the title's commonsensical meanings, several other interpretations might be given, most remarkable among which would be a sense of authority's possession over its notion. Even if it is unclear whether this was Kojève's intention, it provides one explanation as to why the chosen title wasn't simply *La notion d'autorité* (a title that nonetheless mistakenly appears on several French-language websites). Moreover, the possibility of such an interpretation is quite significant, since authority would, in this case, be that which would have authority over its signifier, whether that means to author or to authorize it.

Going back to the end of history, Kojève writes about a bourgeois era with two phases: from 1789 until 1848 as the revolutionary era, in which the bourgeoisie presents a revolutionary project that places it in opposition to the aristocratic past; and then from 1848 until 1940, when this alternative project fades away due to the proletariat assuming the role of the revolutionary class. Therefore 1848 marks a time at which the bourgeoisie establishes its domination in opposition to the aristocracy, as well as to the proletarian revolutionary project, assuming its domination as a presently determined time. It is thus an end of history, but it is a bourgeois end of history, in which bourgeois authority defines its

own time as a permanent present, in opposition to alternative historical forces. Consequently, it is an actual existing end of history, but only for as long as bourgeois authority keeps its authority; that is, for as long as it is able to define its own time it is an authority and through its authority it defines its own time.

The scope of Kojève's inquiry into authority is much broader than that which any presentation of it will reflect, mostly because it brings about a number of unconventional insights into most of the topics in the book. The richness of the text certainly comes from the multiple routes that it can establish. So one shouldn't be misled here by a note by the translator – who published in this journal a very significant contribution to Kojévian scholarship, in which she provides rather stronger support for her nonetheless debatable argument (*RP* 184) – which claims that when Kojève points to three of his chapters ('Phenomenological Analysis', 'Metaphysical Analysis' and 'Political Applications') as the most relevant, he was mostly concerned with the practical political application/influence of the book. If that was the case, one would expect the two concluding appendices reflecting current affairs to be in the list. In fact, to grasp the relevance of those three chapters one should pay closer attention to Kojève himself. At the beginning of the book he argues that the main emphasis of

most approaches to authority has been on its genesis and transmission, adding that the four theories he specifically refers to – namely those of Hegel, Plato, Aristotle and the scholastics – are most complete at the phenomenological level. Thus, when he points to the three specific chapters mentioned above he is referring to the phenomenological analysis as a presentation in which common interpretations of authority are laid out; the metaphysical analysis as a place where he adds a new layer to the already existing conceptions of authority (one that doesn't build on the sheer presence of authority); and the political applications as a place where he offers insights on the existing theories – several of which are already introduced in the phenomenological analysis – from his metaphysical reconsiderations on authority. The three chapters still carry value on their own, but Kojève emphasizes the relevance of the metaphysical analysis as it 'justifies' and 'rectifies' the phenomenological one.

So let us take a step back and start with the phenomenological analysis. It is here that Kojève proposes to present both the essential characteristics of authority and all the fundamental types of authority. This opens several different routes of inquiry, with the phenomenon of authority assuming several different shapes, although each of them is



built for the construction of a larger and cohesive general theory of authority. In this way, authority is presented as belonging to a realm of change; that is, a field in which motion is possible, thus making possible the recognition of a newly arriving authority, in which authority can also effect change. Nonetheless, an authority only produces change; it cannot itself be its subject. Therefore authority has to be able to effect a change that results in the absence of change for itself. This has several implications for any theory of authority: though authority belongs to a reactive field, no resistance can be offered to it; for the absence of resistance, authority needs to be recognized; authority needs to be able to exclude any additional source of change, as that necessarily constitutes a threat to authority's dominion over mutability, and consequently to its permanence. In other words, authority brings about a change that realizes itself by the suspension of (perceived) change. With regard to authority, he proposes four different types, each referred to a different source (though every source is recognizable, it is doubtful that any of the elements Kojève points to were thought by their authors to correspond to complete theories of authority): authority of the father/cause as being developed by the scholastics; authority of the master/risk as being developed by Hegel; authority of the leader/project by Aristotle; and authority of the judge/justice by Plato.

However informative and exhaustive a given list of characteristics of authority may be, Kojève does not see in it anything beyond an unending list of attributes. Moreover, the relevance of each aspect for an understanding of authority remains to be determined. Therefore a metaphysical analysis is required to structure the attributes gathered at the phenomenological level. It is here that Kojève's four types of authority are paired with four temporal forms that Kojève presents as constituting the complete spectrum: the authority of the father is paired with the past; the master with the present; the leader with the future; and the judge with eternity. Advancing this list of temporalities, Kojève intends to include all possible forms of authority. But this step also changes the way authority justifies itself and how it is recognized. The rhetoric of authority now becomes dominated by temporal forms, and its attempt to stop change clearly come forth in the form of the determination of the dominant structure of time in the polity. Consequently, the recognition of authority is not just an acceptance of a given authority, but the reception of its temporal reading. An

identitarian imprint of authority becomes obvious, the past proposed by authority becomes 'my past', the same creation of shared temporal readings applying to all temporal forms.

The reversal in the relation between authority and its notion actually ends up returning at the metaphysical level. Rather than being recognized by the subjects, as suggested by the phenomenological analysis, authority renders the identity of subjecthood in such a way as to produce its recognition. Thus, it is only at the metaphysical level that the absence of resistance to authority can be explained. As authority is distinguished from force, resistance to it can only be justified due to the subject's identitary link to authority, rather than to a voluntary repression of the act.

The picture drawn so far is not left untouched by Kojève. Although the above-mentioned bourgeois domination represented the arrival of the bourgeois end of history, in the form of a permanent present, that time ended in 1940 with the Franco-German armistice. Kojève's essay does not have a formal conclusion, though its two appendices offer some final reflections on authority while discussing the period of the post-bourgeois end of history. This period was first marked by an illusory presence of all forms of authority in Maréchal Pétain, but soon afterwards the bourgeois break with the past, the future and eternity (the last due to the retreat of the previous two, lapsed into class justice in opposition to the remaining authoritarian forms) came back with the addition of a despicable present. Therefore Kojève reads his own time as a moment when authority is escaping from its founding metaphysical structure. Authority is disconnected from all its temporal support, having nothing left to offer. Kojève thus foresees the inauguration of simulacrum as the justification of authority.

Having abandoned his considerations on authority, Kojève did not provide any guidelines for whether one should read his appendices as referring exclusively to the specific time at which the essay was written, or whether he would accept his diagnosis of 1940 as the end of bourgeois domination. Rather, Kojève left an open letter that allows for ample discussion. What the final appendices show is that even after the structure of authority is disrupted, declaring its death might still be a hasty move. And for as long as a determination of the coming times still has a role to play, a reprise of Kojève's text will remain timely.

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