

Toward an assessment of modernity

Alexandre Kojève

In order to speak about the future one must first recognise the contemporary moment, as it is the contemporary moment that indicates the future.*

Previous eras were defined by their culture, that is, by an organically stable system of social relations finding within itself its own ideological justification. In our times, however, culture has ceased to be a real contemporary fact. It is completely absorbed by two different primary forces: Capitalism and Revolution.

Capitalism emerged in the era of feudalism and absolutism within European culture. Once it had fully grown, capitalism imbued this culture with itself and defined the culture as a capitalist and bourgeois one (the nineteenth century). Now, that very same culture, completely absorbed by capitalism, has itself become a part of capitalism. Revolution, the growth of which was dialectically linked to the growth of capitalism, has exited a period of transitory battles and has now gained a long-term and law-abiding nature. Capitalism, having absorbed culture, itself remains essentially uncultured. Revolution, by its very nature antithetical to the present, is unable to create culture until, having succeeded, it is no longer Revolution. Present-day Europe is in its most profound sense uncultured.

The driving forces of the present that emerged within European culture have extended beyond the borders of Europe and have become forms of world unification. Capitalism, regardless of its close link to the concept of a nation (as a market competitor), aims to unite mankind through the equal enslavement of all exploited countries by a united organisation of exploiters. Revolution, stemming from the universally shared interests of the exploited and animated by an international ideology, manifests concretely in a series of mutually linked, but nationally distinct, revolutionary movements (Eurasia, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and so on) that contrast the equalising unitarity of capital with the federal principle

of revolution. 'Culture' in the broad sense has ceased to be a real principle of any form of unification – either internal or supranational – and is instead completely abolished by either capitalism or Revolution.

Until recently, Europe enjoyed global hegemony: its culture evolved into a global culture, and the centres for capitalism and revolution were found on its soil. Now that hegemony is lost – European culture has ceased to be an effective reality, and the United States of America has become the ruling possessor and embodiment of global capitalist unification. The leadership of revolution has passed into the hands of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

The 1914-1918 war was a decisive moment for Europe's loss of its global hegemony. The war could only be concluded thanks to the financial participation of the USA, to which the centre of capitalism relocated as a result. The USA changed from a country of debtors into a general lender. During the war, nearly half of the major European governments' budgets consisted of payments from the USA. Investments of American capital were a major factor in the economic life of the strongest economies in Europe (in particular Germany). Non-European markets for European countries were significantly lost, and any attempt on Europe's part to reclaim them saw not only the USA, but also fledgling Japanese capitalism, less powerful yet even more foreign to Europe, as its competitor.

On the one hand, although European war was a powerful stimulus for revolution, Europe lost its superiority here, as well. A Revolution whose success is without precedent has overturned capitalism in an entire part of the world, Eurasia, and nationally liberated the peoples of the former Russian Empire and Mongolia, establishing a self-governing economic system nearly independent of international capital and founded on the socialist industrialisation and seizure of the entire territory of Eurasia.

* First published in *Eurasia*, 7 September 1929.

Revolutionary movements simultaneously developed in colonies and semi-colonies, partially and fragmentedly developed in proportion to the different levels of their economic development. In conjunction with the spontaneous industrialisation of the most powerful colonial countries (in particular India and China), the movements shook the status of Europe on the world stage.

All of these events, triggered by war, were however the logical conclusion to the preceding development of Europe, as America is nothing more than an excessive outgrowth of European expansion in the greatest period of European development (the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries), and industrialisation and revolutionary movements in colonial countries are the direct result of European capitalism.

Even the war of 1914-1918 is not a random event in European history. Europe's defining feature is a multinationalism combined with an undoubted cultural-historical unity. When European culture was still alive, this multinationalism provided the European world with a particular strength and richness, in the spirit of a characteristic, spontaneous harmony. Until recently, European wars were essentially superficial and didn't destroy the unity of the European cultural world. Yet as European culture dissolved completely into capitalism, multinationalism lost any positive meaning and became nothing more than the premise for wild capitalist competition amongst nations united only by general objects of desire. The peace of Versailles did not eliminate European multinationalism but merely increased the number of potential conflicts. First-hand memory of the past war and a preservation instinct for the moment relegate the threat of war to an unspecified moment in the future. This does not make it any less real. Militaristic energy in Europe is essentially not weakening, and the imbalance between its cultural and economic base has created a situation where Europe globally maintains only one – unenviable – superiority, that of military superiority. A future war – impossible (since the European economy is not in a condition to carry the burden alone) and at the same time inevitable (since the circumstances leading to it, the international competition of capital, remain unchanged) – threatens Europe on the one hand with definitive subjugation to American capital and on the other hand with an unprecedented explosion of revolution.

The two forces however that would benefit from European war, American capital and Soviet revolution, not only do not help to re-ignite war but are the sole concrete forces preventing its occurrence. Only a complete victory of America's advanced capitalism over the fragmented and provincial European bourgeoisie, or the victory of a proletarian revolution, can give Europe that unity and stability denied to it by its national fragmentation. The victory of the first would mean the equal enslavement of Europe and its definitive reduction to the status of a culturally and economically subordinated province. The victory of the second would offer it the chance to realise its unity in federal forms acceptable to each of its parts, and, alone, could return to Europe a worthy and leading place in the ranks of humanity. It is no coincidence that while capitalist America and the USSR both work for the prevention of inevitable war (the participation of Young and Dawes in reparations¹, the Kellogg Pact, the recent speech by the very same Dawes on the question of disarmament; on the other side, the Litvinov proposal known as the Moscow Protocol), neither participate in the League of Nations. For America, the national fragmentation proposed by the League of Nations is too clearly incompatible with the capitalist rationalisation of Europe. For the USSR, it is incompatible with the true interests of the working people of all nations. The League of Nations remains a powerless and abstract, pan-European 'grand-stander'. Its pretensions for world significance, which would leave for Europe the role of world metropolis, in fact only give non-European countries (Japan and British dominions) the possibility of applying pressure on inter-European affairs, and therefore only further underline the hopeless provincialism of Europe and the hopeless loss of its world hegemony.

Thus Europe, having dissolved its culture into capitalism, lost its primacy both in capitalism and in revolution. Its culture, having recently been worldly, has become a dependent detail of provincial capitalism.

The 'crisis' of European culture is so apparent that it now occupies, in various formulations, a common place within contemporary European consciousness. Overcoming the crisis is possible only through a moment of general social and cultural renewal. It is impossible to anticipate this overcoming, as Europe is more seized by capitalism than ever before, even as it appears merely as a provincial country dependent on capital. Elements of

modernity within it are reflective and dependent (this reflection is particularly acute in Europe with regard to German ‘Americanophilia’). In contrast to American capitalism, European capitalism is not industrial but rather consumer-based, and therefore is deprived of an active capitalist pathos. European culture especially falls to the level of mere consumption, losing any possibility of impact on the rest of humanity.

In line with the general crisis of European capitalism and culture, political life also is undergoing a profound crisis.

In the realm of political institutions and establishments, political life is perishing due to the lack of programs and goals. Previous political slogans and goals have lost their meaning, as the very reality on which these policies should act has changed. Entire regions have been lost to policies of autonomy and to the undifferentiated control of economic forces and financial centers. Even if after the peace of Versailles one succeeded in renouncing secret treaties and secret diplomacy (which, as we all know, did not happen), secret financial diplomacy would take the place of secret state diplomacy. The politics of states, on the one hand, is being absorbed into the international play of financial-economic forces, and on the other hand within each state political life is decomposing and decaying in a fruitless parliamentary comedy and in the petty game of ambitions and the economic interests of bourgeois politicians.

The rift between politics and culture is even more irrevocable, and this is despite the feeble attempts at proclaiming cultural politics and a state culture (*Kulturstaat*). There can be no European cultural politics because there is no European culture in any true sense. The fantasy of the leaders of Europe was exhausted in the combination of a ‘state culture’ with an ‘economic democracy.’ The idea, however, of an ‘economic democracy’ is a vivid example of how an unprepared consciousness is unable to see what it really is: a joint-stock company, presented as an ‘economic democracy’ by ‘democratic’ organisations, whereas it is actually one of the most clear examples of financial *autocracy*, the absolute power of financial organisations over the fragmented ‘democracy’

of its shareholders. ‘Economic democracy’ turns out to be simply a new device for fooling the petit bourgeois masses by specialists of financial capital.

The most serious attempt to overcome Europe’s cultural and political crisis, without leaving the framework of multinational capitalism, was Italian fascism. Despite not a small amount of political energy invested in this attempt to revive and rationalise the old bourgeois culture, fascism can only become an extraneous element of the crisis and decay. Trying to bypass the class problem through conciliation, fascism with extraordinary persistence put forward the idea of a self-sufficient and competing nation. Thus, the only talented and lively movement born from post-war Europe to a large extent merely intensified Europe’s main ulcer, its national fragmentation, and infinitely increased the already infinite danger of a new war. Fascism did not create culture, as its classless and nationalist ideology is in contradiction both with the driving forces of modernity (capitalism and revolution, both class-based and international), as well as with its own home base, the base of one of the secondary provinces of international capital. Instead of culture, fascism has merely created a masquerade. No less than ‘economic democracy,’ fascism – albeit in a specific ‘Latin’ theatrical mask – plays someone else’s game, the game of dominant economic forces.

After completing a PhD in Heidelberg on the Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev, Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968) moved to Paris in 1926. He published an important early text on Atheism in 1931 (translated into English in 2018), and gave his influential lectures on Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit from 1933 to 1939 (subsequently edited and published in 1947); his later, mostly unpublished texts include The Notion of Authority (1942/2004) and Outline of a Phenomenology of Right (1943/1981).

Translated by Trevor Wilson

Notes

1. Charles Dawes and Owen D. Young were two American businessmen and politicians who spearheaded legislation on war reparations for Germany after WWI. [Translator’s note].

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Cedric Robinson

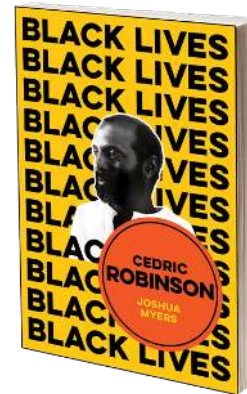
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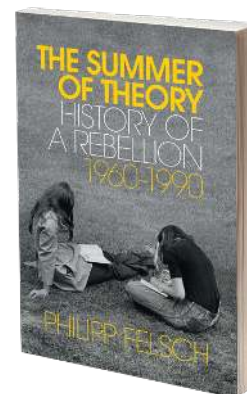
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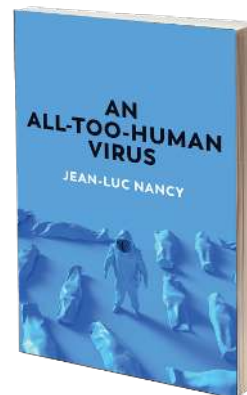
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