

1989

## “Idola” of the Postmodern: Untopical Considerations on the End (and the Principle) of History

Giacomo Marramao

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia>

---

### Recommended Citation

Marramao, Giacomo (1989) ““Idola” of the Postmodern: Untopical Considerations on the End (and the Principle) of History,” *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*. Vol. 3 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol3/iss1/4>

This document is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* by an authorized editor of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact [mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu](mailto:mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu), [hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu](mailto:hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu).

# “Idola” of the Postmodern Untopical Considerations on the End (and the Principle) of History

Giacomo Marramao

1. SECULARIZATION AS “LOPSIDED” PLAN:  
THE LIMITS OF LÖWITH’S INTERPRETATION

From the late medieval period on there emerges—in concomitance with the work of the glossators<sup>1</sup>—a particular way of conceiving of political change. This consists of a resumption and a readaptation of the old cyclic schema of Polybius and is mediated by a true rediscovery of Aristotle’s *Politics*. The aristotelian text—“canonical text of this story,” according to Bobbio’s definition<sup>2</sup>—is the great absence from the “de civitate” disputes of the christian literature of the first centuries: it is, in fact, rediscovered only at the end of the thirteenth century (while for the rediscovery of Cicero’s *De Republica* we have to wait until the beginning of the fourteenth century no less). The effect of the “rediscovery” is, as often happens in cases of this kind, absolutely diremptive: the celebrated classification of the forms of government (which distinguishes, as is well known, three good forms—monarchy, aristocracy and *politeia*—and three bad ones—tyrannies, oligarchies and democracy) is not only taken up again and made the object of renewed reflection, but is reproduced and applied to a reality which is rather different from that of the declining polis which constituted the historical-sociological referent of Greek phil-

---

Originally published in *Filosofia* '87, Ed. by G. Vattimo (Bari: Laterza, 1988).

[Translated from the Italian by Paul J. Thibault]

osophy. It should suffice to recall that Marsilio of Padua himself, in the eighth chapter of a major work like the *Defensor pacis* (1324), does nothing more than reinstate "a repetition pure and simple"<sup>3</sup> of the aristotelian schema. On the other hand, the case of Machiavelli (which we cannot, for obvious reasons, engage at length on this occasion) would merit a separate discussion. *Prima facie*, the machiavellian oeuvre seems to be constituted in perfect continuity with the reinstatement of the classical model of politics. This impression is, however, deceptive for two sets of reasons. In the first place, the florentine secretary did not refer directly to the *Politics* of Aristotle, but to the sixth book of Polybius' *Histories*, in which the classification is inserted into a cyclic movement of the "anakyklesis," in such a way as to interpenetrate with a "cyclic theory" of platonic ancestry.<sup>4</sup> In the second place, the alternation of the good forms with the "defective" and "corrupt" ones no longer occurs through the stimulus of an inexorable natural necessity, which is independent of the will and the subjective choices (the polybian *physeos ananke*), but occurs "randomly between men,"<sup>5</sup> that is to say: as the contingent result of their *actions*. Thanks to this powerful inflection of the classical apparatus, the "reappearance of Polybius in western culture" (according to an expression of our great scholar of antiquity, the late Arnaldo Momigliano<sup>6</sup>) comes to coincide with the affirmation of that artificiality of the state-political order, which represents, starting with Machiavelli, the political model for modernity itself.

Yet beyond these preliminary historical exactitudes, there lurks a theoretical problem, which we now intend to focus on. It has its roots in the *concomitance* which was mentioned at the beginning. What does this concomitance involve? A decisive fact not only on the genetic level, but also on the more narrowly "doctrinal" one: the contemporaneity of the birth of the (modern) concept of *revolution* and of the (modern) concept of *sovereignty*. Parallel with the reinstatement on the part of the glossators of the famous fragment of Ulpiano around the "summa legibusque soluta potestas" and the formula "rex superiorem non recognoscens in regno suo est imperator" (along a not always continuous trajectory, which reaches its crowning point with hobbesian theory<sup>7</sup>) light is shed upon, in the body of the european politico-juridical doctrines, a schema for change which has more or less this form: oppression, liberation, social contract, political struggle, new society. This process gradually assumes the outlines of that which we moderns have called, for these past two centuries, *revolutionary process*. And, even if the term *revolution* (which consists of the transposition

---

of the greek term *apokatastasis*), in its present-day meaning of political overthrow, has a relatively recent usage, there is no doubt that since the renaissance period its pragmatic usage already tends to pierce the shield of the astronomical and astrological metaphor. Although with Machiavelli one still spoke of the "circle" around which the republics "turn," it is not difficult to realize that, in reality, that circle does not close and that its movement has, by this time, taken a direction forward which already seems to allude in more respects than one to the cumulative idea of Process to which we are accustomed.

The story implicit in the schema just reported is not, however, equally told everywhere. It is not a universal schema common to all civilizations, but regards specifically the Occident as the heir of an idea of linear, irreversible and progressively "liberatory" time, whose origin goes back to the very eschatological conception of judaism and christianity. The idea of the judaeo-christian conception of the "redemption" as the explanatory key of the absolutely unique cultural event of the Occident (and of the hegemonic destiny of this "uniqueness," whose power of rationalization, capable of imposing itself on all other cultures, is literally incomprehensible, if it is distinguished from that originary interior energy), goes back, as is well known, to Max Weber.<sup>8</sup> In his wake, it has nevertheless found a rather ample and articulated treatment in the work of Karl Löwith.<sup>9</sup> The specific contribution of this important German scholar consists—above and beyond his overall hermeneutic schema as a key to the "secularization" and to the radical criticism of every philosophy of history—in having pointed out the sources of the modern idea of progress (cultivated in its most markedly "lay" and illuministic physiognomy: that of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in the rebirth of the millenary thought of the late medieval and protomodern periods). We have here a starting point which surpasses by far the ambit of historiographical reconstruction in order to lodge itself in the heart of theoretic philosophy *stricto sensu*, namely, the idea for which, if the specific aspect of occidental *Kultur* lies in an intuition of time as the mere availability for consumption of itself and in the consequent valorization of the *irreversibility* aspect insofar as it is the expression—precisely—of a time-in-consumption (of a "dying time," of a time which is, and exclusively, for-its-death), it follows that not only the concept of revolution, but also that of progress, would descend from the "hope of redemption" and would be nothing more than secular "millenarianism" and secularized "mesianism."<sup>10</sup>

Löwith's interpretative schema will never be sufficiently valorized in our culture, owing to the way in which it succeeds in destabilizing some of the most consolidated and widespread *topoi* of the historical mentality. In spite of this, it is afflicted with a rather serious limitation, which consists, in the first place, in emphasizing all but unilaterally the genealogy to the detriment of the *conceptual stratigraphy*, that is to say, of the analysis of determinate historical-conceptual metamorphoses and changes. In the Löwithian schema, the following question remains completely unanswered: Through what translations of sense has the temporality of the old "theologies of history" (from Augustine and Orosio to Bossuet) been able to enrich the "philosophie de l'histoire" of illuministic stamp? But, beyond this general methodological limit, a more determinate limit is to be reckoned with in the schema which brings the modern ideas of *progress* and of *revolution* back to the political messianism of Joachim da Fiore or to the seven protestants of puritan stamp, there is ratified and coercively united a line which tends to "remove," or to relegate to the rank of negligible "intervals," the periodic *rebirths of cyclic models* (the most visible case is that of the renaissance, but other eloquent periods—from the seventeenth century, from the eighteenth century, and from the nineteenth century itself, commonly defined as "century of progress"—could be adduced).

This *Verdrängung* involves rather weighty consequences: on both the historiographical level, as well as on the more exclusively theoretical one. In the first place, the Löwithian inability to discern the persistence of the thread *line* and *circle*: the true "Gordian knot," which runs across the entire event of the *Zeitauffassung*, of the occidental "conception of time," in which is included the judaeo-christian one.<sup>11</sup> And, in the second instance, the assembling under a single matrix of categories subtended to phenomena and doctrinal complexes which are rather heterogeneous among themselves: messianism, eschatological vision, and apocalyptic vision are—in this sense—anything but synonymous. But in order to find their differential features, it is necessary to call into question another idea, to which the idea of revolution appears closely related: the idea of *Exodus*. The schema of the exodus, the great religious archetype of "linear temporality" (to undertake an exodus, it is necessary to go out from a point *x* towards a point *y*: it is necessary, in other words, to go towards . . .), does it not perhaps also reconnect the image of a "promised land" (*ou*-topic image which hints at an *ou*-chronic movement) to the idea of a restoration of a *status quo ante*? Of *revolution*, in the literal-

---

etymological sense of *restoration*? Therefore: of “cycle”? Will not the Revolution then always necessarily be conceived as a *revolution according to the Law*?

2. *AT THE ORIGINS OF HISTORY: THE EXODUS AS THE NARRATIVE PROTOTYPE OF THE REVOLUTIONARY PROCESS*

The Book of Exodus has for centuries constituted the hermeneutic model of the revolutionary process of liberation. Reflection on it is then an unavoidable step for getting to the bottom of the variegated conceptual constructs which are at the foundations of the western theory of “revolution” in its dual variant: “absolute” revolution (understood as the secular transposition of the eschatological hope and, for this reason, as Event of universal value) and revolution as “relative-historical” fact (understood as a specific spatio-temporal response to specific problems). In this sense, the investigation of the Exodus theme appears indispensable for unravelling the Gordian knot constituted by the indiscriminate assemblage of terms such as “messianism,” “eschatology” and “apocalypse.”

The Exodus is, above all, a narrative structure: a tale. It is, as the american philosopher Michael Walzer<sup>12</sup> observes, “the story of release and liberation expressed in religious terms.” But it “is also an historical tale, secular and earthly.” In other words, it is not a question of a supernatural tale—although the miracle is a part of it—but of a realistic tale. And, as in every self-respecting story, there is a *before* and an irrevocable *after*. That is: irreducible to any desire for reversibility, any “magic circle” of mythology. As “movement in the literal sense,” as “advancement in space and time,” Exodus represents then “the originary form (or formula) of the progressive story.”

Up to this point, the interpretation submitted by Walzer (put forward on the basis of direct and accurate analysis of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy and an indirect hermeneutic, that is, conducted on English translations of the texts of the medieval Jewish commentators: from *Midrash Rabbah* to *Mekilta De-Rabbi Ishmael*, from the notes of Rashi to the commentaries of Nachmanides<sup>13</sup>) would appear to follow exactly the example of Löwith, almost as if it were meant to corroborate its genealogy through the detailed examination of the principal old testament *topoi*. Accordingly, the narrative machinery of the Book of Exodus would have penetrated into “our political culture” on account of the “centrality of the Bible in western thought and its continual

re-reading." That is the reason why, concludes Walzer, "the thinking of Exodus seems to have survived to the secularization of political theory." Not only the definition, but also the conclusion of this reasoning would appear, therefore, to confirm the Löwithian interpretation, for which the secularizing dynamic, far from constituting a process of dissolution "without residue" of the theologemes, would limit itself to dislocating its center of gravity, in the sense of a growing *sacralization of the events of the "profane" world*.

Yet the parallel visions induced by these general propositions are misleading and deceptive. Very different, if not quite opposite, is the objective of the author. He aims, in fact, to demonstrate that the assumption of Exodus inside a cosmic vision distinguished by the circular movement which goes from the creation (and successive fall) to the final redemption is produced because of an unwarranted transposition of that narrative schema into an eschatological and apocalyptic key: *linear time*, introduced into an historical (and *not* cosmological) abode by the Book of Exodus, would thus come to be assimilated to the late Jewish and proto-Christian eschatologies of a gnostic character and to the "apocalyptic doctrines of Daniel and of the Apocalypse."

A further semantic slippage of the narrative of Exodus would be brought about, according to the American scholar, as a consequence of the superimposing of the *messianic conception*. Except that we must recall something which the "genealogists" à la Löwith have barely considered, namely, that messianism enters late in Jewish history. Although messianism does appear—as Saadya Gaon, Jewish philosopher of the ninth century, was to note<sup>14</sup>—through the thinking of Exodus, where, for instance, the final redemption is nothing more than the ordinary redemption (it, too, preceded, in the Hebrew versions, by a new Exodus, by the reappearance of Moses, etc.), there's an additional and more significant circumstance which refers to the exclusively doctrinal level. In fact, though characterized by the introduction of the idea of the "end of the days" and by the promise of "new heavens and new earth," messianism is differentiated from the eschatological and apocalyptic visions by its refusal of all waiting and for its readiness to "force the End." Which does not mean, Walzer comments, "to act only politically (instead of waiting for the omnipotent intervention of God), but to act politically for the final goal." Notwithstanding this distinction, Walzer seems to sympathize with the clean break operated by Gershom Scholem between political Zionism and messianic Judaism:

I deny absolutely that zionism is a messianic movement [ . . . ] the redemption of the jewish people, which I wish for as a Zionist, is in no way identical with the religious redemption that I hope for in the future [ . . . ]. The zionist ideal is one thing and the messianic ideal another and the two do not meet unless in the pompous phraseology of mass parades.<sup>15</sup>

If Scholem, however, limited himself to affirming the unsuturable dieresis between the level of the “promise” of redemption and the level of political utopia (of any political utopia), Walzer hastens to bring back without hesitation the great metaphor of Exodus to the second of the two levels in question: and it is exactly such a *reductio* which enables him, as we shall soon see, to operate a moderate disenchantment (as an “ameliorist”) with the idea of “revolution.” What counts above all else for him is to confirm the radical heterogeneity between the biblical Exodus and the ancient legends of journeys which—no matter how they turn out—begin and end “at home”: from the journey of Odysseus to Ithaca and the journey to Byblos in Phoenicia of the egyptian priest of the eleventh century, Wen-Amon. For the living israelites, the promised land is a “new land” where there is no one to welcome them.

The Book of Exodus—the american scholar therefore concludes—realizes in the meantime a decisive break with every cosmological narrative (myth of the Eternal Return) in that it puts into effect an historical narrative. Beneath this profile, it also represents the quintessence of biblical narration in its entirety, where “historical events occur once and draw [their] full significance from a system of interconnections between past and present, and not from the hierarchic correspondences of myth.” It is the historic “virtuosity” of the narrative schema of Exodus—facing the circular “viciousness” of the Eternal Return—which makes possible its transposition into a sort of politological model of change: Egypt-desert-promised land—that is, the three narrative stages of Exodus (beginning-middle-end)—can thus be easily translated into the triad problem-struggle-solution. To the point of inducing it to speak of a “politics of Exodus” with an amphibious profile: “moderate and prudent,” if compared to political messianism; “revolutionary,” if compared to the passivity and resignation of the traditional ideologies.

Neat scheme, that of Walzer. And what is more, impeccably executed. However, a problem remains, mentioned by the author himself and never taken up again (*et pour cause*: given that its treatment would have obscured the “ameliorist” wisdom of his

reading of Exodus): the power of Exodus is not so much in the beginning of the story, *as in its conclusion*: the divine promise. But the Promise is also the prime agent, the engine of the exodus itself. For this reason, principle and end are all one: they are reconnected in a circular motion whose center is not topological or geographical, but ethical. Principle and end reside—equal before the Law—not in a hyperuranian and remote transcendence, but in the dimension close to us of interiority: “within your mouth and within your heart,” as it is said in Deuteronomy (30: 11-14). Egypt is not only left behind. It is refused. That is: judged and condemned. And the fundamental terms of this judgment are: oppression and corruption. But what is it that makes the judgment possible, if not the Promise? The moral force of that judgment would be *nothing* without the idea of a life which is no longer oppressive and corrupt: from which oppression and corruption are definitively *eradicated*.

Does not then *another* story begin here, this one indeed truly *discontinuous* with respect to the classical mythologemes of the Eternal Return? A story in which *Geschehen* (mere “happening”), invested with “sense” in its totality and the meaning of “value” deep within its most negligible particulars, becomes *Geschichte*? A story in which the interweaving of “line” and “circle” is re-proposed on the assumption of the ethical judgment and the demand for commutation and redemption?

The terms of the question thus recast, the operation—which culminates in the figure of the *Entzauberung* or of the *Entmythologisierung* (of the secular “disenchantment” or of the theological “demythologization”)—will necessarily assume more dramatic and, literally, more radical profiles.<sup>16</sup> It will happen, that is, not indeed in terms of a banal line of demarcation with respect to eschatological and apocalyptic perspectives, but (on the contrary) by starting from a disputed abrogation, which involves, at its foundations, the “futurism” implicit in the modern concepts of History, Progress and Revolution. Secular theorists of society and politics such as Max Weber and christian theologians such as Barth, Bultmann and Gogarten have only produced, in this sense, courageous and powerful records of a process which has already occurred in “things themselves,” which is already “consumed” by the same dynamic of “modern secularization.” The radicality and the seriousness with which these authors take note of the already occurred “disenchantment with the world” is, when all is said and done, in the lucid awareness that the counteraims (the so-called perverse effects of Progress) are not at all in presumed

“exogenous” factors (in obstacles or unforeseen variables that the modern project was not able to envisage opportunely), but rather sink their own roots in the same “monotheistic” structure of Historical Time from which “high profile” categories such as Revolution or Liberation—as much as “low profile” categories like increment, growth, improvement, etc.—draw so much nourishment. The failure, which involves the entire complex of these categories, formed in the great cultural climate of the European enlightenment, has been visible for some time now in the proliferating of the oxymorons most characteristic of the political lexicon of the twentieth century, expressions such as “right-wing revolution” or “conservative revolution.” And it is in this same span of years that terms such as *progress* and *evolution* end up losing the positive axiological thrust they had at the beginning, giving way to neutral categories such as *modernization* and *development*. Is it not perhaps by virtue of this neutralization that the same *Revolutionsbegriff* comes to lose its own disruptive and liberatory features, in order to be transformed into a factor of modernization, susceptible to becoming an object of cold quantitative and comparative analyses?

If all of this represents, without a shadow of doubt, the historical-sociological outcome of the “disenchantment,” it is, however, necessary to add that this outcome does not at all exhaust its importance and implications on the ethico-philosophical level. From the *Entzauberung*, understood as the conclusion of modernity, and from the *Entmythologisierung*, understood as the landing-place for secularized monotheism, a new culture climate is in fact released, and whose implications are investigated by neither the new postmodern apologetic of the “death of God” nor the various deconstructionist or hermeneutic approaches to the thematics of the Subject and of the Foundation: the *polytheistic cultural order*.

### 3. “POLYTHEISM” AND CONFLICT OF VALUES: FROM THE “PRINZIP HOFFNUNG” TO THE “PRINZIP VERANTWORTUNG”

Starting with the Nietzschean announcement of the “death of God,” our epoch has been insistently connoted as the *era of polytheism*. Diagnostic schemes prepared by very different disciplinary perspectives and ideals—from philosophy to theology, from history to anthropology—have converged on the definition of the Occident as “exploded cultural sphere.”

---

*Polytheism* remains, however, an equivocal term. On account of a sort of energetic thrust endogenous to the world itself, it seems to allude to a polymorphous signification, leaving undecided whether it is a question of a return of the old gods or of the advent of "new gods" in a sort of neopagan cultural climate from vanished "ideological" confines: not by chance the theme of the "new polytheism"<sup>17</sup> continues even today to represent one of the battle cries of the "new right," as of the "new left." This aspect of the matter, however, seems to us secondary with respect to a hermeneutic implication more profound than that which the expression *polytheism* implies: the disenchantment inaugurated by the "death of God" does not involve a world which is de-ideologized and de-sacralized *tout court*. The disenchantment involves, instead, that return of the "ancient gods" who "aspire to dominate our life and therefore to resume their eternal contest," which an author as sober and restrained as Max Weber explicitly mentions in his famous conference *Science as Profession* (held in 1918—exactly in the culminating year of the *geistige Entscheidungen*—at Munich in Bavaria before a group of students returned from the war).<sup>18</sup>

The weberian definition of secularization can, obviously, be accepted or even rejected *in toto*. If, however, it is assumed as the point of departure, it is necessary to resist the temptation to carry out convenient reductions of it and to be prepared to accept all its complexity as well as the "gravity" of its consequences. It is well-known that Weber intends the return of the "ancient" gods as the virile ascent of a plurality—tragically undecidable on the philosophical, or theoretical plane *strictu sensu*—of "centers of value." It follows, therefore, that that "return" does not at all constitute a faithful repetition of the old and that, as a consequence, we can speak of the "antiquity" of those gods only by way of pallid analogy. That which is meant then by the term *polytheism* is, in reality, nothing more than the non-mechanical derivative (once one would have said *dialectic*) of the *monotheistic cultural climates* which mark the advent of "occidental rationalism" in its phase of maximum disclosure. The problem of the modern—a term today so abused as to have almost lost all semantic effectiveness—resides for Weber almost entirely in this "ambivalence": in the unforeseen (and yet endogenously *predestined*) "dialectical" counteraltar of its outcomes. If, however, a certain dialectic could be adumbrated—in the way in which Weber, at the conclusion of the *Protestant Ethic*, represents the overturning of that which, at its beginnings, had the appearance of a "fine veil" in the oppres-

sive “steel cage” of the administered world<sup>19</sup>—it is well to be clear that the dialectic is entirely *sui generis*: it lacks, in fact, the characterizing moment of the *Aufhebung*, of the repealing-becoming true of the “negative”; so the outcome of the process comes to coincide with a bare *crystallization* effect of “linear temporality” rather than with an *act of resolution*. Looked on with hindsight, from the perspective of its *result*, the advent of the plurisecular process of rationalization and “making worldly” of the regulating principles of science and politics, which make up the cultural patrimony of the modern Occident, is represented as an unheard of dissemination of the decisionistic energies (of the *Mächte* or “powers”) contained in the “centers of value.” Read in a bad light, and availing oneself of adequate hermeneutic lenses, the great weberian schema seems to communicate to us that the occidental project of technico-scientific neutralization of the originary “powers” has ended up giving space to a critical mass of counteraims, which appear less and less governable within the networks—increasingly more sophisticated, but also more and more exasperatingly self-referential—of the formal rationality of “enlightenment” stamp. And once again, looked at from the point of view of its conclusion, the act of progressive *erosion* of the onto-theological and metaphysical *fundamentals* seems to flow into its symmetrical opposite: into the extreme diffusion and generalization of the originary “deities” neutralized by the *principio monoteista*.<sup>20</sup>

With undoubted sensibility and acuteness, Gianni Vattimo has been able, in some of his recent interventions,<sup>21</sup> to stigmatize this phenomenon. Only today, he has noted most opportunely, can we realize that

not only (as Max Weber has taught) is the economic and technical rationalization of modern society the offspring of judaeo-christian monotheism and the calvinist ethic, but also the awareness of the historicity and relativity of the scientific paradigms, of the inconclusiveness and indefiniteness of science—or, to sum up, of a certain “lightness” of being—is an extreme result of christian being.<sup>22</sup>

All this would have led to the deflagration of the autarchical model on both sides of the question: that of reason and that of faith. *On the side of reason*, with the awareness of the “historicity of the scientific paradigms”: that is to say, let us add, with the substitution of the old external metaphysical realism (characterized by a univocal notion of “reality” and “correspondence”) for that which

Hilary Putnam calls "*internal metaphysical realism*" (for which the aforementioned notions depend on a "cartographic convention," which relativizes them to the various languages of the scientific disciplines). *On the side of faith*, with the awareness of the "(mythological) character of many pages of the Bible": that is to say, with the detaching of the authentic religious nucleus (inherent in the salvational problematic) from the doctrinal apparatus of the various secular theologies.

The way in which Vattimo focuses on the "spiritual situation of the times" (to evoke a famous expression adopted by Karl Jaspers<sup>23</sup> at the beginning of the 1930s) is, in our opinion, correct. Apt, in fact, is the description of the effects of *exploded monotheism* as the copresence of old deposits which reemerge (and which ratzingerian theology uses without embarrassment: starting with that superstitious and apocalyptic rediscovery of the "meaning of sin" and of the "belief in the devil," which a rigorous theology of secularization should enumerate among the most typical phenomena of "secularization"<sup>24</sup>), and that "diffuse expectation before religion" which had precisely nothing in common with neopagan inclinations. The sole aspect of Vattimo's analysis which we are not inclined to share is that implicit in the affirmation—by now become all too widespread as a slogan in the intellectual and pseudointellectual lexicon of these past few years—of the "lightness of being" which would result from the christian message.

Except that the dissent on this aspect touches on a philosophical-theological point which is not at all marginal, but, on the contrary, profound and decisive. It is contained in the question: Has christianity involved an exoneration or better a new, and in a certain sense absolute, *burden of responsibility* of human reason before the event, and especially before that Event which we identify with the "world"? If it is true that, at the center of the christian message, "there is a God who—neither out of pretence nor for a temporary disguise for pedagogic purposes, but seriously and out of love — was made man, that is, he lowered and reduced himself"; if it is true that it is precisely Christianity which subtracts from being, "that of which greek metaphysics and then modern scientism have always spoken in terms of necessity, the rigidity and the static condition which render every story, every contingency and every thing which cannot be foreseen unthinkable": if all that is true, should not there follow a great—indeed, absolute—coefficient of responsibility, and not an exoneration of responsibility, before the being of the world? Does not Vattimo believe that it was exactly the eternal spirals of cyclic time—only *apparently*

lead, with Milan Kundera's permission—to "exonerate" man and philosophy of every responsibility before the event, before the most intricate sense of the happening?

Precisely this last aspect, when all is said and done, calls into question the name of a thinker who, before Weber, had tried to envisage the destiny of occidental reason, starting with the "coming into the world" of the divine: precisely the name of Hegel. It is difficult, at this point, to overcome the impression that, if this change is exempted from the hegelian conceptual dimension (with everything which that involves in terms of a new burden of responsibility: *philosophical* and *ethical* at the same time), it then succeeds in resolving the dilemmas man/history, reason/event, I/world, which deeply scar thinking in our century. Thus, how difficult it is to escape from the temptation to discern that which is Presupposed in the "zero-sum" readings of Hegel as an equal and contrary "reaction" to the philosophically deresponsibilizing, even if *ethically* vigilant (and anything but unprepared), effects of "weak thought."

Hence the legitimate suspicion that the present reinstatement of the problematic (of a late schellingian flavor) of the Presupposition,<sup>25</sup> although conceived in diametrical opposition to every onto-theology, finishes up, when all is said and done, carrying out, willingly or unwillingly, the same *neutralizing* function of the old metaphysical theme of the Foundation, reinstating that same *relation of indifference* to the "historicity" of the event of Presence (*Dasein*) as *being-in-the-world*. And that the only way to pull out of this vicious circle today is precisely by a radical philosophical-speculative investigation of the "principle of responsibility."

In venturing the problem, we are perfectly aware of how "prejudiced" is the *Prinzip Verantwortung* thematic by now, which is equivalent—after the fall of the *Prinzip Hoffnung*—to the miserly wisdom of an antiutopian philosophy centered on the imperative of "scarcity," and on the scrupulous observance of "objective constraints."<sup>26</sup> But, in order to leave the shallows of such an outcome (which only a gross misunderstanding could exchange for "disenchantment"), there is but one road: understand the principle of responsibility in conformity with its most profound meaning, which is contained in its etymology. That is to say: as the ability to *respond*—apart from every abstract, formalistic and transcendental notion of *liberty* and of *decision* of the moderns, which today becomes sublimated in the euphoria of the *bricolage* or the imaginary "which seduces" on the part of the priests of the postmodern—to interrogation deriving from "necessity" and "destiny."

---

 4. FREEDOM AND DESTINY: AFTER HEGEL, BEYOND HEIDEGGER

The complaint concerning secularization has been transferred in the last few years increasingly decisively from the level of theological disputes to that of philosophical discussion. The terms of the debate in course are rather various. It is not, however, illegitimate to bring them back to two fundamental senses, which may be respectively indicated as the "decadent" meaning and the "emancipatory" meaning of the catchword *secularization*.

In the first sense, *secularization* implies a reading of occidental history (and philosophy) in a "decadent" mode, as the progressive fall of the strong metaphysical nuclei in the inexorable "loss of the center."<sup>27</sup> In the second sense, the term *secularization* overshadows a process of positive liberation by new areas of life and reality, of new and *unforeseen* emancipatory chances for human thought and action.

Seen contextually, the two meanings seem, however, to give rise to a double movement. More precisely: to a movement whose dualness results from a different and opposite way of looking at a single and identical phenomenon. Both senses, contextualized, seem, that is, to lead to the same result on the descriptive plane: the abandonment of the traditional "centered" structures, the collapse of the "unchanging things" (to use Severino's<sup>28</sup> words), involve an irrevocable constitutional crisis in theoretical philosophy. At the end of this crisis are waiting, with different emphases but—as is clear from the recent anthology *Filosofia '86*, dedicated significantly to the "Secularization of philosophy"<sup>29</sup>—in substantially convergent ways, the diagnostic schema of Vattimo and the more markedly therapeutic one of Richard Rorty. For the former, the constitutional crisis of traditional philosophy seems to give rise to the proliferation of the historiographical activity as "exorcism."<sup>30</sup> For the latter, that same crisis leads to the thesis of the marginal activity of philosophy and a pragmatic-hermeneutic rehabilitation of the "doxastic" knowledge which is expressed in the formula—incontrovertibly anglo-saxon in flavor—of the "priority of democracy over philosophy."<sup>31</sup>

Except that, exactly at the point in which the two senses—that of "decadent" and that of "emancipatory"—of secularization seem to converge, they return in reality to be represented as paths which fork. The fork, in fact, issues from the moment in which one seeks to establish no longer negatively or only descriptively, but positively—that is, hermeneutically—the meaning of *secularization*. In truth it is Vattimo himself who points out the need for

an unpretentious welding of the experience of the end of metaphysics and the possibility of delineating a positive "task" for philosophy, able to overcome the limits of the "negativistic" and "deconstructionist" approaches. But it is precisely in the way in which the new positivity of thought is meant that opinions tend—in the philosophical debate in progress and in the particular volume in question—"to divorce" again.

In *Filosofia '86* (and, sometimes, right at the very heart of the individual contributions themselves) the positive function of philosophy is in fact presented as being declined in inexorably antonymical ways. On the one hand, it comes to be understood in terms of a "procedural" conception founded on the communicative reciprocity of a flexible rationality, not apodictic, and permeable to metaphor; on the other hand, the "positivity" comes instead to be formulated as the chance of a thinking capable of posing radical interrogations by making a breach in the solid wall of the secular theologies and the "worldviews" (or paradigms) which crowd the religious and scientific-technological fruits of the imagination of our epoch. In the most noted starting points of the debate, in which this renewed radical vocation for philosophy comes to take shape, the decadent and emancipatory meanings of secularization assume the form of a providential *false movement*.<sup>32</sup> For which the only authentic, authentically radical way, to understand "freedom" of thought—opened by the conceptual schemas, edifying and salvational, of tradition—consists in its *paradoxical overturning in terms of "necessity" and "destiny."* The task which is thus opened in the presence of thought—or better: behind it—is then a renunciation, without going back, of every "task," of every construction, of every edifying "cultural model." Only from the renunciation of freedom (illusory) of *Sinnggebung*, of the "gift of sense" of philosophizing understood as an incessant compulsion to construct the "world," painting it with colored pieces of chalk, does the chance open up to understand thought starting from the dimension of destiny. This dimension can only be characteristic of that *thinking* which demonstrates itself able to encounter "friction"—as Wittgenstein said—with reality: not of course of that thinking which relates to the latter as an object-to-construct, as a "smooth surface" free of ripples and obstacles.<sup>33</sup>

It is in this way that the idea of destiny calls into question that of *necessity*. The authentic "necessity of thought" is not the necessity set in place by thought—the relations that thought *objectifies* as "world"—but the necessity that *yields thinking*: that originary friction with reality that drives thinking unawares, the "influential

scene" which every individual as such, "cast" into concrete life, finds himself facing alone, with his naked strength and "power," once the "new modern figures of the guardian angel" ("transcendental I," "subject constituted out of every possible experience," etc.) have vanished.<sup>34</sup>

Only by starting here will philosophy, in the era of science and technics, be able to return to that enigma to which for millennia we have given the name of "experience": to that horizon which "surrounds us from afar" and which represents the eternally inconclusive plot of our destiny. But does not all of that perhaps require of thought a new *positive* attitude, able to emancipate it from the passive (and parasitical) economy of the gloss and to project it, with all the risks and the potentialities of the opportunity, towards a new dimension—*after* Hegel, *beyond* Heidegger?

1. In order to get an idea of the state of research on these issues, see the entry *Herrschaft*—written by R. Koselleck (I, III 8-9), P. Moraw (II), H. Günter (III, 1-3, 5-7), K. -H. Ilting (III 4) and D. Hilger (IV-IX)—in O. Brunner, W. Conze and R. Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. III (H-Me) (Stuttgart, 1982), pp. 1-102, and the contribution on *Revolution*—written by R. Koselleck (I, IV-VII), Chr. Meier (II), J. Fisch (III 1-2b) and N. Bulst (III 3)—therein, vol. V. (Pro-Soz), Stuttgart 1984, pp. 653-788.

2. N. Bobbio, *La teoria delle forme di governo nella storia del pensiero politico* (Torino, 1976), p. 59.

3. *Ibidem*. Cf. also pp. 60-66.

4. Cf. H. Ryffel, *Metabolé Politeión: der Wandel der Staats-verfassungen* (Bern 1949).

5. N. Machiavelli, *Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio*, I, 2, in *Tutte le opere* (Firenze, 1971), p. 79. On this see also the pointed observations of G. Sasso, *Niccolò Machiavelli* (Bologna 1980), pp. 442-45.

6. A. Momigliano, *Polybius' Reappearance in Western Europe*, now in *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 87ff.

7. Cf. for these aspects the still instructive book by F. Calasso, *I glossatori e la teoria della sovranità* (Milano, 1957), especially p. 22. Also see our article *Sovranità*, in *Lessico della politica*, edited by G. Zaccaria (Roma, 1987), pp. 605-14.

8. For a construction of the great weberian theoretical schema, one can only return to the fundamental work by W. Schluchter, *Die Entwicklung des okzidentalen Rationalismus* (Tübingen, 1979): now also translated into italian, *Lo sviluppo del razionalismo occidentale* (Bologna, 1987).

9. Recently published in Germany, by J. B. Metzler, is Löwith's autobiography: *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933. Ein Bericht* (Stuttgart, 1986).

10. For a fuller discussion of the Löwithian theses, refer to our *Potere e secolarizzazione. Le categorie del tempo* (Roma, 1985), pp. 11ff. It is of interest to note, incidentally, that what follows may also be a response—even if indirectly—to the criticisms directed at me by Paolo Rossi in *Le similitudini, le analogie, le articolazioni della natura*, in “Intersezioni,” IV, 2 (August 1984), esp. pp. 243-48 (now in P. Rossi, *I ragni e le formiche. Un’apologia della storia della scienza* (Bologna, 1986), pp. 119-26), where he accuses my abovementioned book of being a “coercive” genealogy; and again in “Idola” della modernità, in “Rivista di filosofia,” LXXVII, No. 3 (December 1986), where he appears indeed inclined to number me among the theorists of the “postmodern” (cf. esp. pp. 431ff.). In reality—as can be derived from the present contribution (but as could be easily evinced from a more careful or less prejudiced reading of *Potere e secolarizzazione*)—my perspective points towards, in contrast with the “genealogism” of a Löwith and the foucauldian “archaeology,” the restoring of the *depth of field* of certain key categories of the modern. So much is this true that the “idola” of the postmodern faithfully relate themselves to those of “modernity” in a curious if unconscious game of mirrors.

11. For a wide-ranging treatment of these aspects, see the extraordinary note-essay dedicated to “L’intuizione del tempo nella storiografia classica” by S. Mazzarino, *Il pensiero storico classico* (Bari, 1966), vol. II, tome 2, pp. 412-61.

12. M. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York, 1985); It. trans., *Esodo e rivoluzione* (Milano, 1986), p. 15. The quotations which follow are taken, unless otherwise indicated, from this work.

13. On the biblical text as narrative prototype—and on the relations which are established in it between *language, myth, metaphor* and *typology*—anglosaxon culture possesses an exceptional model in the research of Northrop Frye (see in particular *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* [New York, 1982]; It. trans., *Il grande codice* [Torino, 1986]). Curiously, however, Walzer maintains that “the ‘code’ of Frye . . . suggests a too elaborated architecture” and he seems to prefer the “more ‘modest’ readings” of Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981).

14. “We judge the promise of final redemption from the first promise since the time in which we have lived in exile in Egypt” (Saadya Gaon, *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, in *Three Jewish Philosophers* [Philadelphia, 1960], pp. 168-69).

15. Cited in D. Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), p. 100.

16. For an analysis of the *radical implications* of “disenchantment” in theology and philosophy, one may refer to my essay *Tradizione e autorità*, in “Il centauro,” Nos. 13-14, (1985), 160-67.

17. Cf. the essays of D. Miller, *The New Polytheism*, and of J. Hillman, *Psychology: Monotheistic or Polytheistic*, now collected in It. trans. in *Il nuovo politeismo* (Milano, 1983).

18. Cf. M. Weber, *Scienza come professione*, in *Il lavoro intellettuale come professione* (Torino, 1966), p. 33. Among the students present at the conference, there was also Karl Löwith, as is clear from his own testimony (cf. *Martin Heidegger im Gespräch*, edited by Richard Wisser [Freiburg-München, 1970], pp. 3-39).

19. M. Weber, *L’etica protestante e lo spirito del capitalismo*, in *Sociologia della religione*, edited by Pietro Rossi (Milano, 1982), vol. I, p. 192 (where one also reads unequivocally “*destiny* made of the veil a steel cage”).

20. For this aspect, the diagnosis of Henry Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris, 1981) remains fundamental; It. trans., *Il paradosso del monoteismo* (Casale Monferrato, 1986), esp. pp. 3-28 (corresponding to the first chapter, dedicated to “Il Dio-uno e le molteplici divinità”).

21. The most significant of which are now found collected in the volume

*La fine della modernità* (Milano, 1985) (cf. especially the last chapter "Nichilismo e postmoderno in filosofia").

22. G. Vattimo, *Il (povero) diavolo e il buon Dio*, in "Europeo," 21, March 1987, p. 7. The following citations refer, unless otherwise indicated, to this article.

23. K. Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (Berlin, 1931); It. trans., *La situazione spirituale del tempo* (Roma, 1982). The expression of Jaspers has been emblematically restored in recent years by Jürgen Habermas in the collective "balance sheet" volume edited by him, which constitutes title No. 1000 in the prestigious series "Edition Suhrkamp": *Stichworte zur "Geistigen Situation der Zeit"*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1979).

24. For the distinction between "secularization" and "secularism"—characteristic of the theology of Friedrich Gogarten—refer once again to our *Potere e secolarizzazione*, pp. xvii-xxvi.

25. Symptomatic in this sense is the volume by M. Cacciari, *Icone della legge* (Milano, 1985).

26. This is the "sweep" which the responsibility principle assumes, for example, in the interesting book by Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979) (see especially the concluding chapter: "Von der Kritik der Utopie zur Ethik der Verantwortung").

27. For a good example of this line, see the research carried out, in the aesthetic and historical-artistic ambit, by Hans Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte* (Salzburg, 1948); It. trans. *Perdita del centro* (Torino, 1967) (this edition comes out, significantly, in the series "Documenti di cultura moderna," directed by Augusto del Noce and Elémire Zolla).

28. Of the vast production of Emanuele Sererino, see especially *Destino della necessità* (Milano, 1980).

29. Cf. G. Vattimo (ed.), *Filosofia '86* (Roma-Bari, 1987).

30. Cf. G. Vattimo, *Introduzione e Metafisica, violenza, secolarizzazione*, in *Filosofia '86*, pp. viii ff.; 89ff.

31. Cf. R. Rorty, *La priorità della democrazia sulla filosofia*, pp. 23ff.

32. Particularly important in this sense are the contributions by S. Givone, *Oltre il cristianesimo secolarizzato*, and by A. G. Gargani, *L'attrito del pensiero*, therein respectively pp. 109ff. and pp. 5ff.

33. Cf. S. Givone, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-21; A. G. Gargani, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

34. Cf. A. G. Gargani, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-20.