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Ernst Cassirer's Posthumous Grandchildren and the Paradigm Shift of Davos

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Abstract: Scholars who are members of a generation descending from a founder of a philosophical school might be titled as “children.” Those members are characterized as scholars who continue the doctrines of the founder into the future. In the history of ideas there are many examples for such scholarly lineages. Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy was less suitable for generating a successorship in the sense of a filiation: That became dramatically obvious at the famous debate between Martin Heidegger and himself in Davos. Heidegger seemed to be the philosopher of the future by developing a “new essentialism” which shall be expounded as the core-message of his doctrine; this is elaborated in the first chapter of this essay. Only in the post-war generations and long time after Cassirer’s death, eminent scholars working in different scientific disciplines and in different countries based their public research – more or less explicitly – on Cassirer’s philosophy of culture. The second section will discuss three famous examples: Nelson Goodman’s Semiology, Pierre Bourdieu’s Sociology of Symbolic Forms and lastly the Political Philosophy of Jürgen Habermas.

Keywords: ideological turn, new essentialism, fate, freedom, symbol

1 Preliminary Remarks

One important reason why Cassirer did not have any academic “children” became obvious during his famous debate with Martin Heidegger 1929 in Davos. As we know, Heidegger was the rising star in the firmament of eminent philosophers at

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the time, and Heidegger was declared the winner¹ of this debate and Cassirer the loser – a decision accepted and affirmed by the majority of the young people who participated in the famous German-French holiday course in Davos. Heidegger was the favourite of the moment and he remained in this position for the next decades – more or less until today.

The Davos documents permit the conclusion that the debate became the manifestation of an *ideological turn* within the mainstream of national and international philosophical discourses: according to Heidegger's emphatically presented demand that philosophy is obliged to regain its original subject and to lead people to confront themselves with the "hardness of fate."² With respect to the context of *Being and Time*, published two years previously, this means: only by finding out the determinants of their fate can human beings gain "authenticity." And with respect to the famous presidential address from only four years later, it means: one must abandon all attempts to gain authenticity by autonomy as it was promised by the leading thinkers of the Enlightenment. Heidegger generated an enthusiastic echo among many readers and listeners for the message of the new philosophy of fate, which programmatically cancelled the ideas and values of Enlightenment.

What is more, there is something surprising in the historical development that, years after the Second World War and years after Cassirer's death, very different eminent authors, researchers, university lectures and leaders of schools all over the world based their intellectual profiles on their specific reception of Cassirer's work: Nelson Goodman, Pierre Bourdieu and Jürgen Habermas – three representative examples that demonstrate on the highest level the varied spread of Cassirer's ideas and concepts within the humanities and even social sciences. For all their diversity, what these scholars have in common is that they refer to Cassirer's concept of symbol: partly in order to use it as a basic position to be deepened and widened, as with Goodman, partly in order to sharpen their own position through opposition to the transcendental disposition of the symbolic forms, like Bourdieu, and finally, partly to identify Cassirer as a political actor, a master of

1 It was Toni Cassirer herself who introduced a certain polemical tone in her report of her meetings with Heidegger in Davos and in her account of the debate. About Heidegger she wrote: "His hostility and pugnaciousness were immediately on display" (Toni Cassirer 2003). And she characterized his intention as follows: "he had the plan of dragging Cohen's achievements into the mud and if possible to destroy Ernst." The very question as to a "winner" of the Davos-Debate came from the philosopher Eberhard Griesebach who participated in the event and concluded in his short summary of the debate in a letter to Ernst Rothaker that there was neither a winner ("Sieger") nor an agreement between the eminent discussants (ECN 17, p. 335, Anm. 48).

2 A transcript of the Davos disputation between Ernst Cassirer und Martin Heidegger can be found in Martin Heidegger (1991) pp. 274 ff and in ECN 17, pp. 199–232.

political subversion and a highly committed republican, as Habermas did. This will be discussed in chapter II. But before this I shall give a short recapitulation of Davos in order to demonstrate that Cassirer was hindered to continue his work as a philosopher whose concept of culture implies consequent dialogues with other disciplines and sciences and who did not fail because of the opposition of one other single philosopher but much more because of the echo and the open-mindedness of the academic public for a philosophy which is looking for an isolated position in strong exclusivity beyond any contacts with the knowledge of science.

We will see in retrospect that Cassirer was discussing in Davos not only as author of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* but also as author of his early programmatic tractatus *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (*Substance and Function*, 1910). The debate there in 1929 was an anticipatory celebration of the victory of a philosophy to which the future would belong: to fate as an existential determination rather than culture as the embodiment of our creative freedom. Even before Davos, the future belonged to Heidegger; Davos was the final confirmation of this bonus. To have a future means to trigger a reception, find successors, build up followings and found a school. Heidegger's school managed to expand with increasing speed, and quickly crossed national boundaries. I am counting all those who became his students, his swarm of children, through active reception, declared discipleship or avowed identification with his philosophy. Heidegger has many of those to this day, even if things have temporarily grown a little quieter since the publication of the *Black Notebooks* a few years ago. From the start, he quickly acquired a school-forming significance that enabled him to gain lasting power, and no one knows whether or not he has entirely lost it in the meantime. Cassirer had neither "children" nor power. The winner in Davos was a foregone conclusion; the countdown to Cassirer's exile already began in 1929, as we now know.

2 The Paradigm Shift: Davos

The legendary encounter between Heidegger and Cassirer after the publication of *Sein und Zeit* (Heidegger 1986) was not only a turning point of epochal significance for German philosophy within the international context, but also a seizure of power, although it remains unclear to this day how the verdict of Heidegger's victory was reached. One can only assume that the great majority of the participants – including Cassirer's assistant, Joachim Ritter, who would become the central purveyor of right-wing Hegelianism in Germany after 1945 – decided it that way. On the basis of the scarce material and the distance we have meanwhile

gained, we are nevertheless able to assess that event in a different manner: it was far from a showdown for one of the two discussants and more of a clash between two cultural paradigms with an inconclusive outcome, even with a slight advantage on the side of the “Olympian” as people called Cassirer at that time. This result confirms a reading of these developments as a philosophical power grab: the future of philosophy from now on could not be separated from Heidegger’s career.

At the beginning of the discussion Cassirer defined Heidegger’s position as much closer to the paradigm of Neo-Kantianism with which he critically engaged than Cassirer’s himself, in so far as the emphasis on the basic condition of the finitude of human reason and human existence belonged to the essential characteristics of Neo-Kantianism. Cassirer’s argument that Heidegger was in fact much more a candidate for a philosophy of finitude – the philosopher who combined human existence and the “running forth into death” ontologically – whilst his own perspective was that of infinitude linked to a practical philosophy of open history that became a paradigm after the Enlightenment. Thus Cassirer was stressing the inescapable interdependence between the theoretical philosophy of finitude and the practical philosophy of infinitude that Heidegger passed over silently. Moreover, it evidently went unnoticed at the time that Cassirer distanced himself from Neo-Kantianism not only 10 years later when he confirmed his critical distance to this school (Cassirer 1993, p. 201), but already before Davos. It was John M. Krois who first presented his reading of the Davos-Debate, which was to be found in his book *Ernst Cassirer. Symbolic Forms and History* (1987), during a conference in Heidelberg in 1999, where he demonstrated that Cassirer had been much more distanced from traditional Neo-Kantianism already before 1929. According to Krois, it was Cassirer’s deep loyalty that he felt to Cohen vis-a-vis the hard-line and uncompromising attitude of Heidegger. “In Davos borders were drawn” (Krois 2002, p. 236). In the context of this important essay Krois explains Cassirer’s difficult as well as delicate situation, who was convinced of the extreme incompatibility between his own and Heidegger’s philosophy. But he nevertheless dared not to criticize Neo-Kantianism considering the danger to suddenly come in touch with Heidegger’s polemical opposition. Krois asks: “Why did Cassirer act so defensively and guardedly in Davos?,” and he answers himself: “Instead of speaking for himself in Davos, Cassirer seemed more interested in defending his teacher Cohen and to demonstrate solidarity with him. Cassirer wanted to salvage the objective validity of cognition before Heidegger’s attacks, but he did so with his own means. His doctrine of base phenomena (Basisphänomene) is not

reconcilable with the credo of the Marburg School ... ” (Krois 2002, p. 237).³ In a certain sense, Heidegger even confirmed Cassirer's objections implicitly: according to Heidegger's aggressive polemic, the philosophy of infinitude referred to as the sphere of historical agency which Cassirer terms “culture,” offers a justification of “laziness,” for it neglects the original task of philosophy, which is the confrontation with the “hardness of destiny.” This denunciation of cultural philosophy is made possible by Heidegger's general elimination of practical philosophy from the tasks pertaining to philosophy, and opens the door to an attitude of fatalism. The programmatic motives of this opposition constituted the framework of the antagonist positions of both adversaries:

- Heidegger, the philosopher of the “fate” of Being – this idea remains constant both before and after the *Kehre*, but addressed from different perspectives;
- Cassirer, the philosopher of freedom – freedom understood as the specific human capacity to create culture.
- Heidegger, the philosopher of the bond that determines our language to fulfil its function as the “home of being;”
- Cassirer, the philosopher of the development of language towards a historical medium of symbolic understanding that transcends the epochs and the national orders.

Behind this rivalry, however, there was a deeper and much more virulent opposition that remained hidden, and whose acuteness and radicality cannot be overestimated. I will demonstrate this elementary contradiction in three short steps:

2.1 Heidegger's New Essentialism

2.2 The Ambiguity of Tradition

2.3 The Politics of Philosophy

2.1 Heidegger's New Essentialism

Cassirer's position was determined, as it were, by the framework of his first great systematic work, *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (1910). Here he built systematically on the philosophy of Leibniz, which he had lavishly reconstructed in his famous book *Leibniz's System in seinen wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen* (1902),

³ See also Massimo Ferrari who makes plausible how deeply Heidegger himself still was concerned by the Marburg School and especially by Paul Natorp at that time; he concludes: that it is not illegitimate “to surmise a little rest of Neo-Kantianism anchored in the Dasein of being” (Ferrari 2003, p. 264).

and to which he remained more faithful throughout his life than to Kant, and competently navigated the history of science, both past and contemporary. Cassirer laid the foundation for overcoming substantialism both in philosophy and in science: neither the substantiality of the leading paradigm of all modern concepts of matter – namely Descartes' *res extensa* – nor its mathematical equivalents can be plausibly grounded: extension is a predicate, not a substance. Consequently, one could conceive of an infinite number of different extensional magnitudes, related to one another like points within a line, whose coordinates can be established by a functional equation and which behave in interrelation to one another. Cassirer's concept of culture cannot be detached from this fundamental scientific-philosophical decision: culture is the sum of all the products of free human actions, and thus the latter can be interpreted as signs of the increasing complexity of the entire sphere of human action – Cassirer is a “universalist” and, in this regard at least, an authentic Kantian. Neither culture nor freedom, of which the former is a function, can be understood as if they were first principles. Any form of philosophical substantialism or ideological dedication to principle (principlism) is foreign to Cassirer. From his point of view, Heidegger's program of an *Analytic of Dasein* seems to be an anachronistic and restorative regression. Indeed, it is remarkable that Heidegger reports in *Being and Time* (§ 11) that, when he was in Hamburg in 1923, Cassirer and he agreed with each other in the necessity of an existential analytics. But – as Ferrari concludes his comment to this remark: “Neither the review of 1928 and even less the meeting in Davos, which ended with an ‘untranslatability’ of both perspectives, let us understand better wherein exactly such an ‘agreement’ might have consisted” (Ferrari 2003, p. 270). Of course, Heidegger conceives of human existence as originally dynamic and processual – that is to say, temporal in the specific meaning of “temporality;” on the other hand, however, he explicitly and primarily envisages existence in the concrete tension between “thrown-ness” [*Geworfenheit*] and death as a “totality,” and these characteristics are included in the first formula of Heideggerian doctrine: existence is the “essence” of Dasein (“Das ‘Wesen’ des Daseins liegt in seiner Existenz” [Martin Heidegger 1978, § 9]). The formula indicates the definite transformation of “existence” into “essence” – a basic categorial decision that has been underestimated in mainstream Heideggerian scholarship to this day. We should act on the assumption that the author of *Substance and Function*, i.e. the modern sceptic towards any type of philosophical substantialism, arrived in Davos after closely studying the important book that made Heidegger not only a famous author but even a new star in the firmament of philosophy: Cassirer will have realized that this great hope in the new generation of scholars was delivering nothing other than *the existential version of an antiquated essentialism*.

2.2 The Ambiguity of Tradition

Now that Cassirer's literary estate is almost entirely published and the criteria of his approach and dealings with the philosophical and scientific traditions have become clearer, one can easily show that he was not a traditionalist; that is to say, he did not act as a guardian of tradition, understood as a normative foundation of our culture, but rather as a leading mediator between decisive formative oppositions in our history, such as the cultural profiles of epochs and their important sources such as the Renaissance and the Modern Age, or between eminent rivals such as Leibniz and Kant, or between opposing scientific paradigms such as classical physics and quantum physics – or last but not least between “cultural forms” such as myth and science. Nevertheless, in Davos, Cassirer was considered a backward-looking encyclopaedist, and thus a conservative whose philosophy seemed to be obsolete, even boring.

Heidegger gladly assumed the role of revolutionary that was assigned to him, revolutionary whose combative reductionism, with which he wanted to reduce philosophy violently to one single fundamental question – what was accompanied by the gesture of a radical innovator and an academic populist of sorts. Perhaps this monomaniacal radicalism is one of the reasons why the discussion between these disputants never explicitly addressed their own relationship with tradition, although there was already a provocative background for this in the programmatic context of §6 of *Being and Time* concerning the question of the adequate methodological approaches to our tradition and – so to speak – the criteria for choosing between “good” tradition (such as Kant's theory of imagination) and “bad” tradition (such as the “vulgar” understanding of time in Aristotle). The opposition between Cassirer and Heidegger with regard to this issue is fairly clear and sharp, since both of them – not only Heidegger – had an “appropriative” attitude towards tradition, tradition understood as matter from the past in order to create the future. But whereas the one did so as a conciliator, the other as a “destructor.” While Cassirer maintained a mediating attitude, which is generally characteristic of his harmonizing historiography, it was Heidegger who, with the unabashed view of a polemicist, implemented some methodological premises that he discussed in the context of the aforementioned paragraph from *Being and Time*: Heidegger does not conceive of tradition as the form or content of a normative heritage, but rather as a process of “concealment” [*Verborgenheit*]. The history of philosophy resembles a collage of concealments, a collage to whose expansion neo-Kantianism contributed decisively through its tendency of making philosophy scientific – or rather, of hiding philosophy behind the mask of scientific truth. Against this tendency the fundamental pre-scientific approach of philosophy to its authentic questions –

above all, the question of the “sense of Being” – had to “affirm” itself with “resolution.” In his forensic exegeses of selected philosophies from tradition – from Aristotle to Bergson, from Plato to Dilthey – and in the context of his methodological instructions, Heidegger polemically and uncompromisingly implements his demands addressed to his colleagues-philosophers. Tradition conceals, destruction discovers; tradition hides, destruction reveals; tradition binds, destruction releases.

From today’s point of view, it is easy to understand why Heidegger caused fascination in and after Davos: he seemed to offer a philosophy of liberation, one that, in opposition to Cassirer, did not interpret culture retrospectively as a “process of human self-liberation” (Cassirer 1990, p. 345), but rather deployed philosophy as a force that liberated humans from the oppressiveness of normative concealments, from the complexity of cumulative knowledge in the sciences, and – last but not least – from the “dictatorship of the They” [*Diktatur des Man*]. This attractive message of “liberation” was modified by Heidegger in the following years, and this development changed the reception of the Davos statement more and more and transformed it into a form of programme. Heidegger’s philosophy undoubtedly remained attractive during and after the Third Reich and the Holocaust, obviously crossing the borders of the realm of the German language. The following factors might have been responsible for this:

- Like every revolutionary promise, this philosophy was welcomed as a release from the commitment to “tradition,” and it did so by shaping its specific outlook in the direction of an ontologically grounded decisionism.
- This philosophy definitively replaced the normative figure of legitimation with the incorruptible authenticity of decision – the decision of Dasein for itself. This disposition is still inherent in every form of primitive fascism today. The analogy between Heidegger’s actually existing Dasein and Carl Schmitt’s “sovereign” is evident.
- This philosophy promised a release from anxiety, not simply by removing it, but by ennobling it: the state of anxiety is both a filter and an indicator of the achieved “authenticity” of existence. A philosophy that points in this direction replaces every form of ethics; in the “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger speaks of the implicit ethics underlying the transcendental analytic of Dasein, which should be the “original ethics.”
- This philosophy offered the chance to become a member of the elite of those who are on the “right” side in the renewed dualism of Good and Evil – in analogy to which Heidegger is constructing a dualism of authenticity [*Eigentlichkeit*] and inauthenticity [*Uneigentlichkeit*], of the derivative origins and noble origins [*Ursprünglichkeit*] of *Mitsein* and Dasein, and so forth.

- This philosophy promoted resentiments because it presented itself as a war cry, inviting people to join this battle: a gesture that was already present from the beginnings of Heidegger's career, and which became a veritable *cantus firmus* in the *Black Notebooks* (cf. Rudolph 2015, pp. 141 ff.).
- This philosophy developed an original dialectic by linking the break with tradition to the appropriation thereof under the name of destruction. By doing this, it solves the problematic tension between the continuity with that origin, which can never be eliminated, and the discontinuity of that authentic existence which is only accountable to itself. This dialectic is reflected in the tensions between referring to a particular pre-Socratic on the one hand (Parmenides for the dualism between being and appearance; Heraclitus for the elitist appeal to a logos that is inaccessible to the masses; Anaximander for the original unity of language and being) and arguing for a “new beginning” on the other.
- This philosophy emancipates itself from the scientific pressure to succeed: “Science does not think,” and even more: the truth of knowledge depends on a language that does not characterize itself by the exhaustive production of objectivity and intersubjectivity. It is actually the other way around: just as we cannot escape from being-in-the-world in order to confront the world thanks to our alleged autonomy, we cannot escape from language even if we make it the object of our investigations, as Heidegger makes clear in *On the Way to Language*: “In order to be who we are, we human beings remain committed to and within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else ...” (Heidegger 1971, p. 134).

2.3 The Politics of Philosophy

In analogy to the well-known category of the politics of history, the title “The Politics of Philosophy” should be understood as the use of philosophy for ideological ends of a political nature. Texts such as Heidegger's rectoral address, the so-called “Letter on Humanism” and the texts collected within the *Black Notebooks* belong to this genre. In opposition to the Enlightenment, Heidegger presents himself as a philosopher of history, or rather, as an apologist for our dependence on history – a dependence shown in history itself. Against history, however, he presents himself as the champion of resolution [*Entschlossenheit*], as the destroyer of tradition, as an agitator who pleads for diminishing the power of tradition. By virtue of its distinctive double-sidedness, this dialectic can be implemented in one way or the other: for instance, it can be employed, as in the rectoral address, against the objectionable escapades of unduly glorified “academic freedom.”

Whatever this attack entails, it targets both the autonomy of human knowledge and the autonomy of free will, both of them unduly glorified since the Enlightenment, and criticizes the principle of the “value-freedom of science” (Max Weber, *Wertfreiheit der Wissenschaft*), which had acquired the status of an ideal only a few years earlier. An annihilating move is thereby carried out: not “destruction” in the sense of “appropriation,” as discussed in the first chapter, but rather “annihilation” in the sense of the *Black Notebooks*: here “annihilation” means something like disempowerment or making something ineffective or meaningless forever, whereas “destruction” is something to be used in a new context. On the other hand, the implementation of this dialectic serves a restoration of the Original in its undisclosedness, of the Pure, of what we are guilty of having forgotten.

Nobody can rule out the possibility that Heidegger’s philosophy may even survive this new scandal triggered by the publication of the *Black Notebooks*. If there is any relevant philosophical content to discover that might one day be discussed without being poisoned by the political implications of Heidegger’s work, already in Davos, Cassirer should have been able to notice this ambiguity in the relationship to what is called “tradition.” And he could plausibly have continued by demonstrating how a philosophy of cultural symbols provocatively competes with Heidegger’s philosophy.

3 Cassirer’s Grandchildren

In the countries that granted him asylum, Cassirer likewise – aside from a few aspirants like Susanne Langer – remained childless. One can, however, observe a phenomenon that is rare, and even more rarely successful: two generations after him, some major scholars and important leaders of schools opened themselves up to his influence so profoundly that one might speak of a posthumous adoption in reverse: they implicitly made him their teacher and intellectual father. I include the three academic teachers and authors mentioned at the start, three very different thinkers from three countries: the philosopher of language, symbol theorist and Whitehead pupil Nelson Goodman from the USA, the sociologist and symbol theorist Pierre Bourdieu from France and even the social philosopher and long-standing director of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, Jürgen Habermas from Germany. I will only discuss Goodman in brief; I will show how Bourdieu needs his father in order to set himself apart from him while using his conceptual framework; and I will show in Habermas’s work how a late discovery can lead to an efficient commonality.

One can, therefore, find the phenomenon of a belated, posthumous influence on the academic work of recipients who already have a standing in their own field

and had occasional encounters with Cassirer's work, but were able to appraise his philosophy critically against the background of their own interest: Nelson Goodman broke the ice by taking Cassirer's thesis that the act of symbolization is the starting point for every individual world-disclosure also as the precondition for the creation of new worlds in the world. The epitome of new worlds in the world, both for Goodman and Cassirer, is culture. This means that we communicate within the network of symbols by participating in processes of symbol interpretation, or by establishing symbols in art. Pierre Bourdieu reads symbols as imprints of power (Bourdieu 1979, 2015). He understands society as concretized culture with all its contradictions and struggles, and what distinguishes art is that it brought Cassirer's symbolic forms down to earth from the heavens (see Magerski 2005, pp. 212ff.). In this reading, the relationship of Cassirer to Bourdieu would be roughly analogous to that of Marx to Hegel – that is, more of a mutually dependent opposition or a critical removal of defects than an agreement. Cornelius Bickel has placed even greater emphasis on the difference between the two symbol theorists than Magerski: "The fundamentally different perspective from which they view the shared theme of symbol formation brings the difference between their philosophical and sociological ways of thinking clearly to light" (Bickel 2004, p. 116). The claim of difference between their ways of thinking rests on the preconception that (Bourdieu's) sociology generally affects a space of the world's reality that remains untouched by philosophy. In short: sociology concretizes where philosophy remains abstract; sociology penetrates to the social reality of actual social struggles, while philosophy remains trapped in the medium of intellectual reflection and analyses not real-world struggles and historical class oppositions, but rather oppositions between worldviews – between myths and sciences, for example. Sociology is the indicative, philosophy the subjunctive. Sociology examines the "bodily involvedness" of humans (Bickel 2004, p. 117), the philosopher considers how they are intellectually affected; the sociologist recognizes that it is a matter of power when people represent, defend and assert their worldviews, while philosophy is content to grasp the diversity of worldviews as proof of the richness of culture; sociology considers cultural pluralism a danger to social peace, yet philosophy sees it as an expression of increasing freedom.

Some relevant interpreters of Bourdieu's support their observations by referring to the assessment of "habitus," understood as the symbolization of the individual's social conditioning. Here at the latest, however, it is apparent that compared to Cassirer, the sociological approach falls short: recognizing the symbolic relevance of human beings' respective habitus requires the act of symbolization. This necessary precondition of the observing symbol-founder is elided by the sociological gaze, which tends towards the false conclusion that society creates a symbol of itself in the habitus: here society becomes the subject of symbolization.

In the semiotic triangle, the sociologist replaces the interpretant or the concept with society, which is at once considered the representamen to which the symbol refers: symbolization thus becomes an act of self-mirroring by the social totality. In this manner, the capability of the *animal symbolicum* is underestimated and the quality of the symbol is undervalued. The PSF, by contrast, seeks to show that it requires a prior act of symbolization to enable the interpretation of the habitus as a sign that points to society as its cause: society is the “object” to which the symbol, i.e. the habitus, refers. In other words, the *animal symbolicum* is the creature defined by the competence to employ the habitus as a symbol of society’s power to influence. This act of symbolization – however indirect – is an act of liberation, not least from society, which, from the sociologist’s perspective, is inescapable.

In an essay that has unfortunately received little attention, Jürgen Habermas enacted a confrontation between Arnold Gehlen’s philosophy of the institution and Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms (Habermas 2001, pp. 63ff.). To illustrate this, he fell back on Cassirer’s famous speech at the University of Hamburg’s “Constitution Celebration” [*Verfassungsfeier*] in 1928: the symbolist – the natural antipode of any form of institutionalism – chose, framed by conformist traditionalist rituals, the method of subversive diplomacy. For according to Habermas, Cassirer was confronted in this delicate situation with an audience of a predominantly German National disposition, and argued both cautiously and firmly – especially in a time of increasing crisis for Germany’s young democracy – for a version of the idea of republicanism that corresponded to his sympathy for a minimalist state. In using the given occasion to take the purpose of the celebration at its word, so to speak, Cassirer was no doubt aware that he was placing himself in the position of a rebel in disguise: resistance against the alleged guardians of the constitution for the sake of that very constitution. Invoking ritualized traditions, Cassirer undermined the possible attempt by representatives of institutional power to claim normative authority in matters of democratic freedom by using this taboo occasion himself to turn the event into an initiative against the authority of the institutions holding it, understood as a fractal of the state.

To sharpen Cassirer’s general position: institutions tend to be fortresses of a frozen past, not stages on which innovation takes place. Or, to use Hegel’s vocabulary: they – and above all the state – are manifestations of objective spirit that fulfil a determining function. They serve – and here Habermas traces a line from Hegel to Arnold Gehlen – the compensation of the natural deficiencies of human nature in the struggle for survival (Gehlen), or rather, they serve to compensate for the deficiency that consists in structural overtaxing by a morality that was conceived for the express purpose of an obedient adherence in one’s way of life to an uncompromising orientation towards moral demands – a morality that demands neutrality of judgement where concern and natural bias would be

legitimate, and which demands the possibility of universalizing personal options where defending particular interests can claim the status of a natural right: "What the subjective spirit cannot achieve must be compensated for by the objective spirit" (Habermas 2001, p. 68). Hegel set the course from which Gehlen, not least owing to political circumstances that favoured his influence, was able to profit – albeit with the marked difference that Hegel's construction of the state should be understood as the manifestation of a metaphysical ideal, while Gehlen's understanding of the state is based on a more "modest" motive: it is an indication of his anthropological realism.

Institutions block autonomy and choke spontaneity. But they do lend stability to the organizational forms of social order and enable their lasting survival. They cripple creativity and are the natural enemies of "revolutions in the way of thinking" – and not only in Immanuel Kant's Prussia. On the other hand – and this is always the basis of their power – they reduce the risk of a constant personal responsibility on the part of the individual: behind the mask of offering to unburden, they cause a "self-imposed immaturity." They can – to rephrase Hegel – be tasked with the realization and lasting preservation of morals, which Kant still viewed as the exclusive and irreplaceable preserve of the reasonable individual. The state organizes the individuals gathered under it as a "people," even if there are numerous historical examples in which the birth of the state seemed to take place as a development from a people to a state people: "people" is always a collective subject whose concept can scarcely be separated from a particular normative claim – from the *Populus Romanus* to the egalitarianism of people's sovereignty in (and since) Rousseau.

Volk is a word that would always remain alien to Cassirer. From Kant, who only occasionally used this category (see Angeli 2013, pp. 41ff.), he preferred to adopt the term "civil society," probably with great sensitivity to the difference that – implicitly anticipating the opposition of society and community, which went back to Ferdinand Tönnies – is hinted at quite clearly in Kant: the *Volk* – which can also exist as a "nation of devils" – is an extremely communalized collective in which the individuals that form its members relinquish their claim to authenticity; "civil society," on the other hand, is an alliance of convenience whose success is meant to prove itself in a reliable solidarity in the face of reciprocal claims to freedom. Cassirer was the heir to the liberal, not the – *avant la lettre* – "communitarist" Kant. Although the liberalist Kant appeared aggressively republican, he was not – contrary to what he himself seems to have suggested at times – really a republican in Rousseau's sense. And, as if Cassirer had the still-current "bifurcation" (Habermas) in mind that had taken place between the two epochal heirs to the French Revolution, he argued for a "third way," one that inclines not towards the communitarists but the liberalists. Cassirer's emphatic reference to Leibniz shows

where his prime concern lay: the individual's inalienable civil rights and liberties. It is in Leibniz's seemingly entirely apolitical conception of the monad, of all things, that he sees these rights grounded more incisively than with any other author; at the same time, he contrasts this very sharply with a consistent critique of Rousseau's *contrat social*:

For with Rousseau, the individual sacrifices itself without limitations to the will of the community, in that it enters into association through the social contract with others. It divests itself of all of its original rights—and exactly this divestment forms the highest principle in Rousseau's theory of the state. All of the determinations of the social contract, as Rousseau explicitly emphasizes, let themselves be reduced to one thing: "aliénation totale de chaque associé avec tous ses droits à toute la communauté." This renunciation knows no bounds and no exceptions [...]. (Cassirer 1995, p. 6)

Reading the later essay on Rousseau from 1932 that proceeds from this judgement, one need certainly not conclude that Cassirer changed his opinion of Rousseau. Rather, he seems to have found the figure of Rousseau suitable in 1932 to oppose the spirit of the age and once again invoke the idea of republicanism, whose most radical version was espoused by Rousseau. Cassirer uses Rousseau's name as a form of Trojan horse, attributing to him achievements and claims that are universally considered those of Immanuel Kant, but which are diametrically opposed to the critique of Rousseau from his speech on the constitution. In the 1932 essay, Cassirer presents Rousseau's position as follows:

For him, freedom does not mean wilfulness, but rather the overcoming and elimination of all wilfulness. It means being bound to a strict and inviolable law that the individual installs above itself. (Cassirer 1975, p. 16)

This is Kant, not Rousseau, the exact description of "autonomy" – that is, laws based on freedom as a guarantee of freedom – in the genuinely Kantian sense; autonomy is precisely not the *aliénation* that Cassirer had set in opposition to the philosophy of radical individuality, following on from Leibniz, in 1928. And it is through Kant – as can easily be shown – that the ideas of Leibniz were genuinely developed further, through his constructive critique of Leibniz: that the individual as such at once represents humanity as a whole, and thus "forms the real subject of the law for inalienable, fundamental rights" (Cassirer 1995, p. 12). Cassirer reconstructed the development of this idea through its various modifications in the history of political thought, clearly pointing out the difference between the Anglo-Saxon and continental versions. For Cassirer, this process undoubtedly culminated in Kant's demand that "the first definitive article of perpetual peace should be a republican constitution in every state" (Cassirer 1995, p. 13). These two constraints – republicanism on the one hand and the guarantee of a universal

individualism on the other – would become the credo for Cassirer's conception of politics in the subsequent years.

Habermas can be credited with reading Cassirer's Constitution Day speech like a manifesto that can be seen in direct opposition to the line of institutionalists from Hegel to Gehlen. It is the institutional substantialism in Hegel's concept of the state that validates Gehlen's anthropologically deduced institutionalism; or, viewed from a different perspective, Habermas shows that Hegel's metaphysical idolization of the state ("the existence of the state is the march of God in the world") was put to genuine use in Gehlen's biologism. One finds two rather striking dependencies in this Frankfurt attempt at a late, but not too-late *de facto* rehabilitation of the founder of modern cultural philosophy and the twentieth-century symbol theory that was fundamental for the linguistic turn: the first is the obvious kinship between Gehlen's institutionalism and Hegel's philosophy of right and the state, and the second manifests itself in the equally conspicuous analogy between Niklas Luhmann's concept of system on the one hand and that of Hegel and Gehlen on the other: the institution separates the purpose of the organization from the motive of the individual. To the extent that Gehlen's approach proves to be a long-distance effect of Hegelianism, there is also a striking proximity between the arguments of the two former colleagues at the University of Administrative Sciences in Speyer, which seems with hindsight to express an elective affinity: "Pursuing this idea of decoupling organization from member motivation, Luhmann developed a systems theory that shunts people off entirely into the environment of social systems" (Habermas 2001, p. 80).

In summary: the arc from Cassirer's work to its later school-forming reception extends already from 1910 (!) to the present. Although the largest part of this time span passed without the formation of any schools or historical chains among recipients, let alone intergenerational traditions of communication about his work, the relatively late force of the sudden reception in such differing fields testifies to a power that could possibly ensure a lasting effect.

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