

TODOR POLIMENOV

A REVIEW OF KHRISTO TODOROV'S *ESSAYS ON THE  
PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY*

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Khristo Todorov's *Essays on the Philosophy of History* is an investigation into the history of the philosophy of history. It proceeds from the assumption that each historical judgement is transitional. As a result, the terms of the philosophy of history must be examined as historically conditioned. From this reflexive standpoint, the ideological content of the philosophy of history and its historical formation appear as part of the legitimation and critical questioning of the path of European societal development in the modern period. In this context, the question of secularization emerges, i.e. the question concerning the extent to which the transformation of history into a fundamental determinant of human life is associated with the ancient Greek distinction between nature and culture or Christian providentiality, and the extent to which the concept of universal historicity in modern Europe is something 'new'.

While the first essay of Todorov's book deals with the general difficulties of historical thought, the second essay concentrates on the problem of secularization. Todorov presents the distinctive features of the Greek and Roman (Aristotle, Herodotus, Thucydides and Polibius) and Judeo-Christian (mostly Augustine) conception of secularism as well as contemporary views of secularization via the debate between the German philosophers Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg. But what is essential to Todorov is to show how – in spite of its manifold meanings – the historical approach first takes root in the middle of the eighteenth century with the formation of the secular notion of 'world history'.

This new conception of world history is vitally linked to the project of developing history as a 'science'. Along with the ideas of progress and individuality in the spiritual evolution of mankind, a series of methodological questions are discussed concerning the validity of historical knowledge. In his third essay, Todorov analyses



the classical conceptions of historical knowledge developed by Giambattista Vico, Johann Gottfried Herder, Immanuel Kant, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. According to Todorov, the main tendency in their works is the attempt to prove the possibility of reason in history and the conformity of history to laws of teleological development intelligible to the human mind. In Hegel, this tendency finds its most classical expression in the radical rationalization of history, which at the same time involves the radical historicization of Reason. It is clear that the rationalization of historical reality can be accomplished only in a comprehensive, all-embracing system of knowledge, which for Hegel can be achieved only through the speculative method. However, the pathos of the professional historians who first opposed Hegelianism was directed above all at defending history as the scientific investigation of the historically Individual and Unique, which at the same time condition historical development. In consequence, all metaphysical conceptions of history were subject to radical criticism.

Todorov's fourth essay focuses on the methodological principles of historicism. Here, Todorov examines the attempts of the founder of the classical Prussian historiography, Leopold von Ranke, and the most systematic German historian of the nineteenth century, Johann Gustav Droysen, to substantiate the objectivity of historical knowledge without failing to account for its own historicity. Objective knowledge of history is that based on the empirical investigation of historical facts. In consequence, however, the methodology of history must be restricted to the description of the procedures governing real historical investigation.

Dissatisfied with both the purely speculative and positivistic method of historical analysis, representatives of the neo-Kantian school in Baden Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert suggest a path, according to which the specificity of historical knowledge is preserved while guaranteeing its objectivity through reflection on the theoretical preconditions of historical knowledge. The neo-Kantian attempts to move beyond historicism by positing the necessity of an *a priori* notion of 'value'. These topics are best conceptualized by Wilhelm Dilthey, the German philosopher who championed the emancipation of the human sciences from the natural sciences. In his 'descriptive psychology', Dilthey insists on

accounting for the individuality and uniqueness of each historical reality, while in his 'historical hermeneutics' he sees a possibility for the foundation of the objective validity of historical science. Dilthey's theoretical orientation, however, does not allow him to avoid the subjectivism of psychological analysis; no hermeneutic corrective can re-establish a sufficient measure of scientific objectivity to historical knowledge once this psychological level is brought into play. This is the essential reason why the historical sciences of the 19th century were born in a state of crisis. This crisis is, of course, not restricted to academic circles but pervades the historical thinking of man in general. This fact does not go unnoticed by figures such as Jacob Burkhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche. While Burkhardt distances himself from a methodological orientation to historical thought, he achieves at the same time a kind of 'scepticism'. And Nietzsche questions the connection between history and life in such a fundamental fashion that it remains incommensurable with the approach of his contemporaries. According to Nietzsche, each historical judgement is limited; hence, the usefulness of historical knowledge for life turns out to be completely relative, and its value ultimately problematic.

The ambivalence, even the 'impossibility', of the tasks taken up by the historical sciences in the nineteenth century historical approach has led not only to an identification of theoretical problems, but also to a radical critique of the historical approach during the 20th century. In his fifth essay, Todorov investigates this radical critique on hand of Oswald Spengler's thoughts on the "morphology of culture" and Martin Heidegger's conception of historicity. Spengler abandons the basic postulates of the historical approach, including the examination of events as products of coherent developments, the requirement for causality in history and for the objectivity of historical knowledge, the ideas of a uniform history and the historicity of reality as a whole. In contrast, he posits the idea of cultures as living organisms. While Spengler definitely parts from the historical approach, Heidegger parts from the philosophy of history. Whereas according to traditional accounts man and his deeds are defined as historical because they are swallowed in the great stream of history, according to Heidegger, historicity is, as

a modus of human existence, a precondition for the possibility of history itself.

Khristo Todorov's *Essays on the Philosophy of History* raises for the Bulgarian community of philosophers and historians, as well as to the wider public of those engaged with the humanities, a number of important questions that have accompanied the development and radicalization of a great ideological program which has had such a profound impact on modernity, namely, the realization of history and the preservation of its significance. The value of this program can be determined in part by its ability to generate its own antitheses.

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