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SECULARIZATION, A VALID CATEGORY?

A REAPPRAISAL OF THE LÖWITH-BLUMENBERG DEBATE
AROUND THE RISE OF MODERNITY

SECULARIZACIÓN: ¿UNA CATEGORÍA VÁLIDA? UNA REEVALUACIÓN DEL DEBATE
LÖWITH-BLUMENBERG EN TORNO AL SURGIMIENTO DE LA MODERNIDAD

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ABSTRACT

Karl Löwith's *Meaning in History* presents the emergence of modern philosophy of history as a secularization of medieval theology of history. His thesis holds that modern historical consciousness transposes into the immanent frame a constitutively transcendent element: the Christian history of salvation. In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* Hans Blumenberg impugns Löwith's theory, by arguing that it works on the erroneous assumption that there would be a substantial content originally possessed by medieval Christianity and only later illegitimately appropriated by modernity. Blumenberg proposes that Löwith's "transposition" hypothesis must be replaced by his own "reoccupation": the modern vision of history would have thus taken up the place of Christian eschatology. This paper contends that Blumenberg fails to see that he and his opponent are arguing at different epistemological levels: while Blumenberg's discussion operates at the level of the efficient causation of history, Löwith's is focused on the philosophical root of the teleology of the modern idea of progress, which explains this notion as a transposition of the *eschaton* into a purely immanent *telos*.

KEY WORDS

Löwith, Blumenberg, philosophy of history, secularization, transcendence, immanence, *eschaton*

RESUMEN

En *El sentido de la historia*, Karl Löwith presenta el surgimiento de la filosofía moderna de la historia como una secularización de la teología de la historia medieval. Su tesis sostiene que la conciencia histórica moderna transpone a un marco inmanente un elemento constitutivamente trascendente: la historia cristiana de la salvación. En *La legitimación de la Edad Moderna* Hans Blumenberg impugna la teoría de Löwith, argumentando que ésta funciona basada en la suposición errónea de que habría un contenido sustancial, originalmente propiedad del cristianismo medieval y sólo después ilegítimamente apropiado por la modernidad. Blumenberg propone que la hipótesis de la

“transposición” de Löwith debe reemplazarse por su propia “reocupación”: la visión moderna de la historia habría pues tomado el lugar de la escatología cristiana. Este artículo argumenta que Blumenberg no logra ver que él y su adversario están razonando en diferentes niveles epistemológicos: mientras que el análisis de Blumenberg opera a nivel de la causa eficiente de la historia, el de Löwith se centra en la raíz filosófica de la teleología de la idea moderna de progreso, que explica esta noción como transposición del *eschaton* a un *telos* puramente immanente.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Löwith, Blumenberg, filosofía de la historia, secularización, trascendencia, immanencia, *eschaton*.

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book *Meaning in History*, Karl Löwith carries out a genealogy of the modern idea of progress. Philosophy of history, Löwith claims, arises as a secularized version of theology of history, gradually evolving into a philosophical dogma. His well-known thesis presents modern historical consciousness as a secularization of the Christian idea of “salvation history” and, more precisely, of divine providence and eschatological finitude — a connection that becomes clearer in the title for the German version: *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*, literally meaning “world history and saving event”.¹

The first author to take issue with *Meaning in History* is Hans Blumenberg, who, in the First Part of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*,² not only accuses Löwith of historical “substantialism,” but also rejects theories of secularization at large, thus taking to task also Carl Schmitt, Odo Marquard, Hermann Lübbe, Thomas Luckmann and Hans Georg Gadamer. Secularization, Blumenberg contends, became an overextended dogmatic category: most critics take it for granted, but no one manages to elucidate it. Blumenberg (1983) disparages secularization theory as a “category of historical wrong” (p. 1), serving the sole purpose of delegitimizing the modern age. An effective formula summarizes Blumenberg’s position, by stating that for secularization theories modernity is nothing but “the Middle Ages minus the faith in transcendence” (Greisch, 2004, p. 281).

This paper does not render a detailed account of the Löwith-Blumenberg debate.³ Instead, it proposes a reassessment of Löwith’s secularization thesis, by complementing his argument of *Meaning in History* with his review of Hans Blumenberg’s *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. My central claim is that Blumenberg misrepresents Löwith’s secularization thesis and therefore, in allegedly refuting him, he is actually attacking a straw man. Blumenberg’s *proton pseudos* consists in assimilating Löwith’s “secularization” to the juridical model of expropriation: to be sure, an interpretation that is in accord with the

¹ The book was originally published in English in 1949 and the German version would come 4 years later, in 1953.

² Blumenberg’s book was originally published in German as *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* in 1966.

³ A comprehensive account of their discussion can be found in Robert M. Wallace, “The Löwith-Blumenberg Debate.”

historical origin of the term. Indeed, the term “secularization” has its origin in France. In the late 1500s we find this noun and its verbal form, secularize (*séculariser*) “meaning ‘the transfer of goods from the possession of the Church into that of the world’” (Bremmer, 2008, p. 433). In applying this interpretive model, however, Blumenberg distorts Löwith’s thesis as a case of historical substantialism, thus incurring in a reductionism that lays bare two suggestive assumptions of Blumenberg’s own argument: its marked apologetic purpose and, more importantly, its underlying materialism.

2. THE SUBJECT OF CONTROVERSY: SECULARIZATION AND THE RISE OF THE MODERN WORLD

In his account of the rise of modernity, Blumenberg subordinates interpretive analysis to legitimation, insofar as he makes the latter determine the former. As Löwith points out in his review of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Blumenberg undertakes — even from the book’s epigraph, taken from Gide’s *The Counterfeiters*⁴— an *apology* of modernity, against the supposed injustice of its misinterpretation as the outcome of secularized Christian theology. Löwith (1968) argues that this fact gives away the book’s vindicating purpose, since Blumenberg not only attempts “to ‘understand’ the epochal character of modernity, but also to rightly assess it, judge it, evaluate it, and vindicate it against an alleged injustice” (pp. 195-196).

In order to grasp the bias denounced by Löwith, we must turn to Blumenberg’s distinction between two very close —yet fundamentally different— uses of the term “secularization”. The first one designates the *phenomenology* or diagnose shared by most theoreticians: namely, that modernity brought about an increasingly irreligious, “secularized” world. As Blumenberg (1983) puts it: “the old lamenting confirmation that the world grows ever more worldly” (p. 16). The second use of the term, instead, refers to the *explanation* of how that state of affairs came about. Blumenberg therefore calls the first meaning of secularization “descriptive” and the second “explanatory” (pp. 3-4).

Blumenberg’s distinction, however, remains incomplete if we overlook a level of analysis that remains unstated in his account and yet plays a determinant role in it. This third instance, I would argue, consists in the *assessment* of secularization, i.e. whether this process represents a positive or a negative development in the unfolding of history —Blumenberg only mentions the assessment of secularization a propos the paradoxically favorable judgment pronounced by Barth’s theology of separation (pp. 6-7). My point is that Blumenberg lets slip a tacit value judgment between the phenomenological description of secularization and his allegedly unbiased explanation. In fact, he claims that the validity ascribed to secularization theory should ensue the more fundamental question as to whether that theory is true: “How one assigns the values here is secondary compared to the question whether a relation of genetic dependence [between eschatology and the moving forward of

⁴ The book’s motto reads: “It’s curious how one’s point of view changes according as one is the off-spring of crime or legitimacy.” (Gide, 1973, p. 59).

history] [...] would be justifiable” (p. 30). In Blumenberg’s own account, however, it is an a priori *value judgment* —“modernity is legitimate”— that determines the *explanatory* question —“how or why did modernity arise?”

Blumenberg takes for granted that Löwith’s secularization theory stems from an indictment of the Modern Age as illegitimate, yet even if we could find traces of a pessimistic vision of modernity in Karl Löwith, the argument of *Meaning in History* unfolds independently of that allegedly negative premise. Indeed Löwith does not take issue with modernity per se, but with those theories that praise it as a radically original age, utterly emancipated from medieval categories. Such theories, he asserts, overlook the undeniable continuity of ideas from one historical period into the other.

In his review Löwith points out that the verdict of legitimacy or illegitimacy is too restrictive when applied to developments in the history of ideas, since those categories cannot account for the transition from one epoch to another. The category of legitimacy or illegitimacy can only apply to “verifiable property relations” (Löwith, 1968, p. 201). Therefore, he argues, Blumenberg’s attempt to subordinate the emergence of modernity to its historical validity is a direct consequence of modeling secularization upon the idea of expropriation.

In addition to the priority assigned to the question of legitimacy, Blumenberg’s misinterpretation of Löwith reveals another problematic assumption: Blumenberg is assertive that, once the idea of juristic “expropriation” dominates the inquiry, the search for a secularized “substance” prevails over all other question (pp. 23-24). In fact, Blumenberg considers “substantial identity” as the first of three principles that would make the talk of secularization valid —the other two being the primary ownership of the substance and its one-sided removal. Accordingly, Blumenberg seems so sure that Löwith’s theory relies on the positing of a substance, that his entire critique is aimed at proving the inexistence of such element. Here we encounter Blumenberg’s second inconsistency: on the one hand he accuses *The Meaning of History* of substantialism, on the other he demands proof of a secularized substance. In other words, Blumenberg contradicts himself when he demands evidence of that very principle, which he is intent on refuting. As Löwith (1983) puts it: “Since his historical consciousness rejects any substantial tradition or basic self-preserving features, yet at the same time constitutes these into a criterion of demonstrable secularization, the author charges his adversary with the burden of proof” (pp. 196-197).

It is on this same ground that Blumenberg rejects Thomas Luckmann’s definition of secularization as “transformation” —rather than as “dissolution”— of traditional religion, claiming against him:

For a usage defined in this way, what is called for is [...] evidence of transformation, metamorphosis, conversion to new functions, along with the identity of a substance that

endures throughout the process. Without such a substantial identity, no recoverable sense could be attached to the talk of conversion and transformation. (p. 16)

It is therefore Blumenberg the one who falls into substantialism, when he assumes that the notion of transformation necessitates a hypothetical historical substance. What he fails to grasp is Löwith's ontological connection between the Christian *eschaton* and the emergence of the modern historical *telos*, constrained as he is by his own empiricist demand. Thus, despite his claim to functionality, Blumenberg restricts real connections to the subcategory of material connections —detectable and identifiable as substantial realities. But the fundamental question remains whether or not Löwith's idea of a causal nexus between the two instances really presupposes a “substance” enduring throughout the process. For if the answer to this question is negative, if Löwith's idea does not rely on a substance that would undergo secularization, then his thesis could be perfectly compatible with a “functional” explanation.

3. LÖWITH'S ALLEGED SUBSTANTIALISM AND THE DIFFERENT MODELS OF HISTORICAL TIME-FLOW

I would suggest that in Löwith's usage, “transformation” simply denotes a certain alteration of an idea, taking place within a much broader frame of continuity. His main contention is that, despite the appearance of interruption, the emergence of the modern world out of the medieval should be understood as a modification of certain ideas, rather than as a radical break. Thus Löwith's point is that an element essential to the medieval worldview, namely the notion of futurity contained in the hope of fulfillment at the end of history, persists in the modern age, albeit with a modified historical frame. But to support this claim, Löwith does not need to postulate a Platonic idea —let alone a “substance” with material—like features like the one Blumenberg ascribes him. Rather, Löwith points out the expectation of a future consummation persistent in philosophies of history.

Furthermore —and I consider this a decisive point— Löwith's talk is not so much about “transformation” as it is about “transposition”: in the process of secularization an idea is transposed from the metaphysical frame of transcendence into one of pure immanence. That is why to Blumenberg's objection that, whereas the Christian *eschaton* was transcendent, the modern *telos* is immanent, Löwith (1968) retorts that this is precisely what to “secularize” means —to render immanent what was transcendent. “Since what else should “secularization” [*Säkularisierung*] mean, if not precisely the possibility of secularizing [*verweltlichen*] an originally transcendent relational meaning into one that is immanent and thus of alienating its original meaning?” (p. 199). This connection is more clearly expressed in the German term *verweltlichen*, which denotes the act of “making worldly” —i.e. transposing into the world an expectation hitherto located beyond this world.

As for Löwith's alleged substantialism, it calls for a fundamental distinction. If the term is taken as denoting the conviction that human nature remains essentially unchanged

throughout history, then Löwith's vision can certainly be denominated substantialist, since that could be considered one of the main insights of his book. If, however, substantialism implies postulating an ahistorical substantial content, unalterable in its reality as a platonic entity, a possession which, originally owned by Christianity, was later illegitimately usurped and distorted by the Modern Age, then Löwith is as far removed from this assertion as is Blumenberg from postulating that modernity simply arose *ex nihilo*. Because Blumenberg misses Löwith's fundamental concern, he also misinterprets the leading argument of *Meaning in History*.

Blumenberg claims having found the deepest motivations underlying Löwith's secularization thesis: the yearning for the ancient reliance on cyclical cosmology and its assuredness that history recurred eternally. According to Blumenberg, this penchant leads Löwith to vindicate antiquity and depreciate both the Middle Ages and modernity. Thus, once ancient cosmology is abandoned, he goes on, for Löwith the whole notion of history is distorted and irretrievably lost. Thus Löwith's chief purpose would be to "set up the renaissance of cyclical cosmology, as proclaimed by Nietzsche." More, Blumenberg claims: "Seen from the point of view of secularization, the false conflict of the medieval and the modern can be reduced to the *single* episode of the interruption of the human connection to the cosmos" (p. 28). But, here again, he seems oblivious to the fact that Löwith's criterion for drawing the watershed between visions of history is not their model of time-flow — whether cyclical or linear— but the way in which their inner elements cohere. Thus, Löwith accepts as valid conceptions of history both the ancient —as a conjunction of cyclical time and eternal recurrence— and the medieval —as a combination of linear time and finite history. The agreement between the two visions is no mere accident: precisely because they represent consistent models, they show awareness that history is neither the realm of ultimate meaning nor the instance of perfectibility by which the human could eradicate evil and attain happiness. By contrast, modern philosophy of history raises a double problem: not only does it mix incompatible elements —time linearity and infinitude— but, more questionably, it rests upon the expectation that human nature must progress toward perfection along the decisive instance of history. For Löwith (1969), this is how "the faith in the absolute relevance of the most relative history" (p. 32) comes about.

Löwith considers the permanence of human nature as an undeniable fact and regards with skepticism any hint at its possible improvement in history. Otherwise put, he disparages as a modern mythology the idea according to which the human genre can evolve into new forms, defining the modern faith in history with a formula borrowed from Croce: "the ultimate religion of intellectuals," and he goes even further, by stating: "The most trivial manifestation of the historical consciousness of contemporary man is the talk of the 'transition' to a new age and the corresponding talk of the 'man until now' and 'man of the future'" (Löwith, 1969, p. 11). Precisely, he sets out to refute this modern illusion by drawing his readers to what he deems the sounder idea of a constant human essence, dominant both in ancient and medieval times. What Löwith's work attempts to rectify is

what he considers the excessive attention placed on the fluctuations of history and temporality, although he declares himself aware that modernity is characterized by this precise tendency (p. 8). In brief, we must understand Löwith's rejection of modern philosophies of history as a rejoinder to the distinctively modern way of thinking, "obsessed with historical consciousness" (p. 16).⁵

However, it is important to note that Löwith readily acknowledges the moving forward of science and social organization —especially in relation to technology— but disavows the progress of a hypostasized "humanity" in modern philosophies of history. Whereas both ancient cosmology and the Judeo-Christian vision of the world safeguarded the permanence of human nature —since neither one assigned meaning or value to history— modern philosophies conceive of human nature as morally and ontologically improvable. This tendency amounts to postulating a gradual eradication of evil from the world, since history ceases to be the realm of contingency to become the crucial instance where human destiny is at stake. The secular faith in progress culminates in the definitive step taken by Marx, from Hegelian dialectics to material praxis and the pursuit of happiness in the form of an earthly paradise: "Marx drew out the ultimate consequences of the Hegelian school's historicism, by reducing the whole of nature to sheer material of the socio-historical forces of production" (Löwith, 1952, p. 239).⁶

4. TRANSPOSITION VS. REOCCUPATION

At this point a suggestive agreement between Löwith and Blumenberg comes to light: both see the idea of progress as a direct consequence of the modern turning away from transcendence. The point of contention comes up in their diverging accounts of that connection. Löwith defines it as one of continuity, moreover, of *causation*: the belief in transcendence is transposed into immanence, which results in the faith in progress characteristic of the modern philosophies of history. Blumenberg, for his part, although acknowledging the Middle Ages as the precondition for the rise of modernity, defines this link not as *causality*, but as mere *occasion*. Moreover, far from providing the ideological matrix for modernity, the late Middle Ages would have supplied the model *against which* the modern age reacted. Thus where Löwith finds continuity in the form of transposition, Blumenberg sees only interruption and opposition: Blumenbergian modernity embodies a brand new conception of the world, in no way indebted to Christianity.

And yet the connection that Löwith traces between Middle Ages and modernity is closer to a functional question than to a substance. Not, however, a question that modernity would drag along as an undesirable burden or as an appendix alien to its own concerns, as Blumenberg seems to suggest, when he states that modern philosophy accepted the

⁵ In this sense, see Barash's explanation of Löwith's politics as possibly influencing his views on history (Barash, 1998, pp. 69-92).

⁶ Translation is mine.

questions bequeathed to it as a challenge and points out: “It is not the autochthonous and spontaneous will to knowledge that drives reason to overexertion”. He even goes further to denounce that only in appearance had the Middle Ages answered those questions it passed on to the modern age: in reality, medieval questions “had only been posed precisely because people thought they already possessed the ‘answers’” (p. 48). Löwith, by contrast, regards those questions as the lasting inquiry into the meaning of human nature that could be characterized as quintessential to Western thought. To him, the history of philosophy, far from suggesting a permanent shift in worldviews, clearly attests to the striking continuity of Western thought in repeating and reformulating the same problems, “from Aristotle to Hegel and from Parmenides to Heidegger” (Löwith, 1952, pp. 237-238).

To such questions, Löwith argues, the ancients answered with an ordered cosmos that moves cyclically and according to fate, Christians with eschatology and Creation, following linear movement and divine justice, and the moderns with a combination of those two models into one problematic scheme. In brief, when philosophers of history posit the perpetual evolution of human nature and the eradication of evil from the world, they are replacing both fate and divine providence with secular progress.

This replacement, Blumenberg contends, should be understood not as transposition (*Umsetzung*), but rather as “reoccupation” (*Umbesetzung*).⁷ In other words, he proposes the permanence not of content, but of function. Yet again, the question is whether Blumenberg’s *reoccupation* is as different from Löwith’s *transposition* as the former would have it. Blumenberg’s opposition of his formal or functional explanation to Löwith’s allegedly material or substantialist thesis holds only if we interpret the latter —the way Blumenberg does— as a *transference* of a possession, as in the case of expropriated church property. But in reality Löwith’s theory follows a functional rationale, since it accounts for the basic problem behind both theology and philosophy of history: the existence of evil and suffering in this world and the wish to overcome it as an instauration of a perfect justice. Hardly could one dispute that this problem pervades Löwith’s entire book, from beginning to end. The epigraph, taken from a sermon of Augustine, compares the world to an oil-press under pressure: “If you are the dregs of the oil, you are carried away through the sewer; if you are genuine oil you will remain in the vessel. But to be under pressure is inevitable” (p. iv). In the conclusion of the book, Löwith wraps up the discussion as he denounces the confounding of: “the fundamental distinction between redemptive events and profane happenings, between *Heilsgeschehen* and *Weltgeschichte*” (p. 203).

While they are both concerned with the emergence of the modern world out of the medieval, Löwith and Blumenberg are arguing at different levels —a fact that determines, in each case, a particular object and method. Löwith centers his analysis on the rise of modern philosophies of history and their fixation upon the idea of progress. Their essential element, he proposes, was the illusion of human improvement through history, a

⁷ The German *Umbesetzung* can also mean “redeployment” or “reinvestment.”

misconception that originated in the immanentization of a transcendent element: the Christian *eschaton*. Blumenberg, on the other hand, identifies as the salient feature of modernity the self-assertion of the human, which would have brought about progress in the sciences and the arts, an advancement ultimately extending to all aspects of social organization. This achievement he interprets as the definitive overcoming of Gnosticism, an overcoming more total and effective than the first one, which would have taken place in the Middle Ages.⁸

It is also their different points of interest that entail divergent modes of explanation. Löwith offers a philosophical, ontological account, precisely because he is analyzing what he regards as a process saturated with ideas: the transposition of eschatology into an immanent frame. He intends to clarify the driving force behind modern visions of history, by tracing the metamorphosis of elements that, though altered, maintain conspicuous traces of their origin. Nowhere is this influence more apparent than in the reversal of historical interest from past events into the future, via Christian eschatology. Löwith (1952) argues that the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament as oriented toward the New Testament “introduced the idea of progress from something antiquated into something new, from something merely promised into a fulfillment and turned the progress into the future as the sustained pattern of historical understanding” (pp. 240-241).⁹ Löwith locates the rationale of these distinctively modern ways of understanding the world in their final cause or intention. The question he addresses could be stated thus: “What does philosophy of history aim at?”

5. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of *Meaning in History* Löwith states the methodological assumption according to which his argument will proceed. Unlike the sciences, he explains, theology and philosophy pose questions that are empirically unanswerable, and this is precisely what constitutes their epistemological dignity: “All the ultimate questions concerning first and last things are of this character; they remain significant because no answer can silence them” (p. 3). And yet Löwith’s methodology is anything but aprioristic: pace Blumenberg, he takes as starting point the indisputable fact that modern philosophies of history —especially since the Enlightenment— are teleologically oriented toward an immanent fulfillment and that this fact betrays their dependence on the theology of history. In this regard, Jean-Claude Monod (1994) aptly points out that one could hold up against Blumenberg’s arguments certain instances of secularization in modern philosophies of history, in which the chiliastic theme of the end of history is still present, as is the case, for

⁸ “The thesis that I intend to argue here begins by agreeing that there is a connection between the modern age and Gnosticism, but interprets it in the reverse sense: The modern age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism. A presupposition of this thesis is that the first overcoming of Gnosticism, at the beginning of the Middle Ages, was unsuccessful” (p. 126).

⁹ My translation.

example, with Kantian millenarianism (p. 225).¹⁰ Löwith, in other words, stresses that philosophy of history arose as an answer to the metaphysical problem of evil and should thus first and foremost be understood as a variation of theodicy.

Blumenberg, on the other hand, because he favors an explanation based only upon efficient causation, seems unable to grasp Löwith's point. This is the reason why, in addressing his opponent's theory, he inadvertently jumps from the metaphysical level of finality to the purely historical level of efficiency, an argumentative misstep known as *metábasis eis állo génos*. Furthermore, Blumenberg reduces the efficient cause to its material type, a fact that restricts his methodology of inquiry: in his relentless demand for evidence, he treats ideas as perceivable, quantifiable, and measurable material—much in the manner of positivism. He inquires less *where* modernity tends toward—or what modernity ultimately means—than *how* or *wherefrom* it emerged. His thought moves along the horizontal axis of efficiency.

Last, Löwith in no way denies that scientific progress started a revolution by itself—i.e. independently from the Jewish-Christian tradition—and that such revolution “radicalized” history by boosting the idea of its moving forward: “Not only have the innovations by natural science accelerated the speed and expanded the range of sociohistorical movements and changes, but they have made nature a highly controllable element in man's historical adventure” (p. 194). And he readily accepts that this development in science led to the self-understanding of the human exclusively in terms of history, as opposed to one based on nature, thus giving predominance to temporality over permanence. Löwith's admission of this fact suggests that, contrary to Blumenberg's “either/or” model, he responds with a “both/and” answer to the question of how the notion of progress arose in modernity. The ultimate reason for this variance, I have attempted to demonstrate, is that Löwith takes both answers as mutually compatible.

SOBRE EL AUTOR

Juan Torbidoni se doctoró en Literatura Comparada en la Universidad de Harvard, con una tesis sobre modernidad, melancolía y metafísica en la Buenos Aires de la primera mitad del siglo XX. Es Magíster en Humanidades y Pensamiento Social por la Universidad de Nueva York (NYU) y Licenciado en Filosofía por la Universidad Católica Argentina (UCA). Su área de interés la constituyen los cruces entre filosofía y literatura, especialmente teoría crítica y filosofía de la cultura y de la historia. Es profesor en la cátedra “Pensamiento Argentino y Latinoamericano” de la carrera de Filosofía y Coordinador del Centro de Estudios en Literatura Comparada (CELC) de la carrera de Letras, en la Universidad Católica Argentina.

¹⁰ “[...] what should we make, for example, of a famous text by Kant, in which it is asserted that ‘philosophy too could have its millenarism’—precisely philosophy, the kind of knowledge that consists in assigning history a rational finality, the advent of a cosmopolitan order?” (Monod, 1998, p. 225) [My translation].

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APPENDIX

TRANSLATION OF KARL LÖWITH'S REVIEW OF *THE LEGITIMACY OF THE MODERN AGE*¹¹

Blumenberg, H. (1966). *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. Frankfurt Am Main: Suhrkamp, 599 pp.

In the 7th German Congress of Philosophy of 1962 —dedicated to the topic of “Progress”— Hans Blumenberg first subjected the concept of secularization to criticism, as an explanatory model of philosophy of history designating the progression from a religiously grounded to a secularized [*verweltlichten*] world. Lately, he has taken up again the critique of secularization schemes in the first part of a comprehensive historically-academic book under the title “Critique of a Category of Historical Wrong” —he named the third and fourth parts of the work “The trial of theoretical curiosity” and the “The Cusan and the Nolan: aspects of the change of epoch,” respectively. The whole book, in turn, is entitled *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, since his criticism of the illegitimacy of the concept of secularization serves him well to justify “human self-assertion” over against “theological absolutism” (part II). Thus, injustice would be done to modernity, if it were conceived from the perspective of a secularized [*verweltlichen*] Christian-theological tradition. Despite the author’s departure from the juridical concept of secularization in the first line, his main concern is surely the right historical understanding of modernity —but his apologetic interest in the original autonomy of modernity’s human self-assertion must not be underestimated. Not only does the author want to “understand” the epochal character of modernity, but also to rightly assess it, judge it, evaluate it, and vindicate it against an alleged injustice. Accordingly, the motto of his book (taken from André Gide’s novel *The Counterfeiters*) reads: “*C’est curieux comme le point de vue diffère, suivant qu’on est le fruit du crime ou de la légitimité*” (Gide, 1973, p. 59).¹²

The point of view for the right judgment of the Modern Age, however, could not be arbitrarily chosen; rather, it should prove to be the true and right one through historical analysis. Contrary to this, the very much used and popularized “secularization model” would have its philosophical origin in Hegel’s philosophy of history, insofar as, in sublating the Christian-reformed historical phase in the Modern World of bourgeois society, it would prove nothing about the origin and specificity of modernity, moreover, it would fail to examine the burden of proof:

¹¹ Karl Löwith, *Philosophische Rundschau* 15 (1968): 195-201. The full review of Blumenberg’s book has two parts: the first one by Karl Löwith, which is the one translated here, and the second by Hans Georg Gadamer.

¹² “It’s curious how one’s point of view changes according as one is the off-spring of crime or legitimacy”.

Thus, for example, Löwith's *World History and Salvation* takes for granted the origin of the idea of progress and of the philosophy of history based upon it [as rising] purely and simply from theological eschatology, without producing any proof of the assertion that the idea of progress is a secularized concept of the transcendent hope in a consummation and fulfillment at the end of times. Whatever value one attaches to secularization —whether as support of the idea of worldly progress or of otherworldly final aims— such value is secondary in relation to whether a genetic-historical conditionality exists between them at all. The author disputes this conditionality not only in reference to the idea of progress and to the philosophy of history based upon it, but also as a general rule and principle. Neither would the modern work ethic have anything to do with a secularization of puritan asceticism (M. Weber), nor the future kingdom of freedom in the *Communist Manifesto* with Jewish messianism, nor would Descartes's philosophical aspiration to an absolute scientific certainty replace the religious certainty of salvation, nor would the idea of equality of all people before the law secularize the belief in the equality of all humans before God, and so on.¹³

In all such examples of alleged secularization of religious representations, the actual historical succession could not be presented as the self-perseveration of a substance alienated from its origin. The first and foremost criterion to determine the legitimacy of the talk of secularization would thus be the identity of the expropriated and distorted substance in its historical metamorphoses, along with the legitimacy of the primary ownership and, finally, the one-sidedness of the dispossession —since the historical explanatory value of the category of secularization would be essentially tied to the preservation of a substantial moment. This demand for evidence of a self-preserving substance or also just of constants in the progress of a historical movement stands, however, in remarkable contrast to the author's rejection of all substantialist philosophy of history. The point of his critique resides precisely in the idea that history is no "substance of tradition" and that the establishment of alleged constants would imply a surrender of understanding. Since his historical consciousness rejects any substantial tradition or basic self-preserving features, yet at the same time establishes these as a criterion to demonstrate secularization, the author charges his opponent with the burden of proof. Since, he claims, that which, what could be verified in the progression from religious to secular manifestations is no identical substance, but rather a functional system of *positions*, which can always be occupied anew, not occupied at all, or newly substantiated.

Only a few instances, in which the author believes he recognizes a true secularization, are tackled by his critique. Thus Rousseau's confessions following the model of Augustine would be a "real secularization of transcendent divine judgment into literary self-judgment." To the objection that Rousseau's confessions are a parody of Augustinian confessions rather than the product of secularization (Blumenberg, 1964, pp. 262, 337), the author replies that "precisely" the parody character would be the possible consequence of a true secularization.

¹³ Unless otherwise specified, all indented text cited by Löwith belongs to the first edition of *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (1966). Because, unfortunately, I do not have access to this source, my translation is based on the text cited here by Löwith.

But even if one can assent, within certain limits, to his criticism of a substantial ontology of history, who could deny that the legacy of an influential tradition determines all relatively new beginnings? (And which heritage has —compared against political authorities— remained more effective and more stable throughout two millennia of Western history than institutionalized Christianity?) That the idea of progress would have only regional meaning and a partial origin, namely in the realms of scientific discoveries and of the literary-aesthetic controversies of the 17th century, and that this idea does not touch on the question about the meaning and the course of history as such and in general, is as improbable as the assertion that the rationality and autonomy of the human in the Modern Age are absolutely original and independent. An epoch could only be autonomous if it began *ex nihilo* and not within and in opposition to a historical tradition. The author himself notices that, just as it happens with every historical legitimacy, the problem of the legitimacy of the Modern Age emerges “from the pretension of this age to accomplish (and to *be able* to accomplish) a radical break with all tradition and from the disproportion between this pretense and the reality of history, which can never start entirely anew.” But the crucial difference would lie in “whether I can say that the Modern Age should be conceived as a *result* of an age thoroughly determined by theology, which preceded it, even if the relation were one of self-assertion and opposition to the predetermination of that which it revolts against, or whether I must say that the Modern Age would just be a *metamorphosis* of the theological substance of the Middle Ages and hence nothing different from the *derivative* conceived under the title *secularism*, altogether thus a *Christian heresy*.” The latter is certainly maintained neither by Hegel’s speculative spiritualization of the Christian tradition, nor by Saint-Simon’s socialist interpretation of the New Testament, nor by Proudhon’s antitheism, nor by Troeltsch’s studies on *The Significance of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World*, nor by H. de Lubac’s *The Drama of Human Atheism*, nor by ourselves, when we discussed the theological implications of the philosophy of history and of post-Christian metaphysics in general. Because our thesis, too, said nothing more and nothing less than that Old-Testament prophecy and Christian eschatology have created a horizon of questions and a spiritual atmosphere —with regard to the philosophy of history, a horizon of futurity and of future fulfillment— which has made possible the modern concept of history and the worldly faith in progress. The question is: where does this giant impulse toward “creative” activity come from? An impulse, that is to say, which urged the Christian West to disseminate its civilization over the entire Earth and to enslave foreign peoples, by converting them to Christianity:

Surely, it was not a heathen but a Christian culture that brought about this revolution. The aim of modern science —to dominate nature— and the idea of progress emerged neither in the Classical world nor in the East, but in the West. But what has this shaping of the world anew after the image of man mended for us? Has by any chance the belief in being created in the image of a Creator, the hope in a future Kingdom of God, and the Christian commandment to annunciate the Gospel to all peoples for their salvation turned into the worldly pretension that we should transform the world into a better one after the image of man and redeem underdeveloped peoples?

With these *questions* we conclude *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* (p. 185 and 194 n.),¹⁴ but by no means with the assertion that the modern world is nothing other than a Christian heresy. The possibility and probability that the modern, worldly faith in progress would contain assumptions related to the history of salvation is no “useless melancholy” seeking after “the remotest responsibilities for the uneasiness felt toward the past.” Nor is it at all striking “that everything can result from secularization,” namely variety, oppositions, and reversals.

For the author it is decisive whether the expectation of an end is performed from “transcendence,” or whether it is performed from “immanence”:

There are no signs of the transposition of eschatology into the idea of progress. The decisive *formal* difference is this: eschatology, in itself transcendent and heterogeneous, speaks of an event breaking into history; the idea of progress extrapolates from a structure immanent to history and coexisting with each present out into the future.

How does the author know that the idea of the progress of history is “immanent”? In the case of Ancient Greece, history is neither immanent nor transcendent, but in the philosophy of history conditioned by theology of history it is probably both. The difference between immanent and transcendent accomplishments does not contradict the possible transposition, or even redeployment, of eschatology into the progress scheme. Since what else should “secularization” [*Säkularisierung*] mean, if not precisely the possibility of secularizing [*verweltlichen*] an originally transcendent relational meaning into one that is immanent and thus of alienating its original meaning? The essential feature of both immanent and transcendent expectations of an end is that they generally live in hope, by thinking of history as directed toward an aim that fulfills them. The epilogue to *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* discusses, therefore, what it means to Greeks, on the one hand, and to Christians, on the other, to live in hope of the future.

An indirect proof of the Christian-theological conditioning of the “Modern Age” is also that before Christianity there did not and could not exist specifically modern representations, ideas, thoughts, and words to designate the natural world, man, and his history. The author himself knows that modern anthropology, for example, has expressed itself broadly in the theological representation of God as an absolute subject and of man as God’s similitude and hence that it adjudicates to man a creative force analogous to God (Blumenberg, 1964, p. 262). Even Sartre’s existential atheism cannot help but define the negating freedom of man as a creation *ex nihilo*. It could be no mere accident that Greek philosophy conceived of no philosophy of history or of freedom and that Greek historians thought about the nature of the human and of history in a completely different way from that the one of post-Christian metaphysicians. The event that we call Christendom does not constitute an epoch among others, but rather the decisive epoch that separates us from

¹⁴ Löwith is citing from the German edition. The text corresponds to p. 203 of *Meaning in History*.

antiquity. Not until Nietzsche's anti-Christian perspective do antiquity and Christianity move together again as religious-founded societies of ancient times. Modern philosophy does not simply "advocate" the function of theology, even and precisely in those cases where it knows itself in the sharpest opposition to it; it is itself philosophical theology from Descartes's rational to Hegel's speculative proof of the existence of God. The "autonomy" of "human self-assertion" – whose humanity can be suspected —is no original autonomy either— even if one does not construe it theologically as lack of mercy and God-forsakenness. Rather, that autonomy is still the incomplete outcome of a protracted emancipation from religious ties, onto-theological concepts, and theological mortgages. Likewise, "theological absolutism" is not simply the wholly other of human self-assertion—for the human already since Comte, Feuerbach, and Marx occupies the role and position of the absolute, although not any longer as God's creature and similitude.

After working through the author's complex way of thinking and writing, a question automatically comes up: why this expenditure of astute reflections, outspread historical learning, and polemical points against the scheme of secularization, if the criticism of this illegitimate category after all coincides with that which it opposes—even though it does it in a sophisticated manner? One can only agree with the author when he designates the idea of progress, applied to the meaningful movement of history in its totality, as an attempt to fulfill a question that, quasi-abandoned and unsaturated, had remained unsolved, after theology had virulently formulated it (p. 35).

The idea of progress as one of the possible answers to the question about the whole of history was involved in the function of consciousness of an already historicized eschatology. It was therefore used as an effort for clarification, which overexerted its rationality.

But the claim that the idea of progress "taken by itself" has risen "totally independently" from the theological representation content of eschatology is dubious, because the "no longer possible totality" of history belongs so necessarily to the claim of a post-Christian philosophy of history, as the history of salvation constructed upon an eschatological aim belongs to the history of theology. The author says very aptly (p. 42 ff.):

The willingness to embrace such a (theological) mortgage of predetermined questions, and to carry them as one's own debts, largely determines the spiritual history of the Modern Age . . . But what actually happened in the process interpreted as secularization is not a *transposition* of authentically theological contents into their secular self-alienation, but rather a *transposition* of positions which became vacant of answers, which did not let themselves be eliminated in relation to their corresponding questions or whose critical establishment . . . lacked the presuppositions and the courage of admitting their insufficiency.

Even Christianity in its early times stood under a similar "pressure" of issues that were alien to it.

The Christian reception of antiquity and the so-called modern secularization of Christianity are structurally and functionally broadly analogous historical phenomena: patristic Christianity arose in the role of ancient philosophy; to a great extent modern philosophy stepped in for the function of theology.

Questions do not always precede their answers; there is ‘spontaneous generation’ of great . . . assertions of the type of eschatological expectancy, of creationism, or of the doctrine of original sin, all of which by the dwindling of their credibility and worth . . . only leave behind similarly great questions, for which thus a new answer is due —if and because it does not succeed in critically destroying the question itself and in undertaking amputations in the system of world explanation. (p. 43)

The juristic concept of secularization, which the author takes as his starting point and to which alone legitimacy or illegitimacy can rightfully be awarded, has a specific and limited realm of application, because it refers to verifiable property relations. In a transposed sense, applied to historical ages, no speech can properly be about legitimacy or illegitimacy, since in the history of representations, ideas, and thoughts it extends so broadly as the power of appropriating and transforming a tradition. The respective results of such a transformed appropriation cannot be reckoned up as positive or negative according to an authentic ownership. The author fails to recognize that in the history of political or other kind of events results are never closed and that they are always something different from what was intended and expected by the originators of a new age. The births of historical lives are all of them “illegitimate.” And the origin of a multiply conditioned and widely ramified historical phenomenon can be “verified” as little as it can be assessed with certainty whether the putative father of a child is the real one.

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