

In Memory of Karl Jaspers (1883-1969)

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Philosophy between Power and Powerlessness: A Homage to Karl Jaspers¹

Abstract

The aim of the following paper is to discuss Jaspers' disappointment of politics and his confession about the powerlessness of the (philosophical) Spirit, expressed at the end of his life. This confession may seem to contradict some of his earlier statements and positions. Yet, by analyzing the evolution of his views about the complex relation between philosophy and politics, the autor claims that Jaspers' philosophy is an emblematic illustration of a tension, inherent in contemporary philosophy, namely that between the faith in Reason and the scepticism about its potentialities to achieve a substantial changement of human nature and society.

Keywords: Karl Jaspers, Existential Philosophy, Politics, Suprapolitics, Spirit, Axial Age

At the end of his "Self-Portrait", Jaspers expresses his disappointment with the sociopolitical situation in Germany and complains that the crowd of the thoughtless, the selfish, the nasty people washes the Germans away, and that there is nothing that one can do against this thoughtlessness, because the spirit is powerless:

It is due to the spirit itself that we do not come to power because that spirit is a contemplative, an analyzing, a judging one, a spirit of conviction, but not a spirit that risks its life. When we read ancient historical writings, we learn there about the digni-

¹ The following article is a more extensive, elaborated version of my French essay "L'impissance de la philosophie: Hommage à Karl Jaspers" (see Raynova 2010, 198-207).

ty, which people carried in terrible times, and then we can probably complain: we lack of dignity! It is due to the spirit itself that it does not attain power because it is only spirit (Jaspers 1988, 24).

This statement, made in 1967 – two years before his death, is not only the confession of a disappointment and of the failure of a lifelong effort but probably also the despair over the possibilities of the philosophers and the philosophy to attain and transform the fundamental principles (*Grundsätze*) of politics as "urgent reality" ("*brennende Realität*"). It must have been a difficult confession, especially because it comes from a man, who, despite his doubts and his declared "realism", believed all his life in the power of reason and philosophy. A shocking confession, if we take in to account that the aim of his existential philosophy was the safeguard of the existence of philosophy, and hence of humanity itself. It poses also the question of how to understand this statement in regard of other assertions, expressed previously in *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (1931) and *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen* (1958), where Jaspers maintained that only philosophy can bring the human being back to the self-awareness, to the meaning and values of existence, and thus to choose itself as freedom. The answer to this question lies probably in Jaspers' personal experience and his professional career. However, if I have decided to examine this question more closely it is not just to put again into discussion the possibilities of philosophy. My purpose is rather to put forward the thesis that the evolution of Jaspers' ideas reveals a trend, which is still actual, namely – the risky and yet inescapable interrelation between philosophy and politics. There are not many thinkers who have articulated so clearly the link between philosophy and politics as Jaspers did. In his *Autobiography*, he writes:

[P]hilosophy is not without politics nor without political consequences. I was surprised to see this connection, which is so apparent in the entire history of philosophy. No great philosophy is without political thought, not even that of the great metaphysicians (...) From Plato to Kant, to Hegel, to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche goes the grand politics of the philosophers. What a philosophy is, it shows in its political appearance. This is nothing incidental, but of central significance. It was no accident that National Socialism, as well as Bolshevism, saw in philosophy a deadly spiritual enemy. (Jaspers 1957, 70)

The importance of this assertion is not only the belief that the essence of a philosophy is revealed in its political expressions, i.e. that applied to the philosophy of Jaspers this would lead us to see in it "Max Weber and Emmanuel Kant reconciled in a philosophy of existence", as Raymond Aron put it (Aron 1988, 224 and 238); its scope goes much further, because it offers us the key to decipher his conception of philosophy, his understanding of the relationship between philosophy and politics, and hence the limits of reason and spirit in face of the political power.

The power of the "useless thought"

When we consider the large number of studies on the Jaspersian conception of philosophy², we should keep in mind the fact – especially recalled by Jeanne Hersch (Hersch 1983, 410-411) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer 1988, 33) – that Jaspers was not himself a professional philosopher. Coming from medicine, he already had the experience of man as sick, suffering and dying, which opened his eyes to the concrete and manifold reality of human being. It was this experience, which also showed him the path to subjectivity, understood as a particular existence that can only be fully realized as *Existenz* and freedom through a philosophical activity. According to Jaspers, the human sciences give us also a certain vision of human being, but this image proves to be too narrow, not allowing us to conceive of it in its integral existence:

Sociology, psychology, and anthropology teach that man is to be regarded as an object concerning which something can be learnt that will make it possible to modify this object by deliberate organization. In this way one comes to know something about man, without coming to know man himself. (Jaspers 1957, 158)

² See for example: Dufrenne/Ricœur 1947; Ricœur 1947 and 1957; Tillette 1960; Hersch 1980; Young-Bruehl 1981; Lengert 1983; Salamun 1985; Gerlach 1987; Saner 1988; Wisser 1995.

As expert knowledge (*Sachkunde*), the sciences offer us specific fragments of reality on which the human being should rely in his action in every concrete situation. However, "no sociology can tell me what I will as destiny; no psychology can make it clear to me what I really am; the true being of man cannot be bred as a race. In all directions we reach the limit of what can be planned and made" (ibid., 157). Therefore, the pretensions of the human and social sciences to give us a knowledge about human being as a whole have to be rejected as utterly inadequate substitutes for philosophy. As an encompassing thinking of the one who thinks by reason (*Vernunft*), philosophy of existence is the thought that can be used by all expert knowledge. However, it transcends it, and it is only through this kind of thinking that the human being can become itself. At the difference of the sciences, philosophy is not knowledge, i.e. not cognition of objects, but "illumination of *Existenz*" (*Existenzerhellung*)³:

This way of thought does not cognize objects, but elucidates and makes actual the being of the thinker. Brought into a state of suspense by having transcended the cognitions of the world (as the adoption of a philosophical attitude towards the world) that fixate being, it appeals to its own freedom (as the illumination of *Existenz*) and gains space for its own unconditioned activity through conjuring up Transcendence (as metaphysics). (Jaspers 1957, 40; cf. idem 2010, 159)

Although usable by the sciences, philosophy is according to Jaspers deeply "useless". That is why the authoritarian systems criticized it and, in the same time, feared it:

Authoritarian church thought has condemned independent philosophy on the ground that it is a worldly temptation which leads man away from God, destroys his soul with vain preoccupations. Political totalitarianism has attacked it on the ground that philosophers have merely interpreted the world in various ways, when the important thing was to change it. Both these schools of thought regarded philosophy as dangerous, for

³ Eden and Cedar Paul translate Jaspers' "Eistenzerhellung" as "elucidation of existence", and this is unchanged in the Routledge edition of *Man in the Modern Age* (see Jaspers 2010; for the German edition: Jaspers 1932). I prefer to use "illumination of *Existenz*", used in Jaspers' Autobiography, published by Schilpp (see Jaspers 1957, 39).

it undermined order, promoted a spirit of independence, hence of revolt, deluded man and distracted him from his practical tasks. Those who uphold another world illumined by a revealed God and those who stand for the exclusive power of a godless here and now would equally wish to extinguish philosophy. (Jaspers 1953, 14)

Philosophy clashes also with another kind of rationality – that of the ordinary man, who applies to each phenomenon the measure of utility. For him, says Jaspers, philosophy is as ridiculous as Thales was in the servant's eyes when he fell into a well observing the sky. People of common sense require philosophy to prove itself, but the question is if this is possible.

It [philosophy] cannot justify itself on the basis of a something else for which it is useful. It can only appeal to the forces in every man which drive him toward philosophical thought. It is a disinterested pursuit, to which questions of utility or injuriousness have no relevance, an endeavour proper to man as man, and it will continue to fulfil this striving as long as there are men alive. (...) Philosophy cannot fight, it cannot prove its truth, but it can communicate itself. It offers no resistance where it is rejected, it does not triumph where it gains a hearing. It is a living expression of the basic universality of man, of the bond between all men. (ibid., 15)

In other words, philosophy can exist only in the communicative unity that gives rise to the particular and multiple forms of philosophical activity. In this sense, it is a *philosophia perennis*, i.e. the One, which is at the base of all philosophies and which enables people to live together in authentic relations. Powerless to prove itself, philosophy is as well powerless to change the world. However, it is by this consciousness of "having no power over the action of the world" that philosophy realizes its power in regard to the individual person: "It is the great and only power, through which the human being finds its path to freedom. Only philosophy makes possible the inner independence" (Jaspers 2018, 169). But what mean independence?

For Jaspers independence is the point where I realize that I depend fully and only from the gift of Transcendence (the Divine or God). This is the gift of myself, of my freedom, of love and reason. Only when I arrive to this point, I become able to take distance to everything and to myself, to see like from the outside what happens, what I do. "From this

point" – explains Jaspers – "comes the light that helps my freedom to grow. I become independent inasmuch as I see everything in this light." (ibid.) Yet, independence becomes untrue when it contains pride; authentic independence, on the contrary, implies always "the consciousness of the own powerlessness". However, this powerlessness is not despair as it is conceived through the prism of a possibility for change: "Philosophizing brings the dependencies to full consciousness, but in such a way that in the powerlessness we find a turn by means of that independence, instead of subjugate ourselves" (ibid., 170).

In summary, the role of philosophy seems to be ambiguous: it is useless, because its thoughts cannot effect any changes in the external world, yet in the course of their formation, human being comes to the true source of itself:

By technically applying my knowledge, I can act outwardly, but [philosophy as] non-knowledge makes possible an inner action by which I transform myself. This is another and deeper kind of thought; it is not detached from being and oriented toward an object but is a process of my innermost self, in which thought and being become identical. Measured by outward, technical power, this thought of inner action is as nothing, it is no applied knowledge that can be possessed, it cannot be fashioned according to plan and purpose; it is an authentic illumination and growth into being. (...) Philosophical ideas cannot be applied; they are a reality in themselves, so that we may say: in the fulfilment of these thoughts the man himself lives; or life is permeated with thought. That is why the philosopher and the man are inseparable (while man can be considered apart from his scientific knowledge...) (Jaspers 1954, 127-128)

Philosophy as "suprapolitics"

Regardless of what philosophy is, i.e. of any possible definition, it is "in the world" and as such it must relate to the world instead of fleeing it (Jaspers 1918, 162). In this relation to the world, philosophy crosses politics and is suddenly surrounded by the political field. What human being seeks through philosophy is the truth about the world and its principles. However, this will to truth (*Wahrheitswille*), which aspires to openness, collides with the will to power (*Machtwille*), which tends to closure. This collision lives within the

human soul and forces the human being to choose itself. The characteristic of the will to power is that it hides behind an appearance of truth. It needs the truth, says Jaspers, because the reverence to truth hides its power aspirations and disguises its true face. Thus, the will to power takes on the appearance of not being what it is, namely an inauthentic human being, lying and bad faith.

In politics bad faith, cunning and deceit have been always obvious means. But the favor of untruth is always a momentary interest at the price of the future. Over time, however, this favor becomes disfavor for the *Dasein*. Truth triumphs over lies. The states built on lies are struck by the effect of politics, driven by the tradition of lying. (Jaspers 2018, 116)

This view on the politics as deceit and lie makes Jaspers a forerunner of the conceptions of social simulacrum, tackled by postmodern thinkers, and in particular by Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1994). But at the difference of these thinkers, Jaspers insists on the critical role of philosophy as reason (*Vernunft*), on its possibilities of establishing the truth against the lies, on its contribution to the public debate (*Öffentlichkeit*) as opposition to the closure of censorship, and thus on its power to claim political freedom as *res publica*. The faith of Jaspers in the possibilities of philosophical reason is based on his conviction that it is an all-encompassing outlook, which transcends as suprapolitical any other way of thinking. Consequently, the role of philosophy is to be a critique and a corrector of politics, a living conscience of the present time calling for a turn or conversion (*Umkehr*) of the political attitude that is based on lies as well on the use of force and total domination.

The phenomena of political history raise horror (...) The impulse to dominate, to apply force, to kill, to torment, to torture remains unchanged since prehistoric times. It may be that this impulse was veiled for a moment, that it seemed tamed, but this is an illusion. (ibid., 78)

While Jaspers' observation that the political orders have always been repressive powers is not new, his requests of *Öffentlichkeit* and *Umkehr* precedes by a quarter of a century the claims of "glasnost" and "perestroika". These requests are at the basis of all his charges of politics, as for example his relentless denunciation of Nazism and Communism

as forms of "total domination" (*totale Herrschaft*; cf. Jaspers 1951, 149; idem, 1960, 36), his criticism of the increasing intervention of the political parties that prevented the opening of the political debate and led to the world dilemma between the physical destruction of humanity by the atomic bomb or its spiritual destruction by the degradation of the fundamental human values (Jaspers 1966, 178). The result of this critique is Jaspers' position that philosophy can contribute to a political change only by initiating an inner conversion affecting the political way of thinking, which should be based on the suprapolitical, i.e. on moral principles and values like the preservation of freedom, humanity, and peace.

There is obviously a limit to pure politics. Where it fails, it need to be led by a suprapolitical [force] in order to succeed and not to fall into the anarchy of dexterity and crisis and then fail completely. Since the state of world peace cannot be realized by purely political means, the idea became inevitable: man seems lost if, under the pressure of the situation, he does not undergo a moral change from within of his freedom. Although this conversion cannot be an object, it must be a prerequisite for a new politics.⁴ (Jaspers 1958, 54)

The conversion should begin with the feeling of guilt (*das Schuldgefühl*) as a purifying condition of the political freedom: "Purification is the premise of our political liberty, too; for only consciousness of guilt leads to the consciousness of solidarity and co-responsibility without which there can be no liberty." (Jaspers 2000, 114-115) Only by this catharsis, humanity could be cured from its present disease, the symptoms of which are torture, deportation, and the threats of atomic war. In other words, only after a profound inner conversion democracy, understood as an alternative to total domination, becomes possible.

⁴ Es gibt offenbar eine Grenze der reinen Politik. Wo sie versagt, bedarf sie zum Erfolg der Führung durch ein überpolitisches, wenn sie nicht in die Anarchie der Geschicklichkeiten verfallen und dann in der Krise völlig versagen soll. Da der Weltfriedenzustand nicht allein auf rein politischem Wege verwirklicht werden kann, war der Gedanke unumgänglich: Der Mensch scheint verloren, wenn er nicht, veranlaßt durch den Druck der Situation, aus seiner Freiheit eine moralische Wandlung erfährt. Diese Umkehr kann zwar nicht Gegenstand, muß jedoch Voraussetzung einer neuen Politik sein.

A fundamental feature of Jasper's philosophy is the conviction that democracy is not simply the power of the majority of the people but a form of government characterized by reason and education, by respect for the person and the assurance of equal opportunities for all, which implies the respect for the rights of the minority groups. Thus, democracy is not so much a system of institutions but rather an administration of politics by reason instead the oppression of reason by politics. Political freedom must be based on the freedom of human being as human and on its realization in society through authentic communication. It is precisely in this sense that "great politics," i.e. converted politics, should aim the realization of a world order through communication. Partisan of political realism in the manner of Max Weber, Jaspers remained at the same time suspicious, and even hostile, to the idea of the unity of Germany seeing in it a new danger for freedom because of the too close connection of the GDR to the totalitarian empire of the Soviet Union. Although it is necessary to reconsider this position today in view of the enlargement of Europe, Jaspers was right to refute the unifying unions, which do not take into account the specific differences of particular social groups or nationalities. It would be also wrong to associate his idea of a world order with the scenario of the "new world order" as described for example by Jacques Attali (cf. Attali 1991). If such a scenario of a world of privileged elites, which do not really care for the vast array of impoverished homeless people, seems to become a reality today, it is, as put it Jaspers, because in freedom lies the very origin of decay and we lack of responsible politicians:

The world of political freedom is lost when there are no great political leaders who appear generation after generation born by the education of human freedom (...) The spirit of the free world offers an ambiguous image. We, the free peoples, have not yet liberated ourselves politically. There is no freedom in economic well-being (...) Democracy has become an oligarchy of parties. What once was called 'culture' becomes more and more the soap ball of some literati. The Spirit loses its seriousness. (Jaspers 1963, 79-80)

From this observation to Jaspers' final disappointment, the path appears to be short. Because, if the spirit "loses its seriousness", it means that a new tyranny has replaced the

old one. This is what Leo Strauss characterizes as the conquest of human nature by the perpetual and the universal or the collectivization of thought (Strauss 1991, 29). Thus, instead of being guided by reason, politicians have remained the same – "opportunist realists, exploitative, cunning and extortionist corporate manager" (Jaspers 1963, 79). Is it any wonder the philosophical spirit appears to be powerless in front of the political power? Moreover, could the project of a philosophy aspiring to change politics through education and reason ever succeed?

The passion of the philosophical reason

The philosophy of Jaspers seems to be a meandering between the faith in the power of reason and the confession of its powerlessness – two tendencies inherent in modern philosophy, where the eulogy of the ratio had to cross foolishness and madness, while its negation occurred often with its own help. The irremediable tragedy of the philosophical reason is that its projects cannot be realized without failure. The idea that philosophy should go into praxis and even "change the world" has resulted in high social costs: the philosophical critique of political passions in the name of humanity and reason quickly turned against humanity becoming a passion of reason, a nurture of distrust, surveillance, denunciation, deportation, and murder (cf. Raynova 1994). It is precisely against this annihilation of the spiritual and the human values in favor of force and control that Jaspers protested all his life. To some extent, his warning as well as his endeavor of *Existenzerhellung* could be compared with the attempts of Edmund Husserl and Albert Schweitzer to overcome the power of objectifying forces by the power of spiritual transformation and the rebirth of humanity by the "heroism of reason" (Husserl 1960, 299). However, there are significant differences between Jaspers and these two philosophers⁵, which believed in the infinite

⁵ Let's remind that Jaspers was with both in correspondence (see Schweitzer 2006, 408-415; Jaspers 2016/2, 374-377).

transforming power of the spirit, and in particular of philosophy. Albert Schweitzer was convinced that the ideals have an "incalculable power" that can overcome any difficulty:

That ideals [of the good and the true], when they are brought into contact with reality, are usually crushed by facts does not mean that they are bound from the very beginning to capitulate to the facts, but merely that our ideals are not strong enough; and they are not strong enough because they are not pure and strong and stable enough in ourselves. (Schweitzer 1949, 75)

Schweitzer seems to ignore the power of reality, and in particular that what Jaspers calls "ultimate situations" (*Grenzsituationen*), i.e. "situations which we cannot evade or change" (Jaspers 1957, 20), as for example death, suffering, struggle, violence. For Schweitzer all situations, including failure and disappointment, are the consequence of our own attitude, and it seems that it would be enough to change attitude in order to change the situation:

All acts and facts are a product of spiritual power, the successful ones of power which is strong enough; the unsuccessful ones of power which is too weak. Does my behavior in respect of love effect nothing? That is because there is not enough love in me. Am I powerless against the untruthfulness and the lies which have their being all around me? The reason is that I myself am not truthful enough. Have I to watch dislike and ill will carrying on their sad game? That means that I myself have not yet completely laid aside small-mindedness and envy. Is my love of peace misunderstood and scorned? That means that I am not yet sufficiently peace-loving. (ibid., 76)

Jaspers did not accept Schweitzer's idealism and in his treatise on the atomic bomb he explicitly criticized the fundamental principle of Schweitzer's ethics – the reverence for life (*die Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben*). To praise life as life and "to consider life as sacred is ambiguous", emphasizes Jaspers, because what imports is not life as such but the quality of life, i.e. that what makes it life-worthy.

[T]his reverence for life is not the last word. The Sanctification [of life] is untrue (...) when life as such is presented and raised as the absolute and only positive. Then human being takes the place of Transcendence, which is an expression of the factual lack of faith. (...) Risk and sacrifice of life is the condition without which a decent life cannot be won and without which the way to salvation cannot be found: however, not risk and sacrifice per se, but as a moment of human life of reason and love. The question is: what is life worth living for? (...) What do I want to do and be, how do I want

to live in the consciousness of my humanity and its threat? Is there a truth that tries the utmost and, if it does not succeed, allows the end to be accepted without fear? (Jaspers 1958, 479)⁶

The political consequences of this reasoning are that we should not accept to save physical life at any cost, i.e. by scarifying what makes it life-worthy – the spiritual values of human dignity, freedom, reason, and love –, nor to sacrifice life and human being in view of some (abstract) values. Both, physical life and life-worthy existence are today at risk from the atomic bomb and totalitarianism:

The atomic bomb, as the problem of the existence of humanity par excellence, is equivalent to only one other problem: the danger of *totalitarian domination* (...). If in the one case existence is lost, in the other the *life-worthy existence* is gone. In both extremes we come to the consciousness of what we want, how we want to live, what we must be ready for. Both problems seem to belong together by destiny. At least they are practically inseparable. The one cannot be solved without the other.⁷ (ibid., 22)

Moreover, in the situation of war treat, the decision to not building to bombs, including atomic weapons (as suggested by Schweitzer), would be wrong and not save humanity:

As long as the states demand their absolute sovereignty and each claim their sole power over the use of their force of arms, self-assertion is inevitably preceded by the preparation for the ultimate, the war. Abandonment [of preparation for war] means

⁶⁶ "[D]iese Ehrfurcht vor dem Leben ist nicht das Letzte. Die Lebensheiligung ist unwahr (...) wenn das Leben als solches zum absoluten einzig Positiven gesteigert wird. Dann tritt der Mensch an die Stelle der Transzendenz, ein Ausdruck faktischer Glaubenslosigkeit. (...) Wagnis und Opfer des Lebens sind die Bedingung, ohne die ein menschenwürdiges Leben nicht gewonnen wird und ohne die der Weg zur Rettung nicht gefunden werden kann: aber nicht Wagnis und Opfer an sich, sondern als Moment des Menschenlebens aus Vernunft und Liebe. Die Frage ist: Um was ist das Leben lebenswert? (...) Was will ich tun und sein, wie will ich leben im Bewußtsein meines Menschseins und dessen, was droht? Gibt es Wahrheit, die das Äußerste versucht und, wenn es nicht gelingt, das Ende ohne Angst hinnehmen läßt?"

⁷ "Der Atombombe, als dem Problem des Daseins der Menschheit schlechthin, ist nur ein einziges anderes Problem gleichwertig: die Gefahr der totalitären Herrschaft (...). Dort ist das Dasein, hier das lebenswerte Dasein verloren. An beiden äußersten Möglichkeiten kommen wir heute zum Bewußtsein dessen, was wir wollen, wie wir leben möchten, wozu wir bereit sein müssen. Beide Probleme scheinen schicksalsgemäß zusammenzugehören. Sie sind wenigstens praktisch untrennbar miteinander verbunden. Das eine ist nicht ohne das andere zu lösen."

submission in this situation. Therefore, the research and invention of the technicians with regard to bombs and all effective weapons technology should be promoted, with no restriction other than that which takes place in mutual security under real and strict control.⁸ (ibid., 481)

According to Jaspers, the highest terms to make peace in the situation of war politics are those of *balance* and *coexistence*, which this entails the use of all means – weaponry, alliances, bases, spheres of influence. Consequently, the conversion to new politics can be effectuated only gradually and in the course of the old one. The new politics should be above "foolish idealism" and "foolish realism". Idealistic foolish politics acts as if the better political condition is identical with the ideal goal. Realistically foolish politics acts as if that better condition could never happen. Both are irresponsible, according Jaspers. The path of responsibility is to encourage every good approach and impulse, to perceive the possibility of the future in the present reality and to think and act from this reality. And this is only possible through the change of the ethos and the willingness to sacrifice (*Opfermut*) under the guidance of reason. In this respect, it is important to note some differences between Husserl's and Jaspers' understanding of reason.

First, Jaspers does not speak of "heroism of reason" (*Heroismus der Vernunft*), as does Husserl, for whom reason refers exclusively to European philosophy and the European ideal of humanity. Jaspers appeals to the "courage of reason" (*Mut der Vernunft*, see Jaspers 1958, 487), whereby reason is inherent in every human being and is further developed by philosophy as communication in view of a world philosophy. The "courage of reason" is an attitude against the despair:

⁸ "Solange die Staaten ihre absolute Souveränität fordern und jeder für sich die alleinige Entscheidung über den Gebrauch ihrer Waffengewalt beanspruchen, ist zur Selbstbehauptung die Vorbereitung auf das Äußerste, den Krieg, unausweichlich. Verzicht heißt in dieser Lage Unterwerfung. Daher ist das Forschen und Erfinden der Techniker in Bezug auf Bomben und alle wirksame Waffentechnik zu fördern, ohne andere Einschränkung als die, die in Gegenseitigkeit unter wirklich sichernder Kontrolle stattfindet."

When I despair of the utmost, the reason teaches me: It is not courageous to make judgments about the end and the inevitable downfall. It is courageous to do in knowledge as well as in ignorance what is possible and not to give up hope as long as one lives. It is also not a brave but rigid philosophy to watch the alleged doom unscathed until it buries one. It is brave to let oneself be shaken to the very bottom and to learn what reveals itself in the ultimate situation.⁹ (Jaspers 1958, 489)

Second, at the difference of Husserl, Jaspers' understanding of reason and history rejects any "a priori of history" and any historical teleology as the "infinite goals of reason" (cf. Husserl 1970, 299 and 349), because the meaning of history cannot be formulated in terms of goals or aims:

If we seek the meaning of history in a movement toward some ultimate state of happiness on earth, we find no corroboration in any conceivable view of past history. On the contrary, the whole chaotic course of human history, with its modest successes and total catastrophes, argues against such meaning. The meaning of history cannot be formulated in terms of an aim. Every aim is particular, provisional, and capable of being transcended. It is only by ignoring essential facts that we can interpret the whole of history as the story of a single decision. What does God want of men? Perhaps a general answer may be ventured: History is the stage upon which man can reveal what he is, what he can be, what he can become, of what he is capable. Even the greatest threat is a challenge to man. (1954, 105)

According to Jaspers from a philosophical point of view, which is always somehow abstract, history breaks down in four stages or "basic segments":

1) The "Promethean age", which must be situated in the very remote past. It represents the foundation of all history, through which man became man in distinction to a purely biologically defined human species;

⁹ "Wenn ich verzage angesichts des Äußersten, so lehrt Vernunft: Es ist nicht mutig, Urteile über Ende und unausweichlichen Untergang zu fällen. Mutig ist es, im Wissen und Nichtwissen zu tun, was möglich ist, und die Hoffnung nicht aufzugeben, solange man lebt. Es ist auch keine tapfere, sondern erstarrende Philosophie, dem vermeintlich erkannten Untergang unerschüttert zuzusehen, bis er einen begräbt. Tapfer ist, sich bis in den Grund erschüttern zu lassen und zu erfahren, was in der Grenzsituation sich offenbart."

2) The age of the ancient high civilizations, which grew up between 5000 and 3000 B.C. in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and on the Indus, then somewhat later on the Hwang River in China.

3) The "axial age" – the years centering around 500 B.C. from 800 to 200 B.C. – when the spiritual foundations of humanity were laid, simultaneously and independently in China, India, Persia, Palestine, and Greece. These are the foundations, upon which humanity still subsists today.

4) The epoch after 200 B.C. until today, which is marked according Jaspers by only one entirely new, spiritually and materially incisive event, equal to the others in historical significance: the age of science and technology foreshadowed in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. Its theoretical groundwork was laid in the seventeenth century; at the end of eighteenth century it entered on a period of broad growth, and in the last few decades it has advanced at a headlong pace (*ibid.*, 98).

Unlike Husserl's Eurocentric explanation of philosophy and history by means of teleology¹⁰, Jaspers conception of the axial age is a cosmopolitan, global one, and has been used, analyzed, criticized as well as further developed by many outstanding scholars, including Samuel Eisenstadt (1986), Robert Bellah (2005), Charles Taylor (2012), Jürgen Habermas (2012), and most lately by Jan Assman (2018). By mean of this conception, Jaspers sets out to show that history is not predetermined and, thus, that the future of humanity is in its own hands: "We cannot define the ultimate aim of history but we can pos it an aim, which is itself a premise for the realization of the highest human potentialities. And that is the unity of mankind." (Jaspers 1954, 106) Thenceforth, the question is how to achieve this unity.

Jaspers underlines that unity cannot be achieved through any rational or scientific universal, because this would produce only a unity of understanding but not of humanity. Unity cannot reside in a universal religion, nor be realized through a conventional language based

¹⁰ Husserl speaks of a telos "inborn in European humanity at the birth of Greek philosophy" (Husserl 1970, 15).

on reason and common sense. Unity can be gained only "in boundless communication of the historically different in never-ending dialogue, rising to heights of noble emulation." (ibid.). The idea of dialogue, on which relies Jaspers, is of course not new. Yet, at the difference of the conceptions of interpersonal dialogue, as for example that of Martin Buber, Jaspers' understanding goes in a sociopolitical direction that seems close to the theory of communicative reason, elaborated later by Habermas. The conditions of dialogue are, according to him, an area of nonviolence and a political form upon which all should agree, i.e. a constitutional world order, built on elections and laws, which are subject to modification solely by legal means. Such an order, specifies Jaspers, is partly built in some western countries and the Ligue of Nations. But the aim is to make him work as a "constitutional world order" that alone can enable durable peace as no state would possess absolute sovereignty but mankind itself. Acting through its constitutional organs, humankind will be sovereign. (ibid., 106)

[O]utside the circle, which is realized within the Confederation as international law, there is another law for the rest of the world, which Kant described in the idea of his cosmopolitan right, but did not further elaborate. There are therefore two stages to be distinguished: The League of Nations of Free States and the unification of all States in a World Citizenship for the purpose of maintaining peace. The non-universality of the League of Nations – actually – is the consequence of the premise that only free peoples are capable of doing so.¹¹ (1958, 148)

Let us remind that after the WWII the idea of World Citizenship got widespread. For instance, Camus wrote in November 1946:

What is international or national democracy? It is a form of society in which law has authority over those who govern, law being the expression of the common will represented in a legislative body. Is it built today? An international legal code is indeed now being

¹¹ "Die Konföderation freier Staaten umfaßt bisher und für uns unabsehbare Zeit nicht die ganze Welt. Daher liegt außerhalb des Kreises, der innerhalb der Konföderation als Völkerrecht sich verwirklicht, für die gesamte übrige Welt noch ein anderes Recht, das Kant in der Idee seines Weltbürgerrechts bezeichnete, aber nicht näher ausführte. Es sind also zwei Stufen zu unterscheiden: der Völkerbund freier Staaten und die Vereinigung aller Staaten in einem Weltbürgerrecht zum Zweck der Aufrechterhaltung des Friedens. Die Nichtuniversalität des Völkerbundes – vorläufig – ist die Folge der Voraussetzung, daß zu ihm nur freie Völker fähig sind."

prepared. But this code is made and broken by governments, that is by the executive power. We are thus in a regime of international dictatorship. The only way of extricating ourselves is to create a world parliament through elections in which all peoples will participate, which will enact a legislation that will exercise authority over national governments. Since we do not have such a parliament, all we can do now is to resist international dictatorship; to resist on a world scale; and to resist by means, which are not in contradiction with the end we seek.¹² (Camus 2002, 657)

Like Camus, Jaspers was aware that this solution is an ideal, which is far from the real social and political situation. That why he warned that we shall not be blinded by an optimism born of enthusiasm for such ideas, which sees the future as all bright. For we have every reason to take the opposite view:

We see, each of us in ourselves, the self-will, the resistance to self-elucidation, the sophistry, with which even philosophy is used as an instrument of obfuscation; we see rejection of the unfamiliar in the place of communication. We see the pleasure men take in power and violence; we see how the masses are swept into war; stricken with blind lust for gain and adventure, willing to sacrifice everything, even their lives. On the other hand, we see the unwillingness of the masses to deprive themselves, to save, to work patiently and quietly toward the building of stable conditions; and we see the passions which force their way almost unobstructed into the background of the mind. And quite apart from the character of men, we see the irremediable injustice of all institutions, we see situations which cannot be solved by justice, the situations arising for example from the increase and redistribution of the population or from the exclusive possession by one group of something which all desire and which cannot be divided. Hence, there seems almost to be an inevitable limit at which violence in some form must again break through. Once again, we are faced with the question: is it God or the devil who governs the world? Though we may believe that ultimately the devil is in the service of God, there is no proof of it. (1954, 107-108)

¹² "Qu'est-ce que la démocratie nationale ou internationale ? C'est une forme de société où la loi est au-dessus des gouvernants, cette loi étant l'expression de la volonté de tous, représentée par un corps législatif. Est-ce là ce qu'on essaie de fonder aujourd'hui ? On nous prépare, en effet, une loi internationale. Mais cette loi est faite ou dé faite par des gouvernements, c'est-à-dire par l'exécutif. Nous sommes donc en régime de dictature internationale. La seule façon d'en sortir est de mettre la loi internationale au-dessus des gouvernements, donc de faire cette loi, donc de disposer d'un parlement, donc de constituer ce parlement au moyen d'élections mondiales auxquelles participeront tous les peuples. Et puisque nous n'avons pas ce parlement, le seul moyen est de résister à cette dictature internationale sur un plan international et selon des moyens qui ne contrediront pas la fin poursuivie".

With this disillusion, articulated by Jaspers, the question arises: What is the sense of the struggles for a better social and political order when finally, injustice persists? What is the sense to "push the rock" to the top, from where it would fall again? Is it not the prophet himself who says: "For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? (...) Better is a handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit" (Eccl. 2:22 and 4:6). What means "*vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas*", if not, that all our efforts are "in vain"? Admittedly, there are very different answers to these questions, and some of them are more optimistic than Jaspers' statement, cited at the beginning. A prime example in this respect is the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, who was at the beginning of his career highly influenced by Jaspers but followed later other paths. Ricoeur is more optimistic insofar as he believes that philosophy and philosophers can serve as intermediaries between different traditions and make a substantial contribution to the public debate (*Öffentlichkeit*). On my question how political philosophy, which has no power over political decisions, can help us to resolve social conflicts, he gave the following answer:

I believe we are useful at this level – requiring better arguments of our opponents (...) Certainly, discussion alone cannot resolve the relations of force, but it obligates force to put itself on the plane of discourse. (Raynova 2009, 45-46).

No matter how we interpret the role of philosophy, the important insight that could be drawn from Jaspers' critique is that neither philosophical encounters nor social struggles and sacrifices will find a justification if they fail to unify reason and praxis, ethics and politics. And probably this dilemma will never stop to torment the European thought, crucified between the faith in reason and the sober skepticism about the transformation of the "crooked timber of humanity" (Kant 1921, 230; cf. Lacoue-Labarthe 1981; Derrida 1983; Bouretz 2010).

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