

The Political Philosophy of the Enlightenment

Collapse and Transformation

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The Age of Reason demarcates perhaps the single more groundbreaking shift in the development of political philosophy. Beginning with the introduction of universal human rights derived from natural law and reason, expectations were imposed upon the government for the first time in history. This Enlightenment era discourse of human rights and the time period's universal declarations indicates a shift in the methodology of politics itself. However, the theories of the Age of Reason, upon closer inspection, at least foundationally appear to denigrate the sovereign and elevate the human. In this paper I will first highlight the broader strokes of the political philosophy of the period in order to illustrate the image of human progress that thinkers of the age portrayed in their arguments. Second, I will find correspondence between the attempted actualization of such an idealistic politic with the politic of citizen management - one that instead denigrates humans and elevates the sovereign further - that follows the period's revolutions. In particular, I will begin with an analysis of what precisely is meant by 'enlightenment.' Next, I will establish an understanding of the principle of universality followed by the general will. Afterwards I will reach the critical turning point in the paper by discussing the formation of the modern nation-state. Finally, I will analyze the post-enlightenment political landscape in which the previously mentioned enlightenment concepts are transformed far from their original intent.

I

Any inquiry into the political philosophy of the enlightenment must first seek to clarify what is meant by 'enlightenment.' For Immanuel Kant enlightenment can be thought of in two ways. First, it can be seen individually as, "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity."¹ Kant believed that, "it is difficult for each separate individual to work his way out of the immaturity which has become almost second nature to him."² The second kind of enlightenment is enlightenment as societal progress. Kant argues, "There is more chance of an entire public enlightening itself. This is indeed almost inevitable, if only the public concerned is left in freedom. For there will always be a few who think for themselves, even among those appointed as guardians of the common mass. Such guardians, once they have themselves thrown off the yoke of immaturity, will disseminate the spirit of rational respect for personal value and for the duty of all men to think for themselves."³ Moses Mendelssohn sees the process of enlightenment as the destiny of man. This destiny, "can be divided into (1) the destiny of man *as man* and (2) the destiny of man *as citizen*."⁴ This distinction between the enlightenment of man as an individual and of man as a member of the state will be of vital importance later.

II

The freeing of oneself from immaturity is represented by the use of reason in guiding one's life. Enlightenment philosophers, using reason, introduced the new concept of human rights. These were rights assigned to people merely by being human. In sharing these rights, there was at least a fundamental sense of equality among men. *The Declaration of the Rights of man* gives testimony to this claim, stating that, "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights" and that such rights are the, "natural and imprescriptible rights of man."⁵ Whereas the initial 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man claims that the aim of political association is the preservation of these rights, the 1793 Declaration of the Rights

of Man goes further to propose that beyond this societal aim, the very institution of a government is solely for this purpose.⁶ If we shortly expand our purview to the American *Declaration of Independence*, a document that was largely influenced by the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, we discover that it reads, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."⁷ These rights are considered to be rooted in humanity itself. The concept of the universal declaration captures the essence of the political philosophy of the enlightenment. Reason itself makes no distinction between humanity in one country and humanity in another. The humanist element of the enlightenment, at least in theory, does not permit any individual's rights to be neglected.

This sense of universalism manifests itself in Diderot's general will. It is perhaps necessary at this point to admit that the Enlightenment was not a homogenous movement. There were sharp disagreements between the more Radical and Moderate camps, and Rousseau presents a conception of the general will that is in disagreement with Diderot's. The goal in my explication of the various philosophies of the enlightenment is to represent the ideals that have influenced politics beyond the collapse of enlightenment philosophy. While Diderot believes that individuals are motivated by self-interest, he finds harmony between this self-interest and communal-interest.⁸ This sense of universalism extends to the degree that those who act against the general will are viewed negatively. Israel writes, "Diderot, characterizes the 'general will' as the core of the true moral system, labelling the man who thinks only of his own private concerns an enemy of humanity."⁹

III

It is alongside the revolutions of the 18th century that the Enlightenment's universalism begins to collapse and its failures grow evident. The problem with the Enlightenment has always been that its theories are universal yet the conditions required to actualize are particular in nature. It is the particular implementation of universal policy that politicizes enlightenment politics and births the modern nation-state. Prior to the French Revolution, the concept of a nation was not yet married to that of a state. Whereas a state was a territory under sovereign control, a nation was the shared history of a group of people. While it may be difficult in present times to imagine them separately, it was equally different in the 18th century to imagine them together. Hannah Arendt elaborates,

The secret conflict between state and nation came to light at the very birth of the modern nation-state, when the French Revolution combined the declaration of the Rights of Man with the demand for national sovereignty. The same essential rights were at once claimed as the inalienable heritage of all human beings and as the specific heritage of specific nations, the same nation was at once declared to be subject to laws, which supposedly would flow from the Right of Man, and sovereign, that is, bound by no universal law and acknowledging nothing superior to itself. The practical outcome of this contradiction was that from then on, human rights were protected and enforced only as national rights and that the very institution of a state, whose supreme task was to protect and guarantee his rights as man, as citizen and as national, lost its legal, rational appearance and could be interpreted by the romantics as the nebulous representative of a 'national soul' which through the very fact of its existence was supposed to be beyond or above the law. National sovereignty, accordingly, lost its original connotation of freedom of the people and was being surrounded by a pseudomystical aura of lawless arbitrariness.¹⁰

Arendt makes a handful of compelling arguments here. Taking them one by one we will start by discussing how the marriage of universal law with the nation-state warped the enlightenment's conception of the general will and universal rights. First, the marriage of universal ideals with particular events serves a transformative role in the enlightenment's general will. The idea of a collective guiding spirit still existed after the revolution, yet it was only representative of the politicized persons considered French citizens. Giorgio Agamben talks of *bios* and *zoe*. *Zoe* is known as bare life, it is life that is simply human. *Bios* represented politically qualified life.¹¹ A citizen is a *bios*. The relationship between Agamben's theory and the enlightenment era is explicated by Susan Maslan, "The man of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen is, in part, the figure for this conception of human life. For the first time the fact of existence required political recognition and served as an irrefutable claim to rights. Prior to the Declaration, as Agamben points out, to be human and merely human was the basis, not for entitlement but for political exclusion. Indeed, the Declaration emerges out of a long intellectual and literary history that opposed the "politically qualified life" of the citizen to the organic, biologically based life of "man."¹²

Irony can be found in the contradictory nature of enlightenment politics. The same theories that argued for universal human rights began to argue that those rights ought to only be applied to particular individuals with a defined political status. Maslan continues,

For Arendt, the tragic irony of human rights is that when one loses one's status as citizen—a process that often entails a loss of fixed residence, a loss of community, a loss of occupation or profession, a loss of one's place within a known social structure—one ceases to be recognizably human. For it is all those ways in which one's life is qualified, Arendt argues, all those products of human creation or artifice, that lend human life its humanity. When the individual is reduced to mere humanity, to the mere fact of birth, of biological or, to use Arendt's term, animal existence, he or she is no longer perceptibly human and risks extermination.¹³

Addressing the latter part of Arendt's argument we must face the pseudomystical aura of the state. It is evident that the simultaneous primacy of the sovereign and the Right of Man formulates a seemingly irresolvable paradox. The resolution of this paradox is the re-emergence of mythology in a post-mythical world. In his book, *The Myth of the State*, Ernst Cassirer speaks of the role myth plays in human social life. Myth is a form of discourse, a typology of language. Much as religion provides moral guidance and scientific research brings about objective truths, myth too has the power to influence one's account of reality. Cassirer argues that through an analysis of the historical progression of language that we come to realize that the word contains two meanings, "the semantic and the magical".¹⁴ I contend that sovereign power parallels the semantic meaning of language as that which can always be claimed to actually exist. The Right of Man, then, is magical and can be superseded by the sovereign when necessary. Therefore the dual primacy of sovereign and right do not represent a contradiction.

The magical meaning of language is particularly important for Cassirer, who sees humans as symbolic animals. Magical language exhibits an expressive meaning which ties together the affectivity of particular events, charges them with moods of hate, fear, anxiety, or hope, and forms an underlying mythical consciousness from which our activity sprawls. Cassirer sees the modern political as a fictional world built up from basic, primitive myths into a complete cultural system. Michael Friedman explains that "since the mythical world does not consist of stable and enduring substances that manifest themselves from various points of view and on various occasions, but rather in a fleeting complex of events bound together by their affective and emotional 'physiognomic' characters, it also exemplifies its own particular type of causality whereby each part literally contains the whole of which it is a part and can thereby exert all the causal efficacy of the whole."¹⁵

Every event in the French Revolution, for example, had infused in it the revolution itself. The Declaration of the Rights of man, the storming of Bastille, the Champ de mars massacre - each of these events not only were part of the French Revolution, they *were* the French Revolution. Further, they all represent more than just the Revolution as the Revolution itself signified a greater purpose. The revolution was the mythological, particular actualization of universal human rights. The mythological power of the French Revolution is further expounded by Henri Lefebvre in his work, "What is the Historical Past?" Lefebvre describes historical analysis as an objective realism. He writes, "The past becomes present (or is renewed) as a function of the realization of the possibilities objectively implied in this past. It is revealed with them. The introduction of the category of the possible into historical methodology permits us to conceive the objectivity—while yielding its due to the relativity, novelty and inexhaustibility—of history, without collapsing into pure relativism. It restores historical actions and personages to the effective movement of history, without falling into subjectivism."¹⁶

Essentially, mythological discourse is capable of re-envisioning history such that the values of the revolution are simultaneously revised and reaffirmed in the present. Insofar as possibility is an always-present element of history, any value can be established in the present via the past. Lefebvre further explains, "The French Revolution made a certain number of events possible, through a 'process' of which it was either the origin or a decisive element. Each time one of these possibilities is realized, it retroactively sheds a new light on the initial event. Thus the revolutionary event, as a totality, belongs not only to so-called 'narrative' history but to a deeper historicity, which reveals itself slowly with the realization of such possibilities and the advent of new possibilities, in the course of this realization itself."¹⁷

It is at this point that one can truly appreciate Cassirer's analysis of myth. If it is claimed that the general will has been reformulated as a Hegelian national soul, and inclusion in this national soul is entirely political, then it holds that the sovereign, as director the nation-state, defines whom does and does not belong to the national soul. Further, as per Lefebvre's analysis, the sovereign is capable of not only re-envisioning the nation's historical past, i.e. the possibilities of the French Revolution, but also making that past re-emerge in the present. This degree of sovereign control allows them to further dictate the future purpose of the national soul. It is in this way that the sovereign first discovers its

control over the population of the nation as a population. The sovereign will go on to expand this control by embracing the origin of pan-movements.

The pan movements which arose in the post-enlightenment world are indicative of 'with-us' or 'against-us' mentalities, a sort of tribal nationalism. Arendt claims that, "Politically speaking, tribal nationalism always insists that its own people is surrounded by 'a world of enemies,' 'one against all,' that a fundamental difference exists between this people and all others. It claims its people to be unique, individual, incompatible with all others, and denies theoretically the very possibility of a common mankind long before it is used to destroy the humanity of man."¹⁸ The world of enemies that Arendt describes flows naturally alongside the political theories of German thinker Carl Schmitt. In his *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt reorganizes the modern nation-state such that not only is the nation divorced from the state, but the state is once again placed above the nation. The state, for Schmitt, is simply, "The political status of an organized people in an enclosed territorial unit."¹⁹ What is meant by political can then be reduced to actions between friend and enemy.²⁰ It is from this point that the dangers of the state-institutionalization of Arendt's national soul grow evident. When the priority of the nation is the preservation and prosperity of the national soul, and the state dictates the past, present, and future of the national soul, the state then determines the present-value and future purpose of the nation *qua* nation. In this context, the nation is the homogenized identity of a people as a unified entity. Further, for Schmitt, "The distinction of friend and enemy denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association of dissociation."²¹ The control of the state over the nation, then, represents itself as the strongest possible manifestation of control. It is in the moment that the state discovers its control over the people as a nation that the bios becomes politicized.

It is at this point that I turn to Judith Butler's work on framing in order to better elaborate on the guiding nature of magical language: "Whether and how we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, how we articulate political analyses, depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established."²² For me to feel sympathy for a hungry child in Africa I must have already established a world which is very different from my own in which people very similar to myself lack the food they need to survive, grow, and develop. After establishing this world, this perceptible reality, I must also interpret how I feel about it. This world need not necessarily carry one mood or another along with it, but when described using affectively-energetic, magical language, the mood is provided. The description itself tells me, semantically, of the nature of that mood. This concept demonstrates the way in which language has become politicized in America such that our political thought is always-already directed. When speaking of the rhetoric used by the Bush administration in advocating the war on terror Butler writes of the binarisms of political speech. The claim "either you're with us or you're with the terrorists" frames the totality of our perceptible options.²³ It is entirely possible to claim that you are with neither 'us' nor are you with the 'terrorists', however when the options are presented as both a semantic binarism and an affective divide between the moods associated with loyalty and with treason, any alternative answers are muted. In this way the binarity of modern political discourse eliminates freedom and the possibility of perspective.

While these modern-day binarisms illustrate an extreme example, the concept of framing can be applied back to the sort of political landscape created by the revolutions of the Enlightenment. By defining what constitutes the past, present, and future of the national soul, as well as excluding groups that the sovereign believes does not belong or are not useful, the citizen, or *zoe* is under absolute control of the sovereign. It is wise to look back at the original distinctions between the forms of enlightenment made by Kant and Mendelssohn. In the post-revolutionary world, the sovereign has become the enlightened individual, or the destined end-state of man. Humanity itself can only find salvation through a societal enlightenment according to Kant, or an enlightenment as citizen according to Mendelssohn – both are understood to be the same in this context. For the citizen of a modern nation-state to progress towards their destiny, enlightenment, they may only do so by becoming a better citizen; i.e., becoming more attuned to the national soul as defined by the sovereign.

My final claim distinguishing the philosophy of the Enlightenment from the post-Enlightenment political is that the citizen has been reduced from an 'I' to a 'they', which has been numbed by the proceeding death of the everyday. Modern political inclusion is marked by, "the misguided apotheosis of the human 'we' into which deracinated groups and individuals dissolve themselves in hope to become more themselves"²⁴ What Matušík describes is the mass relegation of *Da-sein* – Heidegger's being-in-the-world - to the being of everydayness, a being described by Heidegger in-depth:

This being-with-one-another dissolves one's own *Da-sein* completely into the kind of being of 'the others' in such a way that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, disappear more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the they unfolds its true dictatorship. We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way they enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the

way they see and judge. But we also withdraw from the 'great mass' the way they withdraw, we find 'shocking' what they find shocking. The they, which is nothing definite and which all are, though not as sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.²⁵

Essentially, the argument that Heidegger makes is that humans have a unique sort of being that is filled with immense value. In modern politics, however, a politics that qualifies all life and that is guided entirely by the sovereign, our beings are merged metaphorically into one blob of bland nothingness. In amounting to nothing more than aspirants towards the national soul, we all become so much like one another that we are no longer ourselves. This indicates the ultimate irony of the Enlightenment's actualization. A philosophical endeavor that strives to elevate the individual human above all else ultimately relegates them to non-unique objects of the state that the philosophers of the era were immensely critical of. Being-with is always, to some degree a part of *Da-sein*, and the complete immersion of being-with-one-another as described by Heidegger and Matušík accounts to little more than inauthentic living and hardly warrants a critique of modern political life.

Further call for concern arises when one realizes the paradox of reducing *Da-sein* to the being of everydayness in a society which has killed the everyday. German author Victor Klemperer explains that in the time of the Third Reich, every activity was considered historical (*historisch*). Every political speech, every rally, every road, everything that held in any way German was historical. This marks for Klemperer the death of the everyday in this Third Reich. The everyday was replaced entirely with "feast days" that left the Third Reich as 'mortally ill'.²⁶ I contend that this death of the everyday occurred far before the Third Reich. In fact, I believe it occurred immediately following the French Revolution. Recalling Lefebvre's analysis, the state constantly reengaged with the French Revolution by adding to the signified representation of the event. In doing so, the totality of the French Revolution's possibilities were imposed upon every day and every action following the revolution. In this way post-revolution France engaged in the same "feast days" as Germany did during the Third Reich.

One may respond to this argument by claiming that the State cannot entirely control our perspective of the national soul. Butler would contest, "Although restricting how and what we see is not exactly the same as dictating a storyline, it is a way of interpreting in advance what will and will not be included in the field of perception"²⁷ In this way the sovereign defines the perceptible reality, our surrounding world, such that it defines how we are able to feel about the histories it tells. This reinforces the self-affirmation that the I only exists as a conglomerate with the 'they' as citizens lack the agency to define themselves apolitically. This agency is stripped both by a lack of perceptive potential and by the devaluation of apolitical life. Butler especially agrees with the first claim when she writes, "the regulation of perspective thus suggests that the frame can conduct certain kinds of interpretations."²⁸ Ultimately what we are left with is an entirely politicized humanity that is derivative from the birth of the modern nation-state that lacks the ability to escape the national soul as directed by the sovereign.

As I have demonstrated, the political philosophy of the Enlightenment granted special privilege to human *qua* human. However, the methods by which this philosophy was actualized in the real world denigrated the human in two ways. First, the individual's will was transposed into the general will and then to the national soul. When the national soul is defined historically, and mythology has the power to redefine history, it becomes its sovereign right - and perhaps as the director of the nation-state, its duty - to both legitimate and direct the national soul. Second, human life became qualified only in relation to the political sovereign. The attempt to elevate the human above the state instead made the human an object of the state. In both cases, Enlightenment philosophy capsized. Rather than actualizing in the world a politics of humanism in which universal rights were the goal of the state, the revolutions of the Age of Reason created a political schema in which the human *qua* citizen was defined entirely by the state. The result of the Enlightenment was the perversion of universal humanism into particularized management of the national soul.

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