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ON REVOLUTION IN KANT AND MARX

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Political Theory (forthcoming)

This article compares the thoughts of Kant and Marx on revolution. It focuses in particular on two issues: the contribution of revolutionary enthusiasm to the cause of emancipatory political agents and its educative role in illustrating the possibility of progress for future generations. In both cases, it is argued, the defence of revolution is offered in the context of illustrating the possibility of moral progress for the species, even if not for individual human beings, and brings out the centrality of collective agency in moving toward universal moral goals. Discussing the implications of these points is of significant historical interest: it allows us to defend an interpretation of Kant's political thought which is sensitive to the material conditions of historical development and to rescue Marx from an amoral reading of his philosophy of history. Reflecting on the role and preconditions of transformative collective agency is also of normative interest: it allows us to better evaluate the significance of political events that, firstly, re-shape the boundaries of political feasibility and, secondly, play a crucial educative role in motivating future progressive initiatives.

1. The problem

On a superficial reading of Kant and Marx on revolution, the distance between the two authors could not be greater. Kant is often thought of as the defender of reform and gradual political emancipation; Marx is seen as the revolutionary theorist *par excellence*.

Kant emphasizes the superiority of good will over nature; Marx insists that such good will corresponds to the “impotence, depression and wretchedness of the German burghers, whose petty interests were never capable of developing into the common, national interests of a class “.1 For Kant freedom is a fact of reason; for Marx reason is socially constructed. Kant is said to appreciate the role of contractual relations for the foundation of the state whereas Marx derides these as concealed forms of social coercion.²

The contrast appears even sharper with reference to the specific issue of revolution. Kant famously denied the right to revolution, whereas Marx thought revolution so necessary that the normative question concerning its acceptability did not even bear direct asking. For Kant, “there is no right to sedition (seditio), still less a right to rebellion (rebellio), and least of all there is a right against the head of a state [...] to attack his person or even his life”.³ For Marx, the Communists “openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions”.⁴ Kant considers any attempt to take over the state high treason argues that “whoever commits such treason must be punished by nothing less than death for attempting to destroy his fatherland”.⁵ Marx proclaims that we should “let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution!” for the proletarians “have nothing to lose but their chains”.⁶

There is indeed plenty of textual evidence to support the view that Kant might have been afflicted by what Marx in the *18th Brumaire* calls “parliamentary cretinism”, a naive faith in the possibility of promoting reform gradually and within the limits of given institutional frameworks, only to eventually admit defeat when these institutions end up failing to perform their role. There is also, however, textual evidence on the basis of which we might construct a counter-narrative about Kant and Marx. Marx read Kant early in his career and at that stage seems to have preferred the Prussian philosopher to

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. Christopher John Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), 98.

² These and other important contrasts are analysed in William James Booth, “The Limits of Autonomy. Karl Marx’s Kant Critique,” in *Kant and Political Philosophy. The Contemporary Legacy.*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Ann Arbor: Yale University Press, 1993). 245-75.

³ Immanuel Kant, “The Metaphysics of Morals” (1797) in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 463.

⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” (1848) in *Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrel Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 30.

⁵ Kant, “The Metaphysics of Morals”, 464.

⁶ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, 30.

subsequent representatives of German idealism. In the famous programmatic letter to his father (the earliest of Marx's letters available to us) the young Marx confesses to have been profoundly inspired by the idealism of Kant and Fichte.⁷ His later assertion that Kant's philosophy should be regarded as "the German theory of the French revolution"⁸ need not be read as a critique. It echoes the judgment of Marx's friend and collaborator Heinrich Heine, for whom Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* marked the beginning of "an intellectual revolution in Germany". This revolution, Heine thought, offered "the strangest analogies with the material revolution in France" and appeared to be "of equal importance".⁹ Engels's later reference to Kant in an attempt to formulate the challenges faced by the revolutionary movement also seems in line with these remarks. "Our party", he argues, has to prove that either all the philosophical efforts of the German nation since Kant and Hegel have been useless – worse than useless, or that they must end in communism".¹⁰

Clearly then, Kant has been invoked by Marxists not only in a critical fashion, to expose the political limits of German idealism, but also in a more constructive one, to mine its emancipatory potential. Yet, many accounts in the literature have neglected this latter, more sympathetic, encounter. Even when highlighting continuity rather than difference, attention has been devoted mainly to an analysis of Kant's impact on strands of Marxism committed to reform (more than revolution) as is the case with studies examining his influence over French and Russian socialists such as Jean Jaurès, Charles Rappoport, and Nikolay Berdyaev, over Austro-Marxists like Otto Bauer and Max Adler, over representatives of the so-called Marburg School including Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp or over German social democrats like Eduard Bernstein.¹¹

In what follows I pursue a direct comparative analysis of some significant texts of Kant and Marx. This is interesting from a historical perspective in that it supports a reading of Marx's theory of progress in continuity with the idealism of the

⁷ See the letter at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1837-pre/letters/37_11_10.htm

⁸ See Karl Marx, *The Philosophical Manifesto of the Historical School of Law* (1842) in Marx and Engels *Collected Writings* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), vol. 2, 203.

⁹ The same stages, Heine emphasized, "characterize its development which, indeed, shows the most remarkable parallels. On both banks of the Rhine we see the same break with the past, all respect for tradition is revoked", cited in Hans Siegbert Reiss, "Kant and the Right of Rebellion," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17, no. 2 (1956), 179.

¹⁰ Friedrich Engels, *Progress of Social Reform on the Continent* (1843) in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 392.

¹¹ For an excellent discussion, see Harry Van Der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988).

Enlightenment, and also supports a reading of Kant's philosophy of history as sensitive to the material conditions of historical development. Identifying potential commonalities even where the link might at first appear weaker, i.e. in Kant's and Marx's analysis of revolution, sheds interesting new light on the thought of both authors. It allows us to read Kant as a theorist of social and political change and to interpret Marx as a philosopher who inherited rather than subverting the conceptual apparatus of the Enlightenment.

A comparative analysis of Kant and Marx views on revolution is also stimulating from a normative perspective. Existing accounts of the legitimacy of revolution tend to focus either on the defensibility of revolution on individual moral grounds, or on a critique of it from a legal institutionalist perspective. As we shall shortly see, the point on which Kant's and Marx's analyses overlap is irreducible to either individualist moralism or institutionalist legalism. It relates to a defence of the role of collective agency in transformative political events that, firstly, re-shape the boundaries of political feasibility and, secondly, play a crucial educative role in motivating future emancipatory initiatives.

2. Kant and revolution

Any attempt to reconsider Kant's analysis of revolution and to place this analysis side by side with that of Marx should start with confronting an ambiguity. In his political and legal writings, Kant rejected without hesitation the right to revolution, yet he was one of its most passionate supporters when the event historically occurred. It is believed that upon receiving the news of the instalment of the Republic in France, the then 65 year old philosopher exclaimed "Now I can say like Simon: "God, let your servant die in peace, for I have already lived this memorable day!".¹²

Biographies of the time are replete with accounts of how passionately Kant followed the development of the French revolution, avidly reading the daily newspapers and insistently seeking the most recent news whenever his friends returned from a visit

¹² Cited in Jacques Droz, *L'Allemagne et la Révolution Française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1949), 157. See also the discussion in G. P. Gooch, *Germany and the French Revolution* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1965) and Karl Vorländer, *Immanuel Kant : der Mann und das Werk* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1977), vol. 2, 220.

to the country or could bring uncensored views.¹³ At the time of the events in France, his friend and collaborator Johann Benjamin Jachmann remarks, Kant's conversation "lost some of its astonishing diversity". The revolution, he reports, "occupied him entirely; he linked everything to it and never lacked instructive observations on the progress of the movement and the character of its protagonists".¹⁴ Moreover, unlike many other German intellectuals, who had initially embraced the revolutionary cause only to withdraw their support during the Terror years, Kant seems to have never changed his mind.¹⁵ As his student and collaborator Nicolovius puts it, Kant often insisted "that all the horrors that took place in France were nothing compared to those that people had suffered under a despotic regime, and that the Jacobins were probably right in all their actions".¹⁶

Those contemporaries of Kant who documented his position vis-à-vis the French revolution did not limit themselves to noting the philosopher's passionate enthusiasm for the event; they also established clear links between his political sympathies and his philosophical body of work. The point is made particularly clear in a letter dated 15th of June 1793 sent by Kant's student, Johann Gottfried Carl Christian Kiesewetter, with whom Kant remained in warm contact throughout his life. "Everyone", Kiesewetter writes, "is truly anxious to see your system of morality appear, and all the more so just now since the French Revolution has stimulated a mass of such questions anew. I believe that there are many interesting things to be said about the rationality of the

¹³ See for one example the 14th October 1790 letter by Johann Benjamin Jachmann, following his journey on the other side of the Rhine, in Immanuel Kant, *Correspondence*, edited by Arnulf Zweig, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 232.

¹⁴ See Reinhold Bernhard Jachmann, *Immanuel Kant geschildert in Briefen an einen Freund* (Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius, 1804), 29 and 141. As Jachmann also notes in the memoirs published the year of the philosopher's death: "Kant was so keen on having the newspapers in those critical moments that he would have queued for hours in front of the post-office; there was no greater pleasure we could give him except for bringing the latest and authentic news from France." See also Jacques Droz, *L'Allemagne et la Révolution Française* cit., 156-7.

¹⁵ Metzger, a colleague at the university of Königsberg, was astonished by the boldness with which Kant defended the Revolution against everyone, even against high-profile Prussian dignitaries. "There was a time in Königsberg", he writes, "when all the supporters of the Revolution were inserted in the black books of the authorities under the title of "Jacobins". Kant, however, was never troubled by this threat, and he was so well-respected that the authorities left him undisturbed", cited in Lucien Calvié, *Le Renard et les Raisins. La Révolution Française et les Intellectuels Allemands 1798-1845* (Paris: Études et Documentation Internationales, 1989), 29.

¹⁶ Cited in Droz, *L'Allemagne et la Révolution Française*, 158.

basic principles on which the French Republic bases itself, if only it were prudent to write about such things".¹⁷

These remarks throw sceptical light on recent interpretive attempts to disentangle Kant's systematic reflections on revolution from his historical position vis-à-vis French events and his sympathies as an ordinary citizen.¹⁸ In the eyes of his contemporaries, the philosopher's work could and should be appealed to in assessing current political conditions. Yet, this renders the ambiguity of Kant's position on revolution even harder to resolve. How could Kant have so warmly endorsed the practice of an event that he appears to have resolutely condemned in his theory? How does one make sense of Kant's observations in the *Doctrine of Right* that "the presently existing legislative authority is to be obeyed, whatever its origin"?¹⁹ And how do these biographical details fit with Kant's idea that "a people has a duty to put up with even what is held to be an unbearable abuse of supreme authority"?²⁰

One way through the problem is to take seriously Kieseewetter's remarks about the threat of censorship and the need to proceed with caution when linking Kant's views to the ideas of the French revolution. This reading suggests that to avoid the Prussian censoring authorities, Kant might have felt the need to publicly condemn the means deployed by French revolutionaries in order to advocate their cause. In this case, Kant's rejection of the right to revolution might be explained as grounded on prudential considerations. Kant's assertions would be considered a strategic response to the suspicion, if not open hostility, with which the Prussian authorities treated any intellectual attempt to engage with themes thought to undermine the established institutional order.²¹ Denying the right to revolution could then be seen as a concession

¹⁷ Kant, *Correspondence*, 463. See also the discussion on Kant's relation to Sieyès and his defence of the Directorium in Domenico Losurdo, *Autocensura e compromesso nel pensiero politico di Kant*, (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1983), 101.

¹⁸ For more normative discussions of Kant on the right to revolution see Thomas Hill, "A Kantian Perspective on Political Violence," in his *Respect, Pluralism and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 200–237; Sarah Williams Holtman, "Revolution, Contradiction, and Kantian Citizenship," in *Kant's Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 209–31; Christine Korsgaard, "Taking the Law into Our Own Hands: Kant on the Right to Revolution," in *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls*, ed. Andrews Reath et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 297–328 and Katrin Flikschuh, "Reason, Right, and Revolution: Kant and Locke," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36, no. 4 (2008).

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, "The Metaphysics of Morals", 462.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ For the thesis of Kant's self-censorship see Losurdo, *Autocensura e compromesso nel pensiero politico di Kant*, cit. and Andre Tosel, *Kant revolutionnaire : droit et politique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988).

designed to reassure authorities about the moderate nature of Kant's philosophical doctrines.

This thesis is not implausible. Yet it seems to neglect the fact that Kant did not *always* reject the right to revolution. In earlier writings he had traced a distinction between "insurrection" and "resistance" in order to criticize the former and offer a more nuanced account of the latter.²² But even if the thesis of self-censorship were valid, it would at most justify silence on the right to revolution not the kind of straightforward rejection that we find in various passages of the *Doctrine of Right*. After all, as Kant writes in his early letter to Moses Mendelssohn, "[a]lthough I am absolutely convinced of many things that I shall never have the courage to say, I shall never say anything I do not believe".²³

An alternative analysis emphasizes the historical conditions under which revolution would have had to occur in Prussia, explaining Kant's position with reference to the relative backwardness of the German people who could not be considered ready for such a radical development.²⁴ But elsewhere Kant does not seem particularly keen on arguments of this kind. As he puts it in a footnote added in 1793 to *Religion within the limits of reason* alone, making implicit but clear reference to the French Revolution:

I admit that I am not comfortable with this way of speaking which even clever men are wont to use: "A certain people (intent on establishing civil freedom) is not ripe for freedom"; "The bondmen of a landed proprietor are not yet ripe for freedom"; and so too, "People are in general not yet ripe for freedom of belief." For on this assumption freedom will never come, since we cannot *ripen* to it if we are not already established in it.

To be sure, Kant insists, the first endeavours will be more difficult than when one operates under the command but also protection of an authority. Yet, he argues, "we do not ripen to freedom otherwise than through our *own* attempts (and we must be free to be allowed to make them)".²⁵ Clearly then, the backwardness of the Prussian people could not have prevented him from accepting the right to revolution, provided a moral justification of it could be found.

²² See on this issue Dieter Henrich, "On the Meaning of Rational Action in the State," in *Kant and Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 108, based on Reflexionen 8043, 8051, 8044 in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, 1902), XIX, 591 (henceforth Ak).

²³ The letter is dated April 8th 1766, see Kant, *Correspondence*, 90.

²⁴ This is the position in Lucien Goldmann, *Immanuel Kant*, trans. Robert Black (London: New Left Books, 1971), 213.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1793] 1998), 204.

A third reading of Kant's position emphasizes that there is no tension between his endorsement of the French republic and his rejection of the right to revolution. After all, the events in France could not be considered properly revolutionary since they were triggered by a meeting of the Estate Generals, which could have plausibly been considered legitimate representatives of sovereign power. The only revolutionaries in this case were Louis XVI and those who sided with him.²⁶ The Kantian critique would then be directed to the Bourbons and might be interpreted as a reaction to the Vandeian revolt, the counter-revolutionary war against France, and England's interventionist attitude in support of the Ancient Regime.²⁷ A similar reading, however, fails to take notice of Kant's explicit support in the case of other, non-reactionary movements, such as the American Revolution and the Irish resistance. Here, evidence of arguments analogous to the ones mentioned above would be more difficult to marshal.²⁸

Finally, we might be tempted to dismiss the whole question by saying that Kant's rejection of the right to revolution is not problematic after all, for what Kant really means to deny is a *legal* right to revolution not a *moral* claim to overthrow an illegitimate government.²⁹ Leaving aside the complex issue of the relation between justice and morality, and the costs of isolating the two concepts in Kant's body of thought, the objection seems to neglect the fact that the right to revolution is criticized not only in Kant's legal writings but also in other essays (e.g. *Perpetual Peace*) where the maxim on which that claim is based becomes contradictory when universalised. Here the rationale for Kant's critique is deeply rooted in his moral philosophy and highlights the incompatibility of revolution with what Kant calls the "transcendental formula of public right": "all actions relating to the rights of others are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with publicity."³⁰ The maxim to revolt, even against an unjust government,

²⁶ See on this Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy & Revolution : from Kant to Marx* (London: Verso, 2003), 21 and Dieter Henrich, "Kant über die Revolution," in *Materialien zu Kants Rechtsphilosophie*, ed. Zwi Batscha (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976).

²⁷ See also Ref. 8077, Ak, XIX, 605 where Kant argues that England could once have counted on the sympathy of everyone but has been discredited since attempting to overthrow revolutionary France.

²⁸ See for a discussion of this point see Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, 213 ff.

²⁹ A similar interpretation is offered in Ingeborg Maus, *Zur Aufklärung der Demokratietheorie. Rechts- und demokratietheoretische Überlegungen im Anschluß an Kant* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992). For a critique of the distinction between a legal and a moral reason to reject revolution, see also Kenneth R. Westphal, "Kant on the State, Law, and Obedience to Authority in the Alleged 'Anti-revolutionary' Writings" in *Journal of Philosophical Research* 17 (1992), 383–426, esp.

³⁰ Immanuel Kant, "Toward Perpetual Peace" (1795) in *Practical Philosophy*, cit. 347.

is thus inconsistent with the principle of publicity, since if that maxim were openly acknowledged, "it would make one's own purpose impossible".³¹

Perhaps a better response is to grant that the ambiguity of Kant's position is difficult to clear yet entails no contradiction. The emphasis in this case should be placed not on the justification of the actions of particular individuals in existing political circumstances but on the *rationale* for revolution from the point of view of the human species. If we distinguish the two perspectives, we understand how an event that seems difficult to justify from the point of view of individuals can be seen to contribute to human progress once the motives of the actors and the disposition of the spectators have publicly revealed themselves. Kant's position in this case would remain puzzling but is clearly consistent, since, as one author puts it, "we are permitted contradictory predicates, if we are careful enough to attach them to different subjects".³² In this case, we would have to shift focus from the writings in which Kant explicitly rejects the right to revolution against legitimate governments to those in which the historical process leading to the establishment of rightful political relations is thought to contribute to humanity's moral emancipation.³³

Interestingly, this is where the analogy with Marx begins to reveal itself. Despite their different interpretations, shared features emerge if we start our enquiry by asking not how to justify revolution but rather how *not to* justify it. As we shall shortly see, both authors are sceptical of what we might call individualist moralism and institutionalist legalism. That is to say, both consider it misleading to answer the question of the legitimacy of revolution either by invoking individual moral views in judging the acceptability of a specific institutional framework or by appealing to a legalistic understanding of political authority. Instead their strategy of justification, if we can talk about justification at all, is to endorse the point of view of historically relevant collective agents and to reflect on their contribution to the moral progress of the human species. For Kant these historically relevant collective agents were republican states; for Marx that role was played by social classes. The revolutionary

³¹ Ibid, 348.

³² Sidney Axinn, "Kant, Authority, and the French Revolution," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32, 3 (1971), 328.

³³ It is important to clarify that the case of revolution is different from that of war: whilst both could be seen to contribute to the moral development of the species, Kant never considers the latter a "sign" of humanity's progress towards the better.

process through which this agency is reflected reshapes the boundaries of political feasibility and serves as a learning platform for future emancipatory initiatives. Highlighting the similarity between these authors in articulating the role of revolution with respect to these two dimensions is the task of the remaining sections.

3. Revolutionary enthusiasm

Kant's well-known defence of the French Revolution is outlined most clearly in his essay on *The Conflict of the Faculties*. It unfolds through an attempt to defeat scepticism on the possibility of moral progress, and to offer a guarantee of the effects of moral imperatives in the empirical world.³⁴ The question arises as a result of the need to clarify the conditions of success of moral action, mediating between the constraints of nature and the demands of reason.³⁵ It is, in other words, a question concerning the feasibility of moral imperatives and the possibility for human action to defeat the constraints of the status quo.

Whilst in his earlier work Kant defends the possibility of the transition from nature to freedom by invoking nature's benign intervention to facilitate the realization of human moral projects, the kind of event sought in the essay we are examining is of a different kind. The emphasis is no longer placed on how nature facilitates human cooperation preparing for the development of morality (as is the case in writings such as the *Idea for Universal History* or in the essay on the *Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*). On the contrary, following the systematic developments of *The Critique of Judgment*, *The Conflict of the Faculties* is agent-oriented and centred on the dispositions of historically existing human beings.³⁶

Kant is aware of the peculiar difficulty such a change of focus raises. The reason for the difficulty, he argues, is that in asking whether there is progress in history we are considering the actions of free human beings, to whom morality may only order what

³⁴ I have commented on the reasons Kant is interested in the question of the guarantee, as well as the development of the issue from *The Critique of Pure Reason* to *The Conflict of the Faculties* in Lea Ypi, "Natura Daedala Rerum? On the Justification of Historical Progress in Kant's 'Guarantee of Perpetual Peace'", *Kantian Review*, 14, 2, (2010) pp. 118-148.

³⁵ The issue is central in *The Critique of Judgment*, to which I shall shortly return. It also appears in *Perpetual Peace* and the essay *On the common saying* that I have examined in Ypi, cit. above.

³⁶ For more discussion of the developments of Kant's views on teleology up to this point see Lea Ypi, "Teleology and System in Kant's Architectonic of Pure Reason" in *Politics and Metaphysics in Kant*, ed. by H. Williams, S. Baiasu, S. Philstrom (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 134-151.

they ought to do but without being able predict whether they will end up doing it. To ask whether a certain moral development is feasible means to be able to single out an experience which, “as an event”, points to the “disposition and capacity of the human race to be the cause of its own advance”. But to say that something is possible is not the same as saying that it will occur. From a given cause an effect can be only be predicted, Kant says, if “the circumstances prevail which contribute to it”. And even if such favourable circumstances can be thought to prevail once, it would be difficult to conclude that they will always do so. All we could obtain as a result of identifying an event that has revealed humanity’s moral disposition in the past is not a “cause of history”, but a mere “historical sign”. This sign could then serve as an example to illustrate the tendency of the human race as a whole “seen not as [a sum of] individuals” but “as divided in nations and states”.³⁷

Kant, then, is looking for evidence of progress not in the life of individuals but in the development of human beings as institutionally embodied collective agents. His analysis of the development of human potential through the creation of collective institutions is not too different from Marx’s emphasis on human beings as “species beings”, whose “conscious vital activity” is expressed in the material production of their lives and who relate to themselves as to a “universal and therefore free being”.³⁸ We shall return to this point in the next sections. But before we do that, and to fully grasp the relevance of the analogy, we need to examine the nature of the “event” through which progressive agency is expressed. This kind of event, Kant argues, consists neither in an account of the great actions or crimes committed by particular world-historical leaders (here we might think of Voltaire’s *Siècle de Louis IV* for a model) nor in the narrative of the emergence and decay of ancient splendid political structures (as in, for example, Montesquieu’s *Considerations on the Greatness and Decline of the Romans*). Instead, it is the “mode of thinking” of the spectators”, an attitude which reveals itself “publicly in this game of great revolutions” and which shows “a universal yet disinterested sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other, even at the risk that this partiality could become very disadvantageous for them if

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, “The Conflict of Faculties” (1798) in *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 301.

³⁸ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” in *Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000), 89.

discovered”.³⁹ This mode of thinking, Kant emphasizes, consists in “a wishful participation of the spectators that borders closely with enthusiasm, the very expression of which is fraught with danger”. Its universality, he proclaims, illustrates a feature of the human race in general; its disinterestedness proves the moral character of humanity’s predisposition.

Kant then identifies a sign of moral progress in enthusiasm, the attitude of those who take side in favour of the cause of the whole humanity, and who raise themselves above particular interests even at the cost of sacrificing their lives. It is interesting to observe how the young Marx also finds the signs of political emancipation in the “enthusiasm” generated by the cause of one group of people who take it upon themselves to represent the whole of society. “What is the basis of a political revolution?”, asks Marx? It is that, “a *section of civil society* emancipates itself and achieves *universal* dominance”. Yet, Marx insists, no agent can play this role “unless it arouses in itself and in the masses a moment of *enthusiasm*,” in which “it fraternizes and merges with society in general” and “is perceived and acknowledged as its *general representative*”. In this moment of enthusiasm, Marx continues, the claims and rights of this agent “are truly the claims and rights of society itself” and the actions it produces are those of society’s “social head” and “social heart.”⁴⁰

One might object at this point that there is a crucial difference between Kant and Marx. While the latter grounds progress in an intrinsic link between revolution and the enthusiasm generated by those who take part in it, the former is only interested in the attitude of the spectators. In Kant’s case, some have argued, the possibility of progress is illustrated by emphasizing the role of enthusiasm generated by the *reception* of the French revolution, yet the nature of the event itself and the position of its protagonists may have been uninteresting for Kant.⁴¹

There are a number of available responses to this objection. Firstly, we should emphasize that, as a matter of empirical evidence, Kant’s argument is false. The French revolution did not generate uncontroversial enthusiasm on the side of an undivided

³⁹ Ibid, 302.

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” (1843) in *Early Political Writings*, ed. Joseph O’Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 66-67. My italics.

⁴¹ This is the argument in Larry Krassnof, “The Fact of Politics: History and Teleology in Kant,” *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2, 1 (1994), 31. See also Peter Nicholson, “Kant on the Duty Never to Resist the Sovereign,” *Ethics*, 86, 3 (1976), 261.

public; Edmund Burke, for one, was a spectator with rather different sympathies.⁴² If Kant had been indifferent to the event, on what ground could he have selected as authoritative the attitude of those who endorsed the cause of the revolutionaries rather than those who opposed it? Why did he mention revolution rather than counter-revolution as the relevant driving force?

Secondly, it is by no means clear that enthusiasm is a feeling that characterizes only the spectators and not the actors involved in the French events. As Kant puts it in the conclusive paragraph of section six of *The Contest of Faculties*:

genuine enthusiasm always moves only toward what is right, and it cannot be grafted to self-interest. Monetary rewards will not elevate the adversaries of the revolutionaries [*Revolutionierenden*] to the zeal and grandeur of soul which the pure concept of right produced in them; and even the concept of honour among the old martial nobility (an analogue of enthusiasm) vanished before the weapons of those who kept in view the right of the nation to which they belonged and of which they considered themselves the guardians”.

Clearly enthusiasm is an attitude shared not only by the disinterested public assisting at the achievements of the revolution; it also drives revolutionaries themselves. It is a feeling connected to the dignity of acting in pursuit of a cause that advances the interests of the whole of humanity, and whose motivational power is revealed in the process of seeking to promote such universal ends. The “sign” of moral progress is therefore manifest in the feeling triggered by the disposition to act from duty and against self-interest, a sensible representation of the power of moral ideas that elevates and ennobles those who take part in such events.

Similarly, though in a much more passionate tone, Marx contrasts the heroic disinterested attitude of defenders of the Paris Commune (“self-sacrificing champions of a new and better society”) with the corrupt and calumnious actions of the bourgeois guardians of the old order. Enthusiasm, and the heroic display of self-sacrifice by Paris workers is often mentioned as characteristic of their struggle and is itself “the basis of really democratic political institutions” and “a thoroughly expansive political form”.⁴³ The people of Paris, Marx writes, “die enthusiastically for the Commune in numbers unequalled in any battle known to history”; the women “joyfully give up their lives at

⁴² See for a discussion and comparison of Kant and Burke on the French Revolution, Benjamin Delannoy, *Burke et Kant, Interprètes de la Révolution Française* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004).

⁴³ Karl Marx, “The Civil War in France” (1871) in *Later Political Writings*, edited by Terrell Carver, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 187.

the barricades and on the places of execution”; and the moderation of the Commune during its brief existence is “equalled only by the heroism of its defence”.⁴⁴ Here too, the power of ideals obtains a tangible expression in the actions of revolutionaries, who put their own existence behind the collective interests of humanity, thus advancing its moral cause.

This is not to deny, of course, that there is an important asymmetry in the reflections of Kant and Marx with regard to the assessment of a feeling that affects actors or spectators and that shows the power of moral ideas in transformative political circumstances. The enthusiasm of spectators has clearly greater significance in the work of Kant than in that of Marx, whose perspective is much more agent-oriented. Indeed, for Marx the category of a neutral, observing, spectator makes little sense given the nature of his analysis of the modern liberal state, and the distribution of social roles that we find in it: all spectators are at the same time activists, equally invested in the struggle of their counterparts in different political contexts, learning from their mistakes and taking inspiration from their activities. In the case of Kant, the distinction is more clear-cut for reasons that are both historical and conceptual. Kant’s spectator can be seen as member of the educated and politically progressive elite that, in its public use of reason, advocates legislative reforms aiming at improving the system of representation in different nation-states. Since the agent of progress is here understood in national rather than class-based terms, a wider perspective (involving both the activists and the observing public) is required to illustrate the relevance of a political event to those who are geographically distant and perhaps not immediately affected. In Marx’s case, geographical boundaries are no longer normatively relevant, for the mechanism of progressive change is not so much a territorially-bound legislative reform but the collective attempt to remedy conflicts that themselves transcend state boundaries yet allow state institutions to operate. However, for both Kant and Marx, *enthusiasm* remains a uniquely important sentiment, illustrating the power of moral ideas and their capacity to motivate political action and showing that human beings are capable of historical progressive change. But how does the feeling of enthusiasm exactly contribute to providing a visible sign of humanity’s progress through history, in the way Kant repeatedly points out? What is the nature of the link between revolution as a cause

⁴⁴ Ibid, 202.

of moral progress and enthusiasm, as an effect? And how does Marx's conception of political change sustain an analysis that is similar to that of Kant?

4. The causes of enthusiasm: revolution and political emancipation

To answer the question at the end of the previous section, we need to turn to those sections of the *Conflict of the Faculties* where Kant clarifies how enthusiasm matters as the effect of a moral cause, the cause promoted by those revolutionaries and sympathizers who identify with principles of right. The events of the French Revolution have revealed a tendency for improvement, such that it could have been promised only by "nature and freedom alone, united in the human race in conformity with inner principles of right". Indeed, Kant argues, "genuine enthusiasm always moves only toward what is ideal and, indeed, to what is purely moral, such as the concept of right, and it cannot be grafted onto self-interest."⁴⁵

Note that here, just as in the writings of Marx, enthusiasm is associated to a mode of thinking relating to the deeds of one particular group of citizens who are able to move beyond self interest, identify with a universal ideal and speak in the name of the whole humanity. As we saw earlier, for Marx only a class that is able to elevate itself above existing conflicts in order to end all conflicts and vindicate the general rights of society can claim the power to subordinate all others.⁴⁶ The basis for its politically emancipatory action consists in the "formulation of a class with *radical chains*", "a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering", a class which "claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong*, but *wrong generally*, is perpetuated against it" and "which can invoke no *historical*, but only *human*, title".⁴⁷

Here too the motor of historical progress is an agent whose goals identify with the goals of the whole of humanity, and who is able to promote political emancipation through a project of moral liberation. Of course, as we already emphasized above, Kant does not focus on the actions of particular agents distinguished by their belonging to different classes but on the deeds of such individuals as divided into nations and states. Yet, he shares with Marx the thought that we should not attempt to interpret the signs

⁴⁵ Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 301-302.

⁴⁶ Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," 66-67.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

of historical progress by focusing on the actions and motives of single individuals for, as he emphasizes, that would yield “an interminable enumeration and computation”. What we should strive to understand instead is the role of collective agents and institutions in relation to particular historical conditions and the conflicts they serve to mediate.

It is worth noting that the basis for Kant’s argument is, just as in the case of Marx, empirical. The division of people in nations and states, he argues, is relevant and should be taken “as it is encountered on earth”.⁴⁸ Given the nature and development of particular political institutions, it makes sense to focus on the agents taking part in these developments and on the effects of their actions on those who experience them. Marx makes a similar argument later, yet he provides a different historical interpretation of the sources of conflict, identifying it not in nations fighting each other but in the clashes of different classes, determined by their position vis-à-vis transformations in the material conditions of life.⁴⁹

Kant too insists on the relevance of material conditions to specific collective historical developments.⁵⁰ Some of the most striking analogies with Marx emerge if we ask why the units he takes to be relevant for the illustration of historical progress are institutionally mediated and identified with nations and states rather than single individuals. The argument is related to Kant’s teleological understanding of the role that culture, and more particularly what he calls “the culture of skill”, plays in preparing the conditions through which nature is progressively transformed in conformity with human ends.⁵¹

The division of labour and the development of inequality are crucial to understand this point. Skill, Kant explains, cannot be developed in the human race except by means of inequality and the division of labour, “when the great majority provide the necessities of life [...] for the convenience and leisure of others who work at the less necessary elements of culture, science and art”.⁵² The process of immediate satisfaction of needs, and their multiplication leads to a transformation of the social

⁴⁸ Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 301.

⁴⁹ See also Philip J. Kain, “The Young Marx and Kantian Ethics,” *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 31, 4 (1986).

⁵⁰ For a similar argument, see also Allen Wood, “Kant’s Historical Materialism,” in *Autonomy and Community: Readings in Contemporary Kantian Social Philosophy*, ed. Jane Kneller and Sidney Axinn (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 15-38.

⁵¹ For a discussion of the systematic role that the concept of culture plays in a teleological interpretation of human nature see Ypi, “*Natura Daedala Rerum?*”, 135-8.

⁵² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ed. by Paul Guyer, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 299.

world and to increased conflicts between human beings. The tension between those who work and those who exploit the products of their work is itself conducive to further external violence and increased internal discontent. This development however is precisely what prepares the ground for the creation of a civil condition where relations of human beings to one another are subjected to coercively enforceable common laws.

The culture of skill is grounded on an instrumental attitude to promote individual goals and tends to culminate in the achievement of a formal condition through which human beings can resolve reciprocal disagreements affecting each other's status. Political institutions are crucial in this regard for they serve to subordinate the needs and interests of human beings to general patterns of human cooperation. Yet it is only when these political institutions begin to take a more conscious direction, through human attempts to make laws that guarantee that the freedom of everyone is compatible with that of others, that one might hope for an end to all hostilities. With this in mind, it is easy to see how, in so far as the French revolutionaries and their sympathizers contribute to the establishment of a republican order where the principle of peaceful co-existence in respect of mutual freedom becomes part of a public system of laws, they are contributing to the further promotion of the culture of skill.

This point is also illustrated in a footnote to section 65 of the third *Critique* where Kant invokes precisely the French to articulate an analogy between the conformity of ends we ascribe to natural organisms and that displayed by a recent historical event concerning the “complete transformation of a people into a state”. In this organic form of cooperation, each member contributes to the development of the whole whilst its place in the system is itself determined by the idea of the whole (5: 375n).⁵³ The actions of revolutionaries, oriented as they are to putting an end to conflicts due to inequalities between human beings, contribute to the establishment of a civil order where moral principles enter the political sphere allowing human beings to

⁵³ There is some controversy on whether the note in question actually refers to the French or to the American Revolution. Given the fact that the note seems to have been a later addition, inserted by Kant before the text was due to go to print, one would be tempted to think that he was influenced by recent events in France. For the editorial details on the publication of the third *Critique* see the introduction by Emilio Garroni and Hansmichael Hohenegger to the Italian translation, in I. Kant, *Critica della facoltà di Giudizio*, (Turin: Einaudi 1999). For an interpretation that also explains why Kant might refer here to the French rather than American Revolution and that also insists on the turn of the third *Critique* with regard to the issue of natural teleology see Susan Meld Shell, *Kant and the limits of autonomy* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 168-75.

purposefully reshape the course of history. Their enthusiasm is a sign that the development of moral dispositions that may have previously been considered utopian is a tangible practical possibility.

Notwithstanding some important differences, Marx has a similar conception of historical development, and also insists on the relevance of labour and the conscious creation of human products for the self-understanding of human beings as “species-beings”. It is in their transformation of the world that human beings’ activity is first seen as “species life” and nature appears both as their “work and his reality”.⁵⁴ The way to understanding progress in history is through a demystification of nature and religion, by asking not what nature has done for human beings but what human beings do with nature. It is only when people become masters of the natural processes in which they find themselves embedded that they can see themselves as agents of progress. Consciousness, Marx says, is “from the very beginning a social product” but it can only be understood as such once the process of catering for needs has reached a degree of development that means “consciousness is now in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of “pure” theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc”.⁵⁵

The process that triggers such self-understanding of humanity is evolutionary and goes through several stages. Marx’s remarks on this point are similar to those of Kant. At first, human beings are not too different from animals and work simply for satisfaction of their basic needs. From there follows a stage of instrumental motivation, with the multiplication of needs and diversification of social roles leading to more complex forms of social interaction which are in turn at the root of the emergence of social inequalities. The latter are responsible for the division of society in social classes, some of which work for the enjoyment and benefit of the others. This in turn triggers social conflict and the attempt to remedy this conflict by creating political institutions able to contain and overcome it.⁵⁶ In both Kant and Marx, the degree of skills, knowledge and ability to coordinate achieved by one generation is then transferred to the next one, in a path of concrete moral, political, and social development through

⁵⁴ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts", cit., 91.

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, "The German Ideology" in *Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1846] 2000), 183-4.

⁵⁶ Ibid, esp. 176-184. For a discussion of the similarities between Kant and Marx on this point see also Wood, "Kant's Historical Materialism.", cit. above.

which the natural dispositions of human beings constantly evolve. Productive forces, Marx emphasizes, are the result of “practical human energy” but this energy is itself conditioned by the achievements of previous generations. It is because of this “simple fact” that “every succeeding generation finds itself in possession of the productive forces acquired by the previous generation” that “coherence arises in human history”.⁵⁷ Reason, Kant also stresses, “does not operate instinctively, but rather needs attempts, practice and instruction in order gradually to progress from one stage of insight into another”.⁵⁸ This reflective consideration of history as a learning process through which human capacities are progressively refined provides the basis for analysing the transformation of social and political institutions responding in distinctive ways to the development of human needs.

In both Kant and Marx, however, the presence of social conflict in the development of these historical learning processes is crucial to paving the way to more progressive forms of social interaction: both mention, for example, the role of commerce and trade in cultivating unsocial sociability among human beings. In Kant the growth of trade, and thus ever-increasing interdependence among nations, renders war a threat even to the commercial interests of nations who are not themselves involved in the war. This requires human intervention able to design political institutions capable of preserving peace, and it is here that his defence of the French revolutionaries and their attempt to create a republican government becomes crucial. For Marx, the antagonists are not nations but classes, and the end is to be achieved by a revolutionary class rather than a league of republican states. Yet the conflict between particular interests, the development of human skills in response to it and the political resources generated by this process are all shared elements that play a crucial function in illustrating the feasibility of moral imperatives.⁵⁹

For Kant, the French revolution reveals the possibility of human beings gradually transforming nature and defeating empirical constraints so as to make progress in history. Their intervention is of course conditional: it requires acting always in such a way that progress continues to occur. Progress does not depend upon observing

⁵⁷ Karl Marx, “Letter to Annenkov” in *Selected Writings*, cit., 209.

⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim” (1784) in *Anthropology, History, Education*, ed. by Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Loudon, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109.

⁵⁹ See for a similar argument also Philip J. Kain, *Marx and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 288.

passively the political upheavals experienced by human beings divided into nations and states, it requires acting in conformity with the principles that help accelerate its course. But how can we know whether humanity is in continuous progress towards the better, Kant asks? The answer is only possible if we can foresee its development in an *a priori* way. Yet a priori history, he emphasizes, is only possible if “the prophet himself makes and contrives the events which he announces in advance”.⁶⁰

Marx makes a similar point when criticizing the principle of gradual transition in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. We can predict how an event will unfold, he argues, only by consciously bringing it about. “The category of *gradual* transition, “is first of all historically false, and second, it explains nothing”. For a constitution to be changed, and in order for human beings to do consciously what they are otherwise forced to do unconsciously by the nature of the thing, “it is necessary that the movement of the constitution, that progress, be made the principle of the constitution”. It is also crucial then that the “real cornerstone of the constitution, the people, be made the principle of the constitution.”⁶¹

In sum, for both Kant and Marx subversion of the teleology of nature and the demystification of religion opens up new possibilities for emancipatory political action. Revolution is defensible as a political event that contributes to a process of political emancipation with a material basis to it. What revolutionary France shows for Kant is the possibility of putting an end to a social order based on conflict and war, the possibility of creating the institutional conditions under which all conflicts may one day come to an end. Revolutionaries promote the culture of skill by acting purposefully to bring about the events that contribute to harmonizing natural constraints and moral imperatives. This resonates with what will become Marx’s emphasis on the emancipatory force of a particular social class when it rises above particular interests, and promotes a universal cause. In both cases, human beings are central to a reflective teleological system centred on the moral ends of the whole humanity. In both cases what revolutionary action secures is an expansion of the boundaries of feasibility, firmly inscribing on their contemporaries’ conceptual map political and institutional alternatives that were previously unforeseen.

⁶⁰ Immanuel Kant, “An old question raised again: is the human race constantly progressing?” in *Religion and Rational Theology*, 297.

⁶¹ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”* (1843) ed. Joseph J. O’Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 57.

5. The point of view of the spectators: Revolution and moral education

Having emphasized the relevance of revolution from the point of view of the actors of historical progress, we may now turn to the second aspect mentioned in Kant's essay, its effects on spectators. As we saw earlier, Kant finds a sign of humanity's moral progress in the enthusiasm characterizing the attitude of an impartial public to the events of the French revolution. This component corresponds to the second dimension of culture Kant introduces in the third *Critique* to illustrate how the human race is progressively prepared for the development of moral dispositions: the culture of discipline.

Indeed, if the culture of skill defines the process through which human beings learn to submit to the authority of collective political institutions, the culture of discipline ensures that animal instincts and immoral attitudes are refined in an ongoing process of aesthetic education. As Kant puts it, the creative products of human work such as the arts and the sciences contribute to the refinement of society; they make human beings more civilised, win the tyranny of brutal inclinations, and prepare them "for a lordship, in which Reason alone shall have authority".⁶² This is not too dissimilar from what Marx later would call the ideological aspects of society, whereby conflicts between human beings involve "the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological, forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out."⁶³

Enthusiasm, the mode of thinking Kant singles out as relevant to understand the effects of the French revolution on moral emancipation, contributes to a similar educative process. As Kant puts it in the third *Critique*, enthusiasm is the mark of a sublime state of mind. The sentiment is defined as "the idea of the good with affect", and is a condition without which "nothing great could be achieved".⁶⁴ It should be noted that the feeling of the sublime that observers experience along with and through their enthusiasm obtains extensive treatment in Kant's work, from the early *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* to its analysis in the *Critique of Judgment*: the

⁶² Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 431–2.

⁶³ See the *Preface to a Critique of Political Economy* in Marx, *Selected Writings*, 426.

⁶⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 154.

use of the term in the context of the French revolution is therefore highly significant. The sublime is distinctive from other moral sentiments, such as respect for the moral law.⁶⁵ It illustrates “the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e., to that which is moral”⁶⁶ and links to a kind of distinctive aesthetic pleasure that arises “by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them”.⁶⁷ Of course, Kant is also slightly critical of the concept; enthusiasm is after all “an affect” which as such ought to be criticized for its impurity. But enthusiasm is “aesthetically sublime because it is a stretching of its powers through ideas, which give the mind a momentum that acts far more powerfully and persistently than the one given by sensory representations”.⁶⁸

Enthusiasm then is a praiseworthy impetus to thinking in so far as it influences agents’ resolution to follow the dictates of reason. It represents the power of moral ideas from a symbolic perspective.⁶⁹ In the third *Critique* Kant gives various examples of ideas to which a similar state can be associated: ideas of religion, as edification, or of culture as cultivation of particular social interests. The remarks we find in the *Contest of Faculties* are clearly in line with such examples. The mode of thinking triggered by the events of the French revolution gives sensible representation to a moral ideal involving the efforts of the whole human race. The sublime, as Kant clarifies in the third *Critique*, is grounded on freedom but still requires cultivation in order to be perceived as elevating; in fact Kant insists that without being “prepared by culture”, what we call sublime “would appear merely repellent to the unrefined person”.⁷⁰ That the feeling of enthusiasm through which the sublime is experienced affects the spectators of the French revolution is therefore testament to the degree of Enlightenment reached by the disinterested public observing that event yet also reveals the power of its ideas to obtain sensible expression. Enthusiasm contributes to the process of education of all those who take part as observers in revolutionary events; it promotes the development of the culture of discipline and indirectly advances humanity’s moral emancipation.

⁶⁵ For a more systematic discussion of this point see Robert R. Clewis, *The Kantian Sublime and the Revelation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009), esp. chs. 3 and 5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 149.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 128-9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*.

⁶⁹ See *ibid*, esp. pp. 225-8 for a discussion of the role of symbols in the transition from nature to freedom.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 128.

But the nature of the process is such that it cannot be completed during the life span of single individuals. The effects of enthusiasm on the public of the French revolution are of a kind that would remain even if the events themselves were to take a different course, or if the revolutionary efforts were to fail. “For that occurrence”, Kant argues, is too important, too much interwoven with the interest of humanity, and its influence too widely propagated in all areas of the world to not be recalled on any favourable occasion by the nations which would then be roused to a repetition of new efforts of this kind”. Human history progresses through repeated attempts to realize the principles of right. The collective memory of emancipatory events attempted in the past is inherited by future generations and allows these to be a part of the learning process through which moral dispositions are cultivated. It is through this repeated process of trial and failure that “the intended constitution, at a certain time, must finally attain that constancy which instruction by repeated experience suffices to establish in the minds of all”.⁷¹

Marx also discusses the educative effects of revolution on the collective memory of those who take an interest in a rightful cause for humanity. In the writings on the Paris commune, the working people of Paris are celebrated “as the glorious harbinger of a new society” with its heroes, “enshrined in the great heart of the working class”.⁷² This educative experience contributes to the realization of an ideal that requires ongoing historical efforts. As Marx puts it: “The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*. They know that in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending, [...] they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men”.⁷³

The opening paragraphs of Marx’s pamphlet on the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, also emphasise how the historical experience of past revolutions informs current attempts at political emancipation. Human beings make their history not in

⁷¹ Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 303.

⁷² Karl Marx, “The Civil War in France,” (1871) in *Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 207.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 188. And again, in the preparatory drafts, we find the following remarks: “The working classes know that they have to pass through different phases of class struggle. They know that the superseding of the economical conditions of the slavery of labour by the conditions of free and associated labour can only be the progressive work of time”, see {Marx, 1977 #235@557}

terms invented each time anew but “under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past”.⁷⁴ The “tradition of all the dead generations”, Marx writes in characteristic prose, “weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”. In particular in times of revolutionary crisis, when the old world is struggling but a new one has not yet established itself, human beings “anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language”.⁷⁵ Marx’s historical examples of this are abundant: Luther imitating the Apostle Paul, the revolutions of 1789 and 1814 taking inspiration from the Roman republic, the Revolution of 1848 mimicking either 1789 or the revolutionary tradition of 1793 to 1795, Cromwell borrowing speeches and passions from the Old testament. In all these cases, Marx insists, even the “unheroic” bourgeois society needed the ideals, art forms and traditions of the past in order to keep “enthusiasm on the high plane of the great historical tragedy”. This continuous looking back to what has previously been achieved, this “awakening the dead” serves the purposes of the present, the aim is that of “glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old, of magnifying the given task in imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk about”.⁷⁶

This is not to say that all revolutions are the same; while bourgeois revolutions, Marx observes, seem to progress from success to success and only conserve the memory of their triumph, they are short-lived. On the other hand, proletarian ones, “criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses, and paltrinesses of their first attempts” and this “until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible”.⁷⁷ This reflexive process is essential to draw inspiration from past revolutionary attempts, to learn from their mistakes, and to revive in the imagination of contemporaries the moral effects of particular historical transformations and to orient them in shaping dispositions and powers currently unavailable.

⁷⁴ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” in *Selected Writings*, cit., 329.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 333.

Kant and Marx therefore both insist on the relevance of the experience of revolution for the collective memory of those who assist in its emergence. Their argument on progress is both future-oriented and past-oriented. We look back to previous experiences and find evidence of the power of moral ideas in the feelings of enthusiasm aroused by transformative political events. This empowering feeling in turn determines how we judge the prospects of moral progress in the future, and the resolve with which we endorse emancipatory political action. Revolutionary events play an educative function in addition to a politically emancipatory one; their memory matters as much as its actual occurrence in bringing humanity closer to moral progress. Its occurrence, be it future oriented or past-oriented, reveals that the force driving human beings towards historical progress is not of a natural but of a moral, historically reflexive kind.

6. Conclusion

Notwithstanding the important differences between Kant and Marx that a range of scholarship has extensively emphasized, there are significant points of overlap in their reflections on revolution. This essay has disclosed these commonalities, not to claim that Kant was a proto-Marxist or that Marx should be considered a Kantian but to highlight the potential that political enthusiasm harbours for human progress writ large.

Neither Kant nor Marx endorsed just any kind of revolution. For the event to contribute to progress toward the better, the ends of revolutionaries have to be oriented by the interests of humanity as a whole. For both authors, the causes of political change are inscribed in a material reading of social development where conflict and the emergence of inequalities trigger the development of political institutions and learning processes that serve to reshape our understanding of current events. For both, the protagonists of human progress are not individuals but collective agents with a specific historical role, influenced by the process through which human beings subordinate nature to their ends. Of course, in Kant the emphasis is placed more on the character of spectators and the effects of enthusiasm on their dispositions, in Marx the point of view of actors occupies pride of place. But as we saw, Kant is also not

indifferent to the principles motivating revolutionary actors, and Marx also makes some space for a broader morally educative role of the event.

Authors examining the justifiability of revolution from a normative perspective are often divided between those who criticize it on grounds of institutional legalism and those who endorse it on grounds of idealist moralism. Idealist moralists think that since the ends of revolution are right, then revolution cannot be wrong. Institutional legalists think that since the means of revolution are wrong, then revolution cannot be right. The defence of revolution emphasized in this article cuts across this divide. It does so by focusing not only on the actions and aims of revolutionaries themselves but also on the effects of revolution upon those who experience its occurrence, both across space and across time. Revolutions transform the normative and conceptual categories available to the public and remove the feasibility constraints relating to desired political principles. Across space, they contribute to a politically emancipatory process that widens the horizon of political judgment and modifies human agents' assessment of future possibilities. Across time they play a morally educative role in developing a learning process from which future generations can benefit in seeking radical institutional change. Developing further these themes exceeds the scope of this article. But I hope to have shown that the points of overlap between Kant and Marx provide a sound starting point for further investigation.

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