



A REACTIONARY FASCINATION: EMIL CIORAN AND JOSEPH DE MAISTRE

UM FASCÍNIO REACIONÁRIO: EMIL CIORAN E JOSEPH DE MAISTRE

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Abstract. *The aim of this paper is to examine Cioran's interpretation of Maistre's reactionary thought. Cioran judges the philosophical work of De Maistre as a useful instrument to investigate the Twentieth century ideological debate on Revolution, with specific reference to the issue of the engagement of philosophers in politics. Through the analysis of Maistre's criticism of revolutionary thought at the time of the Enlightenment, Cioran proposes an insightful deconstruction of the ideological dichotomy between Reaction and Revolution. Indeed, the paper will show that Cioran's understanding of De Maistre implies both a radical criticism of Sartre's existentialism and an original interpretation of Schmitt's Political Theology.*

Keywords: *Cioran, De Maistre, reaction, revolution, ideology.*

Sumário. *O presente artigo tem por objetivo examinar a interpretação que propõe Cioran do pensamento reacionário de De Maistre. Cioran julga o trabalho filosófico de De Maistre como um instrumento útil para investigar o debate ideológico do século XX sobre a revolução, com referência específica à questão do envolvimento dos filósofos na política. Através da análise da crítica de De Maistre ao pensamento revolucionário na época do Iluminismo, Cioran faz uma desconstrução perspicaz da dicotomia ideológica entre Reação e Revolução. De facto, o artigo mostrará que a maneira como De Maistre interpreta Cioran implica tanto uma crítica radical do existencialismo de Sartre quanto uma interpretação original da Teologia Política de Schmitt.*

Palavras-chave: *Cioran, De Maistre, reação, revolução, ideologia.*

In 1957, one year since Soviet troops overrun Hungary, Emil Cioran writes an essay where he examines the ideological question of Revolutions. Oddly enough, his writing is called *An Essay on Reactionary Thought* and is dedicated

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to Joseph De Maistre, the most important reactionary thinker at the time of the Enlightenment.

¹ This paper aims to understand why Cioran decides to examine the philosophical works of De Maistre to deconstruct the ideological dichotomy between Reaction and Revolution. Moreover, the paper will show that Cioran's understanding of De Maistre implies both a radical criticism of Sartre's existentialism and an original interpretation of Schmitt's *Political Theology*.

Emil Cioran is a Romanian philosopher who spent most of his life as a stateless man in Paris, where he became one of the finest French writers of the Twentieth century. Anyway, he was almost unknown by the general public when he died in 1995. All his French essays are focused on the necessity of being skeptical, that is, of not being engaged in any kind of philosophical or ideological apology. Cioran is quite clear on this point. If a philosopher is supposed to defend a political or religious system, he is not allowed to doubt its ideological premises: therefore, he would easily fall into a dogmatic position (Cioran, 1995; Di Gennaro, 2014). In this sense, Cioran argues that skepticism is synonymous of *disengagement* – i.e., of the ability of not seriously believing in any kind of truth. In the *Temptation to Exist*, Cioran defines his own skeptical attitude toward philosophical or political ideologies as a form of futility, while also specifying that “futility is the most difficult thing in the world. (...) Each time I catch myself assigning some importance to things, I incriminate my mind, I challenge it and suspect it of some weakness, of some depravity” (Cioran, 2011b, p. 210-211).

Cioran ironically suggests that futility is an unattainable ideal since faiths, dogmas and certitudes represent a physiological necessity of human existence: indeed, human beings would prefer to “starve to death” rather than to renounce their own certainties and beliefs (Cioran, 2015, p. 34). From this point of view, Cioran's apology of futility appears to be the confutation of Sartre's understanding of ideologies. According to Sartre, the more a philosopher is

¹ Cioran first publishes *An Essay on Reactionary Thought* as a preface of a book dedicated to Maistre that Cioran himself has edited in 1957 (*Joseph de Maistre. Textes choisis et présentés par E.M. Cioran*. Monaco: Le Rocher). The preface is re-printed by the publisher Fata Morgana in 1977, with the title *Essai sur la pensée réactionnaire. Joseph de Maistre*. Finally, in 1986, the *Essay* will also appear as a chapter of the last book by Cioran: *Exercices d'admiration* (the text is now available in the Critical Edition of Cioran's *Œuvres* published by Gallimard in 2011). We will follow the English translation made by Richard Howard in *Anathemas and Admirations* (2012b).

seriously engaged in a ‘good’ ideology, the more he would contribute to the realization of freedom (Sartre & Kulka, 2007). In other words, Sartre states that freedom could not be conceivable in the absence of an ideal which establishes the conditions of possibility of freedom itself. However, human beings are easily fascinated by the existence of some ‘negative’ ideologies which claim for the abolition of individual liberty. In this sense, it is fundamental to develop the capability of recognizing the right kind of ideologies, and to engage themselves in the fight against the wrong kind of belief systems. According to Cioran the problem is much more complex, because the ‘goodness’ of an ideal doesn’t guarantee the goodness of its historical realization. It has often happened that an ideal of freedom and justice becomes the source of violence and intolerance at the very moment of its political affirmation. Therefore, the problem is not about the political/ethical values defended by an ideology; it is about the mechanisms which allow the passage from a demand of a radical change to the taking of power of this radicalism (Guerrini, 2002).

In accordance with this problem, Cioran refuses the solution proposed by Sartre. In a chapter of *A Short History of Decay* called *On an Entrepreneur of Ideas*, Cioran compares the engaged philosopher to a “conqueror” who

(...) has but one secret: *his lack of emotion*; nothing keeps him from dealing with anything, since he does so with no accent of his own. His constructions are magnificent, but without salt: categories swell with intimate experiences, classified as in a file of disasters or a catalogue of anxieties. Here are ranged the tribulations of man, as well as the poetry of his laceration. The Irremediable has turned into a system, even a side show, displayed like an article of common commerce, a true mass product of anguish. The public delights in it; the nihilism of the boulevard and the bitterness of the café feed on it (Cioran, 2012a, p. 352-353).

In a manuscript version of the French text, we discover that Cioran has initially entitled this chapter *Le Cas Sartre*, revealing us that his portrait of the “entrepreneur of ideas” is a caricature of Sartre’s existentialism (Cioran, 2011a, p. 1342). The reader has the feeling that the engagement of this entrepreneur is as false as his existential anguish: a mere product of a philosophical vogue, generated by the liberal illusion of humankind ruled by the laws of Reason and Progress (Guerrini, 2002). In this context, “the tribulations of man” are nothing but a deviation from the path of unlimited social improvement. Cioran judges this trend as dramatically dangerous, in so far as it makes impossible to see the risks linked to the ‘utopia’ of humankind freed from any chain. In a letter to his friend

Wolfgang Krauss, Cioran writes that such philosophers as Sartre are not able to understand that an ideal of extreme pureness can justify acts of extreme violence, as it happened during the Chinese and Russian Revolutions. In this sense, he says that such apologists of absolute freedom often turn out to be the most fanatic apologists of the “organized terror” (Cioran, 2014, p. 244-245).

In his *Essay on the Reactionary Thought*, Cioran wants precisely to explore how an ideal of revolutionary improvement of the world can be overturned into a justification of a dogmatic vision of reality. In its very essence, revolution is a negation of the *status quo* – a negation of authority. But what happens when a revolution reaches its political goals? What happens when the authority of the old government is substituted by the authority of a new revolutionary government? If a revolution obtains political power, how can it keep its contesting force against the *status quo*? To answer these questions, Cioran dedicates an essay on Joseph De Maistre, the controversial apologist of political absolutism at the time of French Revolution; the theorist of theocracy at the time of the Enlightenment’s critique of religion. But why?

Actually, Cioran’s choice is not provocative; it rather follows a theoretical reason. According to Cioran, the French revolution represents a “paradigm” to understand the mechanisms of all modern revolutions (e.g., the Communist revolution). Consistently, he also thinks that the *failure* of the Enlightenment ideals can be a key of interpretation of the failure of contemporary revolutionary ideologies. Maistre is the most vigorous critic of the contradictions of the French Revolution, the one that had predicted the fanatical epilogue of the cult of Reason. His metaphysical interpretation of the revolutionary event is judged by Cioran as a useful instrument to approach the impasses of our political age. Moreover, Cioran undoubtedly finds in De Maistre a kindred spirit, due to his life and his style. On the one hand, Maistre is a thinker who had “the appetite and the genius for provocation”; who loved to exasperate the reader with “paradoxes” and “enormities” (Cioran, 2012, p. 39). On the other hand, given the political consequences of a war, De Maistre spends most of his life in exile experiencing the sense of loneliness and failure, as Cioran does (Cavalcanti, 2005; Paseyro, 2005).

Indeed, De Maistre is a French Catholic nobleman who becomes a member of the Savoy Senate in 1787. After the invasion of Savoy by the French Revolutionary armies in 1792, he begins his lifelong exile in Switzerland and in Russia. As an envoy of the King of Sardinia, he remains at the Russian court in St Petersburg for 14 years, until 1817. But he has very little power and very little influence: a marginal personality far from home. His masterwork, *St Petersburg Dialogues*, is written during this period and it reflects this feeling of rage against the disorders provoked by the Revolution. Basically, De Maistre accuses the French *philosophes* of having undermined the basis of social order by subjecting tradition, religion and authority to the criticism of reason. An overturning of the natural hierarchy of Creation that has triggered the anger of the Creator; an insane overturning of reality whose conclusion is the blood-drenched guillotine. But the Revolution and the Terror are not only the logical consequence of permitting the spread of heretical ideas; they are also an instrument of God to keep the integrity of the French reign until a new Catholic King would regain the throne (Boffa, 1989). In his *Considerations on France* De Maistre asserts the scandalous thesis according to which the Revolution is a divine *miracle* showing that even the freedom of speech is just a word of the Providence monologue. He argues that God created the Revolution to demonstrate that the *superstition* of Christian law is better than the *tyranny* of philosophical reason (Boffa, 1985)

Such a paradox is typical of De Maistre, described by Cioran as an author of *pamphlets* which destroy the creators of pamphlets, as an *anti-philosophe* who exploits the dialectical weapons of philosophers against themselves (Zobel-Finger, 1975). Cioran says that De Maistre's "style evokes the image of an Old Testament prophet *and* of a man of the eighteenth century" (2012b, p. 43). And he observes that:

Toward the end of the [Nineteenth] century, at the height of the liberal illusion, it was possible to indulge in the luxury of calling [De Maistre] the "prophet of the past," of regarding him as a relic or an aberrant phenomenon. But we — in a somewhat more disabused epoch — know he is one of us precisely to the degree that he was a "monster"; it is in fact by the odious aspect of his "doctrines" that he lives for us, that he is our contemporary (Cioran, 2012b, p. 40).

Cioran recognizes two "monstrous" (or anti-modern) doctrines proposed by De Maistre that should be read as a sign of his modernity. The first one is about a pessimist view of human nature, the second one is about the mechanisms of

conservation of political power. Both are fundamental to understand De Maistre's criticism of revolutions.

As mentioned above, De Maistre is a Catholic senator who knows perfectly the European juridical tradition and its relation to the law developed by the Church during the Middle Ages. He is not only a witness of the passage from the medieval law to the modern one; above all, he is one of the finest interpreters of the aporias regarding the new paradigm of law. According to modern philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes or John Locke, society is not the creation of a transcendent Creator but the effect of a *mutual contract* between human beings who originally lived in the State of nature (Fisichella, 2005; Piovani, 1961). De Maistre refutes this hypothesis, because he postulates an absolute identity between State of nature and Society. Human beings are originally created by God as *social beings*; therefore, there could not exist a State which comes before Society. On the one hand, and from a theological point of view, Society is as natural as Creation is. On the other hand, human beings are as social as sinful. Due to this fact, they are naturally predisposed to do evil things to their neighbors and to ruin common life. The law of God – which keeps humans away from Evil and establishes what is good and what is bad – is the only guarantee of the existence of society and of its historical permanence (Fisichella, 2002).

Cioran observes that De Maistre takes advantage of the doctrine of the Fall to propose a dogmatic and unbearable apology of the Papacy as the institution which represents the law of God on Earth. Nonetheless, he infers two important principles from De Maistre's theological premises. In the first place, the concept of politics always implies a transcendent dimension, and it does not matter if we call it 'religion' or 'tradition'. In both cases politics represents a reality that is not created by human beings; a reality that could not be an *effect* either of social resolution or rational planning. In the second place, if religious tradition is the basis of any possible legislation, society could not exist without some 'sacred' dogmas about its origins—that is, without some mysterious superstitions about the genesis of Power. From this point of view, De Maistre criticizes the French revolutionists because they claim to do *tabula rasa* with their past, as if they could create a rational Constitution released from History: a *new* constitution founded on reason – and not founded on mystery and tradition (Kluback & Finkenthal,

1997). In the French revolutionary perspective, the more a Constitution is rational, the more it is erected on *abstract principles*: principles which should be as clear and consistent as a mathematical equation. De Maistre blames this statement because Constitutions are a matter of history, and not a matter of mathematics, thus it would be a tragic mistake to judge them according to the principles of pure logic. As a good reader of David Hume, he states that an abstract constitution is unstable and dangerous since it is grounded upon an historical void and exposed to any kind of criticism. In fact, a legislation which is built by reason can also be torn down by reason. In the absence of a strong tradition, any rational dissenter can disavow such a legislation and instigate disobedience or social disorders (Fisichella, 2005).

The last sentence needs clarification. De Maistre is not affirming that constitutions are unchangeable or exempted from historical variations; he is affirming that such variations must not be conceived as a delegitimization of the holy tradition. In this sense, he accuses the Enlightenment of being a ‘satanic’ phenomenon because its rational criticism of authority implies a fragmentation of the unity of power, unity which constitutes the *conditio sine qua non* of the continuity of tradition (Maistre, 1994). To avoid this fragmentation, De Maistre postulates the infallibility of power: to emphasize his stance, he even compares the Enlightenment to a “universal solvent” which notably dissolves the certainties of tradition in the name of a doubting reason (D’Addio, 1975, p. 59). Notwithstanding these criticisms, De Maistre does not conclude with a condemnation of reason. According to his reactionary philosophy, he deduces that tradition must be the judge of reason, and not vice versa. Reason can be a useful instrument of interpretation of human society. However, human society is founded on tradition, which in its turn is founded on some religious principles. Consequently, De Maistre infers that without religion there can be neither a tradition nor a society. In the tenth chapter of the *Dialogues*, this idea is emblematically exemplified by the definition of “superstition” made by the Chevalier, one of the characters of the book. After saying that superstition “is something *beyond* legitimate beliefs”, Chevalier notices that “in this world that *what suffices is not sufficient*” (Maistre & Lebrun, 1995, p. 305). And he explains:

To jump a ditch, you must always fix your eyes well beyond the bank or fall in. In short this is a general rule; it would be very peculiar if religion were an exception to

it. (...) I imagine, my good friends, that honour could not displease you. Yet what is honour? It is the *superstition of virtue*, or it is nothing. In love, in friendship, in loyalty in good faith, etc., superstition is pleasing, even valuable, and often necessary; why should it not be the same with the respect to piety? I am led to believe that the outcries against *the excesses of the thing* originate with the enemies of *the thing*. Reason is no doubt good, but it is not necessary for everything to be ruled by reason (ibid.).

This apology of religion does not correspond to a cult of irrationality composed by an *ante litteram* Romantic philosopher. De Maistre is not a 'Romantic', he is a philosopher who elaborates a conception of rationality different from the one of the Enlightenment (Fisichella, 2005). In the Maistrian thought, religion becomes the symbol of a *universal reason* representing a depository of centuries-old norms and habits which guarantees the existence of civilization. De Maistre (1984a) distinguishes the "universal reason" of religion from the "individual reason" of philosophers, by pointing out that the last one would never allow the creation of a peaceful society. Instead of producing shared beliefs and common goals, philosophy produces different opinions and countless occasions of conflict. Therefore, philosophical reason represents an enemy of political life. Against the Enlightenment's philosophical principles, De Maistre maintains that the authority of facts must be substituted by the fact of authority. At a certain point in time, both religion and politics demand faith and obedience with no rational discussion because reason itself shows that sometimes we must stop reasoning (De Maistre, 1984b, p. 39).

Now, we can understand why De Maistre criticized rational abstraction in politics. Unfortunately, he exploited his criticism to justify a theocracy. Cioran would never accept such a theocratical ideal, but he explains why it is important to reflect on De Maistre's reactionary thought. De Maistre proves that authority, "to maintain itself, [must] rest upon some mystery, some irrational foundation" (Cioran, 2012b, p. 79). According to Cioran, this political radical truth destabilizes the philosophical dichotomy between 'left' and 'right', between revolution and reaction, as it shows that "any order that seeks *to last* succeeds in doing so only by surrounding itself with a certain obscurity, by flinging a veil over its motives and its actions, by generating an aura of the 'sacred' that renders it impenetrable to the masses" (ibid., p. 79). In this passage, Cioran points out that any existing government claims to be an *infallible* order: for this reason, it must be surrounded with obscurity (since the less you can see about authority, the more

you must follow its rules). As soon as it becomes *fallible*, a government risks being replaced by another form of power. Cioran (*ibid.*, p. 81) observes that this apology of obscurity is a “truism” defended by reactionary thinkers and rejected by democratic ones, though the democrats know that “reaction often translates their hidden thoughts, [...] many bitter certitudes of which they can give no public account”.

During the Enlightenment, De Maistre denounces that *les philosophes* use the concept of reason in such an obscure way. They are so extreme in their confutation of dogmatism, that they deny the very possibility of being irrational. By doing so, however, they reveal themselves as sneakily dogmatic: in the name of reason, they assume their undoubted rightness. This is a modern aspect of De Maistre’s philosophy, since it discloses how we can be dogmatic by exploiting an anti-dogmatic ideal. And it is precisely in this context that Cioran recalls De Maistre to deconstruct the dichotomy between revolution and reaction. His thesis is that we can be reactionary in the name of revolution, in so far as we absolutize the ideal of revolution. In a central passage of his essay, Cioran writes:

Revolutions start in order to give a meaning to history; such meaning has already been given, replies reaction, we must submit to it and defend it. This is exactly what will be maintained by a revolution that has triumphed; hence intolerance results from a hypothesis that has degenerated into a certitude and that is imposed as such by a regime — from a vision promoted to the rank of truth (Cioran, 2012b, p. 105).

It is important to emphasize that Cioran does not imply that there are no differences between revolution and reaction. Actually, he is strongly convinced that this world needs to be improved, and he does not give up on the idea that the truths of reaction are the last words of our hopes (Cioran, 2015). However, he ironically ascertains the fatality of this improvement: the natural degeneration of the hope in a different world into the static certitude of a well-defined reality — a reality with no escape routes. Shortly before the passage we just quoted, Cioran suggests that “only the pre-revolutionary condition is truly revolutionary”. And he provocatively affirms that “every anarchist conceals, in the depth of his rebellions, a reactionary who is awaiting his hour, the hour of taking power, when the metamorphosis of chaos into . . . authority raises problems no utopia dares solve or even contemplate without falling into lyricism or absurdity” (Cioran, 2012b, p. 102).

This last sentence recalls a passage from Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology* (originally published in 1922), where the German philosopher examines the absolutist character of power and the question of sovereignty. It is interesting to note that in 1950, seven years before writing his essay on reactionary thought, Cioran sends two letters to Schmitt where he also discusses De Maistre, an author that both Cioran and Schmitt have profoundly studied. In these letters, Cioran thanks Schmitt for having sent to him the manuscript of his last book *Ex Captivitate Salus* and a copy of his essay on the counterrevolutionary thinker Donoso Cortés (*Donoso Cortés in gesamteuropäischer Interpretation*). Besides, he confesses his astonishment for having found so many affinities between his own skepticism and Schmitt's philosophy. Especially, Cioran mentions their passion for Max Stirner and their obsession with Kleist's suicide, and he also observes that Schmitt's distinction between "friend and enemy" should be a founding principle of any political theory (Bojanić, 2009; Pozzi, 2016). Moreover, Schmitt defends an idea which will be central in Cioran's thought, namely that the exception is more important than the general norm (Nicoletti, 1990). At the end of the first chapter of *Political Theology*, Schmitt writes:

Precisely a philosophy of concrete life must not withdraw from the exception and the extreme case but must be interested in it to the highest degree. The exception can be more important to it than the rule, not because of a romantic irony for the paradox, but because the seriousness of an insight goes deeper than the clear generalizations inferred from what ordinarily repeats itself. The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: it confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism that has become torpid by repetition (Schmitt, 2005, p. 15).

Indeed, Schmitt defines sovereignty as the decision on the state of exception; a decision which can be made only by the sovereign (ibid., p. 5). The problem is that such a decision appears to presume an absolutistic character of sovereignty (an idea notably contested by democrats and liberal philosophers). For this reason, in the fourth chapter of *Political Theology*, Schmitt focuses his attention on De Maistre and his theory of absolutism. Given that the "relevance of the state rested on the fact that it provided a decision, [and] the relevance of the Church on its rendering of the last decision that could not be appealed", De Maistre establishes a perfect reciprocity between "sovereignty" and "decision" which entails a conformity between secular power and religious power (Schmitt, 2005, p. 55). In order to be efficient, the decision must be infallible; but to be

infallible, it must be absolute. According to Schmitt, De Maistre is stating that *every sovereignty is infallible because every sovereignty is absolute* (ibid.). Obviously, this statement should be applied to any kind of government, regardless of its political structure (democracy, aristocracy, monarchy, etc.), Schmitt suggests that even

(...) an anarchist could pronounce [this sentence] verbatim, even if his intention was an entirely different one. (...) All the anarchist theories from Babeuf to Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Otto Gross revolve around the one axiom: “The people are good, but the magistrate is corruptible”. De De Maistre asserted the exact opposite, namely, that authority as such is good once it exists: “Any government is good once it is established”, the reason being that a decision is inherent in the mere existence of a governmental authority, and the decision as such is in tum valuable precisely because, as far as the most essential issues are concerned, making a decision is more important than how a decision is made. (...) In practice, not to be subject to error and not to be accused of error were for him the same. The important point was that no higher authority could review the decision” (ibid., p. 55-56).

Starting from the same principle of absolutism of power but with the aid of “his axiom of the good man and corrupt government”, Schmitt explains that the anarchist draws the opposite practical conclusion of De Maistre: namely, “that every government must be opposed for the reason it is necessarily a dictatorship” (ibid., p. 66). But this radical opposition to any kind of authority forces him to decide dogmatically against decision because every claim of decision is Evil. Therefore, decision must be forbidden. A conclusion which necessarily entails a contradiction, resulting “in the odd paradox whereby Bakunin, the greatest anarchist of the Nineteenth century, had to become in theory the theologian of the antitheological and in practice the dictator of an anti-dictatorship” (ibid.).

This paradox noticed by Schmitt is one of the cornerstones of Cioran’s essay, and it is the reason why the Romanian philosopher esteems De Maistre as a fundamental key of interpretation of the Twentieth century ideological debate. While examining “the metamorphosis of chaos into... authority”, Cioran must face the same problem encountered by Schmitt in his analysis of the state of exception, namely the problem of decision and of conservation of power. Schmitt has underlined that neither the anarchist nor the reactionary can avoid the responsibility of decision in the moment of conflict. In his turn, Cioran shows that if a revolution triumphs, it could not be anymore an exception from political rules since it stops to be a negation of power: it *becomes* power, and it will operate to legitimate its own authority, as a reactionary regime would do.

In this sense, Cioran talks of the reversibility of ‘the revolutionary sentiment of time’ into ‘the reactionary sentiment of time’. Revolutionaries believe that the absolute perfection will be realized in a forthcoming future, whereas the reactionaries believe that this perfection was realized in a remote past. Nonetheless, Cioran remarks that this distinction would be quite superficial if we do not focus our attention

(...) on the most curious thing of all: the revolutionary idolizes Becoming only up to the instauration of the order for which he fought; *subsequently*, for him, appears the ideal conclusion of time, the Forever of Utopias, an extratemporal, unique, and infinite moment, provoked by the advent of a new age, entirely different from the others, an eternity here on earth that closes and crowns the historical process. The notion of a golden age, the notion of paradise pursues believers and unbelievers alike (Cioran, 2012b, p. 77-78).

The notion of paradise also pursues revolutionaries and reactionaries alike. It is precisely for this reason that Cioran reflects on De Maistre philosophy: to explain better how both a revolutionary hope and a reactionary hope can convert themselves into a fanatical conviction. Furthermore, Cioran finds in the Maistrian thought a proof of the urgency of being skeptical – that is, of being disengaged. Differently from Sartre or from other engaged philosophers, Cioran confesses the disappointment that revolutions “generate in all who have believed in them with some fervor” (ibid, p. 104). However, this confession does not mean that Cioran is inviting us to think as a dogmatic reactionary. On the contrary, it is an invitation to reflect on the anthropological optimism that has allowed the proliferation of modern utopian illusions: an optimism originally developed during the Renaissance age, and then exploited by the Enlightenment to justify its conception of human history as an history fulfilling the requirements of a pure reason.

In *History and Utopia*, Cioran explains that all modern utopias are marked by the heretical doctrine of Pelagius, the theologian who had denied the effects of the Fall and who had theorized that human beings are born good and free, with no trace of an original corruption:

It is hard to imagine a doctrine more generous and more untrue; this is a heresy of the utopian type, fruitful by its very extravagances, by its absurdities which were rich in *futures*. Not that the authors of utopias took their inspiration from it directly; but it is incontestable that in modern thought there exists, hostile to Augustinianism and to Jansenism, an authentic current of Pelagianism—the idolatry of progress and all revolutionary ideologies will be its conclusion—according to which we constitute a mass of the *virtual* elect, emancipated from original sin, infinitely malleable, predestined to the good, capable of any and every perfection (Cioran, 2015, p. 204).

At the beginning of the Nineteenth century, De Maistre denounces the fanatical risks connected with this optimistic vision of human reason. One century later, Cioran develops De Maistre's criticism to show that a revolution which dogmatically believes in its own goodness and perfection could represent an ideological justification of political violence. Cioran criticizes that kind of philosophical optimism which judges the revolution as a good in itself, forgetting that every single revolution should be judged in the light of its political effects (or reactions). At the same time, his analysis of De Maistre's philosophical inconsistencies proves that he is not a reactionary thinker. Cioran knows that this world needs to be improved, and that revolutions could represent the instrument of this improvement. Nonetheless, Cioran is a skeptic and he could not ignore that the history of revolutions is a history of political failures. Thus, he tries to examine both revolutionary and reactionary doctrines in order to better understand the contradictions of any ideological movement claiming the creation/restoration of a perfect world. Cioran is aware that ideologies comply with an anthropological need: the need for certainties. In his essay on reactionary thought, he highlights that we should learn to doubt of our own certainties since there does not exist anything more dangerous than an undoubtable certainty. We could also suggest that Cioran is trying to bring together skepticism and ideology, to see if the revolutionary hope in a better world could be imagined as a skeptical confutation of this world. It is thus not by chance that, in the last page of *History and Utopia*, he compares the quest for Revolution to the quest for Paradise since both could entail the same melancholic epilogue: "No paradise unless deep within our being, and somehow in the very heart of the self, the self's self; and even here, in order to find it, we must have inspected every paradise, past and possible, have loved and hated them with all the clumsiness of fanaticism, scrutinized and rejected them with the competence of disappointment itself" (ibid., p. 223).

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