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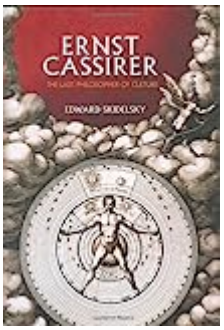
Tobias Bevc. *Kulturgenese als Dialektik von Mythos und Vernunft: Ernst Cassirer und die Kritische Theorie.* Wuerzburg: Verlag Koenigshausen and Neumann, 2006. 406 pp. EUR 49.80 (paper), ISBN 978-3-8260-2964-6.



Edward Skidelsky. *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. viii + 288 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-13134-4.

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The Gentle Professor

In these two volumes, Tobias Bevc and Edward Skidelsky each propose to offer new perspectives on the scholarship and ideas of the philosopher Ernst Cassirer. Cassirer (1874-1945) is perhaps best known in the English-speaking world for his classic work, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (1932). Written in Hamburg, where he had become the first Jewish rector of a German university before being expelled and forced into exile, *The Philosophy of Enlightenment* concludes with an homage to G. E. Lessing: "It is above all because of him that the century of the Enlightenment, to a very great extent dominated by its gift of criticism, did not fall prey to the merely negative critical function–that it was able to reconvert criticism to creative activity and shape it and use it as an indispensable instrument of life and of the constant renewal of the spirit."[1] It was this creative capacity that Cassirer celebrated in his own mature philosophy of symbolic forms as humans' distinguishing char-

acteristic and, he hoped, as not simply a rational bulwark against the darker forces of "life" but as a means for integrating them productively in the vast edifice of "culture," from the earliest forms of myth to the highest levels of natural science.

Cassirer's pleas, however, went almost entirely unheeded, both politically and intellectually. Indeed, among intellectual historians, Cassirer is equally famous as the great loser in the 1929 Davos disputation with Martin Heidegger, which was viewed both then and now as marking an epochal shift in European thought. Before an audience of some two hundred students and professors, including a young Emmanuel Levinas and many other notable figures, the two philosophers held a series of lectures and debates in which Heidegger staged a relentless attack on the humanist, Kantian tradition represented by the elder Cassirer, while the latter struggled, characteristically, to find tacit points of agreement with the charismatic author of *Sein und Zeit* (1927). By all accounts, Heidegger emerged the victor, signaling the predominance of a "new thinking" in generational, cultural, and much less clearly, political terms. The two books under review grapple with the political and intellectual legacies of this "gentle professor" (Skidelsky, p. 229), with divergent approaches and conclusions.

The subtitle of Skidelsky's study, "the last philosopher of culture," reflects a general but somewhat bitter acceptance of this historical verdict at Davos. Much of the book is marked by a troubled resignation about Cassirer's fate, rather than an attempt to revitalize his philosophy–a goal that Skidelsky confesses he originally set for his work but was forced to abandon (Skidelsky, p. 5). He also distances his work from the recent renewed interest in Cassirer among German scholars, which he attributes to a post-1989 political desire for liberal, cosmopolitan figures to admire in German intellectual history (Skidelsky, p. 7). This recent scholarship "insists, against the evidence, that the philosophy of symbolic forms contains a coherent ethics and politics" (Skidelsky, p. 8), a severe lack that Skidelsky identifies as a root cause of Cassirer's "exemplary failure" as the premier representative of the Humboldtian cultural tradition (Skidelsky, p. 6). By contrast, his book combines a cogent reconstruction of the development of Cassirer's philosophy and its failures with, I will argue, a more problematic diagnosis of the historical and contemporary legacy of Cassirer's embattled liberal humanism.

General readers will profit from Skidelsky's clear and economical presentation of the philosophical issues that formed the subject of debate among Cassirer and his various interlocutors and opponents. He frames his contribution as a "general interpretation of Cassirer's philosophy of science in light of his philosophy of culture" (Skidelsky, p. 7), and to that end he is very successful. The book is structured both thematically and roughly chronologically into nine chapters that trace Cassirer's entrance into and partial departure from the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism headed by Hermann Cohen, the development of his mature philosophy of symbolic forms, his responses to the new forms of *Lebensphilosophie* represented in the early twentieth century by Henri Bergson, Ludwig Klages, and Georg Simmel, his dispute with Heidegger, and finally his political legacy. His grasp of the debates over science and philosophy in the late nineteenth century and the emergence of symbolic logic in the work of Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege in the early twentieth century is notable. This understanding allows Skidelsky to outline clearly the broad and fascinating contours of Cassirer's mature philosophy of culture and assess the extent to which it both extended and broke from his earlier work. He emphasizes the lifelong impact of J. W. Goethe, J. G. Herder, and German Romanticism in pushing Cassirer beyond the limits of strict philosophical rationalism, and on the other hand, Cassirer's fascination with Aby Warburg's famous library of European cultural objects and texts (the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg), beginning in 1920. Goethe and Warburg are thus framed as "the twin poles between which Cassirer's mature thought oscillates" (Skidelsky, p. 75), the former supplying a cheerful, "ironic" view of culture and the notion of the cultural symbol as "pregnant" with the meaning of larger, objective wholes, and the latter supplying a more tragic view and sensitivity to both the significance and danger of myth. These two sources were crucial to Cassirer's mature philosophy and his all-too-subtle response to the political developments of Weimar.

Cassirer's *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, published in three volumes in 1923, 1925, and 1929, incorporates these twin sources into an all-inclusive theory of human culture. As Skidelsky explains in the central chapter, symbolism "refers in the first instance not to cultural artifacts but to a natural potency inherent in consciousness as such" to create new dimensions of reality in a process of human self-objectification (Skidelsky, p. 101). Along the lines of G. W. F. Hegel's universal philosophy of history, a debt Cassirer acknowledges, different forms of symbolism enable lower and higher forms of freedom from nature, namely in the teleological movement from myth to religion to science, but in Cassirer's

version, these forms are not sublated but rather preserved in their own right, and at times clash with each other in a more "centrifugal" movement (Skidelsky, p. 106). In the modern world, the disintegrating conflict between the one-sidedness of science on the one hand and the persistence of myth on the other structured the "grand design of Cassirer's philosophy: to restore equilibrium to human culture, to heal a fractured world. Seldom can an enterprise so splendidly conceived have met with such failure" (Skidelsky, p. 125). Cassirer's conciliatory responses to the manifestation of these opposing tendencies in logical positivism and *Lebensphilosophie*, respectively, are treated competently but in a somewhat abbreviated way in the next two chapters. Here Skidelsky proves himself to be a subtle reader of Cassirer's philosophical strategies. Rather than reject another position outright, Cassirer sought to find the moment of truth contained in it and then integrate it into his broad theory of culture. This distinguishes his treatment of *Lebensphilosophie* from that of the logical positivists, who rejected non-propositional statements as philosophically meaningless, and positions him, as Skidelsky argues, between the divide that became institutionalized as analytic versus continental philosophy. Cassirer shared the concerns of *Lebensphilosophie* about the effects of bureaucratization and industrialization, but he believed its affirmation of "unreason" should be integrated into a broader vision of man as creative, symbolic animal. In this discussion, as well as in his chapter on Heidegger, Skidelsky perceptively differentiates the moments when Cassirer misinterpreted his opponents, sometimes grossly, into apparent agreement with his position from those in which he deliberately positioned them in such a way as to undermine their attempts to break from the Kantian heritage he defended. For example, in the Davos dispute, Cassirer seemingly praised Heidegger for rehabilitating the "death-problem" from a 1523 sermon by Martin Luther, but "his ulterior purpose in relating Heidegger to Luther is to situate him within a particular theological tradition, thereby undermining his claim to have provided a truly radical, presuppositionless ontology of Dasein" (Skidelsky, p. 212).

Heidegger was of course unconvinced by Cassirer's claims, and the failure of Cassirer's conciliatory strategy is evidence of a problem that Skidelsky finds more troubling. Cassirer failed to develop a politics out of his philosophy or to even recognize what was at stake in politics until it was far too late. On the other hand, he defends Cassirer's entire oeuvre as a defense of cultural liberalism: it "champions the freely developing personality against all technocratic narrowness, mystical self-surrender, and ideological stupidity. It is directed against those very forces that triumphed in 1933" (Skidelsky, p. 220). Skidelsky further traces his attempts from the late 1920s to defend liberalism more politically on the basis of his vision of human culture until his analysis of Nazism shortly before his death in *The Myth of the State* (1945), which interprets totalitarianism as "a technically orchestrated revival of *mythical* modes of thought and social organization" (Skidelsky, p. 223). But despite Cassirer's political naivetÃ©, Skidelsky concludes that his failed cultural vision provides, at least negatively, some contemporary relevance: "His was a humane and happy dream, and even if it *was* only a dream, it casts a reproachful shadow on our present age" (Skidelsky, p. 237).

While Skidelsky's treatment of Cassirer himself is cogent and well informed, the contrasts he draws with other figures, particularly Heidegger at the end of the book, are rather polemical without really being argued. His insistence upon the term "irrationalism" throughout the book to describe any form of thought that, say, takes Nietzsche seriously, leads him to introduce Heidegger's philosophy as a "strange monster: a rigorous irrationalism, a system against systems" (Skidelsky, p. 196). Few specialists would accept this assessment, or rather epithet, without further qualification, for the status of rationality was in a larger sense precisely what was at stake at Davos.[2] What follows his discussion of Heidegger is quite contradictory. He rightly argues that the issues of the Davos dispute can only be resolved philosophically, not retroactively through politics, and freely admits that Cassirer lost the debate "for reasons that are not just political but authentically philosophical" (Skidelsky, p. 218). But then, listing the great thinkers who "fell under his spell," including, among others, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hannah Arendt, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Herbert Marcuse, he declares, "this massive influence has been almost wholly to the detriment of liberalism– as the political affiliation of so many post-Heideggerian philosophers attests. It is ironic that fascism, defeated on the battlefield, should enjoy this ghostly afterlife in the realm of ideas" (Skidelsky, p. 219). While it is true that none of these figures could be labeled as liberals, the simplistic opposition of liberalism/fascism is grossly untenable, in politics and especially in intellectual history. Exactly what political affiliation did these philosophers exhibit? No further discussion is provided, no sources are cited; indeed there is no evidence of the existence of the enormous debate carried out over the past couple of decades about the political and ethical implica-

tions of continental philosophy. Elsewhere, in his discussion of Cassirer and technology, he draws the following contrast: "Moral antipathy to capitalism typically leads to the demand for some sort of external curb on the pursuit of private self-interest. [Theodor] Adorno found such a curb in communism, Heidegger in Nazism. But such extremes are avoidable" (Skidelsky, p. 190). Whatever the contested status of Adorno's politics (we must, however, state that he was unequivocally critical of Soviet communism) and Heidegger's "error," such a categorical and matter-of-fact statement is misleading to the point of recklessness. Unfortunately, Skidelsky engages in the kind of "scholarship in a prosecutorial spirit"[3] diagnosed by Peter Eli Gordon in the intellectual history surrounding Heidegger, even as he explicitly insists on evaluating these matters on philosophical rather than political grounds.

At numerous points, Skidelsky suggests potential parallels with the first generation of the Frankfurt School on issues such as myth and technology, but just as soon dismisses them, for as he points out, Adorno described Cassirer as "totally gaga (*vÃ¶llig vertrottelt*)" (Skidelsky, p. 125). Tobias Bevc is forced to acknowledge this judgment in his comparative study–he relegates it to a footnote (Bevc, p. 20)–but nonetheless pursues these affinities between Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms and Critical Theory systematically and effectively. In a more narrowly focused and detailed theoretical study, Bevc concentrates on their respective explanations of the "return of barbarism" in the twentieth century, identifying a cultural "dialectic of myth and reason" at the core of both. While careful to highlight important points of divergence, he succeeds in demonstrating how these theories can inform and supplement each other in previously unrecognized ways, especially as formulated in Cassirer's *The Theory of the State* (1945) and Max Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).

Bevc's study is organized into four main chapters that help facilitate the systematic comparison between Cassirer and Critical Theory. Following the introduction, which presents in broad strokes a series of six theses about the historical and theoretical parallels between the two, Chapter 2 argues that Cassirer and the members of the Frankfurt School shared a common experiential horizon in which their theories were embedded. Despite their differences in age (Cassirer was born in 1874; Horkheimer in 1895; Adorno in 1903), they shared not only personal backgrounds, as sons of upper bourgeois Jewish families (though Adorno's mother was from a Catholic background), and the common experiences of World War I, National Socialism, and American exile, but an interdisciplinary approach to a common problem: the "concretely experienced mental and structural disorder of the epoch" (Bevc, p. 18). To be sure, Cassirer's approach to this problem remained more on the level of ideas, whereas Critical Theory turned to psychoanalysis to understand the effacement of the individual to explain this disorder. Like Skidelsky, however, Bevc illuminates the subtle approach that Cassirer already brought to politics by the 1920s, making the events of Weimar the primary experiential horizon of Cassirer and the Frankfurt School's respective theories of fascism. The Marxist background of the Frankfurt School is of course another fundamental difference, but Bevc argues that Cassirer too was significantly concerned with economic issues and should not be dismissed as a "bourgeois" thinker.

In his treatment of Cassirer in the third chapter, Bevc moves quickly from the former's early neo-Kantianism to an analysis of the mature philosophy of symbolic forms. In considerable detail, he elucidates the different forms and their world-structuring powers, including myth, language, art, science, and technology. The most significant of the forms for Bevc's larger project is myth, which for Cassirer is both a permanent part of human experience and part of the dialectic of cultural development in modern society that "limited the linearity of the process of enlightenment and coerced people to come to the view that human culture was something disposable" (Bevc, pp. 143-144). The political danger of myth was already emphasized by 1929 in a chapter of the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* entitled "The Pathology of Symbolic Consciousness." Directed against antidemocratic thinking in Weimar, it argued that the new, technical instrumentalization of myth eliminated the individual freedom that made symbolic formation possible, particularly through the blending of myth and language. Individual freedom was the necessary condition for human symbolic formation, and only a democratization of all areas of life and sufficient resources could hinder the rise of myth always lying under the veneer of culture. Even more than Skidelsky, Bevc affirms the political dimension of Cassirer's thought as a function of the conditions of individual freedom, making space for his interpretation of Critical Theory in parallel terms.

In chapter 4, Bevc wisely limits his discussion of Critical Theory to these parallels and the question of myth. He emphasizes the Frankfurt School's added dimension of social psychology at the root of fascism and, rather than simply the return of myth, the role of rationality itself in the famous dialectic of enlightenment. However, Bevc

argues that there are not only thematic overlaps between Cassirer and Critical Theory but in fact a parallel to the symbolic forms themselves, which in Critical Theory he calls "structures of ordering and perception" (*Ordnungs- und Wahrnehmungsstrukturen*), which first become visible as such in comparison with the philosophy of symbolic forms and are "immanently clarified" in the Frankfurt School texts. These forms, which include language, art, technology, and economy, both constitute the conditions of possibility for the experience of the world and enable individuals to imagine alternatives to the existing world. Art, for example, is for both Cassirer and Critical Theory a dimension of knowledge that grants humans a special form of access to experience and allows the articulation of something that cannot otherwise be articulated. Bevc's primary line of interpretation, however, is tracing the parallel analysis of the "pathology" of these symbolic forms or structures of perception that induced the dialectic of myth in reason in the cultural genesis of National Socialism. He discusses the Frankfurt School's psychoanalytic studies of the sadomasochistic character, the Culture Industry, and of course the dialectic of enlightenment in terms of a historical process of growing restriction of the liberating power of these structures of orderings and perception. Bevc thus finds another significant parallel between Cassirer's pathology of symbolic consciousness and the "context of delusion" (*Verblendungszusammenhang*), coined by Adorno to describe mass society, in which this dialectic became nearly total. The dependency and immaturity (*UnmÃ¼ndigkeit*) of the individual under these conditions was experienced as a freedom from the burdens of autonomy: "All of the qualities of the structures of ordering and perception that constituted a life worth living according to Critical Theory were absent, in the Culture Industry in general and in National Socialism in particular" (Bevc, pp. 357-358).

In the short fifth chapter, Bevc systematically harvests the fruit of his respective interpretations, demonstrating both the complementary and divergent aspects of Cassirer and Critical Theory's explanations of National Socialism. He is judicious in his assessment, examining their contrasting views on each symbolic form. For example, in Cassirer's view, enlightenment represented two thousand years of progress in human consciousness suddenly destroyed; for Critical Theory, the disenchantment of the world was already a return to myth through the domination of nature. In general, Critical Theory seems to function for Bevc as a materialist supplement to Cassirer's idealist philosophy of culture, adding the elements of psychic, economic, and environmental domination to the problem of the pathology of symbolic consciousness. In the final conclusion, Bevc asserts a contemporary significance for integrating their insights against the tendencies toward the "depluralization" of symbolic forms in both religious fanaticism and global capitalism: cultural regression "can only be limited in a democratic society in which everyone has a fair share of its ideal and material resources" (Bevc, p. 378).

Despite Bevc's facility in treating both Cassirer and Critical Theory and his awareness of their divergence on significant points, his interpretation does risk translating the latter too easily into the more systematic structure of Cassirer's philosophy. For example, in Cassirer's "Essay on Man," science, the highest symbolic form, organizes the other forms into "a system of relations, in which everything has its place and which constitutes 'pure meaning' " (Bevc, p. 107), a hierarchy of knowledge that finds no place in Critical Theory. In fact, Bevc's systematic treatment of Critical Theory according to such a teleological progression of symbolic forms is itself somewhat foreign to the spirit of the latter's negative-critical approach. The underlying differences in their conceptions of enlightenment could perhaps be used more reflexively in this methodological regard. A related problem is that Bevc projects too much of Cassirer's trust in the culturally spontaneous individual onto the guarded hopes of Critical Theory. His claim that both saw the debilitating effects of authoritarianism as an assault on individual freedom is certainly justified, but the Frankfurt School placed little hope in the restoration of autonomous individuality. Bevc argues, for example, that in contrast to the historical period that accepted philosophies of fate and existential "thrownness," both Cassirer and Critical Theory instead developed "theories of active world-formation through individuals" (Bevc, p. 378). While the Frankfurt School shared Cassirer's critical view of Heidegger, the implied target, their point of departure was not the creative, self-realizing subject, whose categories of understanding had only to be properly reset in order to produce a harmonious world. These points aside, however, Bevc is successful in demonstrating the viability and theoretical value of comparing their explanations of cultural regression.

Skidelsky offers a welcome, broad introduction of Cassirer's work, but one that is problematic in its approach to broader issues of philosophy and politics. His more polemic claims, often asserted rather than argued, are unlikely to persuade specialists in intellectual history and may misguide general readers about the complex political contours of continental philosophy. Bevc, in con-

trast, offers a more focused and systematic comparison of Cassirer's philosophy and Critical Theory. His argument is generally compelling. He also skillfully draws a number of significant parallels that would seem to have been precluded by Adorno's dismissive comment, although Bevc does occasionally overstep in the case of the Frankfurt School. But perhaps this faux pas is fitting for a scholar whose efforts at intellectual and political conciliation were so recklessly dismissed in his own time and remain, as Skidelsky observes, foreign to our contentious age.

Notes

[1]. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 360.

[2]. For a critique of retrospective political interpretations of the debate (which is cited by Skidelsky in an endnote), see Peter Eli Gordon, "Continental Divide: Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger at Davos, 1929–An Allegory of Intellectual History," *Modern Intellectual History* 1, no. 2 (2004): 219-248.

[3]. Peter Eli Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), xxv.