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*Melancholy*

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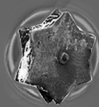
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# Melancholy and Polemics

Panajotis Kondylis

Kondylis Panajotis, *Melancholy and Polemics*. Translated in English by Raymond Petridis & Stephen Stafford. Edited by Aloisia Moser. Originally published in German as “Melancholie und Polemik”, L. Heidbrink (ed.), *Entzauberte Zeit*, Munich 1997, pp. 281-299.

## Abstract

The notion of power constitutes a key concept in Panajotis Kondylis' philosophy and the main subject of his works *Macht und Entscheidung*, *Der Philosoph und die Macht*, as well as of the third volume of his unfinished social ontology (*Das Politische und der Mensch*) subtitled “Identity, Power, Civilization”. This article, one of the thinker's later works, sheds light on a particular aspect of the notion of power by examining the substantive and potential relation between the latter and the mechanism of melancholy within the context of an individual subject's pursuit of social recognition and general or binding influence. It offers a typology of melancholics prominent in the history of ideas, while at the same time unearthing the parallelism that exists between the levels of individual psychology, culture and anthropology.

## Introduction

*Macht und Entscheidung* (1984) constitutes, along with *Das Politische und der Mensch* (1999), the epitome of Kondylis's philosophical positions<sup>1</sup>. In said work, the Greek thinker describes the reasons why constituting a world-image via a "decision" – i.e. a process of (violent or non violent) disruption of the unordered reality of a given preliminary world – proves to be the *only* means of self-preservation of different individual or collective subjects. When speaking of self-preservation, Kondylis actually means the socially appraisable expansion of power. Within the conditions of organized societies, a subject's expansion of power is achieved by his or her renouncing the latter's subjective character and by presenting it as a defender of supposedly objective values and moral principles. The entire normative School of Thought, regardless of the different ideological signs of its conveyors, treats human society as a whole with a repairing disposition which must be seen, in turn, as unbreakably linked to the privileged social role that the diagnostic and "mechanic" of a crisis reserves for himself or herself and his or her power claims associated with said role. In view of the above, one would be in the right to ascertain that the notion of power constitutes the centerpiece of Panajotis Kondylis's overall philosophical standpoint.

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1 In accord, moreover, with the author's explicit statement in "Owed Replies" (= *Melancholy and Polemics*. Essays and Studies. Themelio, Athens 2002, pp. 139-140).

In the present article, our philosopher explores (on the level of social and intellectual history) the un-rare instance in which melancholy – as renunciation of the development of the will to power – functions as an intellectual weapon for acquiring might and recognition, when not reduced to a paralytic resignation from or a final farewell to worldly affairs. More specifically, Kondylis examines historically non-negligible cases in which melancholy with no effort and no failure, melancholy after a failed effort, and melancholy after a successful effort, serves the articulation and satisfaction of a subject's social power claims. He then offers a typology of melancholics prominent in the history of ideas (dandy, recluse, political revolutionary). Having maintained that no necessary logical bond exists between a conveyor's ideological stance and his or her proclaimed optimistic or pessimistic standpoint, Kondylis unearths the structural similarity of the latter standpoints in terms of the following features: first, both the optimistic and the pessimistic standpoint need one another from a polemical viewpoint, since both live on hope *and* fear and both are compelled to invoke the chasm between reality and Ideal, which, in effect, nurtures a certain conception of "deviation" supposedly 'accountable', as it were, for the cancellation or postponement of the hitherto proclaimed "happy end" of history; second, by underlining their difference of content, each of the aforementioned standpoints essentially confirms the significance of entrenching itself vis-à-vis the other. At this point, Kondylis advances his argumentation by making a transition to the cultural

and anthropological level: he outlines the dualistic character of two historically important ideal-types, namely, Christianity (as a model of transcendent metaphysics) and the atheistic Enlightenment (as a model of secular metaphysics), inviting the reader to discern the (non-rectilinear) parallelism that exists between the aforesaid levels and that of individual psychology. He concludes with a brief allusion to the notion of crisis that dominated the philosophical discussion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Except from a single reference to the Peripatetics<sup>2</sup>, Kondylis chooses from the beginning to drop the explicit mentioning of bibliographic sources, perhaps in order to avoid disrupting the systematic argumentation of this succinct essay with philologically charged documentation. Thus, both ancient influences (such as Xenophon's account of "the melancholy of the powerful"<sup>3</sup>) and respective modern ones (such as the Burtonian conception of melancholy "as the character of mortality"<sup>4</sup> or the Freudian apprehension of the relation between mania and depression<sup>5</sup>) remain implicit; as also remain Kondylis's background views on issues relating to the

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2 Pointing to Aristotle's (or an Aristotle follower's) discussion of the connection between melancholy and intellectual brilliance "encountered in all great philosophers, statesmen, poets or artists" (= Aristotle, *Problems*, Book XXX, 1; Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, pp. 155-169).

3 Cf. Xenophon, *Hiero or on Tyranny* in: *Scripta Minora*. Translated by E. C. Merchant & G. W. Bowersock. Loeb Classical Library no 183, London/Cambridge/Massachusetts: Harvard University Press (1925). Said text's influence on Kondylis may also be inferred from the fact that the philosopher translated it himself into Modern Greek.

4 Cf. R. Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, New York: New York Review Books (1621), 2001, pp. 143-144.

5 Cf. S. Freud, *Mourning and Melancholy*, Standard Edition Vol. XIV, p. 253ff.



present essay's content such as e.g. "the unbreakable bond between socially dynamic self-preservation and the invocation of life's meaning and a certain notion of 'common good'"<sup>6</sup>, "the moral uproar provoked by 'relativists', 'nihilists' or, more generally, deniers of the objectivity of life's meaning"<sup>7</sup>, "the logical leap from an ascertainment of the relativity of values to a normative command"<sup>8</sup> etc.

Three key methodological ideas that generally pertain to Kondylis's thought are here readily discernable: a) The crucial – rich in implications – logical distinction between conceptual structure and content<sup>9</sup> b) The -Marxian in inspiration<sup>10</sup>- distinction between the (narcissistic) self-understanding of the doers and the objective function and actual social influence of their deeds, and c) the difference between taking a theoretical idea at its nominal value and comprehending said idea's concrete historical function. The latter brings to mind an elemental credo

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6 Cf. P. Kondylis, *Macht und Entscheidung*. Die Herausbildung der Weltbilder und die Wertfrage. Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1984, chapter II.

7 *Ibid*, chapters II & IV; P. Kondylis "Alte und neue Gottheit" in: *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*. Academie Verlag, 60 (2012) 3, p. 354ff.

8 P. Kondylis, "Universalismus, Relativismus und Toleranz" in: *Das Politische im 20. Jahrhundert*, Manutius Verlag Heidelberg 2001, 45-60.

9 One may perhaps discern R. Koselleck's influence on Kondylis with regard to said distinction; see: Koselleck's *Futures Past*. On the Semantics of Historical Time. Translated by K. Tribe, Columbia University Press 2004, ch. 14, p. 255ff. In view of Kondylis's present typology, it may be worth noting that in the ultimate paragraph of his Introduction in *Chamfort*, the thinker stresses that, structurally, "the same thirst for powerful independence transforms [in the case of Chamfort] the recluse to a political revolutionary, notwithstanding the conflicting contents of their respective life ideals. See: P. Kondylis, Introduction in: *Chamfort*. Selections from his Work. Transl. by P. Kondylis, Stigmi, Athens 1994, p. 22.

10 Cf. e.g. K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, III; Progress Publishers, Moscow, 6<sup>th</sup> printing 1972, p. 38.

of Panajotis Kondylis that usually slips the attention of the majority of intellectuals and “professional” philosophers: A theorist who aspires to make serious contribution to science, must come to realize that it is insufficient to solely penetrate into the content of moral-normative ideas and desiderata “from within”, in order to thereafter interpret their meaning only theoretically or *ex cathedra*; said theorist’s (retrospectively acknowledged) productivity rather depends upon his or her capacity to understand how ideas and desires are to be historically incarnated, i.e. how they will operate substantially in specific situations. Concluding the present piece, Kondylis maintains, in this very context, that what originally manifested itself as “anthropological and psychological pessimism” soon took the character of social criticism and was rapidly transformed into polemical activism which, in turn, instrumentalized the sweeping notion of “social crisis”; by enlisting said example, the philosopher reaffirms just how important for the discerning scholar is to realize the substantial claims to power of the relevant each time conveyors beneath the level of their lofty invocations and abstract-theoretical proclamations. If nothing else, Kondylis’s reminder may signify a wake-up call for intellectuals who are about to zealously raise their new utopian – yet anthropologically indispensable – moral demands.

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## MELANCHOLY and POLEMICS\*

Panajotis Kondylis

*\*Originally published in German as “Melancholie und Polemik”, L. Heidbrink (ed.), Entzauberte Zeit, Munich 1997, pp. 281-299. Translated by Raymond Petridis and Stephen Stafford. Edited by Aloisia Moser.*

When we speak here of the connection between melancholy and polemics, we primarily have in mind those products of the history of ideas which draw their inspiration from the critique of history and of culture as well as from anthropology. In them a pessimistic stance does not lead to paralytic resignation from or a final farewell to worldly affairs. It rather functions as an intellectual weapon, i.e. it serves the articulation and satisfaction of social power claims. When it comes to melancholy, the transition from the sphere of psychology of the individual to that of cultural and sociopolitical magnitudes is by no means linear. We have to, nevertheless, start by underlining certain aspects of the former, since this will make more easily visible the anthropological background of the latter, to the general lines of which we shall then refer. In a certain – but only a certain – sense, the same conceptual thread runs through both levels, which

means that the texture of critical mental magnitudes and the way they are combined are manifested in a similar way. The similarity however, is not merely due to anthropological or psychological magnitudes passing directly into forces of a determined content which influence the framework of culture or of the history of ideas. Rather the similarity lies in that these forces take a stronger foothold, the more they have anthropological and psychological backing. Given the multiple dimensions of the enquiry, we should not confine the psychological consideration of melancholy to the findings of psychopathology. At the same time, though, we must not overlook the fact that melancholy, as a manic depressive psychosis, constitutes the extreme intensification of fundamental, mutually opposing and simultaneously complimentary phenomena of so-called normal mental life, with its familiar incessant fluctuations and ambivalences. Whatever is found everywhere and always in mental life, in turn takes root in the strata that constitute the makeup of the living being "man": no resigned pessimism and no active optimism remains uninvolved in pleasure and pain, in fear and in will to power. The various mixtures of pessimistic and activist standpoints that we shall be addressing, starting with examples of pivotal importance from the history of ideas, are in turn anthropologically based on the possibility of differing combinations of those primordial magnitudes. And this, despite the fact that their ideational content is culturally contingent and consequently variable to the highest degree.

Just as consciousness in general is characterized by intentionality, so too is melancholy: it is always melancholy for something, no matter how one answers the (fruitless) question as to whether this “something” causes the melancholy or simply triggers it. This intentionality of melancholy entails that the relationship with reality, i.e. the relationship with what is taking place without the participation of the melancholic subject, can never be completely severed, even when the melancholic claims to have burned all the bridges to the world. In this case, the intentional “something” of melancholy is repressed or even eliminated for obvious reasons of mental economy. When “everything loses meaning and value”, then this “something” also becomes unimportant and, as it disappears in the ocean of melancholic indifference, it is no longer considered worthy and capable of constituting the main source of the melancholic’s unhappiness. For precisely this reason, the thematic widening of or emotive deepening into melancholy brings relief. By stripping the world of meaning and value, the melancholic takes revenge on the intentional “something” responsible for his melancholy. In this mental state, however, there is no third option, only meaning and lack of meaning. So lack of meaning continues to be defined and felt in its relation to meaning (hence, indirectly, also in its relation to the intentional “something”), or at least it is measured upon the possibility of meaning and the nostalgia for it. Even aggressive rejection of this possibility in no way changes that fact. In any event, the impassive ascertainment of the objective lack of

meaning and the simultaneous comprehension of the subjective necessity of meaning are not a matter for the melancholic *as* melancholic.

Thus, the intentional “something” of melancholy remains, irrespective of its garb and position, steadfastly present in the melancholic’s mental world, and becomes, so to speak, the spirit born of the spirit of the melancholic idiosyncrasy and the axis around which its changing dispositions revolve. These (extremely illuminating for our purposes) changes hover between two situations, which in their pure form can be summarized as follows: on the one hand, the failure to attain this intentional “something” turns into unremitting self-denigration and an oppressive feeling of guilt. Its futile pursuit or its loss can thus result in a crisis of identity or even loss of the ego. This “something” – or even the world *in toto* as a permanent reminder of it – crushes the ego. But the opposite may also occur. The ego may resist being crushed and turn aggressively against the now hostile “something” or against the now hostile world, downgrading them and upgrading itself. Then, from the position of the worthy one, it feels that it has not only the strength but also the right to attack whatever it deems unworthy and at the same time torturous. This phenomenon is manifested in psychoses as a switch from depression into mania, but in terms of form it is equally evident in important and completely normal situations in the history of ideas, situations in which takes place a regular transition from pessimistic ascertainments or dispositions to intellectual drive [alertness], so



much so that the remaining in the former is done with the safe expectation of the latter.

On the basis of the same mechanism of mental economy, which, as we noted previously, brings relief precisely through the delving into or generalization of melancholy, one may think about eluding the threatened failure by relativizing the importance of the intentional object in advance. The relativization of everything may serve here as cover, so that the melancholic is not forced to admit to others or even to himself that the relativization actually pertains to this specific “something”. One’s impotence is not felt here as melancholy after failing the something, but as an attempt to circumvent failure through a melancholic keeping of distances from it. But there is a third option, that kind of melancholy which is born precisely at the moment one “has accomplished everything” – or at any rate shortly after. And this is not only because of the inner emptiness that comes when, having achieved one’s greatest goals, one is temporarily left without new ones. At least equally intense is the feeling of one’s impotence, which this time however emanates from the ascertainment that the power gained by achieving the goal necessarily remains relative, just like any other power, and that consequently one must continue to struggle against opposing forces. This discovery is especially embarrassing when made from a position that one considered to be beyond resistance. The relativization of the intentional object begins anew, albeit from a different perspective. One now realizes that recognition is not forthcoming from all, nor are

desires satisfied in full and without compromise. At the pinnacle of success and precisely to the extent that self-confidence increases, the gaze becomes fixed on whatever continues to resist; especially since opponents are even more irritating and provocative now and can be less tolerated than before. Hence, the sense and melancholy of powerlessness can be felt by even the most powerful, when they consciously or unconsciously measure their strength by the yardstick of omnipotence. Only God the almighty never feels melancholy nor can one even imagine him to be melancholic. According to authoritative theological sources, he can however be consumed with rage. The common perception of God clearly shows that omnipotence can easily be placed at the opposite pole to melancholy.

When the Peripatetics made the observation, thereafter frequently repeated, that all great men without exception, irrespective of their fields of activity, are melancholics, they assumed, perhaps unknowingly, that the distance between potency and omnipotency can be more torturous than the distance between potency and impotency. Seen from this viewpoint, the feeling of powerlessness ultimately prevails over its respective reality, and the dark veil of melancholy covers the powerful and the powerless alike – the former because they lack power, the latter because they are not all-powerful. All the cases about which we have spoken (melancholy with no effort and no failure, melancholy after a failed effort, melancholy after a successful effort) evidence the deeper internal connection between melancholy and powerlessness at

all levels. So, the feeling of powerlessness constitutes the flip side of the will to power – otherwise it would not be so painful and moreover would go unnoticed. In the same sense, melancholy may be transformed into polemics and struggle, just as the feeling of powerlessness into pursuit of power. It is self-evident that this dual transition is potential in nature; it is not ubiquitous and obligatory. But what is of interest here is the very frequent activation of this potentiality, as it sheds light from another perspective on the same fact that appears also in the switch from depression to mania or in analogous mood shifts within the bounds of normality. Melancholy is renunciation, due to external or internal impulses, of the development of the will to power, and at the same time the place for the incubation of a sudden yet foreseeable eruption of this will. If melancholy – of all things – did not have a Janus face, then it could not serve (for example in the form of the anthropological or cultural pessimistic viewpoint) as a kind of springboard for very specific and very dynamic confrontations with existing reality.

By now it should be clear how perceptions of melancholy are connected at the anthropological, psychological and cultural level, as well as at the level of the history of ideas. The intentionality of melancholy is ubiquitous and can bring to light its maybe latent connections, thereby opening the path to urgent action. The great common denominator of the levels to which we referred also concerns the general structure and potential unfolding of the specific phenomenon, not the various contents in which it is

each time concretized. The fundamental conceptual difference between the form of mental acts and the content of intellectual constructs explains a familiar and also illuminating phenomenon, namely that there is no necessary connection between pessimism or optimism as subjective dispositions on the one hand and as world-view standpoints [ideological attitude] on the other. People who are generally considered to be idiosyncratically “pessimistic” or “optimistic” (if we accept that such characterological abstractions can be used) coexist in all kinds of philosophical, religious or political camps. So that with regard to its content, a camp’s credo emanates neither directly from the particular mental dispositions and inclinations of the subjects who represent it nor as their resultant. Despite this, a subject who is not melancholic, and therefore not a conveyor of the mental structure of the phenomenon of melancholy we have described, can imprint this structure on a formation of ideas, which the historical conjuncture, as well as personal preferences or even random factors, each time undertake to concretize. The said subject appropriates this structure after having removed its psychological form, because this structure enables the transformation of pessimism into polemical activism; the pessimistic starting point is chosen because the opponent or enemy is defending some optimistic standpoint. This of course means that the reverse can easily happen too. Polemics that has its starting point in some “pessimistic” standpoint is simply one form of polemics among others: “pessimists” are not per se more polemical than “optimists”. But here,

only their case interests us. There is a quasi a priori reason why “pessimism” (just like “optimism”) must take on a polemical character and shoulder respective duties from the moment it appears in a somewhat theoretical form in the spectrum of culture and the history of ideas. Pessimism and optimism are born within the human condition, therefore they cannot serve as a yardstick for an overall and *ab extra* consideration of this condition, nor for a conclusive evaluation of it. As partial phenomena within a wider reality, they are defined on the basis of their entrenchment in relation to other phenomena. While the way in which they define themselves contains or constitutes an assessment about this wider reality, this assessment is made from a viewpoint that is within said reality and can occupy only a specific and limited position therein. No pessimism is conceivable without explicit or tacit reference to a better reality that once existed or should exist; and no optimism can appear reasonable unless it refers to the overcoming of existing ills. For, if we accept human reality as it was and still is, without the slightest desire for this or that change and without harboring any fear or hope with respect to possible changes to it, then every pessimistic or optimistic stance becomes redundant. But this would mean the freezing of the world under the gaze of an infinite intellect. Human condition exists and lives on fears and hopes, on positive and negative value judgments which are substantively connected to it, and they are not merely the result but also the driving force of its internal shifts and swings.

As partial phenomena, which are based on entrenchments and are obliged to set boundaries, pessimism and optimism must refer to something that lies beyond their respective limits, despite their claim to monopolize the picture of reality, each on its own account. They thus acknowledge, unwittingly, their interdependence within a broader framework. This framework is the multi-dimensional human condition, which they would like to grasp and describe *ab extra* and as a Whole, but they are unable to do so, since this would presuppose the elimination of one of them. What holds generally for the human condition also holds for each historical era and each historical moment. Because the human condition is present in its entirety in each era and moment of history, irrespective of its predominant aspects at any time. So, there are pessimistic and optimistic aspects in each culture and in each era, and they either fulfill complementary functions within the same mental formation, or they preferably condense to separate constructs, which then compete against each other. The various “pessimistic” or “optimistic” eras, which one often reads about in aperçus of the history of ideas, are lofty fictions. They are based on a highly selective and one-sided treatment of the material, and, furthermore, are used for the purposes of periodization with polemical undertones. It is precisely the coexistence or intermixing of the most diverse elements in each era that allows the sometimes unpredictable shifting of positions within the spectrum of ideas, the multiple use of a single idea, or a succession of different ideas at the service of the same individual or collective subject.

After this reminder of the connection between pessimism and optimism within the human condition – a connection which, from an anthropological viewpoint, is characterized by exactly the same necessity as the multiform coexistence of pain and pleasure, of fear and will to power – we shall now turn our attention to pessimistic contemplation, which we understand as the cultural and intellectual-historical manifestation of melancholy as outlined above in its twofold structure. The differentiation made between melancholics that are perceived at the psychological level and melancholics perceived at the level of intellectual and cultural history, can beware us here from pointless psychologisms. The essential feature of pessimism is flight from society or from other people but with simultaneous retention of the subject's relation to them, precisely in and through the flight. The flight thus functions both as renunciation of action *as well as* an act. For the flight is not silent, even when the flier is. Flight itself marks a contemptuous estimation – in deed – of the cause of this intellectual and/or social distancing, and at the same time an invitation to society to change its course, so that a possible return to its fold would be worth the effort. Melancholic escapism, which understands itself as flight from this world for the sake of a better world and a higher ideal, is in itself capable of widening the chasm between reality and the ideal to such an extent as to create an explosive situation, which inevitably will have to be defused in practice. This does not necessarily entail transition from melancholy to revolt – as happens, for example,

with the transition from the stage of depression to that of mania. The tension can take on a variety of forms and reach different heights. This depends on whether the melancholic remains a solitary individual who speaks exclusively on his own account or an individual who is solitary but appears and acts in the name of generally binding norms or, lastly, whether he wishes to join his forces with those of a collective entity, in order to bridge the chasm between reality and ideal by imposing the latter.

To illustrate the above three instances, we have chosen three ideotypical examples from the extensive lineup of relevant melancholics of human culture and the history of ideas. The dandy sees himself as an extremely refined and totally irreplaceable individuality, and his spleen [melancholy] is the price he must pay for his refined and irreplaceable nature – a price which of course he pays uncomplainingly. Because although spleen may mean inner hardship and flirtation with the abyss, it is at the same time the trademark of the chosen one and an intellectual title of nobility, but above all it is the glaring distinctive feature and means of entrenchment against the many, who are incapable of experiencing such exalted feelings. The melancholic habitus has a social spearhead and consequently it is not hidden. It is seen both as an adjunct to and the quintessence of individual refinement and exposes itself in plain view, in order to put – by means of the antithesis – a mirror before the *profanum vulgus*. However, for the provocation to be effective, the impression must not be given that melancholy is nothing more than



weakness of character or flight from those struggles that call for toughness rather than refinement; so it enters the scene aggressively and disguises itself as scathing irony, excelling and shining while remaining on the sidelines. Only as the background of irony does melancholy become visible. And to the same extent that melancholy loses in quality when being converted into hostility or protest, irony degenerates into insolent belligerence. This combination gives birth to the present-day journalistic critic of culture, who may be characterized as a vulgar or mass democratic dandy.

The dandy who shuns society and seeks the salon differs from the recluse who, disappointed by the course of the world, finds wisdom in the tending of his garden or withdraws as an ascetic and prophet into the wilderness, from where he launches his broadsides against his people's sinful way of life. In this latter instance, the correlate of melancholy is no longer cultivated ambiguous irony, but pointed sarcasm that culminates in holy rage. For instead of the dandy's superficial immoralism we now see a rigorous, deeply distrustful and ever vigilant moralism. Since the moral demand is absolute, contact with concrete human reality must instill despair. Then the transition from melancholy to despair takes place in the same breath with the transition from despair to aggression. But only someone whose conscience is free of burdens has the right to such aggression. This is why the prophet – for as long as he remains a prophet, i.e. for as long as he loves the wilderness more than the turbulence of politics

– cannot find true companions, and deep down nor does he want to: the voice of right-thinking sounds stronger and clearer when it comes from just one mouth.

At this point, the paths of the solitary prophet diverge from those of the political revolutionary, who is obliged to rely on collective action. A respective distinction is made within the social intentionality of melancholy. Now, it is not born from the sight of general moral decline, which might have ended up in an equally general lament for human corruption, but rather from the comparison between what humankind and society are today and what they could, and indeed should have been, if only they had been able to evolve in accord with their true nature and true destination. Melancholy thus corresponds to a loss or at any rate a lack, which will be compensated in the future. Until then it serves as an appropriate means for evaluating the presence of evil in society. Here, the typical confrontation of Is and Ought, of ideal and reality, makes its appearance as a lever for the revolutionary change of the latter. The conviction that every human is a potential conveyor of Ought and the Ideal allows to concentrate the fire of polemics on socially conditioned grievances of society, irrespective of general moral objections. As a consequence, this also allows the enlistment in the righteous cause of allies and instruments from the majority of those rebuked by the fiery but apolitical prophet. In collective action or –where the action cannot be collective in the sense of mass participation– simply in the intoxication of activism, melancholy too eventually disappears.

Because in political inaction the loss or lack of which we spoke become felt to the maximum degree. This is why the revolutionary practice, which should merely be the means for remedying the loss or lack, is itself experienced and seen as the remedy, since it constitutes the opposite of inaction.

Meanwhile, the question of the internal correlation between melancholy and polemics is not confined to the construction of a typology of melancholics prominent in the history of ideas, culture and politics. It can be illuminated equally well from another perspective, namely by examining the content of the ideas of which one is speaking each time. Here we must again make a fundamental distinction between three levels, i.e. between views that concern Being and the world *in toto*, views of an anthropological character, and views concerning historical and cultural processes. On the first level, the pure melancholic or pessimistic ideology is reflected in the view that everything is absurd and senseless, that life *per se* has no value. What this view may entail for the private life of an individual is one thing. What someone who endorses the thesis as its public representative can effect within the bounds of a specific historical range is a completely different story. For the time being it should be established whether and to what extent this view can be taken at its face value or whether and to what extent its proclamation can be interpreted as an ostentatious symbolic act, whose purpose is to distance its conveyor's stance from the futile self-delusions and irrational doings of the clueless common man. This

was the case, for example, with the different versions of romantic *Weltschmerz*, which quickly disappeared as soon as the practical prospects improved. And even if this position is taken literally, then any inconsistency on the part of its representative would not consist in the fact that he does not commit suicide (because suicide would be just as meaningless as life, and logically binding rules cannot be put forward for a choice between two meaningless things). The inconsistency would rather consist in the fact that from the *ascertainment* [Feststellung] of the lack of meaning of Being he derives the *demand* [Aufforderung] that others should not believe in any meaning, overlooking of course the fact that it is precisely this general subjective belief in the meaning of the world, with a different interpretation each time of this same meaning, that constitutes a fundamental element of the world's objective lack of meaning. But even if he made this leap of logic, he would still not have achieved much. For the individual and collective drive of self-preservation would have risen up against him. Under cultural conditions this drive becomes one with the idea of meaning: whatever appears in nature as a biological magnitude, in culture (i.e. in the distinctive feature of human nature) necessarily takes on the form and standing of an idea or ideal. And only someone who appears in the framework of culture as a bestower of meaning is suited to assuaging people's drive for self-preservation and thus appropriating it for himself, i.e. exercising power over people based on the assumption of a meaning – no matter in which

form. In other words, assumption of a meaning gives the powerful his power, because it provides his subordinates or followers – as a minimum feeling of power – with the conviction that they share the true meaning. On the contrary, lack of meaning is tantamount to lack of power or, at most, to power that cannot acquire duration and bindingness aside from mere momentary animal-physical compulsion, and that can consequently be of little use – in conditions of human culture.

We now understand why genuine and pure ideological melancholy, i.e. the proclamation of the lack of meaning of Being, has been a *quantité négligeable* in the spectrum of the history of ideas of all cultures and of all eras. Even materialistic worldviews, which for ideological reasons rejected the primary connection between meaning and some spiritual or divine wordly foundation, were obliged to introduce in a logically reckless way principles and forces on some level of the theoretical construct. This they had to do in order to save the belief in the meaning of the moral and social action (as such). Because this belief is necessary from a cultural viewpoint, meaning can be combated only in the name of meaning. For that reason, the proclamation of lack of meaning is completely futile from a polemical viewpoint. And melancholy necessarily remains a private matter to the extent that it is reduced to the idea of the incurable lack of meaning of Being. Positions that cause melancholy or appear to arise from a melancholic predisposition, can take on polemic functions within conceptual formations

only when they constitute one side of a conceptual construct whose other side founds meaning and provides ontological or other guarantees for the imposition of meaning. Pessimistic and optimistic components coexist within every world-image which cannot completely relinquish normative aspects, as is the case in the human condition per se. If that were not the case, the world-image would prove to be incapable of withstanding the competition from others, i.e. of fulfilling the polemical purpose and in that satisfying corresponding claims to power. The reason for that is obvious: we initiate and at the same time justify a polemic, by referring to elements of reality which are worthless or harmful and as such infuse sorrow and melancholy. And then we put forward and justify a claim to power, by maintaining with optimism that through social approval or even imposition of our standpoint that founds meaning we can eliminate those ills. What we do in effect is to identify the victory of our own position with social salvation. In fact: to date there has been no single instance in history where someone stated that the ills against which he is contending could be eradicated with the prescriptions and action of their adversaries rather than their own. This explains why in all great world-images throughout the history of ideas, good and evil or optimism and pessimism coexist. And it is irrelevant whether the respective conceptual pairs are called God and devil, salvation and sin, freedom and oppression, self-realization and alienation, or multicultural society and racism/nationalism.

We shall now give a more concrete outline to this fundamental figure of thought using examples from the second level referred to above, that is, from the anthropological level. The Christian-theological conception of man distinguishes itself structurally by a dualism, both sides of which – the pessimistic and the optimistic – served the Church's claims to power. Human misery after the original sin was described in extremely pessimistic tones, and the practical conclusion was obvious: if man is so weak and unpredictable, then he needs permanent supervision and disciplining from an authority that knows unquestioningly what is good and what evil, and moreover what is required for the individual's salvation. But what could guarantee the final success of efforts toward salvation and at the same time the justification of the manipulation by that authority in any event? For the certainty of redemption – always on the condition of spiritual guidance – the optimistic viewpoint of the conception of man was itself the guarantee. The doctrine of human race being created in God's image revealed the ultimate ontological foundation of human existence and served both as an affirmation and a reminder that one *had* to reach this foundation inevitably, once one casted off the miasma that had enveloped them up to that time through asceticism and repentance. Disciplining under ecclesiastical supervision, whose necessity was based primarily on the doctrine of original sin, thus found its ultimate and above all comforting vindication in the doctrine of image and likeness of God.

From this perspective it is not difficult to understand which polemical reasons impelled Luther to emphatically underline the pessimistic aspect of Christian anthropology: Refraining from an ontological, i.e. necessarily existing ground for salvation, made salvation dependent on the unexplored divine will and thus wrested it from the institutional control and guarantee of the (traditional) Church. The fact that pessimism about human nature in no way checked the activist impulse of Protestantism should not, in light of our programmatic ascertainments regarding the connection between melancholy and polemics, appear paradoxical any more. We must be content to simply indicate this here, so as to focus more deeply on the complementarity of the optimistic and the pessimistic aspect in the anthropology (of one of the main currents) of the Enlightenment. The latter reversed both components of the theological conception of man and thereby retained the dualism by changing its signs. For obvious reasons, the Enlightenment could not seriously question theology's and the Church's social claims to power without confuting the doctrine on the innate sinfulness of Adam's descendants. This doctrine was juxtaposed with the view that human Reason is capable of setting and observing rules of moral conduct on its own resources: the main current of the Enlightenment was in fact of the opinion that not only Reason, but already the sentient nature of man could take care of autonomous moral action. Instinctive drives, passions and so on, are either good from the outset or



can be channeled in such a way that enlightened self-esteem overcomes egomania and greed. However, a much less optimistic view of man resulted from the polemical reversal of the doctrine of image and likeness. Man as the image of God – and therefore God himself – has been destroyed or degraded by being subjected to the strict laws of natural causality, namely, both as Reason and as a sentient being, given that it was precisely Reason that could be interpreted as the spark of God within man. In the overall view of the Enlightenment, pessimistic-deterministic anthropology now stood in opposition to optimistic anthropology (of Reason) in exactly the same way in which theological view, the doctrine of original sin and the doctrine of image and likeness stood in opposition. Enlightenment thinking employed numerous artifices to escape this logical impasse. Nevertheless, from a polemical viewpoint both sides of the dilemma were indispensable. And this was not the first nor would it be the last time in the history of ideas that, in the parallel use of pessimistic and optimistic positions, consistency in polemics outpaced logical consistency.

With too little space allotted here we cannot in the same way examine the decisive polemical aspect of the anthropological pessimistic viewpoint in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The philosophical and literary decomposition of the ego into randomly or temporarily interconnected functions or alternatively into confluent mental and affective currents that turn against the bourgeois synthetic-harmonizing conception of man paved the way for the (no longer

necessarily pessimistic) conception of the subject as open and fluid, which is typical for an utterly mobile mass democracy. Now we shall proceed to the level of historical and philosophical culture, where the contrast between the schema of linear progress and cyclical historical movement (which ends in a quasi impasse) becomes immediately apparent. However, our purpose is served equally well if we remember how the double-faced perception of history was formed in the Enlightenment. The choice of this example is appropriate on account of the highly instructive structural analogy between this aspect of Enlightenment thinking and its anthropological dilemma that we just outlined. In order to deal with Christian historical universalism that sought to subject the history of all nations and all eras to the great common denominator of the designs of Divine Providence, history and philosophy of history in the Enlightenment strove to highlight the special individuality of each nation and each era. Something of this sort could only be achieved if it were demonstrated that historical individuality is shaped in space and time under the visible or invisible influence of causal material factors, in this case geographical, economic and others, as well as political and ideological factors, which in turn emanated more or less deterministically from material circumstances. The deep pessimism that frequently characterizes historical thinking in the Enlightenment is born precisely from the enlistment of as strong a determinism as possible against the hidden and imponderable design of Providence.

Determinism could possibly explain the individual case, but even when the explanation of isolated historical cases was successful, this did not satisfy the demand for a normative and moral coherence of the overall course of history. But we know the social and political fate of those who preach the absence of all meaning. Enlightenment had to mobilize an analogous or even stronger demand particularly against the moral demands of its theological adversary. This demand was reflected in constructs that put an end to the perpetual ebb and flow between causal and normative, pessimistic and optimistic views within the field of the philosophy of history. Of course these did not push aside the knowledge about causal mechanisms which had been gained in the meantime, but a happy end was secured by a particular treatment of the isolated historical cases, one that allowed them to constitute an ascending hierarchy.

We have inadequate space to say more about the way in which the shaping of programmatically pessimistic philosophies of history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was placed in the service of polemics against bourgeois belief in progress and at the same time against a Marxist eschatological view of history, which stood in direct succession of the former. Instead, we should like to conclude our retrospective of the history of ideas with a brief reflection on the notion of crisis, which accompanies the European Modern Era like a shadow. If one were to take the frequency with which this notion is used as a criterion, one would have to consider the 20<sup>th</sup> century

in Europe as the most depressing era in world history. But there is no tangible evidence to support the conclusion that human misery and happiness were distributed in that era any differently than in others. Moreover, if all of the various diagnoses of the crisis corresponded to reality, contemporary society would have disintegrated long ago. Quite irrespective of whether there is a crisis and how it may be defined, a clear distinction must be made in each case between the diagnosis of a crisis and the actual processes that constitute it. Here, only the former is of interest, namely in its necessarily twofold relation to melancholy and polemics. Diagnosis of a crisis produces discomfort or fear, because it holds out the prospect of the dangerous and the uncertain. At the same time it contains or entails a genetic explanation of the crisis as a situation, i.e. reference to the factors that caused it as well as a call to overcome them, and consequently to restore normal conditions, that is, for the implementation of a normative principle that is immune to any crisis. This means specifically: whoever claims the status of a social healer, must first give a diagnosis of the malady and the crisis, and subsequently draw from the diagnosis the legitimacy of the struggle against those that are responsible for it. In the Modern Era the usual linking of such social power claims with diagnoses of crises stemmed from the fact that the latter declared constant progress to be their internal law, and hence they were forced to live with the constant fear of absence of progress. When the denounced ills are not presented as perpetually

recurring irreversible fate but as the defects of a mechanism that can principally be repaired, crisis receives a special meaning almost to be interpreted in a polemic and activist way. Without also being the mechanic of crisis the diagnostic of crisis would quickly turn into a stoically distanced bystander.

The differentiation we made previously between crisis diagnosis and crisis reality suggests the general methodological necessity for as clear a distinction as possible to be made between the self-understanding of acting subjects, their actions and actual processes. The melancholic-pessimistic spirit of a subject who acts in society or in the history of ideas reflects his self-understanding, and can lead to a praxis that is related to the spirit more in a symbolic than in a logical way. Generally the level of self-understanding often proves to be far more complex and conceptually less accessible than the level of action in the real world. The former is characterized through countless mental and conceptual magnitudes that play ceaseless combinatorial games, while the latter is pushed in more or less recognizable directions by concrete conditions and not least by polemic considerations. In other words, an act is more commonplace than the self-understanding of its conveyor. Although meaning-bestowals on the level of self-understanding as attempts to escape the commonplaceness of the act are socially and culturally inevitable, as soon as we become familiar with the perspectival character of the meaning-bestowals as well as their specific intentionality, this commonplaceness becomes obvious. However, the

commonplace and the obvious do not readily coincide. And human life, in its commonplaceness, remains perhaps more unfathomable than the labyrinthine, optimistic or pessimistic wisdom of the meaning-bestowals<sup>1</sup>.

Author's bionote:

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1 Regarding the issues of anthropology, the philosophy of culture and the history of ideas which are touched on here, see Panajotis Kondylis, *Macht und Entscheidung. Die Herausbildung der Weltbilder und die Wertfrage* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984); *Die Aufklärung im Rahmen des neuzeitlichen Rationalismus* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981); *Der Niedergang der bürgerlichen Denk- und Lebensform, Die liberale Moderne und die massendemokratische Postmoderne* (Weinheim: VCH-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1991).