

Modernity and secularization in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* by Hans Blumenberg
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To ask the question concerning 'legitimacy in the modern era' represents an act characteristic of post-modernity, i.e. of a modernity which is suspicious of its own foundations. One of the recurrent forms of this question consists in asking whether the values proclaimed by modernity, the values of what we call 'the Enlightenment' (secularism, the autonomy of reason, progress, political liberalism, etc.), are or are not authentic values. Is modernity, in the words of Nietzsche, a high or a low civilization? Is it in particular a substitute for Christian theology or the moment at which values are created? Behind these apparently historical questions another lies hidden, namely the relief of that modernity in the recovery of the intellectual act by which it was inaugurated. Does this represent a reinstatement of the lost link with a premodern theology or the movement of the project of autonomy proclaimed by modernity towards its fulfilment?

These are issues which were more than adequately addressed by Eric Voegelin, and we would certainly not wish to summarize his position as being 'anti-modern'. Today, I would like to approach these questions in relation to Hans Blumenberg (1920-1996) and more especially his work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (first edition, 1966; second edition, significantly revised and enlarged, published between 1973 and 1976. English trans. R.W. Wallace, MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.), London (Engl.), 1983, repub. 1985 [LMA]). By way of conclusion, I will return to the connections which may be established between the two thinkers.

The works of Hans Blumenberg fall more generally within the category of a hermeneutic of metaphor. It is, for him, a question of substituting the study of the more hidden work of metaphors, symbols and myths for the traditional history of concepts and doctrines. More precisely, the task is to locate movements and changes of emphasis which arise in the comprehension of the recurrent images of history and thought – this is what Blumenberg himself calls a 'phenomenology of the reception of myths'. Using this general method of hermeneutics of metaphor, Blumenberg attempts to identify ruptures within the history of thought beneath the apparent continuities. He is particularly interested in the 'epochal threshold' (*Epochenschwelle*), which philosophical modernity represents, and whose origin is to be found in the Renaissance and the Classical Age. Indeed, for Blumenberg (an inheritor of Cassirer at this point), modernity is characterized by the presence of a specific intellectual act which cannot be reduced to its ancient or medieval antecedents. This act peculiar to modernity consists in the self-affirmation or self-positioning of Man and his techno-rational power, understood as a demiurgic power not limited to the predetermined world of possibles, but independently capable of opening itself to a universe of possibles (*LMA*, IV, 2, p. 533).

Such a hermeneutic of Renaissance, Classical and Enlightenment texts exists in opposition to a 'backward' and anti-modernist hermeneutic of Renaissance and early Classical texts, for which the 'resonant concepts of modernity' (to repeat and extend the expression formulated by Carl Schmitt at the beginning of the third chapter of the *Political Theology* of 1922) were formed in the crucible of late scholastic medieval theology. This hermeneutic has given rise to readings of medieval and Renaissance texts which usually constitute part of a dual strategy of appropriation and denigration, able to differentiate amongst the moderns between a 'positive' school of thought, with its origins in pre-modern traditions (more often than not theological), and a 'negative' school, often defined by the schemata devised by Heidegger in order to conceptualize the destiny of the metaphysical, which would result from the translation of those pre-modern notions outside of their original semantic context.

The fact that Blumenberg undertakes a defense of modernity does not of course mean that he is seeking to justify the totalitarian domination of technical rationality over being, nor the religion of progress and the mundane eschatologies which accompany them, nor still the philosophy of subjectivity and the resultant solipsistic confinement of Mankind – to take some of the principal criticisms leveled at modernity since the 1950s. The Blumenbergian defense of modernity proceeds via a questioning of these recurrent interpretative schemata within the anti-modern literature. The opening section of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* is thus comprised of a critique of one of the foremost categories for the depreciation of modernity, namely the notion of secularization, or more precisely what Blumenberg calls the ‘secularization theorem’, which may be expressed according to the previously cited formula of Carl Schmitt: ‘all the resonant concepts of modernity are secularized theological concepts’.

There is a significant difference between the simple notion of secularization and the general expression, just cited, which attempts to explain modernity in its entirety. The critique advanced by Blumenberg is not directed towards the very (descriptive) thesis by which it is claimed that a process of secularization has taken place in the modern era. It is not even aimed, at least not directly, at the polemical and anti-modern connotation which this thesis may adopt – the ‘common formula’ which has for a long time consisted in (and which still consists today), Blumenberg writes, of lamenting the secular development of the world. Blumenberg criticizes none of these uses, techniques or arguments. What interests him is another more recent use, in which the concept of ‘secularization’ assumes the role of a category designed to account for modernity as a whole. We are therefore no longer dealing with a notion attempting to signify a group of phenomena *within* history, but rather a general explanatory category *about* history. The depreciatory connotation of the category is at that moment broadened into a global condemnation of modernity: the category of secularization thus becomes a ‘category of historical injustice’, understood in three major ways.

The idea of secularization firstly contains the notion of loss, deprivation or decline. To say that B is the secularization of A (and it is only at this semantic level that the notion of secularization acquires a transitive use), is to say that B is A *minus* something – or that B is A deprived of the dimension of transcendence. A secular religion (e.g. for some, the modern religion of the state, of history, of art, etc.) is a religion which has lost its sacred status. Modernity thus expropriates theological notions, transferring them outside of their authentic semantic context and into another context in which they are trivialized and their meaning dissolved. Thus, for Karl Löwith, the philosophy of the Enlightenment, with its notion of historical progress, has ‘narrowed and stunted [...] the theological schema of historical explanation’, ‘by lowering Divine Providence to the level of human expectation of progress, thereby secularizing it’ (*Meaning of History*, French ed, p. 135).

This loss, however, takes place against a background of continuity. Modernity does not constitute an epoch, since it generates no new values. The ‘resonant concepts of modernity’ are *borrowed* concepts. Modernity does not innovate, but does, as it were, the same thing, although less well, as the theological Middle Ages of which it is the inheritor. This borrowing also creates a debt in its turn, even if that debt is more often than not difficult to express in normative terms: what does our western culture *owe* exactly, in the deontological sense of the term, to Christianity? Should it recognize this descendancy in its constitutional preambles? Here we discover the general imprecision of the contemporary notions of ‘historical debt’, of the ‘duty to remember’, etc.

The fact remains that modernity asserts its novelty, claiming to represent a new beginning, a self-foundation and an authentic creation of values. That is the third blow struck against modernity by the category of secularization: modernity conceals a *lie*. It is not what it claims to be, namely an escape from religion and the liberation of mankind – it is in truth no more

than the continuation of religion by new means. In short, secularism is an illusion, and modernity a myth.

Decline, borrowing and lying – these are the three major implicit and explicit axes of deployment of the antimodern potentialities of the ‘secularization theorem’. It nevertheless remains that Blumenberg does not present a direct counter-attack based on these themes. In fact, only rarely do the theoreticians of secularization, whether they be theologians or philosophers (and in the German thought of the years 1950-60, it is often difficult to trace a precise boundary between the two), offer such brusque, direct condemnations. The notion of secularization functions a little like the Heideggerian notion of ‘onto-theology’, which is simultaneously legitimizing and delegitimizing, and which delegitimizes under the pretence of legitimization and legitimizes only so as to delegitimize more effectively. For secularization may well adopt the appearance of a legitimizing discourse. We may therefore consider Christianity *already* to be a form of secularization – and, in return, that modernity *cannot even* claim the invention of secularization in its favor. Ce qui donne lieu à des types extrêmement sinueux de discours sur la sécularisation, such as that of Rodolph Bultmann, amongst the theologians, or of Odo Marquart for the philosophers. Thus, for the latter, to whom Blumenberg devotes the fifth chapter of the first part of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, and whose standpoint might sometimes appear to be quite close to that of Blumenberg himself, modern secularization has had a positive effect in theology, since it has completed the task of theodicy: by bestowing upon mankind the status of a real actor in history, it has in reality absolved God of the production of evil. Philosophy of history is therefore secularized theology or indirect theology: it only ‘speaks of Man so as not to disturb the image of God’, and the atheism which it professes, or pretends to profess, is an atheism ‘*ad majoram Dei gloria*’ (‘Idealism and theodicy’, in *Des difficultés avec la philosophie de l’histoire*, 1973, French ed, p. 66).

The hermeneutic of secularization is therefore in and of itself structurally delegitimizing (regardless of content) from the moment it repudiates the claim modernity makes regarding the novelty of its act in order to bring it back to a heritage which it cannot discard (conversely, to show the legitimacy of modernity would, for Blumenberg, certainly not mean legitimizing it *through* heritage or *as* heritage). What Blumenberg attacks directly is the hermeneutic structure of the category of secularization, by challenging its claim to explain modernity – even if that explanation claims to be neutral (Weber, Schmitt in the third chapter of his *Political Theology* of 1922), or indeed legitimizing (Schmitt again within certain contexts, crisis theologies, Marquart, etc.).

Blumenberg deploys an array of arguments in the first part of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, a good number of which are *ad hominem*. The most immediately striking arguments are methodological in nature: the category of secularization is imprecise, arbitrary, it explains nothing, it is unable to define the limits of its field of application, etc. It leads us to see the secularization of theological concepts in anything and everything (and sometimes also their opposites) (*LTM*, I, 2, pp. 13-16).

There is another deeper criticism concerning the hermeneutic structure of this category. If such a hermeneutic of history serves a reactionary discourse, it is because it itself participates in a reactionary interpretative activity, that of the enquiry into ‘heritage’, or the ‘dimension of hidden meaning’ (according to the expression used by Gadamer, which forms the title of the second chapter of the first part). Such a hermeneutic is also a hermeneutic of suspicion. We have become accustomed to this, especially since the *Krisis* of Husserl, and even more so since the great texts of Heidegger and everything which has ensued from it. According to this hermeneutic, the present is the presentation of an alienated truth – with the ambiguity upon which the Heideggerian *Ereignis* draws, namely, that that which is hidden is simultaneously revealed, revealed as hidden, etc. The ‘metaphorology’ of Blumenberg constitutes an attempt

to escape from this schema of latency and disclosure, which itself rests upon an ontology of substance (in which the same substance is preserved in history by assuming different accidents). Blumenberg is far from believing that every phenomenon is a myth, and that it conceals what it truly is. His hermeneutic is, on the contrary, centered upon the self-understanding which an era constructs for itself out of its own situation within history – this is, moreover, a hermeneutic bias which he shares with Voegelin to a certain extent. This self-understanding is in a sense the very truth of the phenomenon: thus to say that modernity has understood itself as an ‘epoch’ (and even that it has created this concept of epoch in order to understand its own historical situation) and to say that it is effectively an ‘epoch’, is, for Blumenberg, to say essentially the same thing.

The Blumenbergian critique is accompanied by a rewriting of the history of modernity. The latter begins in the first part and continues in the books that follow, with an analysis of the notions of ‘Gnosticism’, ‘intellectual curiosity’ and ‘epochal threshold’. From the first part onwards, in chapter 6, a fundamental opposition, inherited from Cassirer, appears, between *Umsetzung* and *Umbesetzung* – between the transformation of an unchanging substance which assumes different accidents throughout the course of history and the ‘reoccupation of answer positions’ which have fallen vacant (*LMA*, I, 6, p. 65). Modernity is thus the reply to a question to which the Middle Ages were unable to respond; and since replying to a question also generally involves changing its formulation, we may say that modernity is also and above all else a reformulation of the questions posed during the theological age through the use of new terms.

From this point of view, modernity does indeed constitute an escape from the theological, and not a transformation of the theological into a form of mundane theology. This term ‘escape from the theological’ must be understood in a more general sense, as a liberation from any threat which transcendence might hold regarding the rational activity of mankind (we are not saying liberation from all relations relative to transcendence, which would be something else entirely). Modernity has not forged new gods: its tendency is to free itself from the control of any heteronomy, whatever form that might take.

Let us consider an example – that of history understood as secularization of eschatology. His discussions with Karl Löwith in the 1960s gave Blumenberg the initial idea for his work. Historical progress is not for Blumenberg a secularization of Judaeo-Christian eschatology, in the sense of the creation of a secular religion or of the reinvesting of religious energy in a worldly object. Blumenberg highlights what the notion of historical progress owes to the experience derived from the new discoveries. The lesson of that experience is that science is not a closed field, defined by the Pillars of Hercules which served as great models in the past. Truth, said Bacon following Bruno, is the ‘daughter of time’. It is not given in advance, but remains to be conquered, and the true Ancients, those who have attained a respectable age, are not the Ancients, but the Moderns who have accumulated experience over the course of history. For Blumenberg also, history is a field open to the possibility of exceeding itself. Far from being the realization of an absolute, it is the negation of all truth which presents itself as absolute and definitive, thus hindering human inquisition and action.

The notion of historical progress is not born out of the secularization of Christian salvation, but out of the displacement of the question to which Christian theology had supplied an answer during the Middle Ages. The question is no longer one of knowing how the *constitutive* evils of the human essence will find their ultimate meaning beyond the world (to put it simply, the question of salvation), but whether, and how, those evils, which are only *relative* to a fixed period in the history of mankind (and therefore contingent), will be, at least partially, reduced. It is in this capacity that modernity constitutes for Blumenberg, not a ‘relapse of Gnosticism’, in the way that Voegelin had written, but a movement beyond Gnosticism (*Ibid.*, II, introduction, p. 126). The notion of historical progress is thus born not

out of the certainty of the realm beyond the world, but out of the awareness of the provisional and relative character of the situation of mankind in the world; and if there is a form of 'certainty' in progress, it is not a secularization of faith in Providence, but rather designates the (empirically-based) confidence of Man in his own resources. There is no 'inevitability' to historical progress, writes Blumenberg against Scholem, but simply its predictable character. The same may be said of the notion of the infinity of historical progress. The genesis of the modern notion of infinity is analyzed in the first and fourth parts of the *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, as well as in the *The Genesis of the Copernican World*. To summarize matters from that point of view which interests us here, the modern notion of infinity does not itself imply a deification of the world, but retains a negative meaning of indefinite – infinity is 'more a predicate of indefiniteness than of fulfilling dignity', writes Blumenberg in his analysis of Hobbes (*LMA.*, I, 7, p. 85) – and it is significant that Blumenberg chooses to refer here to Hobbes rather than Descartes, for whom it would be difficult to say infinity is only a negative predicate. The history of modern thought must be understood not as the realization of an absolute, nor as the historicization of the absolute, but as a departure from the very problem of the absolute through the development of mankind. It does not incorporate Man within a transcendent perspective, but within a perspective of immanence.

Another example of a misinterpreted act of modernity is that of the modern state conceived as a secularization of the divine omnipotence. It is tempting to see in the modern representation of sovereignty, defined, since Bodin, as absolute power, a transposition of the *potentia absoluta Dei*. If discussion with Löwith supplied Blumenberg with his initial point of reflexion, it was Carl Schmitt who gave Blumenberg the model for the articulation of the secularization 'theorem', according to which 'all the resonant concepts of modernity are secularized theological concepts'. It is true that Schmitt clarified 'political concepts', and that he limited the use of his concept of secularization to heuristic use in the legal domain – for him, the idea implied less a transfer than a structural analogy (*Political Theology*, 1922, p. 47). More importantly, it is also true that Schmitt (in contradistinction to Löwith during the 1950s) was not using this concept in an explicitly delegitimizing sense in 1922.

Let us however stay with this final point. Schmitt is not properly speaking an anti-modern, in the sense of being nostalgic for the medieval theologico-political order. In any case, if he is, he notes the impossibility of returning to the politics of the old theocratic schemata. His archetype for political authoritarianism is not Theodosius (the model of the Christian prince in Augustine) or Saint Louis, but rather, Mussolini. In short, Schmitt is not a pre-modern. He however remains an anti-modern in the sense that modernity is defined as the liberation of mankind in relation to the theological, or, according to the definition of the Enlightenment given by Kant, in his *An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'*, as the 'liberation of the human being from a state of tutelage for which he himself is responsible'. Against *this* rationalistic and liberal modernity, Schmitt employs the resources supplied by the 'secularization theorem' and, in particular, those linked to the idea of myth (and the denunciation of the myths of liberal modernity undoubtedly constitutes the register in which Schmitt shows the greatest virtuosity). For the claims to autonomy advanced by this modernity are no more than illusory; the modernity of the Enlightenment is unable to liberate itself from the theological. It is, moreover, impossible for us ever to escape from the theological. The only real choice is that between an orthodox, coherent political theology capable of accepting itself as such and a heterodox, contradictory, and latent political theology. Liberal political theology is therefore caught in a stranglehold. At worst, it takes refuge in the political incoherence of democratic monarchy, a secular translation (also incoherent and contradictory) of the theology of the *Deus sive natura*. If it is coherent with itself, liberal modernity tends towards atheism. Liberals are for Schmitt no more than weak and fearful Bakuninians or Leninists (and Schmitt does not in return hide his fascination with

authentic nihilist radicals). However – and this is the crux of the matter – atheism itself is not an escape route from theology. To rebel against God is not to escape religion. In the end, only the state decisionism extolled by Schmitt, based upon the relational commandment of simple obedience, represents a successful secular theology. It is successful because it acknowledges the weight of original sin, which at the political level is expressed through the inability of Man to govern himself and to establish a world of universal peace. It is also successful, above all, because it deferentially leaves the fulfilment of the Kingdom to God instead of laying claim to its realization in the world and in history. From this point of view, the virtues of the citizen are those of the Christian, namely humility, obedience and patience.

When Blumenberg confronts Schmitt (and in agreement with Denis Trierweiler we believe that this confrontation is crucial), obliquely in the edition of 1966, and openly in the edition of 1973 which answers the objections raised in the ‘second’ *Political Theology* of 1969), he not only confronts the statement of the ‘secularization theorem’ presented within very narrow limits in the third chapter of the *Political Theology* of 1922 (which is why Blumenberg entitles his chapter ‘Political Theology I and II’); he confronts the Schmittian project in its entirety, a project which he understands retroactively, and particularly in relation to the development of Carl Schmitt in 1926 (definition of hostility as the fundamental category of the political), then in the 1930s, before 1934 (where he defends the principle of a presidential dictatorship capable of keeping radical parties at a distance) and after 1934, the time of his support for Nazism. Let us retain two essential points of the Blumenberg critique, which is, it must be said, one of the rare critiques, along with that of Voegelin, to have confronted the Schmittian project from a conceptual standpoint.

The first difference of opinion concerns the meaning of modern sovereignty. For Blumenberg, this does not imply the substitution of the absolute power of Man for that of God. It is not a matter of transposing a model, but of abandoning the question of authority, through the replacement of autocracy with the impersonal power of reason. The notion of sovereignty, with its theological connotation, has thus been used as a ‘cover’ for liberating oneself from the theocratic schema. More generally, for Blumenberg, every discourse of deification, infinitization and of absolutization (of the world, history, the state, etc.) from the beginning of modernity has a value which is above all rhetorical and polemical. They do not in the least define the limits of modernity. Indeed, modern politics has rather, at least since Hobbes, aimed at the suppression of sovereignty in its voluntarist and heteronomic capacities; and if, as Schmitt thought in 1926, politics must also disappear with sovereignty (or *the* political, in its heteronomic dimension), then politics (or the political) will have been only a stage in the shaping of modernity. The self-government of society, and the autonomy of Man which underlies it, is not therefore in the final analysis, a delusion, but truly the limit of modernity. Blumenberg shows himself to be fundamentally a liberal at this point. Modernity thus does not consist of an affirmation of the political, but, on the contrary, abandons the absolutism of the political, which is strategically asserted in the beginning only in order to combat another absolutism on equal terms – that of the religious.

The second scene of this confrontation with Schmitt relates to the meaning of the self-affirmation of human reason, understood simultaneously by Blumenberg as the founding act of modernity and that by which modernity is legitimized as a new epoch. Carl Schmitt sees a form of deification of mankind here – and thus a kind of theological *hubris*. At the end of his *Political Theology* of 1969, he pushes its egotistic and diabolical character to an extreme, not however without demonstrating a degree of fascination for this type of nihilism. Rehearsing concepts put in place in the 1930s (and in a very different context), Blumenberg argues, against Schmitt, that self-legitimation is at best no more than a legalization (in the same way that legal norms are, judicially speaking, established within a closed legal system), whereas legitimization is constructed in reference to a heritage (*Political Theology*, 1969, postface,

French ed, p. 170) such as a custom, national sentiment, etc. Blumenberg responds by making a distinction between self-affirmation and self-legitimation (*LMA*, I, 8, p. 97). The modern age does not legitimate itself. It is legitimate due to the necessity which is born out of the impasse caused by the late medieval crisis, and by the failure of theology to answer the question which it itself had posed. Paradoxically, for Blumenberg, it is the very concept of legitimation (through historical heritage) which is disposed of by modernity; the latter does not therefore displace the question of a foundation, but frees itself from it. The problem is thus not one of self-affirmation which is not self-legitimation, but rather that of a legitimacy which distances itself from the problem of legitimation.

In this sense we may say that Blumenberg understands modernity through the prism of postmodernity, or even that modernity to him represents a proto-postmodernity. It has often been said that postmodernity inaugurated a more distant and ironic relationship with regard to the values of modernity. However, in reality, those values were not posited as absolutes by modernity itself. Various analyses from Bruno, Descartes, Leibniz, and even from Hegel, have from the Renaissance onwards displayed this distancing from any absolute value, both immanent and transcendent. The Enlightenment, as Blumenberg understands it, does not so much celebrate the triumph of rationality as set out (in a discerning and concerned fashion) the problems engendered by this new rationality. Modernity does not, for Blumenberg (as with Voegelin), commit itself to a dogmatomachy. It is not a response to eternal theological problems *by* mankind (in the sense that Man, and not God, would form the reply to these questions), but rather a questioning *which begins with* Man and the legitimate confidence which he may have in his rational powers. What Blumenberg says of the modern concept of infinity may be said of all the resonant concepts of modernity — that it ‘serves [...] less to answer one of the great traditional questions than to blunt it’ (*LMA*, I, 7, p. 85).

At this juncture, it is possible to say that through different means, Blumenberg rediscovers some of the insights of Voegelin, whose interpretation of modernity he criticizes as a ‘relapse of Gnosticism’, whilst clarifying (paradoxically) that his critique is not concerned with the expression ‘from the point of view of what the author truly meant’, thereby appearing to recognize for himself the existence of a fundamental agreement beneath the superficial differences. In fact, the two thinkers are advocates of a modernity of compromise, opposed to ‘unrestrained modernity’, which, for Voegelin, found its fullest expression in various totalitarianisms. It is also, for Blumenberg, a question of going beyond the aestheticization of Schmitt and Heidegger (amongst others) in order to uncover the true meaning of modernity, which is, undoubtedly, an assertion of reason, but a reason which remains concerned about its own potential whilst turning its back against any absolutizing rationalist excess.