

Jean François Lyotard

Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History.

Trans. George Van Den Abbeele.

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Readers of Jean-Francois Lyotard's previously translated books will not be surprised by the theses of *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History*. Overlapping with his work in *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, and in many cases a presentation of passages that will be repeated word-for-word in the last third of *The Differend*, *Enthusiasm* is best read as an effort to consolidate various recurrent themes into a single context. At just 67 pages in length, it merits the attention of readers interested in the political significance of Lyotard's Wittgensteinian approach to language and his persistent fascination with Kantian critical judgment. Exploring the notions of 'passages', the sublime, freedom, the nature of the political and the sign of history, *Enthusiasm* may be fascinating to undergraduates newly-introduced to Lyotard's work and intriguing to those seeking to contextualize what they have already grasped.

Presented at a conference sponsored by Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique* in 1981, *Enthusiasm* is in part a response to Nancy's article 'The Hegelian Monarch' concerning the question of whether critical interpretation can (or indeed should) be 'internal' or 'external'. However, it is arguable that Lyotard and Nancy's respective works have remained in close dialogue, with Nancy responding to it even after Lyotard's death. For example, Nancy's *The Experience of Freedom*, *Lapsis iudicii* and *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, as well as several papers on the sublime, all merit close reading in conjunction with Lyotard's work. And Nancy's most recent work on justice and democracy resonates with the results of this engagement.

Chapter 1, 'The Critical is Analogous to the Political', should be read alongside Nancy's *Lapsis iudicii*, which also addresses matters pertaining to the juridical: judgment, the judge, generality, and the case or instant. Here Lyotard explores the 'affinity' (or 'analogy') between 'the critical' and the 'political' on the grounds that each must pass judgments in the absence of preconditioning rules. For Lyotard, what distinguishes politics and history from politico-juridical discourse is that the latter's doctrine of right requires that there be rules for making judgments, whereas the latter is singularly marked by their lack. The analogy is expressed by Lyotard in terms of 'universes' and 'phrases': the critical may be the political in the 'universe' of philosophical 'phrases', and the political may be the critical in the 'universe' of sociohistorical 'phrases'.

In this chapter Lyotard argues that the analogy between the critical-philosophical and the politico-historical is possible only if the former is critical and not doctrinal. This is because the doctrinal should follow upon the critical, given that the 'right' to judge is also subject to judgment itself. The critical philosopher, likened by Kant to a judge or court of justice, judges what is the case or whether a phrase is the correct one, though without any doctrine, codebook or system that could serve as a guide. There is no previously established rule that such judgment must obey; on the contrary, the very applicability of the rule is subjected to judgment. Lyotard understands Kant to be maintaining that the critic, while judging critically in order to establish doctrine, is looking beyond the formation of doctrine toward the type known as 'the philosopher'. If the ideal of the philosopher is one who can theorize the gap between critical thought and the philosophical thought that is legislative of human reason, then each critical philosopher should be guided by this ideal when making judgments about relevance, truth and 'passaging'. Lyotard offers an intriguing *reductio ad absurdum* argument: Even if critical philosophy is mindful of the idea of the philosopher, the legislation of human reason and the establishment of the rules governing all possible phrasing by means of the determination of the essential ends of human reason, it is still unclear how the critical philosopher can judge truthfully that there is no intuition to be presented for a given case. The answer, he proposes, is that for each determination of the case critique presents it with an 'as-if' referent, often understood by Kant to be 'symbolical'. Ultimately, Lyotard insists, it is by means of symbols that the critical judge of what is the case can recognize the heterogeneity of phrase families in the absence of rules and decide without having any formal authority to do so.

Chapter 2, 'The Archipelago', can be read fruitfully alongside Nancy's etymological work on 'pirating' in *The Experience of Freedom*. In this chapter the critical function is understood to arise from a quasi- (or 'as-if') faculty, the faculty of judgment. Because there is free play among the faculties, there is a certain indeterminacy in the way a rule determines which domain is relevant to it. The critical philosopher decides which of several respective claims to meaning by the faculties is legitimate. He or she both divides them by showing their incommensurability and mediates them by suggesting 'passages' between domains subjected to heterogeneous rules. For Lyotard, among the most interesting of the terms used to designate such 'passages' is 'the sign of history' in Kant's political writings, which refers back to the 'symbolical' mentioned above.

Here Lyotard proposes that we think of each phrase family as an island and the faculty of judgment itself as the 'admiral' endeavoring to explore an archipelago, carrying and trading ideas among the islands. Critical judgment does not create the conceptual milieu of the 'passage', but merely judges whether and how one may pass from island to island. In this context, Lyotard notes several such 'passages', in particular those pertaining to transcendental illusion, the beautiful and the morally good, and the law of nature as the 'type' of the law of freedom. In each 'passage' he identifies an activity of reflective judgment in which order among singularities is sought only because it is 'as if'

such order existed. And, again, in the free play of imagination and understanding, there is no rule that judgment must presuppose order in order to find it.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Lyotard draws the notions of judgment and symbolization into the study of history. He categorizes the heterogeneity of phrase families operative in conceptualizations of the politico-historical (e.g. descriptive, deontic, teleological, fictional, etc.). As a critical thinker, Lyotard argues, Kant offers suggestions about how possible ‘passages’ between these phrase families can be recognized. Such ‘passages’ come in the form of signs that offer an indeterminate unity to the politico-historical. In passing from one such family to another, Kant’s work on the politico-historical obeys the rules of whichever family he deems pertinent and are thus ‘immanent to’ whichever universe they present. Whether by means of rules or by conceptual spacings, Kant is understood by Lyotard to be striving to contribute to the effectuation of the politico-historical, an effectuation in the form of an understanding of the ‘enlightened’ role of the philosopher and the delineation of a common public space of discourse.

Chapter 4 itself is introduced with a very informative presentation of various Kantian distinctions Lyotard finds important, including those between the moral politician/political moralist, the public/private domains, and the difference between common being and the ‘world of readers’, all of which is vital to any understanding of Kant’s view of ‘Enlightenment’ and thus of the politico-historical. Interestingly, Lyotard uses at some length a seemingly offhanded comment in Kant about ‘the novel’ to approach one possible concatenation of the phrase families composing the politico-historical. In this context he also explores Kant’s claim that the sign of progress in history, or indeed the sign that there is history at all, is enthusiasm for the French revolutionary’s struggle for rights and the Idea of freedom qua free causality inherent in it. Yet Lyotard, following Kant, warns us against presuming that such enthusiasm qua sign of history should be taken as an example or schema of progress. In fact, this notion of enthusiasm opens the domain of the politico-historical in Kant’s work and is surely the guiding thread throughout *Enthusiasm*: the earlier chapters prepare for it, and the concluding chapters offer contemporary speculations about it.

In Chapter 5, Lyotard wonders what is relevant in the Kantian critical view of history today. He addresses the question of whether philosophy has the power to propose, judge and establish any phrase family (or concatenation of phrase families) as capable of presenting the political in its totality. Ultimately, he argues, any philosophy of the political proves to be political itself whenever it discriminates (as Kant does) between the myriad phrase families that can be used to present the political domain. In addition, the rules used to mark the passages that can be followed between the phrase families and their domains are themselves politico-historical rules. Lyotard proposes that Kant can lead us to questions how we may discern, respect and foster respect for the heterogeneity of phrase families, as well as to develop an aptitude for formulating other languages capable of expressing what cannot be expressed in existing phrase families. We must learn

to sanction the coexistence of what is heteronomous, while remaining critically receptive to the tenuous hold we have on any authority to sanction. Arguably, Lyotard's expedition has taken us to the limit of the postmodern. In this respect, *Enthusiasm* is more interesting for its exploration of its own 'archipelago' than for any commerce in theories transacted among the islands it visits.

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