

Afterword: Emmanuel Levinas, the multicultural philosopher

A recent obituary (December 28, 1995) released by AP-Paris called Emmanuel Levinas a “philosopher of four cultures”: Russian, Jewish, German and French. The note could have read “of five cultures” for he also wrote in Lithuanian. In general, most biographical sketches of Levinas mention the importance of the Russian classics in his early formation as a thinker, but do not offer any further information. To date, the Lithuanian aspect of Levinas’s East European heritage seems to have been either overlooked or simply has not been the object of any scholarly study.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in 1906 in Kaunas, Lithuania, the last garrison on the Western frontier of the Russian Empire. The city, having a very large Russian military and Jewish population in addition to its Lithuanian inhabitants, was essentially a tricultural environment. It is in this environment that Levinas grew up and went to school until he left for France in 1923 (except for a few years in the Ukraine around the time of the Revolution) and to which he would return every summer until 1937 when it became impossible to travel across Germany.

Thus, the primary element in his formative years was this mixture of cultures. He went to a Russian school, but the Lithuanian-Jewish culture in which he grew up had a very special meaning; Lithuanian Jews considered themselves to be different from other East European Jews. Lithuania was the center of Jewish scholarship in Eastern Europe. The renowned rabbinical school in Vilnius in the 18th and 19th centuries was a place of great intellectual rigour. In Lithuania, an intellectual Jewish tradition existed as nowhere else in Eastern Europe, producing the genius Elia ben Solomon Zalman, known as the Gaon of Vilnius, and also some very capable philosophers such as Solomon Maimon, who was a contemporary of Kant. Lithuanian Jews were conscious of this intellectual tradition and never embraced the Hasidic mystical movement, which was very strong in Poland, Byelorussia and the Ukraine. Without a doubt, an investigation into the influences of this Lithuanian-Jewish culture, especially in Levinas’s later works, could prove indispensable to understanding him as a thinker.

Furthermore, Lithuania has a very rich folkloric cultural heritage steeped in pagan forms of nature worship which can still be found today in some parts of the countryside. In the Lithuanian culture in which Levinas grew up, a strong sense of awe before existence was very present. In one of his works, Levinas speaks of his first philosophic experience while lying in bed in Kaunas and listening to the “silent noise.”

The question of Russian culture is more complex, but extremely fertile and worthy of a deeper study as well. It is possible to say that most of Levinas's fundamental concepts: the Other, ethics, communality, the We before the I, inferiority, responsibility, humaneness, guilt and religious philosophy, can be traced back to the 19th century Russian philosophic tradition from Khomiakov to Dostoevsky to Soloviev.

The concern for the other, for the "humiliated and the oppressed," is found throughout the greater part of Russian literary and philosophical writing in the 19th century. Levinas likes to quote Staretz Zossima from *The Brothers Karamazov* when the old monk says "take hold of yourself and make yourself responsible for all men's sins," and "every one of us is responsible for everyone else in every way, and I most of all."

In Russian thought, from the first stirrings of philosophical thought in Russia's Middle Ages, the ethical and communal or collective elements have always predominated over the ontological, metaphysical and speculative elements. In Levinas's philosophy, the "We comes before the I." Similarly, in the Russian tradition, community comes before the individual, and this was always expressed in the concept of the unity of man. Individualism is foreign to the Russian tradition. The words "we" and "our" resound in Russian perhaps more than in any other European language. This is especially striking for a foreigner living in Russia. Whereas an Englishman might say "it is done this way," a Russian will say "we do it like this."

Levinas's use of "sociality" reminds one of the concept of *sobornost* (habitually translated as *conciliarity* in English). The root of the word is *sobirat* which means to bring together. For Alexei Khomiakov, who developed the concept under its theological and philosophical-social aspects, it meant the fellowship of man in unity, mutual love and freedom, rather than by regimentation and coercion. It is the ideal of harmony and unanimity.

Interiority or inwardness is also a Russian idea. A century before Levinas was to accuse Western society of lacking in inwardness, the Slavophiles Ivan Kireevsky and Konstantin Aksakov had done so. The Slavophiles believed that the spiritual integrity which is found in the soul must be transposed onto the social level. Society and culture must be expressions of an organic unity where conscience and interior impulse should be the directing forces in society rather than external laws and regulations which "kill the soul" and eliminate personal responsibility, as in the West. Aksakov said that in the West, "even charity is turned into a mechanical business."

Finally, Levinas's writing about the other as disclosing the divine resembles Vladimir Soloviev's "Lectures On God-Manhood." Pure, abstract, transcendental Revelation is not possible. Revelation happens *in* man, and as it happens

in man, so too must it happen in the collectivity of man, in human society, in the relation of one person or groups of persons to the other.

“The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Culture,” written in Lithuanian in 1933 is a small unknown piece of work that never appeared in any of the recent Levinas biographies. During a trip to Vilnius in 1994, I discovered it in a journal which was lying on the shelf of the periodicals reading room of Vilnius University. It is an archeological relic, but also proof that Levinas is not a “French” philosopher or just simply a Husserlian phenomenologist, but that his philosophical roots lie elsewhere. He is the Other, from a non-Western culture. Perhaps this is, in part, the reason for his popularity.

Today there is a great interest in Levinas in Lithuania and in Russia. Numerous articles have been written about Levinas, and he has been translated into both Russian and Lithuanian. But what astonished the academic community in Vilnius was that Levinas actually knew Lithuanian. No one knew about the existence of this 1933 article. It has been somewhat of a sensation to the young philosophical culture of this nation, which is just beginning to recover from 50 years of Marxist ideology.

As far as the philosophical importance of this article is concerned, the reader can decide for him or herself. It is written by a young philosopher who is looking at what is, for him, two relatively new cultures, two new worlds, and he examines them with youthful admiration and enthusiasm. Nevertheless, in it one can find traces of the Levinas to come: a certain distance with respect to Cartesian rationalism, despite his respect for it, and a certain cautious attraction to an unruly German culture which he presents under an almost intoxicated, Faustian light. And then there is the interest in the “concrete” or “total” man and in total existence.

The proof that Levinas is an outsider to these two cultures lies not only in the fact that the article is written in Lithuanian, but also in that he does not actively identify himself with either one and talks about them as only an outsider can. Thus, perhaps we now have a key to Levinas’s acute criticism of Western philosophy which has garnered him so much popularity and respect for its perceptiveness. Perhaps he was able to be so perceptive of the Western philosophical tradition because he came into it from the outside. He was the distant observer. He was not bred in the polite tradition of classical colleges where Molière and Racine were the fare, but rather on the God-seeking anguish of Dostoevsky. Levinas does not abide by the rules. This will become apparent through his subsequent philosophical style. A French editor once told me that Levinas massacres the French language and that is what gained him his popularity among the intellectual-left in France. Indeed, he was creating phenomenology in a language that was not his own. He twisted and turned the

French language in innumerable, unconventional ways, much more so than any proper Frenchman would have ever dared.

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