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Freedom and Libertinism in Culture.

From José Ortega y Gasset to Eugenio Coseriu

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Abstract: In my paper I aim at discussing the problem of freedom in culture, in general, and in language, in special, by resorting to Ortega y Gasset and Coseriu's philosophical ideas. Both thinkers state that genuine freedom is opposed to barbarism or libertinism due to the fact that it is governed by a series of norms or rules freely consented by society/community. The same is valid, in broad terms, for language as well, only that, in this case, the norms (placed at different levels) present certain particularities.

Keywords: J. Ortega y Gasset; E. Coseriu; culture; norms; freedom; libertinism

1. The way in which I understood this topic is mostly tributary to Eugenio Coseriu's point of view. When I say (as it appears in the title) "from José Ortega y Gasset to Eugenio Coseriu", I mean treating this topic from a chronological perspective: Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) had already dealt with it before Coseriu (1921-2002). However, mention must be made that the Romanian scholar discovered Ortega's work fairly late (seemingly, soon after the Spanish philosopher's death), that is after having shaped his own conception on such a subject². Consequently, Ortega y Gasset's influence on Coseriu (where present) is a *confirmative*, not a *formative* one. But I will refer *in extenso* to all these cases in a special paper devoted to this issue.

2. First, we should explain the notion of *culture* and its relation with *freedom*. I will also resort to Coseriu for this purpose. By combining Hegel's perspective with Aristotle's, Coseriu considers that the cultural activity is, in its essence, *enérgeia* ('pure activity', in Aristotle's terms), similar to *Spirit* (as theorized by Hegel). Thus, *culture* is defined by Coseriu (in his conference *Deontology of Culture*) as follows: "Culture is the historical objectification of spirit into forms which last, into forms which become traditions, historical forms which describe the world specific to humans, the human's specific universe. What do we mean by spirit, what is objectified in history as culture? It is the creative activity, it is creativity itself, not something that creates, but creative activity as such, *enérgeia*, that specific activity which is logically previous to any dynamism, to any acquired or experimented technique." (Coseriu, 1994, p. 173). And he continues with a very important remark: "The creative activity itself is a free

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² See Coseriu's discourse on the occasion of being awarded the title of *doctor honoris causa* by the University of Madrid (Coseriu, 1999, p. 41).

activity, in the philosophical sense of the word «free», that is an activity whose object is infinite.” (Coşeriu, 1994, p. 173).

2.1. Once culture defined as a free activity, Coseriu tries to describe it from an ethical perspective, by referring to the implicit norms which such a human activity has to follow. At this point, Coseriu also resorts to Ortega y Gasset’s conception, by providing a (rather approximate) short quotation from the latter’s philosophical work (a quotation which I will identify, when appropriate, with more precision): “Then – we wonder – how should culture be? Each activity, any human activity has its own inner norm, a norm which involves a certain morality, a certain ethics of this activity. A free activity does not mean an activity without norms, and, as Ortega said when he was precisely talking about free activities, it is not the norm the one which limits freedom, but, on the contrary, the norm is accepted by freedom itself, by a certain organization of freedom: «The absence of norm is barbarism», as Ortega would say. Therefore, if we want to be civilized and educated, we have to understand that each activity, everything we do has its own inner norm, which we have to follow. This inner norm is not imposed, but it is an obligation in the old Latin sense of the word *obligatio*, which means ‘a freely accepted norm’. In Romanian, this would equal with: *e un legământ* [‘it is a vow’]. Everything we do in culture and in any other form of activity contains, implies a vow; in the case of culture, always, the vow corresponds to the essence of this form of culture.” (Coşeriu, 1994, p. 174).

2.2. As an essential part (even base) of culture, *language* follows the same fundamental norms. But, as we penetrate its complex reality, the norms become more and more, and refine themselves according to the levels of language. For this reason, some speakers (and even some linguists) tend to take the linguistic liberalism for the real linguistic freedom. In another Romanian conference, *Deontology and Ethics of Language*, Coseriu clarifies all these aspects, invoking Ortega y Gasset again: “That is why, the excessive linguistic liberalism is not really liberalism, but rather libertinism, for it does not admit the existence of these norms which interest all speakers. This liberalism does not promote, actually, freedom of language, which is always motivated freedom, but, on the contrary; the arbitrary attitude is not, in fact, a progressive, tolerant and democratic attitude, but, on the contrary, it is a reactive and anti-democratic attitude, because, by saying: «Everyone may speak the way he wants or thinks.», it means leaving every speaker in his own sphere and at his level of culture and denying his possibility and aspiration to contribute to the major culture of his community. When one says: «All right, if he/she makes mistakes while speaking, that is ok if we understand him/her; it doesn’t matter at all.», it is inappropriate. It has great social, cultural and political importance, and stating that it doesn’t have any importance is, in fact, arbitrary attitude and libertinism, not liberalism. We can conclude with the words of Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher, which also apply to linguistic norms, just as they apply to other cultural and social norms: «Lo peor no son las normas rígidas, lo peor es la ausencia de normas que es bárbarie».” (Coşeriu, 1994, p. 171).

The same ideas are also present in a conference delivered by Coseriu in Spanish (*Texto, valores, enseñanza*), where Ortega is mentioned again: “Entonces hay que procurar que los alumnos asuman que todos ellos poseen esta dignidad simplemente por ser hombres y tener el lenguaje. Hay que intentar que respeten el lenguaje en todas sus formas y que vean los deberes intrínsecos que tienen respecto del lenguaje: hay que seguir unas normas que no son impuestas sino un compromiso, pues aceptamos ser libres y actuar libremente. Hay que hacer entender, en definitiva, parafraseando a José Ortega y Gasset, que lo malo no son las normas rigurosas: lo malo es la ausencia de normas, que es barbarie.” (Coseriu & Loureda, 2006, p. 126).

3. We have already seen that Eugenio Coseriu resorted – in an approximate quotation – to Ortega y Gasset’s words. At this point, we should identify the exact place in which the Spanish philosopher refers

to barbarism in relation to the absence of cultural norms. What is of interest to us is to be found mainly in his book, *The Revolt of the Masses* [*La rebelión de las masas*, 1930], which actually continues some ideas from a previous (partially historical) book, namely *Invertebrate Spain* [*España invertebrada*, 1921].

3.1. In the seventh chapter from *The Revolt of the Masses*, Ortega states that, unlike the mass-man, “the select man, the excellent man is urged, by interior necessity, to appeal from himself to some standard beyond himself, superior to himself, whose service he freely accepts.” (Ortega y Gasset, 1957, p. 63). In fact, *nobility* itself “is defined by the demands it makes on us – by obligation, not by rights. *Noblesse oblige*.” (Ortega y Gasset, 1957, p. 63). On the contrary, the so-called *mass-man* “would never have accepted authority external to himself had not his surroundings violently forced him to do so. As today his surroundings do not so force him, the everlasting mass-man, true to his character, ceases to appeal to other authority and feels himself lord of his own existence.” (Ortega y Gasset, 1957, p. 63).

3.2. Taking *culture* in a broad sense, Ortega emphasizes the necessity that all activities included in the sphere of culture (and civilization) follow certain principles or norms, otherwise there will be no genuine culture: “Whoever wishes to have ideas must first prepare himself to desire truth and to accept the rules of the game imposed by it. It is no use speaking of ideas when there is no acceptance of a higher authority to regulate them, a series of standards to which it is possible to appeal in a discussion. These standards are the principles on which culture rests. [...] There is no culture where there are no principles of legality to which to appeal. There is no culture where there is no acceptance of certain final intellectual positions to which a dispute may be referred. There is no culture where economic relations are not subject to a regulating principle to protect interests involved. There is no culture where aesthetic controversy does not recognize the necessity of justifying the work of art.” (Ortega y Gasset, 1957, pp. 71-72).

3.3. We finally reach that place in Ortega’s work to which Coseriu used to refer, a fragment in which the Spanish thinker, when defining *barbarism*, had also in mind the worrying situation of Europe of those times: “When all these things are lacking there is no culture; there is, in the strictest sense of the word, barbarism. And let us not deceive ourselves, this is what is beginning to appear in Europe under the progressive rebellion of the masses. The traveller who arrives in a barbarous country knows that in that territory there is no ruling principles to which it is possible to appeal. Properly speaking, there are no barbarian standards. *Barbarism is the absence of standards to which appeal can be made.*” (Ortega y Gasset, 1957, p. 72)¹.

4. Before ending this paper, I will underline some other aspects. We have already seen that both Ortega y Gasset and Coseriu state that there is no real culture in the absence of norms or rules. The same remark is valid in the case of civilization as such. Thus, the British philosopher R.G. Collingwood observes that there are two ways of being uncivilized: (i) *savagery* and (ii) *barbarism*. Whereas the former represents “a negative idea” (“It means not being civilized, and that is all.”), the latter way refers to something more: “By *barbarism* I mean hostility towards civilization; the effort, conscious or unconscious, to become less civilized than you are, either in general or in some special way, and, so far as in you lies, to promote a similar change in others.” (Collingwood, 1971, p. 342).

The condition named *savagery* involves, certainly, a natural state, that is (to a great extent) a pre-cultural state. Even so, it is worth emphasizing – along with I. Kant – that nature only functions according to

¹ Since Eugenio Coseriu reproduced (even if roughly) or paraphrased Ortega y Gasset’s words in Spanish, I find it appropriate to quote here the original respective context: „Cuando faltan todas esas cosas, no hay cultura; hay, en el sentido más estricto de la palabra, barbarie. Y esto es, no nos hagamos ilusiones, lo que empieza a haber en Europa bajo la progresiva rebelión de las masas. El viajero que llega a un país bárbaro sabe que en aquel territorio no rigen principios a que quepa recurrir. No hay normas bárbaras propiamente. *La barbarie es ausencia de normas y de posible apelación.*” (Ortega y Gasset, 1966, p. 189).

rules: “Everything in nature, whether in the animate or inanimate world, takes place *according to rules*, although we do not always know these rules. Water falls according to laws of gravity, and in animals locomotion also takes place according to rules. The fish in the water, the bird in the air, moves according to rules. All nature, indeed, is nothing but a combination of phenomena which follow rules; and *nowhere* is there *any irregularity*.” (Kant, 1885, p. 1).

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