

Catastrophic Idealism: The case of Fichte

NICOLAE RÂMBU

Faculty of Philosophy, University "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" Iași

B-dul Carol I, 11 Iași, 700506 Romania

E-mail: nikolausrambu@yahoo.de

The abusive interpretation of a text is common practice in the history of philosophy. Johann Gottlieb Fichte is, however, from this point of view, a 'case'. He is the model of a well-intentioned author, who attacks, in his writings of political philosophy, a de-demonization of the political power, through a new kind of education. This process, however, has led to the emergence of other 'demons'. He is the creator of *the myth of the nation* as political myth, in which the magical function of the word predominates over the function of semantics, in the meanings specified by Cassirer in *The Myth of the State*. In Nazi philosophical and ideological discourse, 'The Divine Idea' of Fichte is tacitly replaced by the new *Weltanschauung*, his political idealism thus becoming a danger.

Key words: political myth, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, philosophy of power

DE-DEMONIZATION OF THE POLITICAL POWER

The problem of the demonization of political power and its de-demonization exists mostly in Germany, in the early 19th century, in the context of Napoleon, who represents an embodiment of an evil politician, extending his power over the Germans now deprived of any political power of their own. Ritter notes that in such circumstances a 'Beurteilung Machiavellis' occurs (Ritter 1948: 140).

Fichte's open admiration for Machiavelli is not, therefore, a singular and incomprehensible gesture; on the contrary, it is the natural reaction of a German who relives, from the political point of view, the drama lived by the Italians of Machiavelli's era. In this context, says Ritter, "the book *The Prince* lives a kind of Renaissance" (Ritter 1948: 140). For Fichte, as noted in the literature, Machiavellian means can and should be used in foreign policy, but not internally. This way of proceeding in terms of political power does not represent, however, an *Entdämonisierung der Macht*. This means, first of all, that Fichte puts "in the place of "State" with its oppressive power, the brutal country (Vaterland), the united political nation" (Ritter 1948: 124–143). Secondly – and this is a most important aspect that I would like to stress – it is the creation in history. For Fichte, the creator in history is no longer the demonic man, in Goethe's sense of the term, who uses evil as the means of his creation. The creator is a totally different kind, 'the visionary', 'the inspired', which Fichte describes with enthusiasm.

The demonism of the power, first highlighted most clearly by Machiavelli, is no longer found in Fichte's political philosophy. And yet, he wrote a series of texts that were intended to contribute to "Ehrenrettung eines braven Mannes" (Fichte 1995: 273). There is, however, no contradiction between praising Machiavelli as discoverer of the demonism of the power, or

following Gerhard Ritter, *Entdämonisierung der Macht*, adopting a contrary vision. The conception of the mechanism of political power, particularly as exposed in *Il Principe*, is, from the perspective of Fichte, perfectly valid about the past and present, while the political philosophy of *Entdämonisierung der Macht* concerns the future, a world completely renewed with a new kind of education: German national education.

Fichte admires Machiavelli for his political realism, because he is a true connoisseur of human nature. Machiavelli diagnosed, as a true physician of the culture, the moral diseases of human society and offered *the prince's* art of governing effectively and achieving, to a certain degree, the general good. "The end justifies the means" is the principle according to which the realistic politician acts, the politician who knows that, in its essence, human nature is evil. Human nature cannot be set in motion to build a grandiose political construction except by appealing to its negative aspects from an axiological point of view: selfishness, envy, avarice, etc. In this respect, Fichte is in perfect agreement with Machiavelli. For him, there is even a continuing moral decay of the individual and society, so that the period in which the famous *Reden an die deutsche Nation* were uttered in Berlin became "the accomplished state of wickedness". In such a world where wickedness achieves its perfection, if one may say so, not even an evil man has any power. His force is based on a strange game of good and evil, but now this possibility is completely annihilated. Following the advice of Machiavelli, the politician can be effective in his governance or, in exceptional cases, he can be a creator in history, if human nature and society are not entirely corrupted.

If the evil politician himself becomes powerless in a completely corrupt world, from where else could rescue come? Fichte's answer is, on the one hand, very clear; on the other hand, it is difficult to properly understand it because Martin Luther's conception of human nature and human destiny are involved in Fichte's speech. The new saviour is *the visionary*, in a very special meaning of a politician who has *Ideas* or *Gesichte*. With the emergence of this new kind of politician, *Entdämonisierung der Macht* reasons that, not the bad side, but only the good side of human nature is the means to which *the visionary* will appeal for creating a new world in which 'the correspondent' of Machiavelli is Fichte.

What Fichte preached in *Reden an die deutsche Nation* is well known: the creation of a new type of man through national education and building an ideal real world after the model of the ideal one that he describes in almost mystical terms. He was convinced that not only evil but also good can be contagious. Fichte is the political dreamer type, about whom Friedrich Nietzsche mentions in the following excerpt: "There are political and social fantasists who with fiery eloquence invite a revolutionary overturning of all social orders in the belief that the proudest temple of fair humanity will then rise up at once as though of its own accord. In these perilous dreams there is still an echo of Rousseau's superstition, which believes in a miraculous primeval but as it were *buried* goodness of human nature and ascribes all the blame for this burying to the institutions of culture in the form of society, state and education. The experiences of history have taught us, unfortunately, ... that a revolution can thus be a source of energy in a mankind grown feeble but never a regulator, architect, artist, perfecter of human nature" (Nietzsche 2005: 169).

Fichte falls, undoubtedly, into the category of these *political and social dreamers*, as Friedrich Nietzsche calls them, who childishly believe in the natural goodness of man. He is an idealist, a dreamer, a romantic. To show that Fichte's political philosophy is a catastrophic idealism that makes him the "prophet of the future German nationalism" (Ritter 1948: 141), we should take a look at what Fichte calls *Idea*. We will see, thus, following Ritter, that in "this

way, the demonism of the power, instead of disappearing, ...actually turns into a perfect Satanism” (Ritter 1948: 158). The political idealism of Fichte, with the enthusiasm for a certain *Idea* designed in the front of the German nation, became contagious and dangerous.

Fichte’s term *Idea* has special significance. In terms of political power, the *Ideas* are the source of any creation in history. The visionary is the politician restrained by such *Ideas* or, more accurately, visions, *Gesichte*, in the Lutheran sense of the term. “In general, the original and pure Divine Idea that which he who is immediately inspired of God should do and actually does is (with reference to the visible world) creative, producing the new, the unheard of, the original... The Divine Idea attains an existence pure from the admixture of natural impulse, there it builds new worlds upon the ruins of the old. All things new, great, and beautiful, which have appeared in the world since its beginning, and those which shall appear until its end, have appeared and shall appear through the Divine Idea, partially expressed in the chosen ones of our race” (Fichte 1889: 229). Not infrequently, Fichte explains what he understands by the *Idea*. In one of his lectures about the scholar, he associates with all clarity the *Idea* with the creative ability of the politician. “The *Idea*, thus moulded on the Divine Life, lives in his life instead of his own personality. It alone moves him, nothing else in its room. His personality has long since disappeared in the *Idea*, how then can any motive now arise from it? He lives in honour, transfused in God to work His Eternal Will, how then caxifame, the judgment of mortal and perishable men, have any significance for him? Devoted to the *Idea* with his whole being, how can he ever seek to pamper or to spare himself?” (Fichte 1889: 182–183). It is easy to discern the mystical nature of this type of speech. Excerpted from the context, such a passage could be assigned at any time, for example, to the Orthodox mysticism.

Fichte himself makes references to the translation of the Bible by Martin Luther to explain in what sense he uses the term *Idea*. First of all, it is about the *Promises* of Joel (2.18–32). Besides the material promises (‘I will remove the northerner far from you...; Fear not, you beasts of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, etc.’), the most important is a spiritual one: “And it shall come to pass afterwards, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions (*Gesichte*)” (Joel 2.28). Only then will it be the case that ‘people shall never again be put to shame’ (Joel 2.26). This is therefore the image that Fichte faces when he reflects on how the German nation ‘will never be disappointed’, to resume the biblical expression. The people are saved when it is governed by a politician who has visions or *Ideas*. He also has the gift to awaken hopes, to instil an optimism that often becomes too absurd, sparking an enthusiasm that is very close to a collective madness.

De-demonization of the political power will lead, eventually, to the emergence of other demons, because who could provide a criterion for distinguishing between true and false visions of an alleged saviour of the nation, between a false prophet and a true one, between a political man who is truly visionary and a psychopath delirium?

THE MYTH OF THE 19TH CENTURY

In his essay ‘*Two Concepts of Liberty*’, Isaiah Berlin makes the following remark: “Over a hundred years ago, the German poet Heine warned the French not to underestimate the power of ideas: philosophical concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor’s study could destroy a civilization. He spoke of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* as the sword with which German deism had been decapitated, and described the works of Rousseau as the blood stained weapon which, in the hands of Robespierre, had destroyed the old regime. Berlin prophesied that the

Romantic faith of Fichte and Schelling would one day be turned, with terrible effect, by their fanatical German followers, against the liberal culture of the West” (Berlin 1969: 119). It is a matter of course that it cannot be attributed to an author what the Germans call *Wirkungsgeschichte* of his work, but if we ignore the barbarism of interpretation, the power of ideas of an author may be, in certain circumstances, catastrophic, despite his good intentions. And this is the case of Fichte. Not just ‘the sleep of reason produces monsters’, but also its dream (Jiménez-Redondo 2012). The Marxism that was put into practice by the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century is a good example of the idea of monstrosity that the dream of an ideal world brings. To take another example, some representatives of Nazi ideology interpreted *Reden an die deutsche Nation* and other writings of Fichte abusively. It is no less true, however, that the text itself allowed such an interpretation.

In the spirit of German Romanticism, Fichte is the creator of the myth of the nation. His whole pseudoscientific construction about the German nation falls into the category of political myths. These are the dreams of reason that produce monsters. Such a creation does not have a theoretical purpose, but a practical one. Like any political myth, the myth of the nation must exalt the public, to stir it, to put it in motion in the direction given by a certain ‘visionary’. Georges Sorel noted that “the myth must be judged as a means of acting on the present” (Sorel 1925: 135). The myth of the nation radically changed the political and cultural reality of the 19th century and it has been an inspiration for *The Myth of the 20th century*. The political myth is not simply a utopia, but an effective way to change the world. For example, “Mazzini pursued what the wiseacres of his time called a mad chimera; but it can no longer be denied that, without Mazzini, Italy would never have become a great power, and that he did more for Italian unity than Cavour and all the politicians of his school” (Sorel 1925: 135).

When referring to the concept of National Socialism, Alfred Rosenberg, in *The Myth of the 20th century*, evokes Fichte as the illustrious founder of the former German nationalism (Rosenberg 1934: 540). Fichte created, indeed, the myth of the nation as a dream of reason. It has all the features needed to function as a modern political myth, this is why the myth of the nation, as shown in *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, is a model for the myth of blood or race. “Today a new faith is awakening – the Myth of the blood; the belief that to defend the blood is also to defend the divine nature of man in general” (Rosenberg 1934: 114). This passage, as well as many others from *The Myth of the 20th century*, is reminiscent of that *Divine Idea* – ‘göttliche Idee’ – of Fichte that will suddenly turn into a strange and dangerous *Weltanschauung*. In the centre of the German race myth is the idea of honour (*Ehre*) and, also, *obligation* (*Pflicht*) and *freedom*. “The words of Fichte: True culture rests upon disposition, reveals our true Nordic nature when facing other cultures whose highest value is not character – which for us is synonymous with honour and duty – but another sense of value, another idea around which its life revolves.

The destinies of the western peoples have taken on diverse forms in the course of time, conditioned by different circumstances. Everywhere that Nordic blood predominates, the concept of honour is present” (Rosenberg 1934: 154).

The myth of the nation, as all political myths, has, on the one hand, a strong mystical load and, on the other hand, a magical side, both being exhibited in a rational form. The shadow of Meister Eckhart is present in all German political myths, from Fichte to Rosenberg. Regarding the magical side of political myth, its creator, to make it more effective, exposed it in words that spell. In short, in such a myth, says Ernst Cassirer, in *The Myth of the State*, the magical function of the word is predominant in relation to its semantic function. The word

magical from the myth of nation of Fichte is the *Idea*. Obviously, this is not a new word, but its use in *Reden an die deutsche Nation* and other such writings fits perfectly with what Ernst Cassirer calls the *magical function of the word*. Fichte's whole speech about that 'göttliche Idee' is orientated towards a strictly practical purpose, namely the formation of the new man. Some writings of Fichte became popular precisely because they were based on the magical function of the word. The *Divine Idea* is nowhere defined by Fichte in a rigorous way and it cannot be because it does not belong to the intellect (*Verstand*), but the reason (*Vernunft*). This Kantian distinction already inflicts on Fichte a radical change of meaning, being almost identical to the one of *The Myth of the 20th century*, for example, in the paragraphs dedicated to the 'organic truth' (*die organische Wahrheit*) (Rosenberg 1934: 684). The *Idea* of Fichte shares nothing with the *Transcendental ideas* of the reason in Kant's *Critique of pure reason* but the name. It is not a mere instrument of the faculty of knowledge or will of man. By contrast, the man himself becomes a mere instrument of the *Idea*. In other words, the man does not have the *Idea* as a random concept, but he himself becomes possessed by the *Idea* as by a demon. The magical function of the word is doubled by the mystical one. "The *Idea* is not the ornament of the individual (for, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as individuality in the *Idea*), but it seeks to flow forth in the whole human race, to animate it with new life, and to mould it after its own image. This is the distinctive character of the *Idea*; and whatever is without this character is not the *Idea*. Wherever, therefore, it attains such a life, it irresistibly strives after this universal activity, not through the life of the individual, but through its own essential nature. It thus impels everyone in whom it has an abode, even against the will and wish of his sensuous, personal nature, and as though he were a passive instrument, impels him forward to this universal activity, to the skill which is demanded in its exercise, and to the Industry which is necessary for the acquisition of that skill" (Fichte 1889 I: 238–239). The *Idea* of Fichte is as mysterious as the *demonic* of Goethe, despite his repeated attempts to define it and illustrate it with meaningful examples. In *Reden an die deutsche Nation* he provides, among others, the following example of *Idea* as *Gesicht*: "Let this generation hearken to the vision (*ein Gesicht*) of an ancient prophet in a situation no less lamentable" (Fichte 1922: 50). This is Ezekiel the Prophet and the biblical myth of the resurrection of the dead people after the remains were gathered and the Holy Spirit breathed on them. Fichte himself has such a *Gesicht* about reviving the German nation: "Though the elements of our higher spiritual life may be just as dried up, and though the bonds of our national unity may lie just as torn asunder and as scattered in wild disorder as the bones of the slain in the prophecy, though they may have whitened and dried for centuries in tempests, rainstorms, and burning sunshine, the quickening breath of the spiritual world has not yet ceased to blow. It will take hold, too, of the dead bones of our national body, and join them together, that they may stand glorious in new and radiant life" (Fichte 1922: 51).

Every society, according to Fichte, should be led by the one imbued with the Divine Idea, which means the same as 'enlightened' in the mystical sense – 'initiated' or 'inspired'. Today it is well known that most tragedies in world history were the fault of such 'inspirations' that 'are shared from the Divine Idea', as Fichte says countless times. In *The Myth of the 20th century*, Alfred Rosenberg repeats almost exactly Fichte's conception of the *Idea* as *Gesicht*. *Das kommende Reich*, as the third part of his main work is entitled, represents such a *Gesicht*. As a political myth, this new *Reich* is a dream of reason, for the purposes stated above. *Das kommende Reich* begins precisely by highlighting the role of dream in the birth of a new world: "The time will one day come when people will honour their great dreamers for being

decisive men of action” (Rosenberg 1934: 450). Before being realized, The Third Reich must be dreamed: “Today, the entire picture of the former paradise stands before our eyes as a spent dream which had once produced life, beauty and strength as long as a superior race ruled. It will live again and it will dream again. But as soon as races of a dreamless kind took over and attempted to realise the dream, reality vanished with the dream. Just as in the land of the two rivers there was a dream of a fruitfulness and power, so a great generation in Hellas dreamed of beauty and life creating Eros. In India and on the Nile men dreamed of discipline and holiness. Germanic men dreamed of the paradise of honour and duty. Alongside the prophetic dreams there are also destructive dreams. They are just as real and often just as strong as the creative ones” (Rosenberg 1934: 455). For Alfred Rosenberg, perhaps the biggest dreamers of this *kommendes Reich* were Meister Eckhart and Paul de Lagarde: “Today the German people begin to dream Eckehart’s and Legarde’s dreams again. But many still have not the courage for this dream” (Rosenberg 1934: 458). This is the political idealism of Fichte which has already become catastrophic. Alfred Rosenberg uses ‘*Traum-Gesicht*’ (Rosenberg 1934: 459) (*Dream Vision*) to enhance the magical power of the myth of the 20th century.

THE IDEA AS A WEAPON

The *Idea* as *Gesicht*, that is, the basis of what Fichte calls *deutsche Nationalerziehung*, is taken up again by philosophies and ideologies of the Third Reich and it constituted the foundation of National Socialist education in the form of a *Weltanschauung*. Around an *Idea*, with its mysterious aura, there are born both the big thrills and collective madness. The Panegyric of Alexander the Great from Sermon III of *Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters* concludes as follows: “This Idea had already been long cherished in the nobler Grecian minds, until in Alexander it became a living flame which animated and consumed his personal life. Tell me not of the thousands who fell around his path; speak not of his own early ensuing death: after the realization of his Idea, what was there greater for him to do than to die?” (Fichte 1889 II: 49–50).

Focusing on the *inspiration* of the politician, Fichte paved the way for aesthetization of the policy. “No one, I may remark in passing, ought to intermeddle in the direct guidance and ordering of human affairs, who is not a Scholar in the true sense of the word; that is, who has not by means of Learned Culture become a participator in the Divine Idea” (Fichte 1889 I: 213).

In the *Second Prelection* of 1805, purported to provide “a more precise explanation of the concept of Divine Idea”, Fichte does not actually explain anything, being rather more concerned to criticize his opponent, Schelling. When referring specifically to the politician, Fichte states that he begins his career as a ‘divine calling’ and his entire work is done as a ‘divine mission’: “The Ruler who sees a Divine Purpose in his vocation stands firm and immovable before all these doubts, overtaken by no unmanly weakness. Is the war just? Then it is the will of God that there should be war; and it is God’s will with him that he resolves upon it. Whatever may fall a sacrifice to it, it is still the Divine Will that chooses the sacrifice. God has the most perfect right over all human life and human happiness, for both have proceeded from him and both return to him; and in his creation nothing can be lost” (Fichte 1889 I: 292). Expressed in this manner, the idealism becomes really dangerous. The *divine calling*, *divine mission*, “right war that is God’s will” and other similar expressions relate to a mysticism of language that escapes any rational control. Any madness can be considered a *divine calling*, any slaughter can be interpreted as ‘right war that is God’s will’, any morbid ambition can pass as *divine mission*, any tyrant can be considered as ‘inspired’ and imbued with a ‘göttliche Idee’. The *inspired* politician of Fichte, totally merged in the divinity, behaves, in fact, as a mystic.

However, an essential difference between these two exists. While a mystic behaves in a way that would be raised to the level of divinity, that would be deified by this exaltation, as they say in mystical orthodoxy, leaving the Earth, the politically inspired Fichte behaves as if God had descended on him. "In this way does the Idea possess and pervade him without intermission or reserve, and there remains nothing either of his person or his life that does not burn a perpetual offering before its altar. And thus is he, the most direct manifestation of God in the world" (Fichte 1889 I: 294).

As can be seen in *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, Fichte outlined a national education plan in which the youth, to be formed only under the spectrum of the Idea, would be isolated from the rest of the degenerate, corrupt, petty world. This mystical-type isolation constituted a pattern of the camp (das Lager) as the ideal way to educate German youth in the spirit of that National Socialist *Weltanschauung*. Baldur von Schirach almost reproduces Fichte's formulations on education for Idea, when he exposes the essence of Hitler Youth. Hitler Jugend is a community educated for the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* "He who walks in the ranks of the Hitler Jugend is not a number among millions of others, but the soldier of an idea (*Soldat einer Idee*)" (Schirach 1984: 327). "The value of a person is measured by how far he is permeated by the Idea, and the best Hitler youth, says Baldur von Schirach, is the one who is totally consumed by the new *Weltanschauung*" (Schirach 1984: 327).

The myth of the nation, which was also floating in the romantic atmosphere of the era, but to which Fichte gave that typical form of political myth, quickly became a tool for modelling the 19th century. Spreading rapidly throughout Europe, the myth of the nation, which is part of the new romantic mythology, gets to trigger devastating energies, which collapsed powerful states and led to bloody wars, like the myth of communism or any other political myth. Whoever talks about Fichte's theory or political philosophy, referring to *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, *Die Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters* or *Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*, commits an error. Fichte did not create any political theory about the nation, but he is himself the creator of the myth of nation as political myth. He is not about knowledge, but action, with a practical and not theoretical role. Fichte himself is not a theorist of nation and political realities, but a *visionary*, a *mystic* who is rationally expressing. He *sees* and *lives* a hypothetical future *as* it was present, but this *as* has nothing to do with the *als ob* of Immanuel Kant. "In the spirit, of which these addresses are the expression, I perceive that organic unity in which no member regards the fate of another as the fate of a stranger. I behold that unity (which shall and must arise if we are not to perish altogether) already achieved, completed, and existing" (Fichte 1922: 4).

There is much naivety in Fichte's conception of the new education, but it is a romantic naivety, of the type that we find in Don Quixote and all idealists, in literature and in life, in those few truly great people who ennobled mankind with their ideals. In a text about Empire, Egon Friedell made the following remark: "Napoleon was not a dreamer and this is the main criticism that it can be brought to him. This is why he failed. Since he did not know that only a dreamer can win the world for a long time, he could win only for a few years or a few months" (Friedell 1991: 936). Unlike Napoleon, as Egon Friedell sees him, Alfred Rosenberg was a dreamer, but his way of dreaming of the new Reich is totally different than that of the Fichte of the German nation, which, over the hundreds of pages of his book *the Myth of the 20th Century*, invokes it directly or indirectly, from where he inspires and he abusively interprets it. The Third Reich that was supposed to last at least a millennium is an example of a typical *dream of reason that produces monsters*.

CONCLUSIONS

The myth of the 20th century, by Alfred Rosenberg, which represented, as is known, the philosophical foundation of Nazism, fits perfectly into what Ernst Cassirer called the *political myths* with which he started the true arming of Nazi Germany. But such a *myth* was not born in a naked land; on the contrary, in German philosophy, Fichte is the creator of the myth of nation that has all the features required to act as political myth, as Cassirer presents in his book *The Myth of the State*.

In his philosophical and ideological Nazi discourse, the *Idea* of Fichte is tacitly replaced by the new *Weltanschauung*, which was, as Hermann Rauschning notes, the most terrible weapon of the Third Reich.

Received 10 September 2014

Accepted 2 March 2014

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NICOLAE RÂMBU

Katastrofinis idealizmas: Fichte's atvejis

Santrauka

Filosofijos istorijoje įprasta įžeidžiamai interpretuoti tekstą. Šiuo požiūriu Johanas Gottliebas Fichte yra „atvejis“. Tai autoriaus su gerais ketinimais tipas, kuris savo politinėje filosofijoje puola politinės galios (ugdant naujoviškai) „atidemonizavimą“. Pasak jo, šis procesas veda į kitų „demonų“ iškilimą. J. G. Fichte yra „tautos mito“, kaip politinio mito, kūrėjas. Jame žodžio maginė funkcija persveria semantikos funkciją E. Cassirerio knygoje *Valstybės mitas* išskleista prasme. Nacizmo filosofiniame ir ideologiniame disкурse Fichte's „dieviška idėja“ tyliai pakeista naująja pasaulėžiūra (*Weltanschauung*). Taip jo politinis idealizmas tampa pavojingas.

Raktažodžiai: politinis mitas, Johanas Gottliebas Fichte, galios filosofija