No man's land

Reading Kant historically

Howard Caygill

In 1784 Kant published an essay for a journal that represented the public face of an Enlightenment secret society of senior officials in the administration of Frederick II. In the forty-fourth year of Frederick's reign it was necessary to plan for the succession and to ensure as far as possible the irreversibility of the achievements of the Enlightenment. The achievements of the Enlightenment, as well as the officials that promoted them, were under threat from the obscurantist religious views of Frederick's heir, who indeed would attempt to reverse the Enlightenment after his succession to the throne in 1786. In the last years of Frederick's reign it was deemed necessary to make an extra effort to strengthen the presence of the Enlightenment in the culture of Prussia and the institutions of the Prussian state. In this the promoters of secret society and journal were prescient, since less than a decade after the publication of his essay Kant's work would be subjected to direct censorship and Kant himself threatened with 'unpleasant measures' for 'continued obstinacy'.

Readers of Manfred Kuehn's biography[*] will learn little about this political background to the publication of 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' The journal in question, the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, is treated as if it were a neutral medium, even though Kuehn informs us *en passant* that it had 'close ties with freemasonry', had to cease publishing in Berlin in 1792 because of political pressure, and its editor, Johann Biester, was subject to police harassment. The omission of a critical discussion of the context of one of Kant's most celebrated essays is consistent with the generally uncritical approach to Kant's life and thought that characterizes this new biography. While Kuehn's biography is invaluable for its summary in English of the results of the research of Rudolf Malter and Werner Stark, as well as the use it makes of the published letters and works of Kant's Königsberg contemporaries Theodor Gottlieb Hippel and Johann Georg Hamann, it does not succeed in situating Kant's life and thought within the political and cultural conditions that made it possible.

In 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' Kant makes several references to the relationship between the life of a thinker, the institutions and structures in which they have to work and the way in which their thought can exceed these structural limits. The essay emphasizes the difficulty facing a 'single individual' who has to 'work themselves out of a life under tutelage' and pays homage to the efforts of the enlightened officials and guardians behind the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* who try, probably in vain, to enable others to do so. The cryptic comments on the life of a thinker in an inhospitable political climate at the beginning of the essay are inseparable from Kant's distinction towards the end between living in an 'enlightened age' and living in the 'age of enlightenment'. Just as the individual thinker must work their way out of tutelage, so too must reason itself, a reference to the historicity of thought that is summed up in the term *criticism*. Yet Kant quickly adds that the 'age of enlightenment' is also the 'century of Frederick', with its institutional structures underpinned by an omnipresent 'well disciplined army to ensure public order': these structures both made possible and set the limits to the free exercise of criticism, and through it the development of reason.

[*] Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001. 544 pp., £24.95 hb., 0 521 49704 3.

The movement between confinement and freedom of thought characterizes Adorno's method of reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in his lectures from 1959.* In the sixteenth lecture he refers to a procedure of reading 'that places far greater emphasis on the ruptures, the immanent antinomies of [Kant's] thinking'; for Adorno these '*constitute* the Kantian philosophy'. The seemingly casual emphasis on constitution refers to Adorno's complication of the relation of *constituens* and *constitutum* in the previous lecture, which would suggest that the ruptures and antinomies that constitute Kant's philosophy are themselves constituted by its existence 'within time'. Thus Adorno provocatively describes Kant's philosophy as 'nothing more than a form of stammering' or 'a form of Dada', indulging in a pedagogical exaggeration that is in fact belied by most of the lectures. On the whole, the Kant summoned forth by Adorno is peculiarly suspended between Hegelian and Husserlian phenomenology, with the intentional relation of *constituens* and *constitutum* that is detected at work in the moments of rupture being described in terms of Hegelian mediation. This movement allows Adorno to escape the 'Baedeker' or tourist-guide view of Kant that 'there is no world without a transcendental subject' (Lecture Fourteen), but does produce some idiosyncratic results.

Perhaps the most refreshing peculiarity of Adorno's reading of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is its structure: contrary to almost every other reading, it ends rather than begins with the Transcendental Aesthetic. This may have been due to his experience of not getting beyond the Transcendental Aesthetic in his lectures of 1954, but more probably respects a deliberate decision to organize the reading of the critique around the question of formal and transcendental logic. Adorno's reading accordingly opens with the moment of excess implied in the synthetic *a priori* judgement and moves from there towards questions of logic and metaphysics, only arriving in lectures eleven and twelve at the deduction and schematism.

The unconventional structure of the lectures is intended to emphasize the speculative moments of the *Critique* that disrupt its otherwise orderly juridical and economic procedures of argument and proof. Yet Adorno's improvised confrontation with Kant's text produces a number of strange ruptures and breaks in its own act of commentary. A peculiar feature of Adorno's style in these lectures is the extensive mobilization of a metaphoric structure indebted to the description of warfare. Even while alerting his students to the unconscious of a text revealed in its metaphors, Adorno extends Kant's simile between metaphysics and a battlefield into a description of the transcendental as a 'no man's land' between psychology and logic. What is more, Adorno's 'no mans land' is a terrain characterized by 'constant friction', where analysis makes a 'forward march' and criticism 'drives a trench'. The ruined philosophical landscape that for Adorno is the *Critique of Pure Reason* is one which bears the scars of conflicts that presided over its birth and that continue to shape its afterlife.

One of these conflicts is evident throughout the lectures in Adorno's insistent attempt to lay the ghost of the ontological reading of the *Critique*. The focus of the early lectures on the 'no man's land' of logic and psychology and the forthright rejection of Heidegger and his reading of Kant combines with a critique of Kant's attempt to 'salvage ontology'. While Adorno insists that the *Rettung* of ontology is the 'thrust of Kant's philosophy as a whole', he nevertheless sees this attempt to preserve 'spiritual realities' that are 'valid for all time' as an alleviation of an insight into the finitude of thought. Whether this is as far from Heidegger as Adorno wished his 1959 listeners to believe is open to doubt. What it entailed was an insistence on Adorno's part upon a view of the historicity of thought that would be more concrete and historically specific than that of Heidegger.

A system of contraries

Before turning to Adorno's understanding of character of historicity it seems appropriate to indicate another level of slippage in Adorno's reading, one that allows it to proceed precisely by virtue of remaining largely unexamined. This is the movement between the contraries of subject/object, universal/particular, form/content, concept/intuition and active/passive, spontaneity/receptivity. Adorno's movement across and between these contraries is vital to his demonstration of a dialectical movement in Kant's texts, but assumes a correspondence between them – that each contrary corresponds analogically to the others: subject is to object as universal is to particular as spontaneity is to receptivity. Adorno emphasizes that the system of contraries that structures the critical philosophy is governed fundamentally by the dynamic contraries of action/passion and above all spontaneity/receptivity. Spontaneity is indeed characterized by Adorno as the concept that makes possible the entire transcendental logic, the source of the synthesis in the synthetic

* Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001. 300 pp., £50.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 7456 2183 X hb., 0 7456 2845 1 pb.

a priori judgement. Yet this assumption needed to be defended more thoroughly, a need perhaps more evident now following the rehabilitation of notions of receptivity and passivity than in 1959 when the value of a certain discourse of freedom in terms of spontaneity and autonomy was largely taken for granted.

Adorno's lectures return repeatedly to the insistence upon the historicity of thought and in particular the historicity of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. The text is said to be traversed by historical force fields that both shape and distort it, but in spite of Adorno's rhetorical gestures the precise description of the text's historicity remains extremely sketchy and limited. Adorno fiercely distinguishes his view of the historicity of thought from that of Heidegger and the Heideggerians, which he describes as the 'dilution' of the 'concept of history' into a 'historicality' that is abstract and formal. Against the abstract understanding of historicity Adorno claims that 'in a very important sense philosophy is related to the concrete events of history', yet on closer inspection his notion of 'the concrete' itself remains abstract and formulaic. History is the history of 'bourgeois society', one composed of the processes of exchange, reification and rationalization. Adorno's reading of Kant in terms of the 'concrete events of history' in fact consists in little more than situating Kant's texts within the abstract and normative accounts of historical process contrived by nineteenth-century historical sociology.

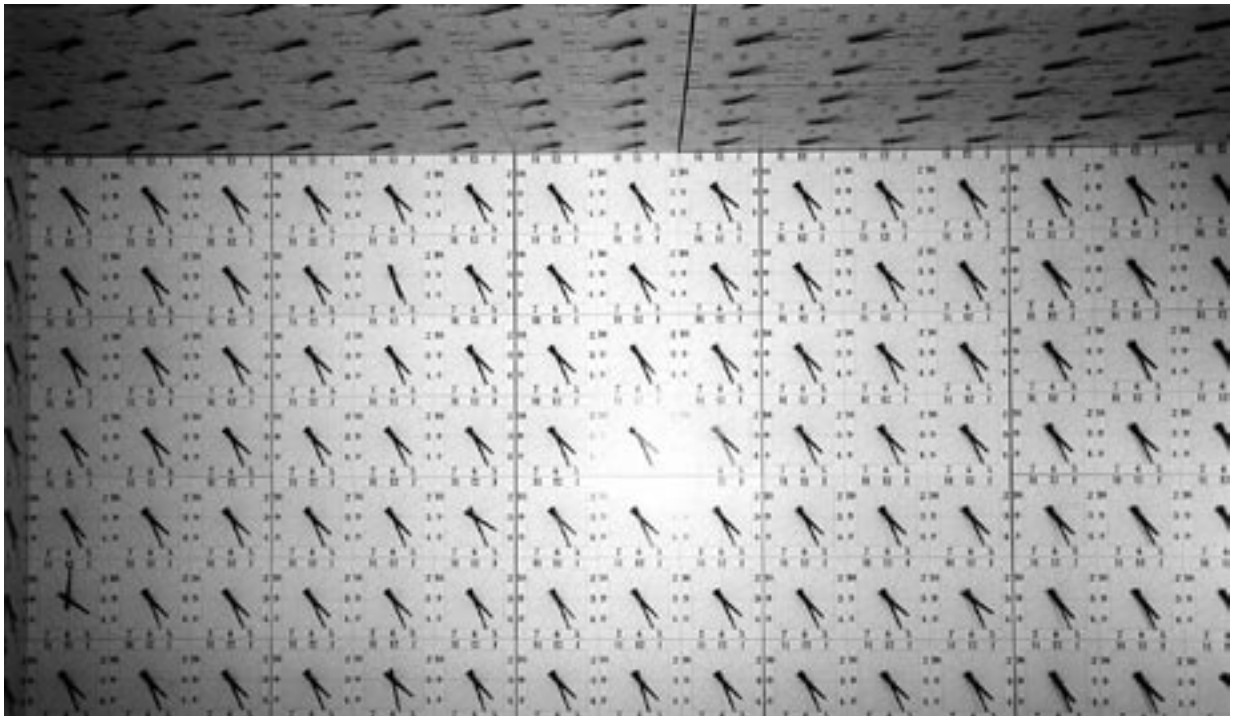
While Adorno's reading of Kant's philosophy as historical respects Kant's distinction between an accomplished 'enlightened age' in which truth would be realized in thought and institutions and an 'age of enlightenment' that develops through criticism, it nowhere relates that philosophy to the 'century of Frederick'. Apart from a few bizarre references to the Great Elector – who ruled Prussia in the century before Frederick II – the concrete historical events of the 'century of Frederick' and their impact as conditions of the possibility of Kant's thought are nowhere considered. And perhaps with good reason, since Adorno explicitly rejects the task of developing 'a *historical* introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason*', offering instead an 'introduction to the *substance* of the book' – yet given Adorno's own critique of substance the rejection of history in its favour is disingenuous.

The aporia of Adorno's reading of the *Critique of Pure Reason* contained in the reference to substance – that it must be historical, but cannot be – expresses a fundamental difficulty in conceiving the relationship between philosophy and non-philosophy. How concrete should the 'concrete history' of non-philosophy informing a philosophical text be? Adorno's concession to non-philosophy goes as far as the results of the historical sociology of Marx, Weber and Simmel mediated by Lukács, but this cannot really be claimed as 'concrete history'. The case of Kant and the *Critique of Pure Reason* exposes a formalism at the heart of Adorno's understanding of the historicity of philosophy. For the historicity of Kant's work is far more complex and involves much more than simply the expression in thought of the antinomies of early 'bourgeois society'. It may more properly be described as the radical opening of philosophy to non-philosophy, a process visible in Kant's lectures that bring the concepts of literature, law, science, economics, military fortification into philosophy. In the lectures, non-philosophy, or history, is not the object of the philosophical gaze but is incorporated in the body of philosophy, transforming it in the process. For this reason it is important to read Kant in terms of the concrete history of the 'century of Frederick', and for the same reason to have a critical understanding of his place in that history, or, in other words, his biography.

Exchange and mart

Unfortunately, Manfred Kuehn's biography, while providing a good deal of information on Kant's life for English-speaking readers, fails systematically to locate this life within the structures of the German Enlightenment. This is unfortunate given the developments in the historiography of the German Enlightenment during the past decade which have now made this possible. The biography starts well, with a prologue critically describing the way in which the received hagiographical image of Kant was deliberately contrived soon after his death and promising a counter-history of Kant's life, but this is not fully delivered. Kuehn introduces the year of Kant's birth with an unhappy paragraph of 'historical context' that refers to a treaty between Moscow and Constantinople and Hume's second year of study at the University of Edinburgh. Thereafter the narrative of Kant's life is structured around the trope of conversion to a life of reason indebted to the very Pietism that Kuehn shows Kant to have decisively rejected.

A more convincing narrative structure might have been provided in the relationship between individual and public enlightenment that is the preoccupation of 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' The events of Kant's own life could have been set within the developing institutions and culture of the German Enlightenment – departing perhaps from



the distinction between the public and private use of reason. It is noteworthy that in the 1784 essay Kant does not refer directly to his own profession as a university teacher who was bound to teach from prescribed manuals and subject to considerable central control. What happens to the distinction between the private and public use of reason in this case? While Kuehn is informative on the context of the academic politics of Prussia and the University of Königsberg, he does not address the complex structure of the publishing industry that governed Kant's 'private' use of reason. Much more discussion is necessary of the media to which Kant contributed – not only the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, already mentioned, but also the *Koenigsbergische Frag- und Anzeigungs-Nachrichten*, where Kant published many of his early short 'scientific articles' and whose closest contemporary equivalent would perhaps be the *Exchange and Mart*. Similarly with the publishers of Kant's books and his adroit use of the medium of the announcement of lectures – supposedly an example of the 'public use of reason' for the exercise of his 'private reason'.

Nevertheless, there are some very strong moments of biographical analysis that undermine the global appeals to historicity made by Adorno. A fascinating example is Kant's appeal to 'analogies to the bourgeois world of commerce' and in particular to the institutions of possession and debt that for Adorno serve as evidence for the bourgeois character of Kant's thought. One of the most intoxicating moments of Adorno's lectures arrives in the twentieth lecture when the metaphor of the transcendental as a 'no man's land' is revealed to be excessively feudal, for the transcendental is '*not* a land at all' but rather, anticipating Derrida perhaps, 'a gigantic credit system in which the final IOU cannot be redeemed'. For a moment the *Critique of Pure Reason* becomes an exercise in debt management, with concepts borrowing from neighbouring concepts in order to allow the spheres of concept and intuition to work together. However intriguing the analogy, Adorno's historical metaphor of a complex credit system both naturalizes a late capitalist institutional structure by projecting it upon a text from an earlier epoch of bourgeois society and obscures its intrinsic historical complexity.

Adorno intends his analogy to work as a historical argument and not as a claim that Kant anticipated in thought the sophisticated credit structure of future capitalism. The latter would be more defensible than the view that Kant was using an available structure of metaphor. For the kind of commercial institution that was available for Kant to draw into philosophy was not the advanced system of credit conjured up by Adorno. Kuehn approaches the question of Kant's commercial metaphors in a far more nuanced way, even if he does not fully develop the philosophical implications of his claims. His account of the guild milieu of Kant's childhood and adolescence and his father's participation in the declining guild of harness-making points to a set of economic structures and behaviour involving honour and probity that were by no means 'bourgeois' in any simple sense, and which were threatened by the development of the institutions of the market. Kuehn sees Kant's contact with international trade through the British merchants in Königsberg, in particular Green, as providing the source for

his use of commercial terms such as borrowing and capital, but does not speculate on what these terms may have meant in terms of the Baltic trade in the eighteenth century. He does, however, remind us of the overlooked significance of Kant's claim, reported by the earlier biographer Jachmann, that Green read and commented upon every sentence of the first *Critique*, suggesting not only that this provided an entry for commercial metaphors into Kant's text, but also that the *Critique* was in many ways a collaborative effort. The proposal to consider the *Critique* as the joint work of a German philosopher and a British merchant is certainly more concrete and perhaps ultimately more stimulating than Adorno's fantasy of it as a sophisticated credit system.

Neither Adorno nor Heidegger features in Kuehn's bibliography, which is dominated by North American Kant literature, the concerns of which dominate the narrative. This is not necessarily a disadvantage, but on occasions Kuehn shows a regrettable impatience with divergent views of Kant, especially the Frankfurt-oriented work of the Boehmes – *Das Anderere der Vernunft: Zur Entwicklung von Rationalitätsstrukturen am Beispiel Kant*. It is not necessary to be sympathetic to the exaggerations of the latter to be concerned by Kuehn's impatient rejection of their theses. In many cases there is still insufficient historical knowledge of the culture of the German Enlightenment to be able properly to judge unusual episodes in Kant's biography – Kuehn's rejection of divergent interpretation in the name of common sense betrays a hermeneutical dogmatism that assumes that we already know the meaning of certain historical events and practices that appear initially puzzling.

An example of the latter is Kant's sexuality. Our knowledge of male sexuality in the German Enlightenment is insufficient either to 'out' Kant or to reassure 'straight Kantians' (to give the term another twist) that everything was in order. The intense friendship with Green, the shared domestic arrangements with Kraus and Kant's gift of a diamond ring to him, and finally Lampe's unspeakable assault on the aged Kant, all demand interpretation within the context of historical work on masculinity in the Enlightenment. Regarding the ring, Kuehn reports a friend of Kraus writing in a letter 'Kant first gave him a diamond ring, as a *pretium affectionis*. Kraus was very moved and showed it to me then. But it was not long until the two men had to give up the union (*Verbindung*) into which they had entered with this ring, namely to live only for each other.' Kuehn admits that Kant's gesture is 'open to speculation' but pours cold water on any attempt to do so – the gift was only a gesture of Kant's gratefulness; 'it meant no more than that'. Rather than torrid speculation or cold water, some historical analysis of the practice of men giving diamond rings to each other would have contributed more to our understanding of the meaning of this event. Similarly with Kant's claim in 1802, 'Lampe has done such wrong to me that I am ashamed to say what it was.' Andrew Cutrofello's reading in terms of Kant's sexuality (*Discipline and Critique: Kant, Poststructuralism and the Problem of Resistance*, 1994) is rejected as 'pure fantasy or wish fulfillment'. But the grounds for this rejection – 'Neither the drunk servant nor the feeble-minded Kant has anything of the sort in mind' – seems itself to play into a counter-fantasy and wish-fulfilment. In both of these examples and in many other cases in the biography, the understanding of Kant's life and thought would have been enhanced by more critical work relating the events of Kant's life to the culture of the 'century of Frederick'.

Kuehn's account of Kant's later years does to some extent satisfy the critical ambition of the Prologue to the biography. The first generation of Kant biographers focused on the elderly Kant, and in spite of often harrowing evidence succeeded in minimizing the tragedy of Kant's slow mental collapse. Kuehn's balanced account of Kant's dreadful last years corrects the more humanist version contrived in Cassirer's biography, and shows very little evidence of noble humanity, but only mental and physical suffering. It raises the question of why Kant was never subjected to the irresponsible link often made between the work of Nietzsche's sanity and his madness – the fact that Kant's mental attrition at the end of his life was not mobilized in the same way as Nietzsche's illness suggests a cultural investment in a fantasy of reason that required the avoidance of certain aspects of the complex record of Kant's life.

While Kuehn's biography presents a large amount of information previously unavailable to English readers, it does so in a largely uncritical fashion. From the narrative of this biography it is hard to see how this life led to the revolution in thought that is Kant's philosophy. As in the case of Adorno's lectures, but from a radically different point of departure, the problem of the relationship between thought and the concrete events remains unresolved and perhaps not even fully addressed. One solution might lie in the further historical pursuit of the concrete event and the structure in which it is found, as well as tracing the ways and means by which such events entered and transformed the philosophical text. But this would qualify the sovereignty of the philosophical text that in the end both Adorno and Kuehn take for granted.