

The many lives of Alexandre Koyré

**Paola Zambelli: Alexandre Koyré in incognito. Firenze:
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Paola Zambelli's new biography entails many surprises for those who have so far regarded Alexandre Koyré as a bookish historian of science and philosophy detached from worldly matters. As a result of thorough research conducted in many archives, beginning with Russia, she offers us an accurate reconstruction of the environments in which the scion of an affluent family of Ukrainian Jewish merchants became the cosmopolitan star of Western intellectual history of science—the reference point for Kuhnian 'historical epistemology' as well as the patron of the *Centre de recherches d'histoire des sciences et des techniques* in Paris. Zambelli's work discloses events and liaisons in his life that were unknown until now and illuminates the background of his moral and intellectual development. Koyré's itinerant life across Russia, Germany, France, Egypt and the USA also becomes an occasion for her to draw a wider picture of the philosophical culture of the first half of the most tragic century in European and World history.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first part—which directly justifies the title of the volume, 'Koyré undercover'—explores rather obscure vicissitudes linked to his youth. Zambelli reveals an unexpectedly subversive and politically engaged man to the reader, one who was very active in his homeland, the Ukraine, from the time of the failed Russian revolution of 1905 to the successful one of 1917 and the conclusion of the *Grande Guerre*. Her portrait of the scientist as a young man will strike the reader who is familiar with his later work: his aseptic style, the Platonic heights from which he looked down upon the conceptual history of science and philosophy and the impartial demeanour of his intellectual historiography. The reader will be surprised to discover that Koyré, as a socialist revolutionary, was imprisoned by the Czarist police more than once under allegations of criminal activities such as illegal propaganda and terrorism. Such scenarios have been

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reconstructed thanks to Russian and French documents, and despite the secrecy that Koyré himself—and later his heirs—maintained on those troublesome years (Zambelli actually laments their reluctance to make the relevant documents accessible).

During WWI Koyré fought first as a legionary on the French–German front and later in Russia. Documentary evidence shows that he worked for the French *Service des reinseignements* in Odessa; in other words, he was a spy. What is more, it is not clear whether he worked for the French or the Soviets—or for both. As a matter of fact, he became the person responsible for the Bolshevik commission of press and propaganda in Odessa, acting as ‘the eyes’ of Christian Rakovsky, who was the military chief and president of the provisional Ukraine government. When Koyré was arrested in Istanbul on 1 September 1919, the French put his name on the list of hostages to be exchanged with the Soviets. Even Karl Popper, the fierce anti-communist philosopher of the Cold War era, began as an activist of the Austrian Communist Party. And yet Koyré’s rebel and military past looks much more radical than Popper’s and raises many questions concerning his later *rupture épistémologique*.

The second part of Zambelli’s monograph deals with Koyré’s formative years and early career in Germany and France. First, she tackles his studies in Gottingen between 1908 and 1913, marked by his passion for mathematics and its philosophical foundations, and especially for Husserl’s phenomenology—which Koyré always regarded as a method and not as metaphysics. From Husserl Koyré derived his own Platonic realism, anti-psychologism and anti-relativism in philosophy. His relationship with his teacher was not spotless, as Husserl even refused to support Koyré’s dissertation on the mathematical paradoxes. This impasse notwithstanding, Koyré remained attached to Husserl, including during his years in Paris. He fostered the French translation of the *Cartesiansche Meditationen* in 1929, and in 1934, he was among those who promoted the publication of Husserl’s *Nachlass*.

Zambelli stresses Koyré’s role as a mediator between the German and the French philosophical culture throughout the years. He secured Husserl, Scheler and Heidegger a wide reception in France and introduced Bergson and the new French sociology into Germany. The intellectuals who had an impact on him in France (where he settled down more permanently after WWI) included Gilson, the historian of medieval philosophy, who shared his belief in the relevance of the metaphysical foundations of modern thought with Koyré; Lévy-Bruhl, the Sorbonne professor of modern philosophy and scholar of ‘primitive’ cultures, who communicated to him an interest in pre-logical collective representations, which Koyré would investigate in terms of the pre-scientific mystical underpinning of early modern science and philosophy; and most importantly Emile Meyerson, a philosopher of science who re-oriented Koyré towards the history of scientific thought. In 1933–1934 Koyré taught the classes on Galileo at the *Hautes Études* that anticipated the publication of the famous *Études galiléennes*. This marked a decisive step towards his incredibly influential treatment of the Scientific Revolution as a unique moment of rupture in history, marking the passage to modernity. The English translation of the beginning of the first Galilean volume, *À l’aube de la science classique* (1939), published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* as ‘Galileo and Plato’ (1943), launched a

Platonic reading of the mathematical science of Galileo and Descartes in sharp contrast with the materialist and socio-economical perspectives embraced in those years by Marxist scholars. Borkenau, an exponent of the *Frankfurter Schule*, severely criticized Koyré's idealism. Borkenau was in turn reprimanded for his crude economic determinism by other exponents of the same school, in particular by Grossmann, in the years in which the Frankfurt group had to flee Germany and then Europe. Koyré did not share their views, but he certainly shared their fate. In 1940, although he was a well-established scholar in France he did not hesitate for a moment to abandon the country as soon as it fell prey to Nazi aggression.

The last part of the book deals with his exile during WWII and the years after the conflict. During the interwar period, Koyré had often travelled to Germany up to 1933; afterwards he refused to go back to that country until the end of his life. He was a visiting professor at the French *Université Égyptienne* in Cairo several times, and Egypt was the harbour where he first found refuge from the Nazi flood. Although he could have immediately quit the Old World for the USA as a fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation, he postponed his departure from Cairo for many months. According to Zambelli's reconstruction, he was a keen supporter of Charles de Gaulle and waited for his visit to Egypt when he received a *France Libre* pass card with the signature of the political military leader. Koyré's Rockefeller sponsors did not think well of his 'frank and naive' Gaullism. When he eventually moved to the USA, his commitment to a foreign country was suspicious, especially before the USA entered the war. Moreover, his affiliation to the *École Libre des Hautes Études* in New York, where he held the position of general secretary together with Lévi-Strauss, strengthened the doubts of the authorities, in spite of the neat separation of political engagement and scholarship he exhibited. As Zambelli remarks, his *Introduction à la philosophie de Platon* (1945)—a sort of immediate philosophical bestseller—can be regarded as a political manifesto. The discussion of tyranny in the *Republic* was instrumental to his criticism of the European conjuncture. He proposed philosophy as a political remedy, fostering intellectual freedom, dialogue and peace. In New York he also became very close to Hannah Arendt, whose work he appreciated. Both shared a firm condemnation of Heidegger's political drift towards Nazism. Before 1933 Koyré had praised his work and made it known in France. However, he was among the first who denounced Heidegger's collusion with the regime and looked with apprehension at the success of his 'individualistic' thought in France after WWII. To affirm his dissent, Koyré also boycotted an otherwise successful Parisian conference held by the controversial philosopher in 1955.

In his final years Koyré became one of the first 'intercontinental professors' commuting between the USA and France. He became an affiliate of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton when Oppenheimer opened it to the humanities. On this side of the Atlantic scholars such as Braudel and Febvre acknowledged his scholarship in the history of science, which resulted in the foundation of today's *Centre Alexandre-Koyré*. In both contexts Koyré reinforced the programme of a philosophical history of science in line with the French intellectual tradition.

Koyré's works can now be reassessed in the light of Zambelli's most up-to-date and substantiated biography. Her study, incredibly rich with information and

insights, should constitute the basis for a revised *intellectual biography* of Koyré, as the former image of the speculative intellectual alien to earthly matters is irremediably cast into doubt. The most compelling question that arises is to re-establish the connection between Koyré's life and work—between the theory and praxis which he saw as *separated* in champions of early science such as Galileo and Descartes. Hence, the next challenge for historians of science will be to explain and comprehend the tension and possible complementarity between the *private* (even secret) political man and the *public* apolitical intellectual.