PHILOSOPHICO-SCIENTIFIC ASPECTS AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF VOLNEY’S GEOGRAPHICAL RESEARCHES

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Abstract

At the end of the 18th century in France, in the milieu of idéologues, the interest in non-European cultures becomes a concern of scientific order. These intellectuals claim the need to make use of scientific research to better understand and master reality: this urgency emerges, for example, in the requests for scientific information sent by the Geography Section of the Institut de France to the corresponding section of the Institute of Cairo. In this period, commissions are established in order to examine exploratory travels, like the one that evaluated the voyage of Charpentier de Cossigny to China.

In the works of Volney (1757-1820), traveler, philosopher, historian and politician of the Revolution and the Empire, the new awareness of the scientific dimension of travel strongly emerges. In Questions de statistique (1795) – a work required by the government itself - for example, he outlines the tasks of the traveler-scientist: to identify the spatial coordinates of the region explored, to study the climate, to examine the landscape carefully, to carry out a geological analysis of the soil and a survey of the species of plants and animals that are found there. Moreover, the traveler-scientist must shed light on the political situation of the country visited, make an anthropological analysis of the local population, examining it in all details (from feeding to the most common diseases, from moral qualities to the relationship between town and country), study the economic activities and also carry out an analysis using a sociological approach (from the administrative-judicial framework to the family structure).

In my paper, I would first like to highlight the most significant philosophico-scientific elements of the Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte (first edition: 1787) and other works of Volney, in particular the conception of geography as a science capable of entering into a relationship with many other disciplines, which emerges in these works. The Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte appears as an extremely complex scientific investigation, in which the examination of the geographical dimension, the historical research and the ethnological and linguistic analysis, as a whole, aim at elaborating a complete, synchronic and diachronic reconstruction of a given region human. On this basis, I would, secondly, like to stress the problem of intellectual and political implications of Volney’s works. In summary, I propose to problematize, from a political perspective, the scientific reconstruction of certain natural and human realities (Egypt, Syria, and so on), carried out by Volney using the various tools and a thorough methodology: this survey does not seem to have only a cultural dimension and to question credited theories (such as physical determinism), it also provides a remarkable set of data and information which circulate around Europe and are also used in the political sphere to open up new colonial perspectives (the Volney report on Egypt and Syria must, for example, be linked with the decline of the Ottoman Empire and with the attention which the crisis in Turkish politics was beginning to arouse in Europe).

Keywords: Volney, geography, anthropology, French colonial aims

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