European Responsibilities

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Members of the Jury, Distinguished Friends and Colleagues,

Before I begin my talk, please allow me to convey to you a brief message from the president of the Patočka Archives in Prague, Professor Ivan Chvatíc:

*“It is of course a great honour for Jan Patočka to receive this distinction from the Spinozalens foundation. We, as the members of the Jan Patočka Archives and the representatives of the heritors of the Patočka estate, are deeply touched. It means that the jury has understood Patočka's deep interest in the problems of European history and his contribution to the intellectual analysis of the situation of mankind in the 1970s. Many of his thoughts are highly relevant even today, 40 years after his death. The award of the Dutch prize is especially valuable as it was the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Max van der Stoel who received Jan Patočka as the spokesman of the Charter 77 in February 1977. Max van der Stoel’s action, while on an official visit in Prague, signalled the international acknowledgement of the Charter 77 and Patočka appreciated it very much.”*

* *Professor Ivan Chvatík, 23 November, Prague*

It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to be able to speak to you about Jan Patočka’s philosophy and more specifically about his contribution to the debates about the idea of Europe.

I first encountered Patočka’s work as a graduate student in Leuven, but it was not until I made my first journey to the Patočka archives in Prague that I realised the extent to which his memory and legacy are tied up with the intellectual and – spiritual – life of the Czech republic.

Hence to speak about Patočka acquires a kind of ethical and political as well as intellectual significance. It takes on a responsibility whose scope feels broader, somehow more personal than is the case with most philosophers. To use a Socratic metaphor that we find also in the thought of Hannah Arendt and Vaclav Havel as well as Patočka himself. One does not speak alone of Patočka, but always with a *diamon* over one’s shoulder, the *diamon* in this case bears the ethical weight of European history that Patočka spent his life trying to think with and through.

This sense of responsibility that one feels in relation to Patočka, the man and his work, stems in no small part from the risks that his students took to listen to his clandestine living room seminars; and to produce, reproduce, and share his work in *samizdat* form. To speak or even think against the grain – to question the most precious givens of social, political and cultural life was and is still the paradigmatic political act. The great Hannah Arendt reminds us of this when she laments the classic split between *theoria* – the detached contemplation of the philosopher – and *praxis* – speech in the public sphere. And it is not without consequence that for both Arendt and Patočka, it was Socrates, the gadfly and indeed Athenian dissident, who was the paradigmatic political figure.

This sense of risk and responsibility was further impressed upon me when I actually saw the few binders and folders that make up the Patočka archive and which they task themselves to preserve; “you risked so much for this? A few binders” – and the answer is: of course.

Archives like the Patočka Archives in Prague or the Husserl archives in Leuven, themselves, often seeming like museum pieces filled with museum pieces, are more than just repositories of information, facts, and cultural memory that only a handful of devoted students really care about; they are a form of ethical memory. They remind us that the life of the mind sometimes requires great acts of courage and is worth sacrifice.

These things are not accidentally related, but allow us to recall Pericles’s funeral oration (as recounted by Thucydides). This oration, a eulogy not only to the fallen soldiers of Athens, but to the democratic spirit of the Athenian polis is itself a founding document of Europe. In it Pericles tell the gathered citizens of Athens that freedom is courage, and the reward for courage is immortality in human memory. But Periclean courage and Patočkean courage are not the same. In Perciles’s oration, courage is an affirmation of the Athenian Polis, its traditions, habits and culture. For Patočka, by contrast, political courage always entails the questioning or even negation of the polis. Indeed, he tells us that the task of a true politics, a politics of what he calls “care for the soul” is to construct a polis where the gadfly, the dissident, Socrates, can not just live but speak; and not just speak but offer new possibilities and trajectories toward the good that call into question our situation in the present.

For Patočka’s students and of course for Patočka himself who died in defence of the life of the mind, the risk of thinking and speaking was worth it. But how can talking about Plato be worth a risk to life and limb. Yes, there is a question of freedom of speech, isn’t all speech worth such risks? For Patočka the meaning is somewhat deeper.

In times of great risk, the life of the mind is not a luxury to be enjoyed by an intellectual elite, but, as Patočka says, must become a mass phenomenon. The element of risk is itself of paramount importance because it allows us take a certain distance from the world. It *shakes* us to use Patočka’s term. This risk does not allow any escape from the harshness of the real into a peaceful state of contemplative observation. Instead it opens the possibility of moving beyond the sclerotic present to “propose the resolution of new situations, and beyond that introduce the possibility of restructuring our experience.” It is worth noting that Patočka wrote these words, from a text entitled “Intellectuals and Opposition”, in 1968 during the Prague Spring, when he was for a brief time filled with hope that a reform of Czechoslovak socialism could be brought about.[[1]](#endnote-1) This hope was soon dashed by the brutal process of normalisation.

The risk at stake here is not only to our bodies but also to the very meaningful structures of our realities, the concepts through which we see and categorise the world that we move and act within; and this risk is an essential component of both freedom and responsibility. If we are not willing to take this risk, we can claim neither to be free nor responsible. Patočka links these characteristics and indeed this willingness to risk the very sense of reality with what he calls being a “spiritual person”, writing: “a spiritual person is not of course a politician in the common sense, but he is political in another way because he throws the problematicity of reality into the face of society (…).” He added: “To pretend that politics is something non-decent for a spiritual person – that is the worst sophistry one can imagine.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Dissident thought does not operate from on high like a spiritual guide; it interrogates reality from below, it is on the street, kicked into the gutters, in the melee of everyday life, where it can, so to speak, pull the rug out from under power. The act of dissent, of interrogation, which can be a simple refusal to participate in what Havel would call “the lie”, strips the ruling structures of their power, at the very least of their power over you. In this negation, as Havel again tells us, the powerless gain a kind of strength. This “weak power” can carry great force precisely insofar as it retains its careful attention to the concrete in its critique of reality. Patočka’s notion of a phenomenological and indeed existential dissidence is again echoed in Havel’s term “existential revolution”.

It is notable in this context that the weak power gathered together in the Charter 77 movement, which had no formal platform or membership and no formal goal other than to force the Czechoslovak government to acknowledge the lie of its abstract interpretation of human rights agreements, was never officially responded to by the communist government. Instead ad hominin attack on Patočka, Havel and other signatories were used to try to undermine the “weak power” of this document.

Patočka not only wrote of this sense of risk intrinsic to his notions of responsibility and freedom, but also lived it. In the immediate period following the Prague Spring of 1968 he had several opportunities to leave Prague and join other intellectuals in exile, but instead chose to stay, banned from teaching at the university, confined to working in near-secret.

As is well-known, this decision to stay in Prague (against the pleas of his friends abroad and in particular the German philosopher Eugen Fink) even during the brutal period of normalisation, and the subsequent decision some nine years later to become a signatory and spokesperson of Charta 77, in a sense cost him his life.

In February 1977, though suffering from chronic bronchitis Patočka accepted an invitation organised by Dutch journalists (Dick Verkijk) to meet the then Dutch minister of Foreign Affairs Max van der Stoel to discuss Charta 77. Learning of this meeting after the fact, and fearing more international exposure for Charta 77 at an upcoming party at the German embassy (to which Patocka was in the end not invited) the Czechoslovak secret police picked up Patočka, drove him around and interrogated him (firmly but politely) for the whole day of the German party. They returned the exhausted, bronchial Patočka to his house that evening; he was soon admitted to hospital and would never return home. For this reason, Patočka is perhaps best known as a kind of martyr in the struggle for human rights. But the decision to remain in Prague should not be limited in its significance to this undoubtedly important outcome. Indeed had he left Prague his work would likely be consigned to history, an interesting side note in the phenomenological tradition.

But the reasons and significance of remaining in Prague go beyond these contingencies. The position of Prague during the cold-war as an intellectual and industrial centre displaced to the periphery in many ways mirrored what Patočka would say about Europe as a whole. It allowed Patočka to think Europe in a different way, through which he arrived at his concept of post-Europe (to which I will return in a moment). But the connection to Czech culture and history in Patočka’s work has further significance.

The nation cannot be understood as a given, or as a cultural base whose significations provide security or shelter. Rather, says Patočka, the nation calls to us to accomplish it. A particular culture and history demands a response from us, not of blind affirmation, but precisely as a way into responsibility, understood as this act of problematizing all reality. We study and embed ourselves in national culture not to stabilise *it* or *ourselves*, but the opposite; to help us understand how meaning is formed, how it unravels, to take up ideas and concepts that will serve as tools in this again highly risky endeavour. Patočka’s refusal to become a free-floating intellectual, safe, but exiled from home was not then simply a personal decision but a philosophical one deeply intertwined with the very nature of his understanding of dissident thought. (As the great American legislator Tip O’Neill said: “all politics are local”.)

But just as it is a grave error to think of the nation as a stable base of meaning, so too would it be gravely mistaken to try to jettison it, say in favour of a kind of European identity. The nation is (or at least was) on the path to Europe, but this is not a path of abstraction wherein we become European by looking to some set of shared values or history. It would be foolhardy and dangerous to try to arrive at a notion of shared European values, rights, or traits, belonging to a particular cultural sphere, and then worse to try to claim them as exclusively European, this would amount to a kind of abstract intellectualised form of nationalism with all the problems and none of the force of the national sort of nationalism.

We need only to think of the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s elegant rebuttal of the claim that her capabilities approach to freedom is Eurocentric: go to India, she says, and ask if the Raj was primarily interested in cultivating the capabilities of its subjects. Many Indians would be surprised to hear Europeans claim that these are European values, having seen very little of this in their actual encounters with Europeans. Patočka was well aware of this and says much the same at many points.

I would like to finish then by saying something about the role of the life of the mind and the intellectual in responding to the question of Europe. Patočka, the philosopher, is perhaps best known today as a thinker of Europe. Indeed that is the reason that he has received this important recognition. This is perhaps odd, despite his many important reflections on European history, he states in no uncertain terms, in the seminars that he gave from his living room during the dark period of normalisation, that Europe is finished. I will read you a striking passage published in the text *Plato and Europe*:

Europe, that two-thousand-year-old construction, which managed to lift up

mankind to an altogether new degree of self-reflection and consciousness, and

strength and power as well, [...] this historical reality, which for a long time

supposed that it encompassed all of mankind, that it is mankind and that all

else is worthy of neglect, is definitively at an end. […] [T]his enormous power,

definitively wrecked itself in the span of thirty years, in two wars, after which

nothing remained, nothing of her power that had ruled the world. […] Naturally

she harnessed the entire world into this, just as she made the whole world

hers before that, in a very crude material way. She forced it to completely

engage itself in those horrendous enterprises. The result is, of course, that here

are its inheritors, and these inheritors will never allow Europe to be what it

once was.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Yet, at the same time, Patočka elsewhere acknowledges the unheard of social accomplishments of post-war Europe; and affirms the importance of the European tradition in understanding this condition which he calls “post-European”. It is safe to say that there is a fair bit of ambiguity in Patočka’s thinking about Europe.

The term post-European does not only signify a displacement of Europe from the centre of geo-political power, but with that displacement a destabilisation of European rationality that opens a possibility. The possibility that is opened up is nothing less than an opportunity to re-establish the spiritual foundations of European and indeed human existence. It is the possibility for a resuscitation and reconstruction of the European *logos*, an attempt to save it from what he calls the “internal mutations” that have left it drained and sclerotic. What does this mean? Coarsely, that the post-European condition opens the possibility for a consideration of the powers of European rationality beyond instrumentality, or as he says elsewhere, beyond “the massification of all human life under the perilous form of industrial productivity.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Let us be frank and ask if this “massification” that Patočka laments is not precisely what we see affirmed when the prime minister, for example, of Hungary calls for an “era of the work based nation state”?[[5]](#endnote-5)

The post-European condition however is only possible because of the destructive legacy of European reason, because of its mutation and narrow rendering as techno-scientific instrumental reason, and the consequent de-centring of Europe from global power; but it is also possible because of the demand for continuous self-critique that Patočka located at the core, illustrated first in Socrates and lastly in the phenomenological tradition, of European thought. This is precisely the meaning of the idea of post-European Responsibility within the context of Europe. It is a taking up again of the tradition of reason, but in a dissident fashion, that is, as a way to bring into question and problematize the seemingly stable givens of European and indeed global social reality. Put otherwise, in the wake of its “destruction” what does Europe have to offer? Displaced from the centre, it can finally offer critique through the interrogation of its own tradition and history. In so doing, post-European thought offered dissidence against the structure of techno-rational civilisation that characterised both of its successors.

Faced with the bleakness of the Czechoslovakian situation in the mid to late 1970s Patočka refuses any positive formulation of this post-European condition. The task of the “solidarity of the shaken”, those who have in essence accepted the post-European condition, is to say “No” to further “massification” of human life. His decision to serve as spokesperson for Charta 77 and to demand at the very least that Czechoslovakia adhere to its institutional human rights commitments was in some sense a practical and political step beyond what we find in his philosophical writing of the time.

If we look back to a more hopeful moment, 1968, we find a different voice in Patočka’s work, one that saw the student movements – what he means when he refers to “intellectuals” – as a harbinger of change. He places particular emphasis on the “technical intelligencia” (engineers, inventors) and the need to harness the increasing power of the cybernetic revolution, what we would today call the digital revolution, for the cause of Socratic dissidence. But this possibility rested as much on an understanding and willingness to interrogate the European tradition as a historical process of meaning formation as it did on technical know-how. This undoubtedly remains an enormous challenge, but one that, given the immense political and social forces at stake in the digital transformation of the European and indeed global lifeworld, cannot be shirked. To take up this task, is nothing less than the essence of European Responsibility in a post-European world. Faced with existential threat(s) to the planet and to many national democracies, it may be wise for us to be humble in admitting as Patočka so readily did that European logos no longer belongs solely, if at all, to Europe. Post-European Responsibility is global in scope and remit

Let me put this another way. The only way to avoid the dissolution of the opportunity offered by post-European humanity is to adapt the stance of Socratic dissidence that is the resuscitated spiritual ground of European reason. But we must also accept, indeed welcome, that this dissidence in the face of global challenges can no longer be proper only to Europe, but must necessarily become globalised and Europe must play a role in this; Europe must advocate the post-European condition.

This notion of post-European responsibility is rendered by Patočka as the task of the open soul; I have used the word dissidence here to emphasise the critical stance that this soul takes toward power. A certain vigilance is needed here; if this dissident stance is somehow reified, again rendered as the supremacy of European reason, we run the risk of a post-European Eurocentrism, a kind of deadened Eurocentric critique of Europe against which, Patočka warns, non-European societies or even some *European* societies will construct a defence against.

The task of the European intellectual in embracing this sense of post-European responsibility may thus in some instances be knowing when to destabilise or stand against Europe itself; therein lies the paradox and hope of European Responsibility.

1. See, Jan Patočka. 2016. “Intellectuals and Opposition” translated by F. Tava and D. Leufer. In: *Thinking after Europe, Jan Patočka and Politics*, Meacham, D. and Tava, F. eds., London: Rowman and Littlefield International. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See, Jan Patočka. 2007. “The Spiritual Person and the Intellectual” translated by E. Manton. In: *Living in Problematicity*. E. Manton ed., translated by E. Manton and E. Kohák. Prague: Oikoymenh, 2007. Original Czech version: “Duchovní človek a intelektual.” In: *Péče o Duši III*, 355-371. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jan Patočka. 2002. *Plato and Europe*. Translated by P. Lom. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See, Jan Patočka, “Note sur l’ère posteuropéenne” [Problems of the Post-European Epoch]. In: *L’Europe après l’Europe*. E. Abrams ed, translated by Erika Abrams e Marc de Launay, with a postface by Marc Crépon. Lagrasse: Verdier, 2007, pp. 264-66 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp, July 30, 2014. Available at <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>. Cited in Jiří Přibáň. 2016. “Resisting Fear: On Dissent and the Solidarity of the Shaken in Contemporary European and Global Society” In: *Thinking after Europe, Jan Patočka and Politics*, Meacham, D. and Tava, F. eds., London: Rowman and Littlefield International. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)