
THE RETURN TO EUROPE OR THE CRISIS OF CIVILIZATION?

O presente artigo resulta de um trabalho de investigação do autor elaborado na sua qualidade de Conferencista e Colaborador do Instituto da Defesa Nacional, seleccionado para publicação na revista «Nação e Defesa».

Sumário:

Neste artigo, datado de 1995, o autor examina o período de transição pós-comunista vivido pelos Países da Europa Central e de Leste, desde a expectativa criada pela revolução de 1989, designadamente, de acesso à «Ordem Liberal» de tipo Ocidental, passando pela análise dos fenómenos políticos entretanto ocorridos, de que são exemplos a evolução da situação e das condições de segurança regional, na ex-Jugoslávia e na ex-Checoslováquia, e para além disso, alertando para a existência de uma «Crise da Civilização Europeia», factos estes, entre outros, que vieram atrasar e obrigaram a reconsiderar os processos de transição para a Democracia e de integração na Europa Ocidental.

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I

Five years already have passed, since the Soviet empire collapsed down and the European situation dramatically changed. Looking back at what have experienced during this period and trying to understand what really happened after the spectre of communism, which was going around Europe for almost one and half centuries finally disappeared, we should first realize another important change which took place in the meantime: There is a remarkable difference between our perception of that event in the very beginning of this new era and now.

In 1990, we were told repeatedly by prominent Western observers of the events in East-Central Europe that there was nothing particularly original in the revolutions of 1989: «With all the fuss and noise, not a single new idea has come out of Eastern Europe in 1989»⁽¹⁾. What happened there and what was greeted with great enthusiasm and joy, was understood as a liberation, as a restoration of an already known and existing Western liberal order. «The ideas whose time has come are old, familiar, well-tested ones – (It is the new ideas whose time has passed)»⁽²⁾.

In 1995 however, the overall picture of East-Central Europe is definitely less rosy than it was five years ago and the role played by all these «old well-tested ideas» is not at all unequivocal and entirely unproblematic. What we observe in East-Central Europe nowadays, are not only their more or less successful «implementations» – i.e. political and economic reforms essentially «on track», in most of the post-communist countries – but also many other, rather disturbing and unexpected phenomena. There is the unprecedented Bosnian debacle – not only a disastrous product of nationalism which resur-

(1) French historian François Furet, quoted on page 27 in Ralf Dahrendorf (1990). *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*. Chatto and Windus: London.

(2) A quotation from English scholar Timothy Garton Ash, *op. cit.* above page 28.

faced in many parts of East-Central Europe after the collapse of communist ideology, but «the greatest collective security failure of the West since the 1930's», as one high-ranked U.S. official put it recently⁽³⁾.

Should we perceive the political processes in the post-communist countries only as more or less successful «transitions to democracy»? Or is there much more at stake here than only the «westernization» of the East, but also other transitions have to be taken into consideration? Should the collapse of communism be understood as the victory of the «old» western world over the hubris of utopias and the totalitarian deformation of «well-tested» European political traditions? Or should we see here at the same time the crucial moment in the historical process which started already in the beginning of the twentieth century, and whose consequence is that both politically and spiritually Europe lost her until then undisputed and undisputable dominant position in the world? Is the process going on in Europe after the collapse of communism, a mere home-coming of «post-totalitarians» from their Babylonian captivity to the nice, prosperous, and safe haven of the West? Or is the current rapprochement of East and West in Europe taking place at a moment of profound crisis in European civilization, and Europeans cannot go, as they might like to, «back to the future», but find themselves in an entirely new, unprecedented, and thus unknown situation?

The aim of this paper is to look at both models – «return to Europe» and «crisis of European civilization» – more closely and to point to some of their practical and/or theoretical implications. My guide as far as «return to Europe» is concerned, will be Ralf Dahrendorf, i.e. I will depart from the concept of «open society» coined by his teacher, Karl Popper, and Dahrendorf's description of the political processes in East-Central Europe as the «re-opening» of societies which were kept closed under totalitarian domination.

The theme of crisis of European civilization or European mankind was introduced into the philosophy of our century by Edmund Husserl and then picked up and developed by many others. I will mention here from three thinkers, who in spite of many significant differences, have something essential in common: Hannah Arendt, Jan Patočka and Erich Voegelin. They all came from Central Europe. They all were members of the same generation, being born in the beginning of our century and passing away prior to the collapse of communism (Arendt and Patočka in the seventies and Voegelin in the eighties). They could all observe the emergence of totalitarianism in the countries of their

(3) Richard Holbrooke: America, A European Power. Foreign Affairs, March/April 1995.

origin and the totalitarian form of government fundamentally influenced their lives. They all were confronted with the challenge of Husserlian phenomenology and were convinced that in order to understand the roots of contemporary political crises in Europe, it is necessary to return to the immediate experience of human matters and «to recapture the reality»⁽⁴⁾.

While the «return to Europe» approach seems to be very present in current political debates and decision-making processes throughout East Central Europe – it underlies practically all political programs and conceptions the East Central European politicians are coming forth with and trying to sell to the public, both domestically and internationally – all warning signals of the crisis of European civilization seem to be rather suppressed and marginalized in the post-communist political debates. This is on the one hand perfectly understandable. On the other hand, when we realize where do we stand five years after, gives us, in my view, enough reasons to become again more aware of and more sensitive to exactly this aspect of current European situation.

II

«What does it all mean, and where is it going to lead (you want to know)? Are we not witnessing a process of dissolution without anything taking the place of the old and admittedly dismal structures?»⁽⁵⁾ With these questions, Ralf Dahrendorf, a prominent British political scholar, opens his *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, in my view the most lucid account of the collapse of communism in 1989, written in the form of a letter dated in April 1990, «intended to have been sent to a gentleman in Warsaw». The model for this writing was Edmund Burke, who did similar thing in 1790 when he in a similar letter («intended to have been sent to a gentleman in Paris»), articulated his opinions concerning the French Revolution:

«...though I do most heartily wish that France may be animated by a spirit of rational liberty, and that I think you bound, in all honest policy, to provide a permanent body in which that spirit may reside, and an effectual organ by which it may act, it is my misfortune to entertain great doubts concerning several material points in your late transactions.»⁽⁶⁾

⁽⁴⁾ E. Voegelin: Autobiographical reflections.

⁽⁵⁾ Page 4, Ralf Dahrendorf (1990).

⁽⁶⁾ Selected Works of Edmund Burke. Volume I (1905). Reflections on the French Revolution. Methuen & Co.: London, page 14.

Dahrendorf's message is pretty clear: as far as European revolutions are concerned, nothing much has changed between 1970 and 1990. The central problem of post-communist countries, returning after decades of forced separation to Europe is apparently the one which has occupied the minds of all modern European revolutionaries: How «to provide a permanent body in which a spirit of rational liberty may reside»? How to create, after an out-lived, «ancient» regime was displaced or simply fell apart, a new body politic? How to transform a profoundly negative force of revolution into the architectonic power of lawmaking and city-building? How to follow the American rather than the French example in this matter and found a new political order «without violence and with the help of a constitution»⁽⁷⁾?

Dahrendorf was inspired by the Burkeian conservatism: In times of revolutionary change, even «when, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another», to paraphrase the opening sentence of American Declaration of Independence, it is law and tradition (and not utopian political doctrines) which only can constitute a solid basis for human liberty and free political institutions. East-Central Europeans can only succeed in their revolutions – i.e. after they managed to dissolve all connections with the ancient regimes – if they reintroduce the rule of law in their countries, renew all institutions of freedom in their societies, restore the political culture based on civic values and the virtues of citizenship, in short, if they are able to transform the whole social fabric inherited from the *ancient régime* and become once again an «*open society*». From Dahrendorf's point of view the bottom-line of the story which is going on in East Central Europe is simple: *the societies which have been closed for decades are now reopening again.*

Eastern Europe had to undergo a drastic and, in a way, an artificial change during the period of communism. What happened was historically unique and unprecedented: the totalitarian regimes which came to power in all countries in the zone of Soviet influence⁽⁸⁾, succeeded to close their societies. Seeing the basic source of their legitimacy in the utopian ideology of Marxism-Leninism,

⁽⁷⁾ Cfr. Hannah Arendt. What is Authority. In: Between Past and Future Six Exercises in Political Thought. The Vicking Press New York, 1961, page 140.

⁽⁸⁾ And that meant first «satellization», i.e. «binding of the region's states to the Soviet Union», and than «sovietization», i.e. «the transformation of the regions's domestic, political, economic and social structures, institutions, and patterns according to Soviet norms and values.» – Cfr. Charles Gati: The Block that Failed. Soviet-East European Relations in Transition. Indiana University Press, Bloomington & Indianapolis 1990, pages 9-23.

using the most horrible methods of social engineering, committing crimes against humanity, the totalitarian rulers finally succeeded in paralysing practically all institutions which are, under the normal conditions, an indispensable part of all bodies politic. They liquidated not only all their opponents in the power struggle, but also all «soft» institutions of civil society. They disabled not only the mechanism of parliamentary democracy (where criticism of the government and replaceability of those in power by others with different policies are the necessary conditions) but also destroyed all mechanisms and structures, whose function is not to compete for political power but simply to make the political body «open» – i.e. to make it responsive to all instigation coming from outside or from within and capable of self-reflection and self-transformation. Politics in the closed society, instead of being «a hypothesis which is permanently tested against reality and corrected in the light of experience», in the words of Ralf Dahrendorf's teacher in the matters of open society, Karl Popper, becomes a pure technology of rule and dominion. The public space was destroyed and what remained was the administration of life functions of the «socialized» human collective.

In the course of time, however, this almost perfect stability turned to be even from the point of view of its own preservation, the socialism's most serious imperfection: no matter how sincerely the enlightened leaders, who from time to time appeared on the top of the hierarchy of power, wished to use their position to modernize the outdated social order, socialism has proven to be unreformable. The truth was very simple: any attempt to break up its closeness, to problematize its revolutionary dogma, to make it «more human», «more efficient», or «more up-to-date», could result only in the loss of «legitimacy» of the socialism's foundation. What had been gradually withering away during the history of the communist regimes, was certainly not a «state», as the founding fathers of the movement had wrongly predicted, but something else: a power generated by the very existence of a political community, a power, capable of animating a body politic and keeping it together. The biggest problem and the proverbial Achilles's heel of totalitarian regimes was, according to Hannah Arendt, that of ancient tyranny. Being a corrupted or perverted form of government («political combination of force and powerlessness»), condemning the rulers as well as the ruled to «impotence and futility», tyranny:

«prevents the development of power, not only in a particular segment of the public realm but in its entirety; it generates, in other words, impotence as naturally as other bodies politic generate power...: it alone is unable to develop

enough power to remain at all in the space of appearance, the public realm; on the contrary, it develops the germs of its own destruction the moment it comes into existence»⁽⁹⁾.

Seen from this point of view, the revolutions of 1989 had much less of positive content than some of their participants, and above all some of the most outspoken outside observers of these events, would like to admit. What we observed, witnessed or eventually took part in, were not so much the masterfully concerted actions of «velvet» revolutionaries, but a sudden break-down of the delegitimized and, by its own «perestrojkas», undermined regimes. The closed systems simply collapsed down and the societies which had been kept closed for decades immediately started to reopen again. The revolutionary activities which burst out in East-Central Europe during the annus mirabilis 1989 were not the immediate cause of the collapse, but rather its first and the most visible consequence.

As I already indicated, Dahrendorf's approach to the phenomenon of European revolutions – no new ideas, but rather the return to the «old, well-tested» ones – is in a way «counter-revolutionary»: «Edmund Burke argues eloquently that the whole point of 1688⁽¹⁰⁾ was to prevent a revolution like in France 1789»⁽¹¹⁾, to prevent «reigns of terror and virtue», which characterized the rule of the Jacobins. In observing East-Central Europe 1989-1990, as he said at the beginning of his letter, «from his Oxford study», Dahrendorf apparently wanted to make a similar argument and his message sent to all post-communist politicians was pretty clear:

«Neither Central Europe, nor social democracy nor any euphemism for the «middle way» must be thought of as a system, or indeed a Utopia, if liberty is what we want. The choice between freedom and serfdom is stark and clear, and it offers no halfway house for those weaker souls who would like to avoid making up their minds»⁽¹²⁾.

⁽⁹⁾ Hannah Arendt: Human Condition, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1958, page 202-203.

⁽¹⁰⁾ 1688 was a year of the «Glorious Revolution» in England, and we might add also 1776 of the American Revolution.

⁽¹¹⁾ Ralf Dahrendorf: op. cit. page 10.

⁽¹²⁾ Ralf Dahrendorf: op. cit. page 62.

The enthusiasm of liberation must not obscure the reality that a choice must be made here between two opposite alternatives and that no «third» way is possible between them; that the major issue of post-totalitarian politics is going to the conflict «between advocates of systems and defenders of the open society»⁽¹³⁾. Only after the «choice between freedom and serfdom» is made and the existence of open society guaranteed, the normal politics can emerge, where a «hundred options may be on offer, and three or four usually are»⁽¹⁴⁾. The post-communist politicians were «to go back to the 1780s, to the lessons of the great transformations of that time» and to use The Federalist Papers, as an «unsurpassed manual of liberal democracy»⁽¹⁵⁾: The biggest threat to democracy in the times of transition and of disordered society, warned James Madison, was weak government. The key question is then what «republican remedies» can be used to make the government stronger; how the emerging open society can be stabilized and protected not only against the forces of «the ancient regime», but also against those new politicians who pretend to be the speakers of the people but in reality serve their own self-interest and seek to «aggrandize themselves by the confusion of their country», in the words of the other Federalist, Alexander Hamilton⁽¹⁶⁾.

The relation and proper ordering of very different agendas in the process of transition, the correct sequencing of «constitutional» and «normal» politics and the right choice and use of «republican remedies» which are capable of making the government stronger, is, in Dahrendorf's account, the key problem. The envisaged ideal schedule of transition to democracy develops, according to Dahrendorf, as follows: First comes the problem of the constitution⁽¹⁷⁾. Then «normal» politics bursts in and the economic reform must be executable within this environment⁽¹⁸⁾. The key, however, the lengthiest process, according to Dahrendorf, is the third problem: the emergence of civil society:

«The third condition of the road to freedom is to provide the social foundation which transform the constitution and the economy from fair-weather

⁽¹³⁾ Ralf Dahrendorf, *op. cit.*, page 62.

⁽¹⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, page 35.

⁽¹⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, page 30.

⁽¹⁶⁾ The Federalist Papers, First letter of Alexander Hamilton.

⁽¹⁷⁾ «The formal process of constitutional reform takes at least six months» (Ralf Dahrendorf, *op. cit.*, page 99).

⁽¹⁸⁾ «A general sense that things are looking up as a result of economic reform is unlikely to spread before six years has passed.» (*ibid.*, page 99-100).

into all-weather Institutions capable of withstanding the storms generated within and without, and sixty years are barely enough to lay these foundations»(¹⁹).

If at the very beginning of the revolutionary transformation arrives «the hour of the constitutional lawyers» and a little later «the hour of the politicians», these two would «mean little without the hour of the citizen.»(²⁰) Only then and not in the moment when the post-communist countries are eventually admitted to the European Union or NATO, the «return to Europe» from the totalitarian captivity, will become an irreversible and undubitable reality.

Dahrendorf's letter is not and it certainly does not want to be a masterplan for post-totalitarian politics of transition or a handbook to be used by post-totalitarian politicians. The lucidity and depth is achieved here just because the author himself consciously rejects to be read that way. Having told «candidly his sentiments» similarly as Edmund Burke did two hundred years before him, Dahrendorf also concludes his letter: «I have little to recommend my opinion but long observation and much impartiality»(²¹).

«I also like the way Burke winds up his epistle by describing himself as one who "when the equipoise of the vessel in which he sails may be endangered by over-loading it upon one side, is desirous of carrying the small weight of his reason to that which may preserve its equipoise". Is there a more measured way of describing a countercyclical view of things? Liberty above all is what I believe in. The goal may be obvious, but the path to it has many pitfalls. We can help overcome some of them, but for the most part our own energy and sense of purpose are called for. The rest is luck. I keep my fingers crossed and hope for the best. This I do with all my heart».(²²)

III

Looking at East-Central Europe in the spring of 1990 Dahrendorf certainly scored many good points. In the today's perspective, however, his basic scheme

(¹⁹) Ibid. page 100.

(²⁰) Ibid. page 100.

(²¹) Edmund Burke. op. cit. page 199.

(²²) Ralf Dahrendorf, op. cit. page 164.

– post – totalitarian politics as a unreconcilable struggle between «advocates of systems and defenders of open society» – is simple incomplete and omits the most critical aspects of our current situation. Democratization, transition from the totalitarian state socialism to the liberal political order of the Western type, is only a part of the process initiated by the revolutions of 1989. All so called complications on the road from serfdom to freedom – the rise of nationalistic movements, the turmoil and civil wars in different areas of the post-communist region, the overall destabilization not only of East-Central Europe but of the international order in general – all that indicates more than clearly that there is something wrong with the dominant understanding of the current political processes. With respects to the change of the political climate in Europe which has taken place between the beginning of 1990 and now, it is obvious that the interpretation of the meaning and the political implications of the collapse of communism, formulated in the optimistic political atmosphere after the great victory of liberal ideas and after the unconditional surrender of Europe's biggest enemy, was at least shortsighted, or maybe entirely mistaken⁽²³⁾. After decades of stability and rigid constellations we are approaching not the «end of history», but a period of uncertainty and difficult length search for a new balance.

First, what seems to escape the Dahrendorfian point of view is the basic fact that the liberation and revolutions came after the period of totalitarian governments, which did not only deprived the East-Central European of their liberties and rights, but also closed the East-Central European societies «noetically», i.e. paralyzed their members as far as their capacity to live in the public space of polis, to share one common world with their fellow-citizens, to think together about the «human affairs», to articulate them in speech and to «act in concert»⁽²⁴⁾. If we want to analyse the post-totalitarian development, if we want to understand the basic patterns of post-totalitarian political culture and behavior, we should also pay attention to that bizarre state of «epistemologic chaos» in which the post-communist societies find themselves in the moment

⁽²³⁾ A serious warning, as far as the present state of matter in Europe, comes, for instance, from one of the biggest champions and the most active supporters of the idea of open society in the post-communist world, George Soros: «The collapse of the Soviet Union threatens to become a defeat for the free world because we are failing to integrate this region into the free world and, instead of being integrated, it is disintegrating. Indeed, what used to be the Soviet Union may become a black hole which may eventually swallow up civilization.» (George Soros: *The National Dictatorships and Open Society*, expanded version of a lecture delivered at the Harvard Club of New York, November, 18, 1992).

⁽²⁴⁾ Cfr. Hannah Arendt: *Human Condition*.

of their «re-opening»⁽²⁵⁾; we should seek to understand their basic «mental» condition, which is still very much rooted in their totalitarian past; we should study not only the various facts of post-communist politics, but also the post-totalitarian political culture, the process of the re-invention of politics by the post-totalitarian political mind.

The second problem of the post-communist political processes in Europe omitted by Dahrendorf, concerns the close interaction between the domestic and international change: what we are confronted with is not only the process of democratization (i.e. the transformation of a regime, which collapsed down) and its eventual problems and difficulties, but a *dual transition*, «domestic transitions within an international system itself in transition»⁽²⁶⁾. The collapse of regime (state socialism, totalitarianism) in East-Central Europe has been accompanied by the collapse of empire. We observe here states disintegrating irretrievably and being replaced by new ones. Is the agenda of a state or nation-building compatible with that of re-opening and democratization? Is it not true that these two processes have very rarely fit together in Europe's past⁽²⁷⁾?

The third problem not considered at all by Dahrendorf is a kind of extension of the two previous ones. The «epistemological chaos» and the reality of «international system in transition» characterize quite obviously not only the current situation of the post-communist countries of East-Central Europe. We are not dealing here with the political processes which can be contained in the region of their origin. On the contrary, from the very beginning they spill over its borders, not only influencing decisively the situation in the Western part of the «old continent», but having also a global dimension. Even the greatest champions of open society, even the regions where this «most precious invention of the West» has taken its deepest roots, are wessley-null made part of the process of post-totalitarian re-opening. What is going to happen in and with East-Central Europe will act as a kind of catalyzator for the political processes also elsewhere: definitely, in the rest of Europe and in the West in general, but also on a global scale.

Summing up: With respect to what is going on after the collapse of communism in Europe, Dahrendorf's sharp choice «between serfdom and freedom» seems to be an oversimplified bifurcation. Interpreting the post-communist transitions as «reopening of temporarily closed societies» only,

⁽²⁵⁾ Cfr. Gabriel Andreescu: *Violence and Transition Period*.

⁽²⁶⁾ Bunce, *op. cit.*

⁽²⁷⁾ Bunce, *op. cit.*

seeing the principal problem of post-communist societies in the choice to be made between two options – «with no “third way” possible between them» – Dahrendorf completely omits the heart of matter and blurs the most important distinctions. What escapes his simplistic dichotomy is that there is something more important, more powerful at stake now than the process of post-communist democratization and re-Europeanisation; that this process has not only an European, but also a global dimension. What we are living through and experiencing with is not only the collapse of communism, but also the end of an era in the history of mankind, the most profound crisis of European civilization.

IV

As far as the diagnosis of the current state of Europe we want to depart from late Edmund Husserl: Europe has fallen into a crisis in the twentieth century. What is at stake primarily is the noetic capacity of Europeans, the dominant form of European reason, i.e., the scientific way of knowing. What, however, Husserl means by Europe? Europe, as he tries to explain, has never been only «a conglomeration of different nations influencing one another only through commerce and power struggles»⁽²⁸⁾. It is a historical formation which in spite of all changes and metamorphoses has been always animated by one and the same spirit – «a new spirit, stemming from philosophy and its particular sciences, a spirit of free critique and norm-giving aimed at infinite tasks, dominating humanity through and through, creating new, infinite ideals»⁽²⁹⁾. Europe in this Husserlian sense means a civilization, constituted by the Greek discovery of THEORIA, by the reception of a certain permanent timeless principle – logos and ratio; by the recognition that the human life can be founded upon reason.

There is no doubt, that it was the «efficacious knowledge» of modern science which was born in the seventeenth century in the philosophy of Galilei, Descartes and others, enable Europeans to improve radically the living conditions of their societies and made Europe an undisputed hegemony in the world affairs. There was, however, a price to be paid for this spectacular success.

⁽²⁸⁾ Edmund Husserl: *The Vienna Lecture (The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. by David Carr, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1970, p. 289).

⁽²⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

Modern science, warned Husserl, fell in the same time into trap of «naturalism and objectivism». What can modern science tell us, if we want to leave aside the realm of facticity and start examining the process of scientific objectification itself? What does it rest upon? What is that, what is able to unify various individual acts and performances of science into some coherent whole? Is not a grave and strange matter that all questions concerning the links between scientific truths and their meaning in human life – all questions which are of central importance from the point of view of the human individual being – are systematically excluded as «unscientific»? Is not modern science, in its hunt for objective reality, losing from sight something essential for the rational way of living, something without which human reason remains unintelligible to itself, and that is its own subjectivity?

Modern science, concluded Husserl his Vienna lecture from 1935⁽³⁰⁾, regardless to its spectacular successes, has estranged itself from its original ideal. Because it is unable even to register the problem posed by the subjectivity of human reason and knowledge, its rationality «is of a piece with the rationality of the Egyptian pyramids»⁽³¹⁾. In spite of its enormous potential, it suffers from the lack of rationality and that is the principal cause of the current European crisis.

The Husserl's response and proposal how to escape from the crisis of European existence – how to avoid «the downfall of Europe in its estrangement from its rational sense of life, its fall into hostility toward the spirit and into barbarity»⁽³²⁾ – is his project of transcendental phenomenology. The rationality of European spirit can be sustained only if the immediate experience is rehabilitated as the principal source and point of departure in the noetic activities of Europeans. If a Husserlian philosopher is to succeed in this efforts to resist nihilism and skepsis threatening and literarily eating away the European mind in the twentieth century, he has return to PHAINOMENA, to re-establish the broken communication between the realm of scientific objectivity and the world of human existence (*Lebenswelt*). How can he do that? By adopting strictly theoretical attitude, by turning his attention to the intentional life of thinking ego and to the processes of constitution of «objectivity» in the subjective sphere of human consciousness.

⁽³⁰⁾ Ibid.

⁽³¹⁾ Edmund Husserl, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

⁽³²⁾ Husserl: Vienna Lecture, *concl.*

V

As far as the basic motive of their philosophizing, Arendt, Patocka and Voegelin are in a perfect agreement with Husserl. However, their understanding of response to the noetic crisis of European civilization is fundamentally different. Is Husserl's transcendentalism with its unequivocal preference of theoretical attitude and his search for the certainty of evidence and apodictic knowledge within the immanent sphere of ego really and adequate point of departure? Is it not what motivates and inspires the Husserlian project criticizing «objectivism and naturalism» of modern science still rooted in the mentality of modern man, who has succeed in liberating himself from the hardships which once had determined the human condition bound to the earth, but finds himself now, after he finally left the earth with the help of science, in the state of world alienation?

The objection Arendt, Patocka and Voegelin want to raise against Husserlian phenomenology can be thus formulated as follows: Theoretical attitude to-be-rediscovered and re-assumed by a phenomenologist cannot escape the predicaments of human condition. It does not offer an apodictic beginning for human science. Theoretical attitude must be seen and interpreted as a possibility of finite human existence, as a possibility within the reach of man, whose nature is not to know but, Aristotle tells us, «to desire to know»⁽³³⁾; who is not SOFOS, but FILOSOFOS; who does not have a divine knowledge of the things but only HÉ ANTHROPINÉ SOFIA, i.e., is capable of finding himself in aporias⁽³⁴⁾ and recognizing that of «escaping [his] ignorance»⁽³⁵⁾.

The lesson to be taken in the moment of European crisis in the twentieth century is that of humility: the openness of human life – the human ability to live in truth – can be sustained only if man is able to learn to understand himself again not from the point of view of the absolute and the infinite, but taking into consideration his own finiteness and limitations. It is the revival of negative knowledge of old Socrates, what should be rediscovered in the current situation. What is at stake is the insight that there is a fundamental difference between the absolute «divine» wisdom and the human way of knowing: humans can only know something by keeping themselves open to the unknown and unknowable, by remaining vigilant and watchful to the mystery of revelation of Being.

(³³) Aristotle.

(³⁴) Ibid.

(³⁵) Ibid.

The finite nature of human noesis has all-important consequence: theoretical attitude sought by Husserl – or BIOS THEORETICOS, as the ancient Greeks put it – with its specific rationality and capacity to «transcend» ephemeral human matters and enter the realm of true and unchangeable being, cannot be isolated from other forms or modalities of «free» life, from other BIOI that a free and «open-minded» man can lead. Arendt, Patocka and Voegelin take on the fundamental Husserlian motive in order to reinterpret PROTE FILOSOFIA from the point of view of revitalized, original, non-metaphysical motive of philosophizing. They want to think not in isolation from but on the contrary, in the context of human polity and its BIOS POLITIKOS. Their aim is not to reflect on the political phenomena from the distanced position of theoretician, but to engage the philosophical thought once again in the search for common good. The fundamental goal of their meditations and reflections, is a kind of «maieutic» assistance in the reopening of modern political mind, the socratic «care of the soul». Philosophy in the twentieth century, in the times of European crisis «is called on», in the words of Patocka,

«to give expression to what society still rudely wants to say, to give its voice to still mute tendencies, but also expose what is behind them, to demonstrate their genesis, to mark cross-roads, to identify problems, even to try to resolve them.»⁽³⁶⁾

Its is not, and in fact could not ever be, a propositional, transferable knowledge of an ideal world, which can be expressed in a form of the doctrine, but «the articulation of the experience of concrete consciousness of concrete man»⁽³⁷⁾, who lives in concrete situation. Philosophy is called again not only to theorize, but to «put human life to the test» (DIDONAI ELENCHON TOU BIOU)⁽³⁸⁾ and reversely, what is at stake in our current European situation and what is a decisive issue today, is the ability of modern Europeans to revitalize within the public spaces of their common world the forgotten tradition of political through having its origin (ARCHÉ) in philosophical question.

What about the polis these new «classical»⁽³⁹⁾ political philosophers are speaking to? Where is its public space? What is the common good its citizens are called on to share and take care of?

⁽³⁶⁾ Patocka.

⁽³⁷⁾ E. Voegelin: Anamnesis.

⁽³⁸⁾ Platon: Apology.

⁽³⁹⁾ Leo Strauss.

For Arendt, Patocka and Voegelin, the crisis of European civilization, whose noetic dimension was introduced to the philosophical debate by Husserl, is first of all a political crisis. After World War I, Europe started to lose her former position of hegemonic player in the world affairs, new and unprecedented phenomena emerged in all spheres of life, undermining the European spirit with all its «infinite tasks and ideals» and universalistic habits and inclinations. Whereas the Husserl's solution of the European crisis was still pretty much «Europocentric»⁽⁴⁰⁾, Arendt, Patocka and Voegelin already knew that the European humanity was undergoing together with all non-European civilizations and cultures, a dramatic and irreversible change. They were aware that the old solutions and approaches to the crises and conflicts ceased to function; that Europe, no matter how venerable and well-tested her principles and basic ideas were, was entering an unknown and entirely unprecedented future; that in the power struggle which shortly after the Great War was over, burst gain all over the world, the European cultural and spiritual heritage was at stake; that the «European» age in the history of mankind came to an end in the twentieth century; that the most important task for European philosophy has become to respond to the challenge to the European thought presented by the fact of emergence of global community of nations in our century and the birth of global civilization: to navigate its boat through the straits between Scylla of dogmatism and Charybdis of relativism.

The political phenomenon, which reveals «the very heart of our century»⁽⁴¹⁾, is the rise of totalitarian movements, totalitarian revolutions, totalitarian forms of government and totalitarian visions of a new world order. What is the nature of totalitarianism? What are its origins? What enable at least temporary success of the regimes which represented undoubtedly «the most radical denial of freedom» in the history of mankind? What lesson should be drawn from here? What are the remedies Europe and all her heirs and successors should rely upon to resist the totalitarian threat? These questions explicitly raised by Hannah Arendt, but important without any doubt also for Patocka and Voegelin, point to central «noetic» problem of contemporary politics and *punctum saliens* of contemporary political theory. The thing is that it was not a brutal force and atrocities beyond measure committed by totalitarian governments, as Arendt observed, what contributed most to the dissemination and consolidation of totalitarian power, but its ability to use opportunity

⁽⁴⁰⁾ David Levy.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Arendt.

offered by the more and more globalized situation of mankind and to come up with the seditious project of global rule; to operate successfully in the social and political environment flooded by the ideological language, to paralyze the human capacity of understanding.

What becomes the most urgent philosophical problem after totalitarianism has become possible at all within the civilization which has grown from the European heritage, was to discover and clarify the symbolical forms which would be able to shape and cultivate the understanding of current «postmodern» man. What is at stake – and it explains also why totalitarianism is even after the totalitarians ideologies of nazism and communism were defeated still biggest threat for global civilization – is the absence or weakness of meaningful structures in human history which could help us to find the way from our current confusions, from our inability to articulate «the subject hidden behind the bland symbolism of “mankind”»⁽⁴²⁾. What could and what should serve as a source of unity in the pluralistic and multicultural global community? Can the dialogue which always was led only within the confines of concrete societies and their symbolical forms, be globalized and re-discovered as a part of the on-going «dialogue of mankind»⁽⁴³⁾?

VI

To conclude, I would like to go back to the current post-communist transitions. There is no doubt that the model of the «return to Europe» offers relatively good and save guidance for the process of re-opening of the societies which were kept closed during the last decades, isolated artificially behind the «iron curtain» and now are back in their own histories again. There is hardly anything else what could be recommended to Central Europeans than the ideas of modern liberalism, and above all the concept of an «open society». At the same time, however, the sound advice seems to be to remain vigilant and watchful in the times of the European crisis. The democratic traditions and the example and the assistance from the West might not be enough powerful instruments for the understanding where we are right now, for the development of that skill the post-totalitarians seem to need more than anything else: the capacity of right political judgement, the ability not only to adopt themselves

⁽⁴²⁾ Voegelin: Order and History II.

⁽⁴³⁾ Eric Voegelin IV. vol.

to the «western climate of ideas» and to integrate themselves into that style of life which still seem to flourish in the western part of formerly divided European continent, but to act with a clear understanding of the novelty of their current situation.

To understand and articulate also for those who where not forced to make a similar experience, the story of their totalitarian past, seem to be one of the tasks for Central Europeans today. The tragedy of Central Europe, Milan Kundera tried to turn attention of the West in the beginning of eighties, should become not only the impulse for retribution of those who could be blamed for the past evils, bus also the contribution of Central Europeans to the dialogue of mankind which the great philosophers of our times started to provoke as their response to the fact that the modern European civilization finds itself on the crossroads in the end of the twentieth century.

No matter than in the short term perspective of post-communist transitions the arguments pointing to the crisis of European mankind might look too academic, unconvincing and with very low political impact, they definitely will have their place in the long-term perspective, at least if it is true that Central Europeans believe that Europe, as one project among others in the framework of emerging global civilization, is also their future. Not taking the model of «crisis of European civilization» into serious consideration in the debates on post-communist transitions is certainly possible and might be seen as a smart move how to protect and even further disseminate all venerable, «well tested» liberal ideas, whose time has come according to people like with the collapse of communism. Those who hold this view should be, however, very cautions. Because what looked like clear victory of freedom over serfdom five years ago, and now still is presented as the only plausible alternative, may end up being indeed a proverbial Pyrrhic victory of future.

Martin Palous