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Patočka, Foucault, Hamvas, Elias,
and the Care of the Self**

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DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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**Thinking Beyond the East-West Divide:
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1. Introduction

As a matter of practice, East-West exchanges in the social sciences follow a specific ritual. East (or East Central) European scholars are supposed to provide new information, reports on the actual state of affairs, while their Western colleagues theories and methods. The latter are the standard ones in the profession, as there has been little interest in the past in the East European situation on the part of leading or innovative scholars.

This article followed a different path. It brings together thinkers; some of the most exciting and influential thinkers in both East and West, in order to demonstrate the fundamental common points of their works. The thinkers selected for this purpose are not exclusive possibilities. Nevertheless, they are all major figures, and it would not be easy to find others who, in terms of influence and significance, would equal them in their respective fields and countries.

The list and the assumed connections may seem perplexing. Foucault is classified as a post-modern or post-structuralist philosopher. Elias is a sociologist. Patocka a phenomenologist, while Hamvas is completely unknown in the West. Two of them, Elias and Foucault are from the West, too well known to require an introduction. Only one common characteristic will be emphasised: the variety of their background life experiences. (1) The other two are from the East. Jan Patocka is a Czech philosopher whose works have been extensively translated into both French and German, and is best known by the direct impact he had on Charta 77 and Havel. (2) Hamvas is a Hungarian thinker whose life and work, at least up to W.W.II, could perhaps be compared with Borges, but who after 1948, to a large extent due to the intervention of Georg Lukács, was not only deprived of the possibility of publication, but was dismissed from his job as a librarian, had to work as an unskilled worker between 1948 and 1964, and died in 1968. (3) His rediscovery only started in the mid 1980s.

All four also had a strong footing in the other camp. Patocka was a favorite student of Husserl, well read in Heidegger, up to date all his life with Western intellectual currents. The same can be said of Hamvas who was a scholar of Nietzsche, Jaspers, and Heidegger, introducing them and many others in Hungary before 1948, and keeping touch even after. Elias was born and raised in Breslau (currently Wroclaw in Poland), considered himself Jewish and German, and had a share both in the East European background and the totalitarian experience. Foucault was living in Krakow for one year, wrote there a significant part of *Madness and Civilisation*, and claimed later that this experience had a significant effect on his whole work and outlook. (4)

The actual links between the four were minimal. This, however, makes the connections between their work all the more exciting. Only one aspect will be singled out: the extremely close link that exists, especially between Patocka and Foucault, concerning the concept of the "care of the self" or "soul", perceived as central both to the meaning of Western civilisation, and the diagnosis of the present - both in the East and the West.

2. Patocka and the care of the soul

The care of the soul (*le soin de l'âme*) was not simply a concept used by Patocka, but his most important one. It is the guiding theme of his last two summary works, *Plato and Europe* and the *Heretical Essays*. (5) It has also been selected as the title of the six-volume samizdat edition of his collected works. (6) Patocka is making rather strong claims for the general importance of this concept: it is the care of the soul that is the central element in the heritage of Europe. The destiny of Europe, or Western civilisation, is linked to the fate of the care of the soul.

This is not just an isolated remark, but returns, stressed, throughout *Plato and Europe*. Most of the individual chapters, or seminars, are closed by a reference to the link between the care of the soul and Europe. The care of the soul is "at the basis of the

European heritage" (p.21). "The history of Europe, in a great part, up to about the 15th century, is the history of attempts made to realise the care of the soul." (p. 45). "What is constituted here, with this philosophy of the care of the soul, will make the specificity of the European [form of] life. ... [here lies] not just the specificity, the autonomy, but also the continuity of the European [form of] life. ... Europe as Europe was born out of the theme of the care of the soul." (p. 79) "Europe - Western Europe first of all, but also what is called the "other Europe" - is issued from the care of the soul." (p. 99). The list could be continued.

These formulations are summed up in the last seminar: "The task we set for ourselves was to reflect upon the beginning of history. Now, history is the history of Europe, there is no other one. The rest of the world knows annals, historiography, but not the continuity of an unitary mission, susceptible of universalisation. And what is at the source of European history? We have said that it is the idea of the care of the soul, the idea in which there are reflexively summed up all the aspirations of Europe up to the present." (p. 225)

The *Heretical Essays* take up and elaborate the same theme: "The care of the soul is ... what gave birth to Europe - we can maintain this thesis without the slightest exaggeration." (p. 93)

Such statements should strike any Western social scientist as incredibly naive: a peculiar mixture of Hegelian idealism and early modernization theories. And yet, Patocka realises the stakes of his claims. That's why he is saying so unequivocally: "without the slightest exaggeration". And that's why he is taking the trouble of specifying carefully, once the radicality of the claims maintained, both controversial elements: the reality as opposed to the idealism of the concept, and the unique position of Europe.

First, Patocka repeatedly stresses that his is not an idealist thesis. (7) First, the care of the soul is not an autonomous mental activity, but a specific practice, "the praxis of intellectual life". (8) This practice is a reflection on what one is actually doing, leaving

a mark on all activities. The care of the soul "enters in the circle of all other human possibilities and ... obliges [them] to reflect. In this way, it leads even what is not philosophic to a degree and state different from where it was before the reflection." (9) But, second, the care of the soul is not just a correlate, but a direct activity, a work on the agent that is able to effectuate reflection: the soul. In order to perform its task, the soul must guard its own forces, must be vigilant and wakeful: "So that we could effectuate this brand new and, in a sense, pitiless work of thought, there must be a discipline of the soul, we have to take care of the soul." (10) The care of the soul is not just a universal lateral activity, but first of all involves taking care of itself.

Finally, this practice of the care of the soul has a specific target: truth. This was first just the correlate of Greek cosmology, as Patocka shows for the case of Democritus. (11) With Socrates and Plato, however, a new demand emerges: truth, instead of being the intellectual condition of the soul that makes access to truth possible, becomes replaced by the stronger exigency of the true life. The crucial point of any philosophy of the care of the soul is the extent to which a philosopher validates his principles by his own life.

The practice of the care of the soul emerged as a response given to a concrete challenge. This challenge, however, has also direct relevance for our own daily life. It is the link between these two moments in history that is at the centre of Patocka's attention.

Two possible paths can be chosen in order to study these links. One could either start with the present, with us, on an involving, personal, and self-referential note; or one could start with the past, the moment of emergence, using the most detached and classical philosophical language. In his two main works, if only to indicate their complementarity, Patocka chose the alternative paths, paying attention to the circumstances in which his ideas were put forward: the first in *Plato and Europe*, a private seminar; the second in the *Heretical Essays*, written for a wider audience.

The *Essays* start with Patocka's reading of the Husserlian concept of the "natural world", or the *Lebenswelt*, used to describe a primary situation, the starting point of general analysis. This "natural world" was used by Heidegger, shifting the emphasis, as the background against which, according to the Greek word *aletheia*, truth became manifest. Patocka takes a further step. He claims that the problem that phenomenology set out for itself to do, a precise description of this "natural world", is impossible: "the problem of the natural world *does not seem for us* susceptible to be resolved.". (12) Instead of an exhaustive description, he opts for a negative definition: the natural world is the world before problematcity, i.e. before history. He indexes the problem of the emergence of the manifestation of truth to the birth of history, the realisation of problematcity.

This specific configuration explains the sudden and joint emergence of three different but connected sets of concerns: the search for the order of the cosmos (cosmogony); the search for a stable political order (politics); and finally the search for stability inside (philosophy as the care of the soul). In this context, the specificity and significance of the new practice becomes visible. Philosophy is not simply reflection about the meaning of life, or the order of the world, but is a practice to shape the soul (the self), not simply in order to attain an abstract and eternal truth, but to realise a true life: a life that is stable, is able to withstand the loss of meaning, of disorder, without closing the opening of freedom and receding into an ossification of social and human existence.

This practice of strengthening the soul proved to be extremely powerful and lasting. It was this practice that made the civilisation in which it was born able to survive a series of crises, the collapse of all those political projects that were defined correlatively with the philosophical practice of the care of the soul: the Greek polis, the Roman Empire, and finally the Holy Roman Empire. It was this practice that has been taken over by Christianity, providing it with its ground, so that it "represents the

strive that is up to the present the most powerful - never surpassed, but never even thought until the end - that makes man capable of fighting against decay." (13)

At this point, Patocka qualifies his story, with a surprising turn. Everything said about the destiny of the care of the soul and Europe holds true up to a moment, the disruptions around the 16th century. Just when the early modern period starts, however, with the period of science, discoveries, economic and colonial expansion, Patocka locates the disappearance of the care of the soul, the moment of betrayal, the source of our present condition.

This is where the private seminars take off, running the same circle from the other end. Patocka begins with a diagnosis on two levels whose exact links are left suspended. He elaborates on contemporary environmental, political, economic crises, but even more on the dominant current mood, a sense of helplessness. This is what makes the situation truly intolerable, not the objective circumstances. This is the configuration that is comparable to the conditions of emergence of Europe; and this is the reason why, as a way out, he is proposing, somewhat rhetorically, to re-launch the project: "The question that we will pose is the following: the care of the soul, that is at the basis of the European heritage, isn't today again for us to recur to, us who are in need of finding support amidst the general weakness and the resignation to decline?" (14)

On stating Patocka's rather startling claims about the specificity of Europe, two possible charges were immediately voiced: idealism and Euro-centrism. We have seen that Patocka was well aware of these objections, and was trying to anticipate and meet them. Still, his arguments need additional support. It is this reinforcement that is provided, however surprisingly, by thinkers unknown to Patocka: Foucault and Hamvas.

3. Foucault and the care of the self

On a superficial reading, the works of Foucault and Patocka seem to be miles apart. What could be more different than an angry description of the way power functions in modern Western societies, investing minute aspects of daily behaviour and producing the very form of individuality where, in their naiveté, philosophers claim its liberation; and the ideas about the fundamental role of philosophy in history and politics, and the mission of Europe. In fact, this is the way in which in the respective circles the works of Foucault and Patocka has been read so far. In Paris, Patocka's influence is restricted to phenomenologists, and has not been even touched by Foucauldians. In Prague, *Discipline and Punish* was circulated in a samizdat version, only to arouse the perplexity of Czech intellectuals, who read it as the denouncement of modern Western society as being totalitarian.

But Foucault was not simply the author of *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *History of Sexuality*. These works are rather the most questionable of all his undertakings, written during a short and peculiar period of his life. A proper understanding of Foucault can only be based on a thorough reconstruction on his whole life and works. In this, a special attention must be paid to the most neglected and least understood period of his life: the last years.

Such an undertaking has to counter serious difficulties. The gap between the books of the 1970s and the 1980s is very wide, and could only be bridged by access to the lectures Foucault gave at the *Collège de France*, between 1978 and 1984. But these lectures are so far unpublished, and will remain so for the foreseeable future. However, the problem is not merely a matter of accessibility. The lectures are available in tape at the Foucault Archives. Anyone working seriously on Foucault can study them. (15) But there has been so far little willingness to do so.

Even Foucault's biographers failed to take up this task. Just in the last year, three biographies have appeared in English, all of them based on extensive research, containing crucial pieces of information. (16) But not about the crucial lectures. Both Eribon and Macey only present superficial, sometimes plainly false accounts. Miller is the only one actually going into some details about the course of 1984, but only concerning his predilection with the theme of death. None of the biographers did perform their minimal duty, the consultation of all available sources. As a result, they only consolidated the biases in Foucault's reception.

This omission has a particular relevance for our purposes. It is in these lectures, especially those given between 1982 and 1984, that Foucault exposes the last and in a sense only version of his philosophy that has a very strong elective affinity with the intellectual undertaking of Patocka. Discussion will again be restricted to the "care of the self".

First, the care of the self (*le souci de soi*) was not just an expression used by Foucault, but had a central place in his most important last period. First, it has become the title of volume three of the sexuality series. This, in itself, should not be underestimated, as Foucault was always quite concerned with precise title selection. But there is more. He originally planned to publish the book outside the sexuality series. (17) It was supposed to be based on his 1982 course, which was not at all about sexuality, but, entitled "The hermeneutics of the subject", discussed the care of the self. In this course, Foucault was not just working on the theoretical and methodological problems related to the sexuality project, as was the case with the 1980 course, but was already going beyond what he considered at that time a burdensome homework, and tried to tackle, directly, the broader question of the history of subjectivity.

Second, this concept is not only similar to, but is identical with Patocka's "care of the soul". First, the Greek word used for "care" is identical in both thinkers. Patocka is using the Greek expression *epimeleia tes psyches*, while Foucault the phrase *epimeleia*

heautou. (18) The second word is different, but names the same thing. Patocka is emphasising that in Plato, as opposed to the previous tradition, the soul is not simply the source of intellectual knowledge and truth as seen from the perspective of others, but is the "soul that I am". (19) Foucault, when analysing the meaning of the term *heautou*, immediately shows that it is the "soul". At this point, his analysis must be presented in some detail.

Foucault opens the first lecture of 1982 with three broad claims, situating the topic. (20) First, he starts with the distinction between the care of the self and the knowledge of oneself, putting the emphasis, as opposed to the standard reading of the history of philosophy, on the former. Second, he connects this tradition to Socrates. On the basis of three passages in the *Apology*, Foucault makes three points. First, the care of the self was the mission Socrates received from the gods - not caring for the others, but inciting them to care about themselves. Second, this poses the question of the link between the care for oneself and the ability of making others care of themselves. Third, the role of Socrates is restricted to the first moment, the awakening. The project which Foucault locates at Socrates and which he claims to lie at the heart of European philosophy is to wake others up from the slumber in which they conduct their everyday existence in order to live differently: not following any precept, but starting to be concerned with themselves.

The third main opening claim is that though this idea started with Socrates, it was not restricted to him, but was widespread in Ancient philosophy, and a number of different practices emerged related to it.

In the second hour of the first lecture, Foucault starts his analysis by using Plato's Alcibiades as his source material; a text he called "the very theory" (*la théorie même*) of the care of the self. According to Foucault, this text is divided into two parts, defining first the meaning of "self", and then of "care". (21) Concerning the first, Foucault starts with emphasising the way Plato was introducing into the dialogue the definition of the "self": this starts

when a second, stressed, reflexive, and elaborate reference is made to the famous Delphi statement, defining the mission of Socrates. Second, he states that the definition of the "self" is given quickly: it is the soul, defined as one's own soul. Third, the most important point in this definition, according to Foucault, is the way Plato arrives at the definition. It starts with a number of questions, indicating that the specificity of the soul is located at the side of questioning. The capacity of posing questions is located to language, the grammatical subject, and this subject is defined through the use of language as an instrument. Foucault is elaborating on the Greek word for "use", *chrestai*; a term that will serve as the title of the second volume of the sexuality series. Finally, in this way Plato arrives at the definition of the soul, which is therefore not a "soul-substance", linked to the problem of eternity and immortality, but a "soul-subject", defining the singular and transcendent position of the subject in relation to what surrounds him.

In specifying the meaning of *heautou*, a definition of the care is already implied. If the soul is the relation one has to the surroundings, then "care" defines its modality. The different expressions used in French or given in the English translations provide a good indication of this meaning of *epimeleia*: it is to take care of, to be concerned with, to take pains at. But this refers to the surroundings, and not to the soul itself. The second part of the definition deals with the meaning of the care applied to the self. And here, according to Foucault, Plato is immediately evoking the principle of "know yourself", defining the soul as the divine in man. With this act, Platonic philosophy lapsed back into metaphysics and idealism.

The rest of the 1982 course takes a clue from this claim, studying the resurgence of the care of the self in the Roman period, while a good part of the 1983 course represents a more balanced reading of Plato. But in the 1984 course, the problematics of the care of the self in Socrates returns, in a slightly different form, and with extreme emphasis. (22)

The death of Socrates, analysed in the third lecture, is the paradigmatic starting point for the course, an introduction to Foucault's main concern: the connection of the 1982 and the 1983 lectures, the care of the self and the telling of truth (*parrhesia*). This connection is made in the fourth lecture, through an analysis of *Laches*. This is the dialogue, rather than *Alcibiades*, where Foucault now traces the latent tradition in philosophy to which he claims to belong. Its importance is shown by its position in the course, and also spelled out explicitly by Foucault on several occasions. (23) And it is at that very point, at the end of the introductory remarks on *Laches* that Foucault is naming the only philosopher who, according to him, read Plato, and therefore European philosophy, in the same manner. The reference is to Patocka, and specifically to his book *Plato and Europe*. (24)

We have shown so far that the philosophies of Foucault and Patocka, far from being opposite, were rather respectively the closest for the other in the 20th century. Our second point is that Foucault elaborated a concept that provided a crucial supplement to Patocka's work, establishing a solid ground against charges of idealism. This was the concept of the "techniques of self".

The place of this concept is again crucial in Foucault's work. It has been emphasised in his most important methodological writing, the introduction of *The Use of Pleasure*, where the concepts of problematisation and of techniques of self are singled out as the most important theoretical benefits gained due to the delays of the sexuality project. (25) Foucault has defined this concept several times. Let us single out the one given in Vermont: "technologies of the self ... permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality." (26) The presence of these techniques permits something that has been central, in many different forms, for all the writings of Foucault: the shaping and the transformation of individuals. But this term, as opposed to the earlier term

"techniques of power" also points out the specificity of such techniques in the West. They are never simply forms of domination imposed from the outside, but techniques that always involve and rely upon the very freedom of the individual as an agent in their operation. If, according to Patocka, the history of Europe is the history of the care of the self, then for Foucault, supporting and supplementing Patocka, the history of the West is the history of the way in which the techniques of self were used and deployed, connected but never reducible to the systematisation of the government of others. Far from being a category of post-modern aestheticism, as it is often alleged, Foucault's "care of the self" goes at the heart of Western rationality, precisely in the sense of Max Weber; (27) and far from being a category of Hegelian idealism, Patocka's "care of the soul" touches as much reality as Foucault's most empirical and institutional undertakings.

4. Hamvas and the axial age

The second voice of support for Patocka's thesis about the link between Europe and the care of the soul, concerning Europe's position in the broader framework of world civilisations, comes from the work of Béla Hamvas. Curiously enough, Patocka even specified the conditions under which Hamvas was in fact able to accomplish this feat. In a well-known place in the *Heretical Essays*, Patocka advances the thesis that it is the experience of the front that renders the understanding of the 20th century possible. (28) Hamvas had this experience in three different occasions: during W.W.II, when he was called three times into the army; during the bombing of Budapest, when in an air raid all his books, notes, and manuscripts were destroyed; and finally during the prolongation of the war, the communist period, where he was forced to work as an unskilled worker. In line with the suggestion of Patocka, all three experiences, instead of stopping his work, only led him to reach ever new heights.

The term "axial age" was coined by Jaspers, closely following on Weber's comparative studies of world civilisations, denoting the spiritual ferment of the first millennia BC. (29) This idea of "axial civilisations" kept coming up time and again. Conferences were organised to take up the theme, (30) but it has never led to significant results. The enormity of the theme and the extreme specialisation of modern academic life made the pursuit of this question practically impossible. Hamvas did not use the expression "axial age", neither followed closely Max Weber, though was closely acquainted with the works of Karl Jaspers. Yet, given his extreme erudition and familiarity with Ancient languages, he was in a unique position to pose the question of axiality, and was able to accomplish a breakthrough.

First, as opposed to the rather vague talk about the axial age being the first millennia BC, Hamvas shortened the time period of two or three generations around the year 600 BC. (31) Second, he specifies this event not in terms of political history, but it as the collapse of traditional order - a revolution comparable only to the neolithicum. The emphasis on the radicality of this break allows him to pursue a project opposite from the usual accounts on axial civilisations. Instead of describing the new in contrast to the old that has been overcome, he is collecting the fundamental common points of the traditions that have been suddenly and together lost. In a way, he is returning to the Husserlian project of describing the "natural world", a project Patocka claimed impossible, though not at the level of phenomenological description, but of actual historical reconstruction. Hamvas claims that in the first volume of *Scientia Sacra* and some of his later works he succeeded in showing the coherence of this tradition. (32)

This reconstruction enabled Hamvas to come up with a novel interpretation of axial civilisations, and of Christianity. In this framework, all axial civilisations are attempts to come to terms with this sudden and fundamental loss of order, loss of meaning. (33) Therefore, as a matter of consistency and coherence, everything in them is conditioned by this prior loss of order and normality. They are attempts to establish stability once the very

ground has collapsed. Their value is given by the extent they succeed; their limitation by the fact of the prior loss of order. Therefore, they can be universal only with this proviso. Everything having truly universal significance, according to Hamvas, can only lie in the tradition that has been destroyed before, and that such axial civilisations preserve only in fragments.

The strength of Europe, that Hamvas also links to the Greeks, specifically to Plato, (34) lies in the attitude with which it handled the break: to interpret the collapse of order as a possibility for innovation. It is this attitude that gives both its strength and weakness. Its strength, because instead of trying, desperately, to turn toward the past that was lost and establish a rigid, hierarchical order it looked ahead, and put all its spiritual efforts in the establishment of a novel type of order (politics) and a novel way of giving sense to individual existence (subjectivity); but also his weakness in forgetting its own conditions of emergence. Here, Hamvas is reinterpreting Nietzsche's diagnosis of European nihilism. Europe is providing the most successful and resistant, therefore universal approach to the collapse of traditional order, but only at the price of destroying all truly universal values. It is only by the accomplishment of this nihilistic project that the two types of universality will become identical. This will have been made possible, according to Hamvas, by the only phenomenon within axial civilisations that represented a return to the traditions that have been lost: Christianity. (35)

Here, the reading of Hamvas deviates radically from Foucault, Nietzsche, and even Patočka. As opposed to Patočka or Heidegger, Hamvas is not hoping for a revival of religiosity, rather interprets Christianity as not being a religion. It is an ethics, a conduct of life, a search for wakefulness. In this way, paradoxically, Hamvas finds inside Christianity the same concerns that Foucault and Patočka were searching for outside. Christianity, for Hamvas, represents a bridge with the "natural world", a meaningful order, beyond the history of axial civilisations, including their most collapse-resistant version, Europe.

So far, we have been able both to substantiate and expound Patočka's ideas about the care of the self being the foundation of European civilisation, by connecting them to the work of Foucault and giving them a more stable conceptual footing using the concept of the techniques of self, and by situating this in the context of the emergence of axial civilisations as it has been elaborated by Hamvas. In order to close the circle, we still have to connect these considerations to the present of East Europe. This will be accomplished by making a reference to the work of Norbert Elias.

5. Elias on the conditions of the care of the self

The most obvious point of connection between Elias and the preceding discussion would be through an analysis of the *Civilising Process*, which, however, cannot be pursued here. The text to be analysed here is an essay first published in 1956. (36) On a first look, it is just a methodological piece. But, like in Weber's or Foucault's methodological works, questions of method and of substance cannot be separated. The article was written at a peculiar period of Elias's life: in the 1950s when, after the war, Elias was going through a difficult period. It was practically his only publication in the thirty years separating the first and second editions of the *Civilising Process*. All these conditions find an echo in the piece, which captures and transcends at once the post-totalitarian and the post-war *Weltanschauung*. With this article, Elias defined the central dilemma of all post-totalitarian transition periods, and diagnostised the failure of meeting it head-on.

The dilemma, the vicious circle, or, in his later terminology the "double bind" is the following. Problem-solving requires clear, disciplined thinking - a degree of detachment. This is all the more necessary the more such a problem is not just an intellectual puzzle, but an existential problem; at the limit, a matter of life and death. On the other hand, the more burning the solution is, the more difficult it is to tear oneself away from the immediate

surroundings and interests - the involvement. Thus, the more a solution would require cool head, the more it is difficult to obtain.

For Elias, this point stands at a general level. For the purposes of the paper, the emphasis is on the extent to which it has a particular relevance for diagnosing the post-war situation, especially for countries where the loss of war also meant the collapse of a totalitarian regime. There are clear indications that Elias also had this "post-totalitarian" situation in mind. Most of the examples he mentioned in the late Introduction are about the absolutist period, the 17-18th centuries - to such an extent that at the end, he thinks it necessary to give one example from non-dictatorial societies. (37) The example, however, is rather about the difficulties of the transition from dictatorial to non-dictatorial societies, especially concerning the switch from external control to self-regulation, the self-restraint of emotions; and specifically mentions, as an example of a problem, the case of refugees of the "Eastern autocratic societies" to the West.

Mutatis mutandis , this is the change post-communist societies had to accomplish now as a whole; a task that is all the more difficult as the former regimes were not simply autocratic or dictatorial ones, but were using explicitly and consciously the manipulation of sentiments, the mobilisation of the population always for emotionally charged and involved tasks. How do current East European countries deal with this dilemma, whose solution requires first a degree of detachment, a tearing of oneself away from the immediate, overwhelming existential problems, an awakening and wakefulness and, as a precondition of any possible concrete solution, a proper care of oneself - when the former system made everything in his power to make everyone living under its grip to become unprepared exactly for this task?

Though this point cannot be studied in depth in a short paper, two types of empirical evidence will be used to illustrate it: an ideal-typical text, and data from a recent sociological survey. (38)

6. East Europe and the care of the self: a text

The text is a lecture given by the Hungarian writer Péter Nádas in front of a West-German audience high-level administrators, businessmen, and academics. (39) The context is worth presenting in some detail. First, Nádas is one of the most acclaimed writers of his generation in Hungary. Second, writers do play a huge, even excessive role currently in East Europe - it is enough to mention the names of Havel, Solzhenitsin, or Csurka. Third, Nádas used the opportunity to give a global East-West assessment, aiming to represent, as far as it was possible, the way intellectuals think in East Europe. This makes the text ideal-typical in the original sense of Weber.

The central theme of the lecture and the ensuing discussion was an alleged "communication gap" between East and West. This, however, is a mistaken expression, trivialising the depth and the nature of the problem.

Nádas starts his lecture by two sets of terms. The second characterises someone who is able to organise his fate (Nádas is listing a five dozen terms like success, seriousness, composure, detachment, affluence, etc. etc.), while the first those lacking such a control (defeat, loss, collapse, demise, suffering, etc. etc.). This indicates the difference in the way people live their lives in the East and in the West, and the cause of the communication gap: people who have control over their lives cannot understand someone who has no such control, and vice versa.

In the next page, Nádas is illustrating the point by a concrete example about the way people are supposed to answer the simple question of "how are you" in the East and in the West. In the latter region, even if one does experience difficulties, it is not to be mentioned in the response; while in the East, one is expected to complain immediately. Nádas is considering such response patterns in a matter of fact way, as the clear and correct representations of the different lives people live in the East and

the West. The communication gap is given by the lack of ability to receive the messages of the others.

However, such a view is unacceptable, and provides a clear diagnosis of the current problems in East Europe. The two attitudes are not at the same civilisational level (in the precise sense of Elias). Modern civilisation is based on the idea of the care of the self. One's actual conduct of life should not simply reflect his or her current emotions, but an elaboration, a degree of distancing and self-control, due not solely to the effects one's behaviour has on others, but also the importance of self-presentation. In this context, the absence of complaining is not a neutral custom, but has a fundamental value on its own. Face-to-face complaining to others is one of the most self-debasing acts individuals could engage in; an act in which one gives up composure and control over oneself, at the same time delivering oneself to the other, waiting to be absolved. The whole argument of Nádás can be turned around: the different expected response patterns to the simple question of "how are you" in the East and the West are not objective representations of symptoms, but diagnoses of the sickness. Composure is not a consequence of affluence; rather, affluence was only made possible by the way such a care of the self had been democratised in modern societies - democratisation being nothing but the democratisation of the techniques of the self, in the ambivalent sense of being made widely accessible and also automatic, therefore losing its own value through levelling. (40)

7. East Europe and the care of the self: a survey

The diagnosis concerning the absence of the care of the self in East Europe and a lack of awareness of this problem can be reinforced by recent empirical data. This is from a comparative survey of mayors in Hungary and the former Czechoslovakia, carried out on the basis of personally conducted interviews. (41). Only one set of items will be analysed here, a list of 22 statements. Seventeen of the 22 were from our interviews, while four from an American

survey of local councils. Respondents were asked to state the extent to which they agreed with them (see Appendix). (42)

The statements are all closely related to the daily activities of mayors. An in-depth analysis of such items can often reveal more about the actual predisposition of respondents than widely used, direct attitude sets. But, in order to prevent the reproduction of trivial response patterns, some of the items included had an extremely strong wording. (43) Even if the statements were from daily life, a fair chance was given to the respondents to stand back and reflect upon the contents of such statements. It would not have been surprising if the overwhelming majority of the respondents had off-hand rejected such claims.

The actual responses were all the more surprising. The statements with the extreme wording were not only not rejected off-hand, but were strongly endorsed by the majority of respondents in all three countries. Thus, in Hungary, 68% of the respondents not only agreed, but strongly agreed with the statement that the voters expected all the legacy of the past forty years to be cleared away in a few days (the respective data for the other two countries are 59 and 52%); 57% agreed strongly that for many, democracy only means a free-for-all situation (57 and 69%); and a shocking 73% agreed strongly that a Western democracy would require other type of individuals (65 and 66%).

In order to analyse the structure of response patterns, to test for meaning and coherence, factor analysis was performed separately for each country. It led to three major results. First, the coherence of the response patterns was high in each countries. The first unrotated factor explained a considerable portion of the variance of the individual items, and was not merely a g-factor, but in each country was a factor of complaining. (44) This was the clearest in Hungary, with a wide gap between the factor loading of the items related to complaining, and all other items. In the other two countries, the differences were more continuous, but the interpretation of the first factor was identical.

Second, in each country, the item with the highest loading on the first unrotated factor, having a "representative" role in defining it, was the same: it was item 701/6, describing the helplessness and powerlessness of respondents. In posing 22 questions to about 750 democratically elected mayors in Hungary and the former Czechoslovakia, we had to discover that the attitude whose presence or absence defined most the common response patterns was a sense of helplessness, the presence or absence of a perception that one is caught in a trap with no leverage, no possibilities, no discretion. (45)

Third, apart from this item, there were a number of others that in each country had a high loading on the first factor, defining most clearly the type of complaining characteristic of respondents, closing the circle. These were not the complaints about the government, nor about the survival of the former nomenclatura, but the sharp statements about people in general, presenting not only a disturbing picture, but also showing a wide gap between self and other in these countries: a general blaming of the others, and a failure to apply such considerations to oneself.

8. Conclusion

The article selected four thinkers with different background and no direct connection among them, and presented the fundamental common points both in their reading of the specificity of modern civilisation, and the diagnosis they suggested for the present, concerning both East and West. The convergence of their ideas has profound theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it shows that while serious work can only be done in complete isolation, pursuing a long-term, lonely, personal project, far from the noisy intellectual debates of the day, this leads not to idiosyncratic, irrelevant results, but the precise formulation of the real problems of the day. Practically, in the call for detachment, wakefulness, and the care of the self, it offers a solution to the problem of the conduct of life under conditions of the dissolution of social order fundamentally different from and opposed to both

naive modernisation theories and standard socialist or leftist critiques, not to mention the post-modern versions; a solution that is indexed to a concrete situation - the dissolution of order -, but that, given this fact, has an universal validity.

Notes

(1) Foucault started his career abroad (Sweden, Poland, West Germany), and for long resisted to pursue the standard French academic career. He lived in Tunis, and visited regularly Brazil, Japan, and the US. Elias, upon leaving Germany in 1933, went first to France, settled in England, and lived for long periods in Ghana, the Netherlands, and again in West Germany.

(2) For an English language introduction, and a translation of a good collection of essays, see Erazim Kohák (ed.), *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

(3) Lukács wrote his critique of a book by Hamvas and his wife Katalin Kemény on modern art in September 1947, denouncing him, solely due to his aesthetic views, as a fascist (sic!). Coming back from Stalin's Soviet Union, Lukács could not plead that "he did not know" - not only what was going on, but the direct consequences of his own words uttered then and there.

(4) See the interview 'On Power', in Lawrence D. Kritzman (ed.), *Politics, Philosophy, Culture* (Routledge, London, 1988), p.98.

(5) See Jan Patočka, *Platon et l'Europe* (Paris, Verdier, 1983) [1973]; and *Essais hérétiques sur la philosophie de l'histoire* (Paris, Verdier, 1981) [1975].

(6) See Erika Abrams, 'Avertissement', in Jan Patočka, *Liberté et sacrifice* (Grenoble, Millon, 1990), p.5.

(7) *Platon et l'Europe* , 79.

(8) *Essais hérétiques* , 92.

(9) *Platon et l'Europe* , 79.

(10) *Ibid.*, 87.

- (11) Ibid., Ch.5.
- (12) *Essais hérétiques* , 24.
- (13) Ibid., 117. This is almost identical, at all points, with the views of Hamvas.
- (14) *Platon et l'Europe* , 21.
- (15) This is located at the *Bibliothèque de Saulchoir* , in Paris.
- (16) See Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard U.P., 1991), James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (N.Y., Simon and Schuster, 1993), and David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault* (London, Hutchison, 1993).
- (17) See for e.g. Eribon (1991), 319.
- (18) See for e.g. *Platon et l'Europe* , 87; and Michel Foucault, *Résumé du cours 1970-1982* (Paris, Juillard, 1989), p.145.
- (19) *Platon et l'Europe* , 78-79.
- (20) See Foucault Archives, cassette C 65 (1). For related publications, see *Technologies of the Self* , ed. by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (London, Tavistock, 1988); the outline of the 1982 course in *Résumé du cours 1970-1982* ; and 'Hermeneutique du sujet', in *Concordia* 12 (1988), pp.44-68, a publication based on incomplete student notes.
- (21) The skeleton of this analysis, taking up a good two hours of lectures, is given in four paragraphs in *Technologies of the Self* , p. 25.
- (22) See Foucault Archives, cassettes C 69 (3) and C 69 (4).
- (23) About this, see also Thomas Flynn, 'Foucault as Parrhesiast', in James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (eds), *The Final Foucault* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1988), a useful, but very short account of the 1984 course.
- (24) It is to be emphasised that no similar claim has ever been made by Foucault previously; while here, it was done at the focal point of his most important and explicitly conclusive course. One should not forget that Foucault wanted to take a Sabbatical that

year, in order to finish his work on sexuality, but decided to give the course once he knew that he was mortally ill. This is a clear indication that he considered this course to be more important than the eventual completion of the fourth volume of the sexuality series, *Les aveux de la chair*.

(25) Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasures* (N.Y., Vintage, 1986), Introduction, pp. 10-11.

(26) *Technologies of the Self*, p.19.

(27) This is especially true for the Weber reconstructed recently by Tenbruck and Hennis. See Friedrich H. Tenbruck, 'The problem of thematic unity in the works of Max Weber', *British Journal of Sociology* 31 (1980), 3: 316-351; and Wilhelm Hennis: *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1988).

(28) This has been published in English as 'Wars of the 20th Century and the 20th century as war', in *Telos* no.30 (1976/77), pp.116-126. Another important thinker fully meeting the requirements of the front experience, and completely neglected by Patocka as well as the other thinkers analysed, is Wittgenstein. See Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London, Vintage, 1991), Ch. 7.

(29) See Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, 'The axial age: the emergence of transcendental visions and the rise of clerics', in *European Journal of Sociology* no.23 (1982), pp. 294-314.

(30) See for e.g. the Spring 1975 issue of *Daedalus*.

(31) See Béla Hamvas, *Scientia Sacra I* (Budapest, Magvető, 1988) [1943-44], p.17.

(32) See especially *Patmosz I-II* (Essays) (Szombathely, Eletünk, 1992) [1958-1966].

(33) Patocka has the same ideas; see *Essais hérétiques*, Ch.3.

(34) See his 'Száz könyv' (A hundred books), in *Az öt géniusz* (Bern, 1985), p.160.

(35) The best comprehensive analysis is contained in the second volume of *Scientia Sacra*, still in manuscript, to be published soon. For partial accounts, see *Patmosz*.

(36) See in *Involvement and Detachment* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1987), pp.3-41. For background information and analysis, see Stephen Mennell, *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992), Ch.7.

(37) *Involvement and Detachment*, lxviii.

(38) For more comprehensive accounts, see Agnes Horváth and Árpád Szokolczai, *The Dissolution of Communist Power: The Case of Hungary* (London, Routledge, 1992); and Agnes Horváth, *Area Without Conflict: Political Discourses in Hungary, 1945-1991* (manuscript, 1993).

(39) Péter Nádas, 'Sors és technika' (Fate and technique), in *2000* 5 (1993), 6: 9-12.

(40) It is this ambivalence that has been described, though in opposite manners, by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* and Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* - books that should be read together, in order to correct the excesses of each other.

(41) The survey was made in August-September 1992, with about 250 mayors in Hungary and the two parts of the former Czecho-Slovakia each. The actual number of cases were 246, 257, and 243 for the three countries respectively.

(42) For a detailed analysis, see Árpád Szokolczai, 'Types of Mayors, Types of Subjectivity: Continuity and Discontinuity in the East-Central European Transitions 1', EUI Working Papers, 1993.

(43) See for e.g. items 701/4, 701/6, 702/6, 702/9, 702/11.

(44) The first factor explained 14, 13, and 12% of the total variance of the 22 items in the three countries (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia) respectively.

(45) It does not mean that the overwhelming majority claimed helplessness. The statement was agreed by 47, 58, and 72% of the respondents in the three countries. Rather, this was the most important issue dividing respondents.

I would like to thank Steven Lukes for making a number a helpful comments and suggestions on the first version of this paper.

Appendix. The original text of the question

A few statements are listed below. Please, tell me whether you completely agree, rather agree, rather disagree, or completely disagree with them.

- 701/1. As a mayor, my main task is to establish the proper atmosphere for work
- 701/2. The elected body should set up general policies, but most members are only interested in single, personal matters
- 701/3. The local governments are abandoned
- 701/4. In the first days, the voters thought that everything that has been accumulated in 40 years will be solved by the next day
- 701/5. Practically everything happening here goes through my hand
- 701/6. As a mayor, I am nothing but a shock-absorber between the government and the population
- 701/7. Without my former contacts, we would have gone under long ago
- 701/8. I can't understand that if we pay unemployment benefits, why can't we constrain those in our area to do public works
- 701/9. It is not in the interest of this government that the local councils become stronger
- 701/10. Political discussions around the elections were loaded with cynicism
- 701/11. We must make people believe that the locality is theirs
- 702/1. I would prefer to raise taxes rather than cut back city services
- 702/2. It is important to have a city plan that shapes the nature of development in the city
- 702/3. Our resources should be distributed on the basis of need, even if this means that some parts of the city will get more than others
- 702/4. Governmental aid to cities should be increased
- 702/5. Because of a decrease in supervision, corruption has even increased in the last times
- 702/6. A Western type democracy would require proper individuals
- 702/7. The main entrepreneurs in this region are the same persons who filled important positions even in the former system
- 702/8. We have become careless, we still do not realise that the paternal power has disappeared from above us
- 702/9. Everybody is only looking for his own truth, does not care about performance
- 702/10. A lot of people think democracy means that from now on, they are free to do anything
- 702/11. People felt lost and disappointed after the changes, as the Promised Land did not come immediately



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