



A philosopher and his history: Jan Patočka's reflections on the end of Europe and the arrival of the post-European epoch

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Abstract

This article analyzes the lectures and texts from the last period of Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, one of the last disciples of Edmund Husserl, the founding father of phenomenology. The point of departure is Patočka's critical reception of Husserl's concept of the crisis of European mankind. There are, however, two other elements distinctive of Patočka's thought essential for this interpretation. First, he was a classical philosopher aiming at Socratic 'care for the soul'. Second, he approached the theme of universal human history from his own unique historic position: as a Czech philosopher, involved in the Socratic manner primarily with his own Czech national community, for whom the big question of the future of European mankind and its legacy at the end of its golden modern age is inseparably connected with a 'small' one: the question of Czech national existence – the question of the future of his nation in a changing world and the issue of its freedom.

Keywords

Contemporary history, Edmund Husserl, Jan Patočka, the crisis of European mankind, the end of Europe, the post-European epoch

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I

As is evident in his biography, Patočka's *locus operandi* was never limited by the boundaries of academic philosophy (cf. Patočka 2011). Not only at the very end of his life when he became one of the spokespersons of Charter 77, but from his youth, Patočka tended to react *more philosophico* to the instigations coming from the public sphere.¹ He always aspired to turn the results of his academic investigations into questions directed to the general public; questions to be examined in the dialogue between philosophers and non-philosophers. He always was ready to 'test' his ideas against the opinions circulating in various public *fora* and, with their help, examine critically various thoughts produced by the collective mind of the body politic of which he was a part. He tried repeatedly to formulate as precisely as possible, without ever designing a closed philosophical system, the aim, content and method of his philosophical investigations, convinced that accuracy of expression is the most important virtue of a philosopher. Philosophy's most important task is never to speculate *in abstracto*, he wrote already in 1936, at age 29, but rather 'to criticize life in all its components and manifestations' (Patočka 1996: 505):

to express what society has hitherto wanted without being aware of it, to put into words its unvoiced tendencies, but also to show what is behind them, to clarify their essence, their genesis, their intricacies and problems, and to attempt then to resolve them. (Patočka 1996: 62)

In other words, in order to understand Patočka's philosophical life work as a whole we must consider the strongest motive of his philosophizing: to challenge the sclerosis of mind threatening not only his own political community but all good European societies during his life time; 'to be engaged', to use the formulation of Eric Voegelin, 'in an act of resistance against the personal and social disorder of [his] age' (Voegelin 1990: 265); to think and act with respect to the current crisis of European civilization as a classical, i.e. Socratic, philosopher speaking from the depth of the ancient origins of philosophical thought, for whom the essence of philosophizing was not to formulate metaphysical doctrines but to 'care for the soul'.

Closely related to his attempt to evoke the Socratic spirit of open philosophical dialogue within the Czech milieu was his preoccupation with what he called Czech national philosophy. Patočka's national program, the essence of which was to conceive the 'Czech question' in 'worldly terms', was modeled on Masaryk – the philosopher who became the first president of the modern Czechoslovak state. Like Masaryk, Patočka regularly admonished his fellow Czechs for their parochialism and provincial mindset and repeatedly emphasized the need of Czech national society to open itself to the external world; to face philosophical problems of universal humanity; to examine critically its own views and opinions, and to resist more philosophico its endemic smallness (Palouš 2002).

Patočka's overall relationship to Masaryk would certainly deserve a thorough analysis. This text, however, only allows me to make a rudimentary remark. On the one hand, as a phenomenologist Patočka criticized Masaryk's positivism. He argued repeatedly that no matter how genuinely and religiously motivated Masaryk's resistance to the decadent tendencies of modern European civilization might have been, Masaryk's positivistic response, especially as exhibited through his 'progressive' philosophy of history, could not open the way forward from the current crisis of European civilization.

On the other hand, however, it should never be forgotten that in spite of this criticism, Patočka had the highest respect for Masaryk the philosopher. Throughout his life he was literally fascinated by Masaryk's practical attitude towards theoretical philosophical ideas. He repeatedly emphasized the importance of Masaryk's belief that what matters is not only how they emerge in the life of the mind (*bios theoretikos, vita contemplativa*) of philosophers but how they can be 'used' by men of action and what their concrete effects are in the human world. The originality of Masaryk's philosophy consisted, according to Patočka, in his courage to test his philosophical ideas against the political realities in which he participated; and when he got into conflict with public opinion, not to hesitate to speak up and go against the current (cf. Skilling 1994)!

Usually, the point of departure for interpretation of Patočka's philosophy is his relationship with Edmund Husserl. Patočka's own description of the two first encounters with the man who inspired him to pursue for the rest of his life the path of phenomenology is quite telling (Patočka 2006: 630–41, 607–29).

In 1929, Patočka, at the age of 22, was a visiting student at the Sorbonne in Paris. Husserl came there at the end of February to give two lectures of introduction to his 'transcendental phenomenology' (Husserl 1974, English trans. 1976, cf. Husserl 1981: 78–81). Patočka, who already considered him to be his philosopher, could not miss this opportunity. He said about his experience of being in the audience:

I sensed the air of compelling necessity to lay down anew the foundations and to look at a new direction to achieve historical depth. At the same time, I saw a philosopher in front of me, someone who was not reading a paper about somebody or commenting on something, but just sitting in his work-room, as if alone, struggling with his problems, paying no attention to the world or the people around. (Patočka 2006: 631)

Three years later Patočka finally had an opportunity to meet Husserl face to face. After spending the winter semester 1932/1933 in Berlin – where he had experienced 'the atmosphere of that witches' cauldron, in which the end of Europe, and in conjunction with it the tragic turn in the lot of phenomenology and so many phenomenologists, was already in the process of preparation' (Patočka 2006: 631) – he came to Freiburg. As a holder of a Humboldt scholarship he had a letter of recommendation from this foundation which he hoped would help him to get into the close circle of Husserl's students. He received an invitation to come to Husserl's home to discuss the terms of his apprenticeship. When he rang the bell, Husserl himself opened the door and said: 'Finally! I had students from all over the world, but so far no fellow-countryman. . . . If you are coming to me unspoiled by philosophical doctrines and without spiritual blinders, *if you really want to learn to see*, then you are warmly welcome here' (Patočka 2006: 631).

Here we have the beginning of the personal relationship between Patočka and Husserl which lasted for the next five years (until Husserl died in April 1938). As the historical record shows, since the beginning of the 20th century the phenomenological movement inspired by Husserl (Cf. Patočka's postscript to the Czech edition of Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl 1968: 161–90) started to dominate universities – particularly in Germany – and brought a new vigor and hope not only to philosophy but to many other disciplines, especially in the field of humanities and normative sciences (Husserl 1968:

166). As Patočka described the prime of phenomenology after the publication of Husserl's *Logical Investigations* in 1901 in his postscript to the Czech translation of *Cartesian Meditations*: 'A philosophical atmosphere arose, that had not been here for a long time; the atmosphere of new confidence in philosophy as an autonomous, rigorously scientific discipline, entirely independent of specialized sciences, disposing, as they do, of its own bulk of knowledge – generally recognized and extendable by the continuous fruitful research – as it is in mathematics or physics' (Husserl 1968: 166).

The fallacy in the expectations accompanying the emergence of Husserl's new concept of 'philosophy as a rigorous science' is more than obvious. First of all, as it became clear in the beginning of the 1930s, even Husserl himself did not meet them. His Paris lectures – where Patočka observed him 'sitting alone', not paying much attention to his audience, but 'struggling with his problems' – actually demonstrated quite clearly the fundamental difficulties of his seemingly apodictic and self-evident beginning. It also turned out that the rigorous phenomenological research pursued by his loyal disciples was certainly not merely adding new pieces to the edifice built under the watch of its main architect but was rather leading them on their own philosophical paths. All of them, including Patočka, were brought to the point when they had to decide about their way forward, and to start questioning the hitherto uncontested Husserlian point of departure.

Even more worrisome when Patočka started his apprenticeship with Husserl was what was brewing in the Berlin's 'witches' cauldron', as he aptly described the political situation of the Weimar Republic as Adolf Hitler was on his way to seizing power. The rise of totalitarianism of the German, Italian or Russian brand raised serious questions about Husserl's belief that the main battlefield in the crisis of European civilization in the 20th century would be science and philosophy; that the reconciliation of all those who found themselves for different historical reasons to be mutual enemies could be eventually achieved (cf. Patočka 2006: 632) because the 'European "world" was born from ideas of reason' (Husserl 1965: 191), to quote the final paragraph of a lecture Husserl delivered on 7 May 1935 in Vienna – by means of the 'rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy' (Husserl 1965: 192).

When it became clear that phenomenology had to be understood as an open-ended journey of philosophers rather than a 'rigorous science', that philosophers were simply unable to ward off the impending catastrophe in Europe with their rigorous scientific knowledge, the question became: would it be a philosophy of history informed by phenomenology's 'collective' insights concerning the history of humankind and the particular experiences of phenomenologists themselves with it, rather than ahistorical Husserlian transcendentalism with which philosophers should commence their resistance and search for new paths of departure?

This brings me to my last general remark. The philosophy of history is clearly an essential or even the most significant part of Patočka's philosophy. It is, without any doubt, its ultimate achievement and its culmination. Its point of departure, as we are going to see in the following section of this text, is on the one hand clearly based on Patočka's critical reception of Husserl's concept of the crisis of European mankind. At the same time, however, it is characterized by two other elements distinctive of his thought which were mentioned previously. It always should be kept in mind that it is a classical Socratic philosopher who is speaking; a philosopher whose 'program' in the

end is not to express his thoughts in the form of propositional knowledge, no matter how much importance he ascribes to the 'exactness' of his own concepts, expressions and propositions, but the philosophical 'care for the soul'. And, it should never be forgotten that Patočka approaches the theme of universal human history as a Czech philosopher, who sees the world through the lenses of specific experiences of his own nation and for whom the big question of the future of European mankind and of its legacy at the end of its golden modern age is inseparably connected with a 'small' one: the question of Czech national existence, the question of the future of the 'small' Czech nation in the changing world and its freedom.

II

The text I am going to focus on now was written sometime between 1970 and 1977, in the final phase of Patočka's life, which culminated in his decision to get engaged personally in the life of his '*polis*' and to accept the role of spokesperson of Charter 77. Besides the much better known *Heretical Essays* and the lecture series *Plato and Europe* from the same period, it contains one of the most important articulations of Patočka's philosophy of history. The fact that it was found on top of other papers lying on his desk after he passed away on 13 March 1977 led the editors of the Collected Works to believe that in spite of the fact that no significant changes were recently made, Patočka did not consider it entirely finished and was still working on it (Patočka 1999: 396). *Europe and the Post-European Epoch* opens with the following announcement:

What is proposed here will be most likely found by historians a-historical. Philosophers, on the contrary, will consider this proposition as a tributary to the accidental historical events. Both of them will criticize its overmuch constructivism. Its author, however, is ready to accept this risk. His aim is to propound problems, which are concealed behind the things we can see in our immediate surroundings – thanks to the fact that our momentary anxiety has made us shortsighted; to do away with what is closest to us and to let appear what is most distant from us. This essay departs from a hypothesis which is deliberately *audacious*. To let the whole process of European history revolve around one single principle, or rather around only one implication of this principle, is a nonstarter lacking any credibility in the eyes of both historians and philosophers – irrespective of the fact that this implication is apparently huge and decisive. Nonetheless, such a bold decision can be adopted more easily in the present times, thanks to a great thinker who has already discovered the way on which something like a principle of European spirituality, distinct from all other spiritualities, can be found: Edmund Husserl, who in his book *Crisis of European Sciences* assumed the task of the renewal of rationality. To be sure, the notion that *Europe is logos and ratio*; that it is in Europe where the idea of universality – the only idea capable of turning the world into *one world* – emerged, has been known for a long time (Patočka 1999: 80)

There are two things that must be thought through carefully when one reads the opening paragraphs of Patočka's essay. On the one hand, it is his Husserlian hypothesis itself: what makes Europe from the very beginning of her history a spiritual unity distinct from all other cultures and civilizations is her '*logos and ratio*', originally discovered by Greek philosophy. But what we also should not leave unnoticed is Patočka's

characterization of his hypothesis as *'deliberately audacious'*. Why does Patočka actually need to say that? Would it be the same if he said *'deliberately provocative'*? Does he merely refer to a conflict pending between him and other historians or philosophers? Does he just provoke them by indicating that their histories and philosophies probably are among those things that must be demolished and removed if our capacity to see the fundamental problems of our epoch is to be restored?

Or does the characterization of his hypothesis as *'deliberately audacious'* indicate more than that? Is it his intention to bring us from the surface of things to the region of deeper phenomena which will arise before our eyes only after we manage to overcome our momentary anxiety and sharpen our weakened spiritual sight? Can it happen that what we will discover then will be the connection between *'logos and ratio'* inquired into by European philosophers and their own audacity?

A year before his last major book on the current European crisis was published in 1936, Husserl delivered two lectures, first in Vienna and later in Prague (Husserl 1965: 150). The basic message of these lectures can be summarized as follows: European civilization finds itself in the 20th century in a deep crisis. The reason why, according to Husserl, 'European nations are sick', and 'Europe itself is ... in critical condition' (Husserl 1965: 150) is the fact that the core element of European identity is omitted by Europeans. Europe, Husserl reminds us, has never been fully determined 'geographically, as it appears on the map, as though European man were to be in this way confined to the circle of those who live together in this territory' (Husserl 1965: 155).

Since the very beginning of European history 'the title Europe designates the unity of a spiritual life and a creative activity' (Husserl 1965: 150). Being European has always meant joining other Europeans 'in spirit ... in the unity of one spiritual image ... exhibiting the philosophical idea immanent in the history of Europe' (Husserl 1965: 156). Europe, states Husserl, can only survive on the current historical crossroads if today's Europeans will manage to rediscover that what they inhabit is not a piece of land but a civilization, having its spiritual roots and being endowed with 'its immanent teleology' (Husserl 1965: 156); requiring throughout its history animation by a 'a new spirit stemming from philosophy and the sciences based on it, a spirit of free criticism providing norms for infinite tasks ... creating new, infinite ideals' (Husserl 1965: 177).

What characterizes Europe more than anything else in the current phase of its history, and what is the most important outgrowth of its innate entelechy, is modern science and technology. As a decisive social force in modern society, it has undoubtedly tremendous potential to empower men technically and to improve the material condition of human life. Its 'efficacious' knowledge, which is increasingly capable of changing the human world according to human plans and wishes, however, is failing to serve *'les maîtres et possesseurs de la nature'*, when asked to become a reliable guide to protect and enhance the rational sense of their life. The reason is that its cherished rationality has fallen into the trap of 'naturalism and objectivism', and as such cannot be perceived as a signpost of Europe's progress, but rather 'on a level with the rationality of the Egyptian pyramids!' (Husserl 1965: 186).

This crisis, then, Husserl concludes, 'can end in only one of two ways: in the ruin of a Europe alienated from its rational sense of life, fallen into a barbarian hatred of spirit, or in the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy' (Husserl 1965: 192). What can help Europeans achieve such a renaissance? Husserl's answer is not surprising. It is his

transcendental phenomenology, the aim of which is to bring the lost 'spiritual image of Europe' back to the attention of Europeans. It sets for itself the following fundamental tasks: to recover 'through a heroism of reason' the broken thread of communication between the realm of scientific objectivity and the primordial sphere of human matters given to us in our immediate subjective experience; to rehabilitate the philosophers' 'theoretical attitude' and to oppose it to the 'natural attitude' human beings adopt towards their fellow-men and things they are surrounded by in their life-world; to attempt a philosophy of history that would enable us to rediscover the forgotten telos, the inner motive of European civilization: the idea of human life based upon insight.²

Of course the question must be raised: does not Husserl's concept of the crisis of European man Patočka chose as his point of departure represent the clearest example of Eurocentrism of the past that simply cannot grasp fully both the spiritual and political challenges of our times? What about the scheme of world history implied in it – putting the discovery of *theoria* by the Greek philosophers at its beginning and Husserl's own discovery of transcendental subjectivity as a new apodictic origin of philosophy at its end? Did Husserl really believe that he discovered history's ultimate telos (cf. Voegelin 2002: 45–61)? Wasn't Patočka's proposal somewhat *démodé*, if we take into account that postmodern winds were already blowing in nearly all European philosophical salons at that time? In short: to want to build a contemporary philosophy of history in the 1970s on Husserlian foundations? Wasn't it an enterprise doomed in advance and likely to fail?

I can offer two preliminary reactions to all these objections and doubts. First, even if it were true that Patočka accepted entirely Husserl's Eurocentric interpretation of the history of mankind, his own Eurocentrism in this particular text still would need to be qualified. Having expressed many times before the highest admiration for his teacher, he stated a little later: 'Husserl's work, which was written to avert the final catastrophe of the European world' (Patočka 1999: 83), should serve a somewhat different purpose in our current historical situation: 'it still might be able to assist in the elucidation of the situation of mankind after this catastrophe already happened, and even to shed some light on the first short lap on our way into the emerging post-European world' (Patočka 1999: 83). Second: regardless of whether the above-mentioned scheme of world history – with the discovery of a new apodictic beginning of philosophy chosen as its decisive turning point and with the discoverer himself elevated to the position of founding father and highest priest of a new sect of self-appointed 'functionaries of mankind' – can be imputed to Husserl or not, Patočka certainly had somewhat different ambitions. Husserl's identification of European spirituality with 'logos and ratio' must be, according to Patočka, related to and primarily perceived through the lens of the real groundbreaking discovery Husserl made much earlier in his *Logical Inquiries*, concerning 'the elementary mechanism of opinion and insight' (Patočka 1999: 80).

According to Patočka, turning attention to this philosophical problem, Husserl, in fact, 'returns to the Platonic distinctions, examines the oldest switches, where decisions were made on the paths of reason for whole millennia, and formulates the problems of reason in such a concrete way that they can become the key to the questioning situated in the open field of history' (Patočka 1999: 81). What Husserl managed to achieve by getting hold of this key was

to demonstrate for the first time in the history of the mind the elementary bond connecting *epistémé* to *doxa*. The products of *epistémé* – thinking containing the active element of reflection – become parts of the life-world; they reshape and transform this world, both on the level of its individual things, and that as its elementary structures. As such, however, they can never surpass it entirely and make it unnecessary. Their relationship to the life-world is fundamental. Only through this relationship, though, and thanks to it can they always make sense and be at all comprehensible. (Patočka 1999: 80)

And here is the real question which has attracted Patočka's interest: Isn't it just 'the elementary mechanism of opinion and insight' – this 'miraculous, so far unexplored and unseen through, mysterious triviality'- where we should start to overcome our momentary anxiety? Doesn't this define the starting point of the new historical journey from the European past to the unknown post-European future? Isn't it what must be explored first, if we want to claim our right, or at least to hope, for some illumination?

Husserl's observation that *epistémé* is founded on *doxa* and not vice versa has significant implications. What actually is the *doxa* we are advised by phenomenologists to depart from? How is it changed after the 'epoché' has liberated us from the shackles of our natural attitude towards reality and has put us for a passing moment in the role of 'the disinterested spectator of the world that is demythologized before his eyes' (Husserl 1965: 182)?

Doxa, as we all know, means 'opinion'. It designates the immediate contents of our unreflected and unexamined noetic life. It covers everything that the cultural environment of which we are a part has taught us. It denotes what we have inherited from our ancestors as our beliefs we share with all (significant) others. It is what we have received as 'pieces of knowledge' or 'skills' in the process of education at home, at schools, or just was imprinted in us thanks to the fact that we live in a certain society with its practices and habits. We can be confident, on the one hand, as Aristotle pointed out in his *Metaphysics* (993a30–993b7), that all our *doxai* never miss reality entirely and always contain some elements of truth. On the other hand, we should be aware that they also harbor idiosyncrasies, illusions, misperceptions and even lies; that they can deceive us, instead of correctly advising us; to blind us instead of letting us see; to bemuse us instead of steering us towards wisdom.

What is then the matter with truth in our human situation? Our *doxai* can never be complete, unchanging and self-consistent. They must always be further examined, controlled, tested against reality and corrected in the light of experience. They should always be susceptible to further transformations in the process of noesis – described by Plato in his *Seventh Letter* (342a6–343c6) as a sequence of steps leading first from *doxa* to *doxa aléthés*, and from there through *epistémé* to *nous* – we take part in as rational animals, living beings having *logos*, endowed with capacity of reflection and insight.

The real moment of truth for human *doxai*, their most serious test, comes obviously with our actions, which they inspire and initiate. Is *ti agathon* – 'some good', every human endeavor 'seems to aim at', to use the famous first sentence from *The Nichomachean Ethics* of Aristotle (1094a1–3), the real good or is it not? Are our words and deeds by which we make our presence in the world capable of passing the test of reason true to the standards of *epistémé*? Can they be accepted when perceived *sub speciae aeternitatis*, or, at least, judged with the help of socially recognized values? Are they meaningful or meaningless? Do they

follow some relevant target or are they rather confused and erratic? Are they moral or immoral, legitimate or illegitimate, law-abiding or unlawful? Do they keep us on the right road in our passage through life, or are they, on the contrary, sending us in a wrong direction, something that should be changed in our life time if we want to escape in the moment of our death our 'final', i.e. irreversible, damnation?

It is in the area of these and similar questions where Patočka steps in. And his point of departure in the noetic process from *doxa* to *epistémé* is a concrete historical situation he himself is a part of. This is what he said in the introduction of the first lecture from the series 'Plato and Europe' for a close group of his disciples in a private apartment in the fall of 1973:

People meet a lot nowadays to talk about various abstract and sublime issues, in order to escape for a moment from their current distress, and to raise in a way their souls and minds. I think it is nice, indeed, but rather like an entertainment for old ladies. Philosophical thought, on the contrary, however, should have a different meaning. It should help us somehow in our need. It should become our *internal action* in any situation. (Patočka: 1999: 149)

What was actually happening in Czechoslovakia in the fall of 1973 when Patočka started his lecture series about Plato and Europe and was writing about the end of Europe and the arrival of the post-European age? How did he and his students perceive the surrounding world at that time? What were their *doxai*, their actual opinions of it? What about their preliminary thoughts, by which they tried to transform these *doxai* in the process of noesis into at least a kind of *epistémé* – a knowledge the exactness of which didn't necessarily need to be measured by the established standards of humanistic sciences or philosophy, but just to respond to their basic natural desire to know (*orexis tou eidenai*) and thus shield them from the otherwise potentially devastating existential impact of their momentary situation?

A quick historical reminiscence: the years that followed the unsuccessful attempt of the Prague Spring of 1968 to reform the totalitarian communist regime and endow socialism with a 'human face' are known in contemporary Czech history as the 'period of normalization' (Palouš 2011).³ The then prevailing mood among Czechs and Slovaks was frustration, anger, distress and anxiety. The hopes and excitement caused by the almost miraculous arrival of freedom in our closed society was crushed by the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact led by the Soviet Union on 21 August. Life in Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of the invasion was even worse than it had been prior to the 'Spring'. Tens of thousands, who refused to spend the rest of their lives in communist enslavement, emigrated. Those who stayed could only helplessly observe the restoration of the totalitarian regime. Having taken their 'lessons from the years of crisis', the 'normalizers', backed and supervised by their Soviet masters, started to close the society again and systematically liquidate every remnant of freedom. All those among the party members who took active part in the 'contra-revolution' were purged and removed from any position where they could exert any influence on society. Political apartheid was not only exerted against them but also applied to those who refused to repent and were not willing to conform to the rules and habits essential for the orderly and smooth functioning of a closed totalitarian society. Extensive and detailed measures were adopted in

the media, at schools, publishing houses, scientific and cultural institutions, etc., in order to eliminate any free flow of information, any open public debate, so that in the future similar disruptions of 'socialist order' could never happen again. At the same time a kind of 'social contract' – a relatively undisturbed private life and even some personal benefits for loyalty to the regime – was offered to the silent majority of the resigned and subdued population. Thanks to the existing power constellation there were no signs on the horizon that this situation could ever change.

Everyone could observe in the beginning of the 1970s what Havel termed a 'late-totalitarian regime' (Havel 1991: 328–50) emerging step by step and penetrating all aspects of life of the social body, brutally awakening its members from their 1968 dream. And the strategy of the 'normalizers', whose primary aim was to compel cooperation from the people by every means, and to use only the minimum force necessary to regain total control over their spontaneous, and thus by definition politically dangerous, behavior was apparently working. What was brought back to life in the process of 'screening', which was the main instrument of the policies of normalization, was the ugliest brand of Czech political realism, based on the capacity of members of a small nation to conform themselves to the situation in the world dominated by bigger and more powerful players: to resign temporarily their own freedom, truth, honor and dignity, but to survive.

When this attitude prevailed it was not at all surprising that it became relatively easy for the power holders, as Patočka observed, 'to extinguish in advance the smallest glimmer of mobilizable social initiative, to deprive the society entirely, or almost entirely, of its moral strength', nonetheless allowing at the same time 'its external physical capacities . . . to grow' (Patočka 1999: 100). The form of government established in the process, bluntly characterized by Patočka as 'human machinery of decline and degeneration', didn't need the iron fist to have its way. What could be seen in action here was rather 'fear, disorientation, wiles of comfort, possibility to gain advantages in the environment of general scarcity creating here an artificially interconnected complex of motivations' (Patočka 1999: 100).

In sheer defiance of the corrupting and morally bankrupt state of affairs in Czechoslovakia in the beginning of the 1970s, the basic tone of Patočka's philosophical activities became resolute, exhortative and audacious. Even in the bleak and stressful situation in which Czechs found themselves in the period of normalization, Patočka did not miss an opportunity to remind his students *more Socratico* what the main mission was of a philosopher in such a situation: to come with his advice on how to resist the destructive effects of corrupted social and political order. What still could make a difference, according to Patočka, despite the fact that all hopes connected with the 'regenerative process' of the Prague Spring 1968 were irretrievably lost, was philosophical thought conceived as our '*internal action*' based on our capacity of reflection and insight! Patočka clearly stated in his lecture quoted above: 'Human reality is always situational. When reflected upon, it changes thanks to the very fact of reflection . . . becoming at least partially clarified or on the way to clarification. . . . People trapped by a calamity are in very different positions when they give up and when they don't. The man who is finding himself in a desperate situation still has different options on how to behave!' (Patočka 1999: 149).

The Czechs might have lost all hopes that they could ever be liberated from their current Babylonian captivity in the Soviet empire, but the advice given to them by a

classical Socratic philosopher in their midst had to remain always the same: Do not give up, say no to this machinery, and insist under any circumstances on your right to live in harmony with your insight!

In no historical situation is man allowed to resign his elementary task, to think, to examine constantly his *doxai* and to keep transforming them into *epistémé*. In no historical situation should man refuse to put his life under the test of reason and care for the soul, to gain at least spiritual orientation in his situation. In no historical situation can man escape the elementary consequences of his freedom and be absolved from the task to be 'good', from the duty to behave morally, to resist by all available means the decline and degeneration threatening always the very core of his human identity.

The suggestion Patočka came up with in the bleak atmosphere of the early 1970s was not at all surprising, at least for those who knew how he had reacted to the social and political crises in the past: the turn to philosophy in an attempt to formulate general, universally valid questions which would help us to gain basic orientation in our situation, because it is here we should start our search for solutions to our particular problems. So what did emerge before the eyes of those who were seized by his appeals? Who followed in the 1970s the demolition works of his '*audacious hypothesis*', according to which Europe is a civilization that has come into existence the moment the ancient Greeks discovered its ruling principle – the idea of human life controlled by reason – and this discovery began the whole process of human history?

The circulation of Patočka's philosophy meant dramatically enlarging the horizon of the world observed; radically broadening the narrow-minded and originally very limited scope of this discourse; bringing into it the elements of generality and transcendence. If its original point of departure was a particular historical situation that could be compared to the situation of the crew of a ship which had just been wrecked, the answer to the question of where to start from, according to Patočka, was the human condition as such: we can understand our own possibilities in our concrete situation *hic et nunc* only when we first become aware of the limitations we have to accept, because of our human nature. And here we have to realize: 'Man is always engaged in an adventure that cannot in a certain sense turn out well' (Patočka 1999: 150). As finite beings, on our way through life from birth to death, 'we are all in the situation of a ship the wreckage of which is inescapable!' (Patočka 1999: 150).

The confrontation with our own finitude turned our attention to the realm of classical philosophy. Patočka, however, had a still more challenging announcement to make: the finiteness of human existence does not concern only individual human beings. Historical formations are also finite entities, proceeding from their birth through the prime of their lives to their death. The most important aspect of the historical situation in which we now find ourselves is that the European age is over, that Europe's central position in human history has ended!

What we are currently experiencing is the beginning of a new epoch in the history of humankind. Thanks to the destructive wars of the 20th century, Europe has ceased to play the hegemonic role. Her political and economic rule over the world, her supremacy based on the rationality of European civilization, especially on her modern science and technology, which guaranteed for centuries Europe's monopoly of power, its complacent and self-serving belief that 'it is mankind and anything else is irrelevant' (Patočka 1999: 156) – all of that is now definitively over. The rebirth of Europe Husserl still hoped for in

the late 1930s was simply not going to happen. What could a contemporary Socratic philosopher do under the current historical circumstances? Patočka's response was clear and straightforward: he had to confront his *audacious hypothesis*, the origin of which he owed to Edmund Husserl, with the reality of the end of Europe and to start to examine with its help the emerging 'post-European world'; to prospect at least the first stretch of the road on which humankind – no longer European – has set off, and to try to elucidate its spiritual problems, old and new.

An important inspiration for this project came from the British historian Geoffrey Barraclough (1908–1984), the author of the then influential book *An Introduction to Contemporary History* which was originally published in 1964 (Barraclough 1976) and stated that the dominant feature of the contemporary world as observed in the 1960s is the transition of power (*translatio imperii*) from Europe to her non-European successors.

Patočka in the beginning of his text endorsed this observation but indicated, at the same time, that it is not a corroboration of Barraclough's book but a 'critical follow-up' (Patočka 1999: 85); that his philosophical approach to the problem of the post-European epoch was not to be linked, but counter-posed to Barraclough's contemporary history. The question to be clarified then is: where is the line dividing these two?

Unlike Barraclough, who was fully focused on phenomena discernible in the world of politics today that would enable him to study changing power constellations, Patočka intended to explore first of all its fundamental spiritual aspects; to approach the arrival of the post-European epoch not as a matter of current *Realpolitik* – as the transition from the European balance of power to a new form, i.e. non-Eurocentric world politics – but primarily as a philosophical problem. From this perspective he had to say, however, that Barraclough's attempt to clarify what is at stake in the world today did not offer a way out of the current crisis, but a blind alley:

His 'contemporary history' ... is an approach which is perfectly pertinent for political analyses of this or that situation. It takes a stand in the middle of events and attempts to make from there a kind of sortie in different directions. This is, however, exactly the reason why this method is unable to illuminate and define the present in its essential relation to the past. The fact that the contemporary situation is post-European, that it is deeply affected by the negative element of the prefix 'post', hinders its real use by Barraclough. And further, 'post-Europe' presupposes the idea about Europe's past, about what it was. The depth of this divide can be fully measured only when we try to grasp the contours of Europe as a whole. All of that can hardly be revealed if we stick to this method. (Patočka 1999: 97)

According to Patočka there were three fundamental points of disagreement with Barraclough:

1. Barraclough presupposes one single mankind in the sense of mankind already Europeanized.
2. Barraclough accepts uncritically, without reflection, the European periodicity of history as if it were something that belongs to history as such. He does not consider the possibility – and most probably the necessity – of the existence of the pre-European historical epoch, the European epoch (further divided into Antiquity, Middle Ages and Modern Times) and the post-European epoch.

3. Barraclough is unable to delineate in a convincing manner the contemporary situation, because he does not take into consideration its starting point in the inner sense. (Patočka 1999: 96)

Further, for Patočka there were three things to be distinguished when speaking about Europe and her civilization in the moment of Europe's end and the arrival of the post-European epoch, 'in order to achieve the maximum of clarity' (Patočka 1999: 83):

1. The European principle, the principle of rational reflection, according to which all human activities, including the activities of thinking, must be based upon insight.
2. Europe as a single historical reality, political, social and spiritual, including the ways in which this reality came into existence, the institutions created in the course of European history and also the forces working in the direction of unity even after Europe disintegrated into a group of sovereign particular organisms.
3. The European heritage, which consists of things which all heirs of Europe accept from her and what they avouch to be, as a matter of course, their common possession: science, technique, the rational organization of economy and society. (Patočka 1999: 84)

As far as the European principle of '*logos and ratio*' is concerned, one should always bear in mind that it doesn't put a detached 'theorist' on the pedestal of European humanity but it is essentially a Socratic principle. The fundamental presupposition for activating this principle is the commitment and determination of concrete men and women living in their '*poleis* (cities)' in an open historical situation to resist the personal and social disorders of their age; to strive for unity with themselves under this condition, regardless of all the uncertainties, risks, temptations and distractions of social and political life, and thus to 'care for their souls'.

It presupposes their awareness that insight, the examined life (according to Socrates, the only way of human life worth living) should be based upon, cannot be made from the safe distance of solitary observers of human matters but only in their midst, within the confines of a given and historically constituted public space. It requires their recognition that this public space is inhabited not only by a few philosophers but by the plurality of 'ordinary' citizens, by a concrete social and/or political body, having on the one hand its historically developed sense for transcendence and universality of 'principles' and 'values', but at the same time characterized by all its peculiarities (religion, traditions, customs, rules and practices, etc.).

If the primordial task of phenomenology is to rehabilitate the 'theoretical attitude' of classical philosophers as opposed to the 'natural attitude' of humans toward their 'life-world', this rehabilitation cannot be conceived by separating the former from the latter, as an attempt to escape from a concrete historically conditioned situation to the *domus interior* of our thought. On the contrary, the insight which is at stake here can be achieved only as a result of the direct encounter or confrontation of philosophers with their fellow-citizens. It isn't available in the form of 'divine wisdom' (*sofia tou theou*), but only as a kind of 'human wisdom' (*hé antrópiné*) (Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 23a6), the manifestation of their

Socratic audacity. It is, for sure, enabled by their 'private' exposures to philosophical ideas – by all 'intimations of transcendence' to use the wording of an important contemporary political philosopher, David Walsh (1997), they may have received – but it is what can be shared with all others. It is not only their passive reflection (or speculation) of what is; it is not just a quiet meditation concerning pure being, penetrating from the surface of our human matters that we are busy with in our daily existence within our life-world, into the depth of metaphysics; it is their 'internal action' in the world inhabited by the plurality of others; it is their philosophical deed.

What must be thought through is Europe as a single historical reality and Europe as a legacy, as a heritage in the common possession of those who are emerging on the world scene in the post-European age – as something inherited by them, to use the Arendtian expression, 'without testament' (Arendt 1968: 3–15). As a single historical reality, Europe lends herself undoubtedly as a complex object for historical and/or socio-political inquiry and analysis. As a heritage, Europe still is and will be around in the contemporary world – in the form of products of modern European science and technology, or as the rational organization of economy and society, which also have become indispensable parts of our life-world thanks to the progress achieved by European humankind in the process of modernization.

However, what about this distinction itself, the distinction between what Europe was and what Europe still is in the post-European world, being inherited, accepted and understood by Europe's current heirs? Aren't we confronted here with something that lies at the very heart of the philosophical problem of the incipient post-European epoch? Because, who are actually Europe's 'heirs'? What is the challenge they face in the moment they have received Europe's past achievements and can claim that all of that is 'their common possession'?

Here is where Patočka's philosophical reflection actually does begin. Much as Barraclough rightly identified the changing geopolitical constellation in the world and newly emerging patterns of distribution of power in the post-European age, he still seems to be viewing this situation through the European lens. What we observe today is considered by Barraclough as the result of *one history of one mankind* that progresses in a linear motion. He wrongly believes, Patočka says, that one humankind is a historical fact and forgets easily that humankind and Europe are not one and the same thing; that there is no humankind yet, but multiple humankinds that still wait to be united, transformed into one global and genuinely post-European civilization.

The heirs of Europe are very heterogeneous. Some are legitimate descendants of Europe, emancipated offspring of her body that have grown in the distant areas of the world to planetary magnitude. They are the formations in which Europe is still active to a large extent and also vice versa: they have also exerted their influence – not only political, but also spiritual – on Europe. The others are essentially pre-Europeans, characterized by different degrees of pre-Europeanism. During the European age they stood aside, or they were just manipulated objects and never subjects in the sense of active players in history, proceeding thanks to Europe's initiative. (Patočka 1999: 84)

The core of Patočka's criticism of Barraclough lies in his inability to formulate and think through with sufficient clarity and precision the real in-depth problem of the contemporary phase of world history, namely the grand reawakening of non-Europeans

accompanying the arrival of the post-European age, the fact that makes the gap between the past and the future much deeper, more fundamental and thus more revolutionary than Barraclough could ever think:

The moral superiority, the awareness of insurmountable strength, which had spoken once in the orders of Chinese emperors, even in the moments of their most profound humiliation, turns in the times when those who up to now ruled the world, have lost their power, into a new bond for enormous consensus. What claims its rights here is the energy kept intact by isolation, untouched by barbarian rule, strengthened by humiliation, steeled thanks to its entry into the world processes during the revolution which lasted for long decades, the energy zeroing in an unknown direction; mankind speaks here, all of a sudden, from the abyss of times, which were pre-European; *unconquered Egypt which persisted in isolation and waited for its moment to come back and reveal itself in its full strength*. Post-European mankind speaks here from the pre-European depth, and if the language used is the one of all contemporary revolutionaries – Marxist terminology – it is only conducive to the fallacy Europe so easily succumbs to. (Patočka 1999: 94)

And Patočka's consequential questions:

What entitles us to expound the latest phase of the history of East Asia from the European perspective and view the phenomena such as the Chinese revolutions in 1912 and 1949 as the Europeanisation of China as matter of course, instead of at least considering – mindful of Europe's own evolution through various catastrophes to an ever more complex new formation of the same principle – that what we might be confronted with here is, on the contrary, Sinotization of certain European cultural elements? . . . Is Chinese Marxism a continuation of the Marxian way of thinking, applied to the Chinese material, or is it rather the continuation of Chinese universalism which uses the conceptual equipment of Marx as a welcome means of how to articulate its own historical mission? (Patočka 1999: 96)

This observation, however, leads Patočka to a conclusion which is evidently based upon Husserl's diagnosis and also his proposed remedy of the European crisis. It is certainly not Marxism or any other modern European ideology that should guide us in our efforts to understand our current situation in the world. Nor is it a postmodern relativism with its impossible attempt to free us from all European metaphysics – as if we could simply change our thought like clothing, as if European metaphysics were so easily hived off from European languages. If we want to prevent the nightmare which Husserl was warning us of in the 1930s it is the return to the core European principle of *logos* and *ratio*, the revival of European classical philosophy that can help us to understand our current dilemmas and illuminate our current cross-roads. As much as the situation has changed between then and now – and the emergence of totalitarianism which brought unimaginable and unprecedented suffering to hundreds of millions of people gave us a horrible lesson indeed – there are basically still two alternatives, both foreseen by Husserl, so far as the future of Europe's legacy in the post-European world:

Europe has put forward two ways the earth can be opened: the outward way of conquest and domination of the world, which brought about the eclipse of Europe as a single historical formation; the inward way of opening the earth in a sense of unlocking of the world, the

transformation of the life-world of human existence as such. This is the course we should find, after all, outside catastrophes and inner confusions, and stay on it to the very end. (Patočka 1999: 94)

Coming to this conclusion, Patočka, however, leaves definitively the field of contemporary history and descends to the philosophical depth of his own point of departure. Opting unambiguously for the second way of opening the earth and unlocking of the world, instead of its conquest and domination, he lets both 'legitimate descendants of Europe' and also the other heirs of European power be busy with their own actual political problems and agendas. He invites his companions to take the path of classical philosophy, and guides them – as he did many times before – from the origins of philosophy in myth through the pre-Socratics, Democritus, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and develops again the ever recurring theme of his thought: 'the care for the soul'.

Let us restate what might be a matter of implicit agreement between Patočka and a contemporary historian. First, it is the prevailing mood in contemporary societies observed by Barraclough: 'the sense of living in a new period' (Barraclough 1976: 13); the feeling that we all live in a world finding itself in a deep crisis, a world different from the 'world of yesterday', a world undergoing, whether we like it or not, a profound and irreversible transformation. Second, not only a contemporary historian but a contemporary classical philosopher, too, needs to establish boundaries for his analysis; to identify the events of the past, thanks to which 'the problems which are actual in the world today first take visible shape' (Barraclough 1976: 20); not only to point to the pragmatic happenings affecting the existing power constellations but also, and maybe in the first place, to the events in the sphere of the mind – to what Eric Voegelin has called the decisive 'spiritual outbursts' (Voegelin 2009: 492–3) that have taken place throughout the course of human history – in order to clarify our contemporary situation.

It must be stated immediately, however, that it is exactly here where their connections end. Barraclough decided, as we know, to pick the year 1890 as his *terminus a quo* – adding the last decades before the outburst of the First World War to the period to be marked out as 'contemporary'. Choosing on the other side 1961 as his *terminus ad quem*, he clearly delimited the subject matter of contemporary history – the period of Europe's end – separating it from the previous historical epochs, namely from the Modern era, which catapulted Europe into the role of uncontested global leader, disposed to discover and conquer other continents of the world, to 'civilize' them by imposing on them the Eurocentric world order, and ruling over them without any restraints for centuries.

In contrast to that, Patočka as a contemporary classical philosopher decided to return to a much deeper and more distant past. In order to recall in the contemporary situation the elementary truth that Europe as a civilization has been always animated by a certain principle – Europe as '*logos and ratio*' – he had to move back not only horizontally but also vertically: to the very beginning of the process set into motion in the city-states of ancient Greece, where not only Western politics but also Western philosophy was born; the process which sent Europe on her historical journey, leading from ancient times through the Middle Ages and Modernity to its end in the present times – thanks to the tragic events which happened during the 20th century.

At first sight it appears that the overlap between approaches of contemporary historians and contemporary classical philosophers is actually very small. Barraclough stays on the surface of political matters, but lacks the necessary philosophical depth. Patočka looks towards the deeper spiritual strata of contemporary European political reality, but leaves the ephemeral politics of the day with its power struggles and sometimes painful concrete existential questions behind. His *consolatio philosophiae*, offered primarily to his Czechoslovak fellow-citizens whose country was at that moment stricken by the totalitarian plague, sounds, when read now more than 35 years later, rather like an invitation to a contemporary Platonic Academy and certainly not as an appeal to wake up the spirit of resistance in the *polis* that fell into a deep crisis. Nonetheless, is there anything wrong with this assessment? Wouldn't such a conclusion be in clear contradiction to what has been said above, starting with the four general remarks about Patočka's philosophy?

In order to respond to these questions I will limit myself here just to one key point made by Patočka in the most famous and also the most controversial chapter of his *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, called 'Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War' (Patočka 1996: 119–37).

Having started the project at the moment of transition from 'prehistory' to European 'history', Patočka finally arrived at that event which marked the end of Europe and served as a gate for humankind to enter the post-European world. This is what he wrote in the first paragraph of the sixth essay, identifying the heart of the problem of the relationship between contemporary history and contemporary classical philosophy. This text also demonstrates effectively what was, and still is, the most significant endemic weakness of political programs with which Czechs and Slovaks entered the 20th century – under the leadership of Masaryk (the first president of their democracy created as the result of the 'world revolution' of the First World War):

The First World War provoked a whole range of explanations among us, reflecting the efforts of humans to comprehend this immense event, transcending any individual, carried out by humans and yet transcending humankind – a process in some sense cosmic. We sought to fit it into our categories, to come to terms with it as best we could – that is, basically, in terms of nineteenth century ideas. (Patočka 1996: 119)

What the First World War really was necessarily escaped the attention of most of its interpreters thanks to the fact which was practically unavoidable: they were endowed with ideas coming from the past. The real meaning of this 'cosmic event' – an event that was powerful enough to change not only the power constellations in this or that part of the world but *the whole* world – started to come out only in the light of future experiences of humankind during the 20th century. What really happened has become known gradually, only thanks to those contemporary historians capable of acting as builders of a bridge erected over the gap which opened between the past and the future, and also with the help of the ideas of contemporary classical philosophers. Only the process of understanding itself, with both contemporary historians and contemporary classical philosophers participating, can offer a clue to what is at stake in the stage of human history opened by the First World War; to answer the question of what has remained after

the dust settled in the European battlefields, of European hegemony, and can be offered to all Europe's heirs as her legacy.

When one reads this text now, there is no doubt that Patočka managed to sketch this great drama of modern humanity with an exceptional existential urgency and all the persuasive power of his philosophical ideas. But what should not escape our attention is the fact that Patočka didn't pay attention at all as usual historians certainly would have in this case – to the causes and results of it. Instead, he invites the reader to turn his attention to the phenomenon of the 'front experience' and states clearly what his main purpose is: to allow this experience to acquire the form 'which would make it a factor in history' (Patočka 1996: 134). Why?

Patočka's answer is based on his philosophical diagnosis of our contemporary situation in the 20th century: The world in the age of the end of Europe is and will be formed by 'Force' unleashed thanks to the European 'logos and ratio' – turned, thanks to the scientific revolutions of modernity, into science and technology. This force itself – offered by Europe to the emerging global humanity as its legacy – can, however, become deadly. It has opened the door to an invasion of a thus far unknown and unprecedented evil to our life-world, the evil that took the form of totalitarianism with all the unspeakable crimes committed in the name of ideas and ideological political projects against humanity. The only 'weapon' that can be offered by a philosopher engaged in the act of resistance against this danger cannot be his idea only but the 'solidarity of the shaken'.

The solidarity of the shaken is the solidarity of those who understand. Understanding, though, must in the present circumstances involve not only the basic level, that of slavery and of freedom with respect to life, but needs also to entail an understanding of the significance of science and technology, of that Force we are releasing. All the forces on whose basis alone humans can live in our time are potentially in the hands of those who so understand. The solidarity of the shaken can say 'no' to the measures of mobilization which make the state of war permanent. It will not offer positive programs but will speak, like Socrates' *daimonion*, in warnings and prohibitions. It can and must create a spiritual authority, become a spiritual power that could drive the warring world to some restraint, rendering some acts and measures impossible. (Patočka 1996: 135)

The interpretation of the First World War with the help of ideas coming from the 19th century was commonplace not only among historians and scholars. It was also built into the foundations of the independent democratic Czechoslovak state. Its founding father and first president, the retired university professor Tomas Masaryk, subscribing to his positivistic creed believed that what happened in Europe and in the world in the years 1914–1918 was a 'world revolution'. Because it was essentially a progressive event, he saw in it a sufficient guarantee of our future free existence: 'The history of Europe since the 18th century', he wrote in a seminal essay whose main ideas were submitted to the attention of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 and that precisely reflected the dominant and unambiguously optimistic spirit prevailing in Czechoslovak society at the time,

proves that given their democratic freedom, small peoples can gain independence. The world war was the climax of the movement begun by the French Revolution, a movement that liberated one oppressed nation after another. And now, there is a chance for a democratic Europe and for freedom and independence of all her nations. (Masaryk 1969: 372)

The fallacy of all these expectations, when we take the historical experience of Czechs, Slovaks and other Central European peoples in the 20th century, is more than obvious. And also, we already know what was Patočka's own and final response to the current crisis; what was his personal concrete way of acceptance that the most important part of the European heritage in the post-European age is, as he phrased it, the 'solidarity of the shaken'.

Patočka finished his last philosophical seminars and lectures and became the spokesperson for Charter 77. He died shortly after – having been exposed to all sorts of harassment from the communist government and a series of prolonged police interrogations. What is then his final philosophical message, the last word to our ongoing debate about *translatio imperii*, about the end of Europe and the arrival of the post-European age? Most likely it is something that can't be contained and thus found in philosophical texts and that transcends the very activity we under normal circumstances call philosophy:

The solidarity of the shaken is built up in persecution and uncertainty: that is its front line, quiet, without fanfare or sensation even where this aspect of the ruling Force seeks to seize it. It does not fear being unpopular, but rather seeks it and calls out quietly, wordlessly. Humankind will not attain peace by devoting and surrendering itself to the criteria of everydayness and of its promises. All who betray this solidarity must realize that they are sustaining war and are the parasites on the sidelines who live off the blood of others. The sacrifices of the front line of the shaken powerfully support this awareness. (Patočka 1996: 135)

III

Patočka died more than 33 years ago. If a contemporary classical philosopher were seeking the inspiration from a contemporary historian today – in a similar way as he was inspired by Barraclough in the first half of the 1970s – he would have to admit at the beginning of his 'critical follow-up' of contemporary history written in 2012 that the world has changed dramatically in the meantime.

The spirit of the 1960s and 1970s, present clearly in both Barraclough's book and Patočka's philosophical reaction to it, is gone. The short 20th century – 'the age of extremes', as Eric Hobsbawm (1996) characterized it – ended already in 1989, when communism collapsed in Europe in the wave of revolutions that passed throughout her eastern part. The bipolar political system that came into being in the 'old continent' as a result of the Second World War disappeared. The new geopolitical situation emerged which can be perceived as a kind of happy end to the East Central European 'tragedy' (Kundera 1984). The nations of this part of the world, doomed to live for more than four decades separated by the 'iron curtain' from the free world of the West, were suddenly offered a tremendous opportunity to turn their dreams into reality and to 'return to Europe' they have always – at least according to their own convictions and beliefs – belonged to: to open again their temporarily closed societies; to rebuild (or build anew) democratic political regimes and market economies; to become members of the same regional institutions and bodies as their Western European partners; and to start forming with them a new, this time single and unified, political architecture.

History, however, was then preparing another lesson. It became more and more obvious that the destabilization of European political architecture goes much deeper; that the

movement of change just started is much more radical and is going to have much bigger consequences than anyone could have thought – taking place in three concentric circles.

The post-communist transitions (the ‘first circle’), undoubtedly an important and, indeed, history-making event, have had undoubtedly significant regional consequences (the ‘second circle’). On the one hand, the desire of East and Central Europeans to ‘return’ as quickly as possible to ‘Europe’ – or to be more correct, to become part of the process of European integration that started without their participation after the Second World War – forced those who were already there to accept the idea of another enlargement process; to open again the institutions the western part of European political architecture consisted of in the pre-revolutionary era, and launch willy-nilly a new round of reform.

There was, however, another serious consequence of the outburst of freedom in the region affected after the Second World War by the evils of Soviet communism. Regardless of how keen the liberated nations had been to accelerate as much as possible the process of the restoration of their ‘natural’ place within European civilization, all of them were first returned to their own national histories. They were finding themselves exposed again to all the unresolved questions concerning their identities and self-perceptions – kept as if in a kind of frozen state in the past decades. The ghosts of nationalism were unleashed in the whole region and turned out to be the biggest challenge, the first and most important test for the new East Central European – rediscovered or built from scratch – democracies.

The movement of contemporary history, however, did not stop here. Already when the post-communist countries were taking their first steps on their homeward journey from the ‘Babylonian captivity’ in the Soviet ‘evil empire’, the signals started to come practically from all over the world that the emerging new order was going to be very different, indeed, from the one that had shaped the ‘world of yesterday’. Not only the political architecture of the ‘old continent’ is being rebuilt now, but the other continents as well have been affected profoundly by the ongoing transformation (the ‘third circle’). Already during the 1990s, conflicts of a new type started to emerge and have changed the international atmosphere. With the decrease of tension between East and West after the end of the Cold War, the ‘orthogonal’ dimension of global affairs was quickly gaining in importance, and started to overshadow the ideologically defined conflicts of the past: the relationships between the developed North and the developing South.

By far the strongest message that humankind is now finding itself on the threshold of a new historical era was undoubtedly sent by the barbarous attack of Al-Qaeda on US soil on 11 September 2001. If 9 November 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell could have been perceived as the end of an era, a revolutionary turning point in contemporary European history, one can rightly say that 11 September 2001 has brought us definitely to the 21st century; changing irreversibly our perception of historical time, introducing into it the strong and, indeed, unforgettable sense of the difference between the world before it happened and the world after. The profound and so far open-ended reconfiguration of the international system as a whole has become the dominant aspect of our contemporary political reality.

There is, for sure, a host of facts that should be at the center of attention of today’s contemporary historians and considered accordingly by contemporary classical philosophers, illustrating, practically on a daily basis, that we aren’t living any more in the European but in the post-European age, in a world with an open historical horizon, a world whose post-

modern inhabitants simply lack what their modern ancestors had and what characterized the 'spirit of the time' for long centuries: the unshakeable confidence in the victorious project of Europe as *logos and ratio* and in the idea of its permanent progress.

Can we conclude by stating that Patočka's concept of the 'end of Europe' – a 'critical follow-up' of Barraclough's version of contemporary history – lends itself as a possible point of departure for a largely absent (and that is why badly needed) philosophical reflection of the world we are living in today? I am convinced it does. In spite of the finiteness and of his concrete point of departure in his Czech experience – speaking up 'in an act of resistance against the personal and social disorder' of his time – Patočka joins in a unique and distinct manner the conversation concerning the complex relationships between power and spirit in today's world.

Notes

1. Charter 77 was published on 1 January 1977 and publicly asked the government of socialist Czechoslovakia to respect the human rights of its citizens guaranteed by two international UN Covenants (the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) that 'were signed on behalf of our Republic in 1968, confirmed in Helsinki in 1975 and came into force in our country on 23 March, 1976'. Charter 77 was created as 'a free, informal, open community of people' that expressed its wish 'to conduct a constructive dialogue with the political and state authorities' about human rights, and authorized Jan Patočka, philosopher, Václav Havel, playwright, and Jiří Hájek, international lawyer who was for a couple of months in 1968 the Czechoslovak Minister for Foreign Affairs, to serve as its first three spokespersons.
2. There has always been a challenge to find an adequate English equivalent of Husserl's *Lebenswelt*. Quentin Lauer offers an unusual but interesting version: 'enviroming world'.
3. There are many publications about the failed attempt to reform communism in Czechoslovakia in 1968. My own account of this period of our contemporary history can be found in Palouš (2011).

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