

# Jan Patočka Is a Historical Symbol as Much as a Philosopher. Interview with Michael Gubser

**Michal Zvarík**

*Michael D. Gubser is an associate professor of history at James Madison University. His professional interests include history of international development and intellectual history, where he specialises on the regions of Central and Eastern Europe. In this field he published *Time's visible surface: Alois Riegl and the Discourse on History and Temporality in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna (2006)* and *The Far Reaches: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Social Renewal in Central Europe (2014)*. In the second of these books he proposes a claim that phenomenological movement had an important historical impact on social and political events in Central Europe and played a crucial role in the fall of communist regimes. In the interview he discusses his views on phenomenology, Jan Patočka and his influence on Charter 77 and events thereafter. The interview took place on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2016 in Gdańsk during the conference Phenomenology and Practice, which was dedicated to research of the roots of phenomenology in Central and Eastern Europe as well as to opening new and original themes and problems within contemporary phenomenology.*

*M. Z.*

**Michal Zvarík:** *You approach phenomenology as a historian. It is a kind of strange encounter. I wonder, what is its nature? What does intellectual history get from phenomenology and how does intellectual history help to understand phenomenology itself?*

**Michael Gubser:** It's true. I approach phenomenology as a historian and from history. First, let me say that intellectual history or the history of ideas is an area of history that emerged in the United States in the beginning of the 20th Century, so it is an established historical discipline there. In part it treats the history of philosophy. Traditionally philosophers have written their own history or incorporated history in their work. For example, Franz Brentano in the beginning, who was very, very historical in his writing, tended to write the history of philosophy as a way of doing philosophy, as a way of understanding both the strengths and weaknesses of philosophical positions and to arrive to new insights.

In the United States, it is not so strange to approach philosophy from history, although I know that it is strange in a way in phenomenology to do so. The reason I did this is because phenomenology has had very important historical implications. And I think that phenomenologists are often so busy doing phenomenology, working on focused problems of philosophy, that they are not aware of the impact that their field of philosophy has had historically. And in that sense I think it is important for a historian to approach phenomenology and to look at phenomenology broadly, not to look just at one phenomenologist or one problem, but to observe the tradition as it runs from Husserl or Brentano forward. When you do that, you see that phenomenology has not been an esoteric philosophy, simply a philosophy of logic and consciousness, or perception. It is those things, but very consistently, from the beginning of the tradition, it also had a social and political aspect.

So one thing I wanted to do by approaching as a historian was to show that social and political thought was central to phenomenology from its start. But I think my claim is even stronger. I think

phenomenology has influenced major historical events in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and I think that this influence is simply not recognised by many phenomenologists or many historians. I can speak about the United States, where in the fields of intellectual history or cultural theory the tendency is to focus on the philosophies that tend to be explicitly political or have an explicit social theory, for instance, certain versions of Marxism or post-structuralism, where the engagement with social theory has been very explicit. And the tendency is to understand phenomenology as a kind of Cartesian, intellectualist project. Even though it influenced such thinkers as Foucault, Derrida, Sartre, and Lévinas, Husserlian phenomenology is generally thought to have had little social or political payoff. And my sense in looking at this as a historian is that this view is wrong. In part, it is wrong because typically the focus is on Western European. Certainly in the United States, French, German, and English philosophical texts were available. But when one looks at Eastern Europe, one sees that phenomenology not only had explicit social and political content, but that it informed important social and political movements that had tremendous historical impact. And that is mostly unknown. That is why I say at the beginning of the book *The Far Reaches*, that phenomenology is a preeminent social and political philosophy of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Most people today will be surprised to hear that. But I think looking at it historically from the view of Central and Eastern Europe really shows this to be the case.

**M. Z.:** *So you see phenomenology in Central Europe as a practical activity.*

**M. Gubser:** Partly.

**M. Z.:** *What is behind this orientation, not only in phenomenology, but rather in the region of Central Europe? Could you present the motives behind the overall character of *The Far Reaches*?*

**M. Gubser:** Every book is partly personal. It is partly a response to a research problem, but I think that books are also responses to personal lived experience, to use phenomenological terms, and this book certainly was that. Part of my attraction to Central Europe was that I came of age and started studying history at precisely the time when communism in Eastern Europe collapsed and Eastern Europe was transforming. And this was very exciting. I taught English in Prague in 1991-1992 and learned some Czech. This was long before I even heard of phenomenology. In fact, it was in Prague that a friend first introduced me to philosophy (Adorno in that case), so the ingredients of my future career as an intellectual historian first came together in Czechoslovakia. So there is that personal background.

The book is about Central Europe, but I think that it is also informed by some very American concerns. In the 1990 when I was coming of age politically, the dominant interpretation of what happened in Eastern Europe in 1989 was that Eastern Europe had returned to some sort of normal political life. By this it was meant that Eastern Europe had embraced the western liberal tradition of parliamentary rule, human rights and free markets. That kind of interpretation then fueled a sort of triumphal view of American politics: "We have won the Cold War". The most quintessential expression of this is Francis Fukuyama's essay *The End of the History*, an essay that later became a book.

And as we seen in the last 20 - 25 years of global and US politics, this triumphalism - and the idea that communism's death meant that all government involvement in the economy and society is bad - has led to the sense that liberalism is the only game in town and that it is our duty and privilege to promote democratization abroad. This view shaped US policy after 9/11 with the invasion of Iraq and beyond. I began to work on this book in 2006 or 2007 in the wake of this invasion, and it was partly informed by what seemed to me a wrongheaded notion that Eastern-European dissidents were essentially a Western liberal vanguard. And my sense coming out of the book still is that it is not so much liberalism or a western vision of politics that motivated dissident movements in Poland and Czecho-Slovakia, but rather a more native tradition of phenomenology. Crucial here is that both Polish and Czech dissidents - and they made very different uses of phenomenology - formed not just a critique of communism in their countries, but also of modernity in general, including Western industrial modernity, which they condemned as technocratic and consumerist. They felt that modern people, East and West, abdicated moral values and gave over their subjective identities to a kind of general conformism. This critique was not simply launched against normalized Czechoslovakia or communist Poland, but was a general critique of the industrial or post-industrial society. And in this sense the idea that dissidents where people who wanted to be western is simply wrong. They were profoundly critical of both West and East.

**M. Z.:** *Here we can cite Patočka, who is an eloquent example this kind of critique. How and in what context does this criticism of West and liberalism appear in his work?*

**M. Gubser:** In Patočka it appears prominently. He sees Marxism as an extreme reaction against the problems produced by modernity. He sees Marxism and liberalism, as a species of the same fundamental ill in Western modernization. Of course, he sees considerable promise in Western modernization, for example, the emancipatory potential of liberalism, modern science that is potentially good. But when modern science comes to dominate and suppress experience - here is a Heideggerian element - then the human being has become simply another source for manipulation, another resource to use and use up. And he says quite explicitly that Marxism and liberalism are brands of the same sort of genealogy in this regard.

Two essays that I think are really important and lesser known in Patočka's work are the essay on meta-civilisation, *Nadcivilizace a její vnitřní konflikt*, and the essay on Post-Europe, *Evropa a doba poevropská*. There have been a number of works translated into English, while these have been translated only into German. But they really show that Patočka sees western liberalism as an extreme and but less evil version of Western political modernization, but nonetheless exhibiting some of the same problems as communist modernization. I think that a very interesting thing about Patočka - and this flies in the face of the argument that the dissidents were fundamentally liberals - is that he was by no means anti-Marxist. In these essays or in his notion of second movement of existence, he had sympathy for Marxist criticism of the exploitation of workers, or the exploitation of nature that is inherent in modernity.

By the way I think that this is true in Poland, too. In Poland the reception of phenomenology was often filtered through Catholicism and, of course, the Catholic Church has a long history of criticizing exploitation of workers. That is certainly picked up by Karol Wojtyła and Józef Tischner, who celebrate work as a realization of human worth (although Tischner condemned Marxism in a

way few other phenomenologists did). And Patočka was in that regard also sympathetic to Marxist criticism. The problem, of course, is that communism became the cure that turned out worse than the disease. Certainly Soviet Marxism embraced a commitment to technocracy, to conformity, to bureaucracy that was worse than what existed in the West. But it is an extreme version of what Patočka sees across industrial society. I think those essays are actually really powerful in making that case.

**M. Z.:** *I would like to turn to Jan Patočka's political involvement and influence on Charter 77. Many interpretations are dedicated to this final chapter of Patočka's life and are trying to see a direct connection between his practical engagement and philosophy. To what extent are these attempts justified?*

**M. Gubser:** I think there is a tension. The literature on Patočka goes in different directions. By now Patočka is certainly well known and well regarded in phenomenological circles and he is becoming more known in philosophical circles, so there is enough literature that I think we can talk about a certain variety. Obviously there is some desire among the writers to see his commitment to Charter 77 as flowing directly from his philosophy. I am not sure it is so clear. There are a lot of elements in Patočka that could contribute to an interesting political philosophy. I don't know that they are well developed. I tend to think that Patočka's Charter 77 manifestos have more to do with the present moment, the need to publicize Charter 77, than they are connected with his long-standing philosophy. But there are, of course, elements binding the activism to the philosophy and these are important. He talks a lot in his philosophy about freedom and that in turn can be translated into the Charter 77 movement. Freedom becomes a kind of calling card. Also the transcendence of one's circumstances is a powerful slogan in Charter 77, not to mention the idea of solidarity in crisis. I don't know, however, that there is a direct, immediate segue from philosophy to politics in Patočka. I think the political implications of his phenomenology would have to be worked out more carefully.

I have said this before, but Patočka is in some ways a symbol as much as he is a man or a philosopher. As a symbol, Patočka's final sacrifice and his commitment to Charter 77 is powerfully connected with his philosophy of freedom and so I think that for many Czech activists in the 1970's, who had some limited understanding of his philosophy, the sense that he was a philosopher of freedom, that he was committed to Charter 77 and died for it, was a very, very powerful and historically important symbol. However, this is different from saying that his philosophical ideas necessarily culminated in this activity. Perhaps he thought there was the way in which he is transcending his own moment and thereby embodying aspects of his philosophy, but I do not think it is as clear as some writers would have say. I do not think there is an automatic translation.

I guess I think that, on one level, Patočka the symbol – the philosopher of freedom who sacrificed

himself for freedom - is historically the most important Patočka. The symbol that he represents is powerfully important and exists independently from the question whether his action was philosophically grounded in his work.

Can I add one more thing? Because of Charter 77's commitment to rights, it suggested that Patočka's work culminates in human rights. That is where the greatest tension comes in my mind. Human rights mean many different things, of course, and in the 1970's and onward involved a specific conception of the human being. There was a certain essentialist or formalist quality to the rights-bearing human being; for example, the human being as someone who possesses the rights to life, etc. Patočka's philosophy was a philosophy of openness, in which talking of any sort of essence or a definition of a human being was anathema. Humans could always transcend themselves at any time. And so, the fusion of a specific human rights notion with Patočka's notion of human openness is a little hard to do. Yet I think that Charter 77's call for human rights makes it tempting for many people after 1989 to see the dissidents as essentially western liberals, since human rights is a central concept of western liberalism. That makes for a very easy translation: "Oh, they were advocating human rights, so they are liberals in the western sense". I think that we have to be very careful about that linkage, because it misses some of the crucial aspects of Patočka.

**M. Z.:** *In the closing chapter of The Far Reaches you propose the quite intriguing idea that in phenomenology can be found a troubling tendency to elitism. You mention that it originates in Husserl and his idea of the philosopher as a functionary of mankind.*

**M. Gubser:** Even before that, in Brentano.

**M. Z.:** *Can be this tendency to elitism traced also in the work of Jan Patočka?*

**M. Gubser:** I would say it is more apparent in Charter dissidents who are inspired by Husserl. There were enormous debates, for example, the Vaculik - Havel debate, whether there is a kind of misplaced heroism among Charter 77 dissidents. The argument was that Charter 77 was composed of cultural elites that were persecuted, but somehow occupied a privileged position, so they could survive and take a moral stance while still putting food on the table. And there were also questions whether the average Czech or Slovak, who in some extreme cases was treated with real disdain in the statements of Charter 77 members, could actually participate in these activities, whether he was in a position to be able to give up his job, vacation, university privileges for his children - things needed to survive or live a modestly comfortable life. So I think the elitism comes from there, and certainly Havel was dogged by these accusations of elitism long after 1989, by claims that he had been in a privileged position and therefore was able to maintain a kind of moral stance that others could not.

I think that throughout phenomenology there is an element of this, the idea that the philosopher-functionary should be able to help renew or rejuvenate the society. Husserl is powerful and potent, but I think that there is this problem of elitism when you start to think about philosophers as persons

leading the way. It never is a direct political leadership. It is rather a sort of cultural stewardship. But there certainly is nonetheless a kind of cultural elitism that fuels it and to me this presents a weakness in phenomenological social thought historically. In a way, the ideal position for a phenomenological thinker is to be something like a pope, who is not a political leader in a sense of being a state leader, but is certainly a kind of cultural steward or cultural guide. And obviously Karol Wojtyła, a phenomenological philosopher before he was pope, is an example. This is not only about controversial positions he took as pope, but about a certain leadership style that did not allow for much dissent, a top down leadership that insisted on orthodoxy and really did not tolerate dissent.

**M. Z.:** *Where do you think this tendency to elitism rises from? Or what are its philosophical or historical presuppositions?*

**M. Gubser:** There are ways in which the notions of proof and evidence, that are central to phenomenology going back to Husserl and Brentano, can give rise to a concern for elitism, of the privileging of a narrow educated community of truth-seekers. Central to phenomenology is the claim that only the ability to perceive evidence provides for ultimate truth and perceiving evidence demands extraordinary care and cultivation. Brentano at one point says that the only way to prove that blue is not red is to actually observe and see. That is simple example that makes sense. But the notion of perceptual truth, truth that has to be perceived, can become problematic when, as Brentano argues, it takes a lot of effort, a lot of work, a lot of study to be able to cultivate the ability to notice the truth of things. Brentano makes this point in his writings, about how much training it takes to notice things. So ultimately there is a danger of reaching the point where only a trained few can really say “ah, this is true because I see it as true and I have cultivated the ability to perceive truth.” With Brentano I do believe it reached a point where the ultimate authority is a community of philosophers who have cultivated insight. And it is precisely in that notion where the danger of elitism lies. I know, in the ideal this ability ought to be cultivated among many people, that everyone should be able to cultivate their insight. But practically speaking, I think there is a worry that you will end up falling back on philosopher-functionaries who say “Well, here is the insight as we see it”.

Charter 77 in a way illustrates that point, with the many accusations of elitism lodged against it. On the other hand, even some of the Charter signatories criticized what they saw as the self-appointed, privileged moral stance taken by some of the spokesmen.

**M. Z.:** *It seems that according to you phenomenological origins are throughout permeated with a Platonic sentiment of the philosopher-king.*

**M. Gubser:** Let me turn that statement on its head. Again this may be a very American way of thinking, but I think the strength of phenomenological social thought in this day and age is that it provides ways to conceptualise

collective activism outside a Marxist framework. One of the things that was central to the phenomenological tradition was the argument that a human being is fully human only if it exists in a community and in relationships with other people. You see this in Patočka, in his notion of the *polis*, in his notion that to achieve excellence one needs to exist in the *polis* – at times in tension with the polis, to be sure, but nonetheless existing with others, not in regal isolation. I think the possibility of collective activity is something that is not found so much in political discussion today with its emphasis on individualism, at least in the United States. Ethics, too, is often reduced to individual, private morality, each of us makes his own decision. But there are conceptions of ethics that see morality as profoundly connected with communal relations and shared commitments, and I think the phenomenological tradition highlights this and highlights it in a way that is not Marxist. One of the things that emerged after 1989 is the general sense that all forms of collectivism were fraudulent, because they implied some version of Marxism. I think phenomenology is a powerful entry in that debate and has a lot of historical tradition behind it.

**M. Z.:** *So, can we summarise that Patočka with his emphasis on the community of polis overcame the shortcomings of the philosopher-functionary position?*

**M. Gubser** I think that Patočka is interesting in this regard. He is far from Husserl's philosopher-functionary, and I would say that there is simply a tension there, but a very fruitful one. On the one hand, his movement of transcendence suggests a certain isolating elevation from other men. On the other hand it is clearly a transcendence that takes place in the context of a community of other fellows, in the communal solidarity of the shaken. So there is both a community and a kind of elevation beyond community. And I do not think it is settled, what that means. There is a struggle between the two positions. I think these are themes that need to be worked out. What is the relationship between freedom of a community and freedom of a person? What is the relationship between person and a community? What is the relationship between transcendence and the *polis*?

**M. Z.:** *We have already mentioned that Patočka, due to his political involvement, became an important symbol. In this context I find one question especially intriguing. In one of the notes in The Far Reaches you briefly mention the possibility that the symbol of Patočka as a martyr is a sort of a myth. How is this statement to be understood? What is it based on?*

**M. Gubser:** There is a recent and very interesting book by Jonathan Bolton.

It is titled *Worlds of Dissent*,<sup>[1]</sup> and he questions whether the myth is an accurate reflection of historical facts. Also, he looks very closely at what happened when Patočka died and questions some of the mythology around it. In a way, I think it is a minor point. Historically, it may be true that there has been a myth of Patočka built by eulogies, which came both from the Czechs and abroad. For example, Derrida, who was involved with Patočka, and Richard Rorty wrote eulogies. However, I don't think the historical facts, whether or not he ultimately succumbed because of interrogation, exhaustion, or other things, take away from the powerful symbol that Patočka represents. And they do not take away the historical importance of that symbol, that he was perceived as a person who contended, that he used themes and terms from his philosophy in order to justify Charter 77, etc.

But this takes us to an important issue. Historians obviously focus on facts. They are trying to establish the facts correctly. But often it is not the day-to-day facts that are historically important to one's legacy. It may or may not be that Patočka ultimately died because of exhaustion from the interrogation. But the myth of him as a martyr is itself an important historical fact, and it had an important legacy in Charter 77. It helped to keep it unified despite having such a disparate array of thinkers.

Myth is also a historically important motivator. And so I think in that sense Patočka's involvement and Patočka-as-martyr was critical. There are stories that at his funeral, which was attended by many admirers, a horrible helicopter circled the cemetery to see who came out. It was so loud that you could not hear things. This clearly underscores his potency, the fact that he was a powerful thinker and a revered man, someone that both the regime and his followers took very seriously. So, in a way, medical accuracy is beside the point. The power of the man who committed himself is the crucial historical fact of his legacy.

**M. Z.:** *In the end I would like to turn to Patočka's important notion of problematization. It seems to me that in his case we can speak of problematization on two levels. On the one hand, Patočka posed important questions concerning the wholeness of human existence. On the other hand, as every great philosopher, he himself still remains a question.*

**M. Gubser:** It seems fitting that the philosopher of problematization would be still problematic. That is only appropriate.

**M. Z.:** *Of course. But generally speaking, Patočka, due to his emphasis on problematization, might appear as a "naysayer", who, for example, says "no" to liberalism, "no" to Marxism, "no" to pure technocracy. And this leads to a question, whether there is some positive content in Patočka's work. Is his philosophy mostly about saying "no"?*

**M. Gubser:** I do not think his philosophy is about saying "no". In terms of

social and ethical theory, I do not think it is necessarily clear what direction it would go. But there are an enormous number of developed theories that he presents. For example, his philosophy of three movements is an intriguing and powerful conception of both a person and, potentially, a society. His work on post-Europe and meta-civilization is a critique of certain things, but there are intriguing insights and positive notions. His notion of the care for the soul has a lot of positive potential. I certainly would not call him a “naysayer”. That is not to say that social, political, anthropological and generally philosophical implications are necessarily fully developed. But I think there is an enormous amount of carefully drafted concepts and themes that are waiting for philosophers, historians, and cultural theorists to develop. There is definitely a critique of technocracy, but underneath that, care for the soul is an attempt to provide a positive answer. The notion of transcendence is partly an attempt to provide a positive answer to what could rectify the imprisonment of everyday conformism. Are they fully developed? No. But are they intriguing conceptual steps? Yes, absolutely, and very potent ones. So I do not think he is purely a philosopher of negativity.

#### P o z n á m k y

[1] BOLTON, Jonathan: *Worlds of Dissent. Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2014.

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