

## TIME FOR A NEW WAY OF READING PATOČKA?

Francesco Tava, *The Risk of Freedom*, trans. Jane Ledlie (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 179 p. ISBN 9781783483785

Originally published in Italy in 2014,<sup>1</sup> this is an excellent book on a very important thinker that provides a new way of reading Patočka's work which is particularly sensitive to the practical implications of his theories. It is not the first time that freedom is emphasized as a central issue in Patočka's thought, but this is probably one of the best efforts at showing how the whole of Patočka's thought is built on his understanding of freedom as being our ability to transcend the realm of objectivity. This book is not only an excellent presentation of the main ideas of Patočka, but also a powerful argument about their relevance for our present.

Every philosopher of the magnitude and complexity of Patočka demands a close reading and beckons scholars to do a careful analysis. In the beginning it was the work of Patočka's disciples, both inside and outside the Czech Republic, to explain the complex work of their teacher. Kohák, Bělohradský, Rezek, Šrubař, Chvatík, and others went about fulfilling this necessary task while the works of Patočka began to be translated into several different languages. Although the English reader already has some very helpful works to illuminate them,<sup>2</sup> the translation of Tava's book is a significant step

<sup>1</sup> This book is a translation from his *Il rischio della libertà* (Milano: Mimesis, 2014), which followed in the wake of Jan Patočka, *La superciviltà e il suo conflitto interno: Scritti filosofico-politici*, ed. Francesco Tava (Milano: Unicopli, 2012), Tava's translation of an anthology of Patočka's writings. Tava has been researching Patočka's work for many years and continues to do so. He recently published a new anthology in Italian: Jan Patočka, *Platonismo negative e altri frammenti*, ed. and trans. Francesco Tava (Milano: Bompiani, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Erazim Kohák's philosophical biography of Patočka in the introduction to his anthology *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989); Aviezer Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); and Edward F. Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in a Postmodern Age: Politics and Phenomenology in the Thought of Jan Patočka* (Albany: University of New York Press, 2002), were, before the publication of Tava's book, the most helpful to the English reader and are still required reading for any scholar dealing with this thinker.

that may mark a new phase in the ongoing discussion of Patočka's insights. This new book might be evidence of the fact that Patočka doesn't need to simply be presented anymore and that we can move on to a new level of discussion in which a group of readers already familiar with his most significant contributions can discuss Patočka's place among the main thinkers of the last century. He was not only a disciple of Husserl and Heidegger but was as much an original thinker as Merleau-Ponty or Hannah Arendt, and the interest that he has awakened is still growing.

Tava's book is extraordinary in many senses: not only because of its richness and density, (every paragraph is full of insights and information and every single page deserves a close reading, something that is not usually the case with essays today), but also because of the angle at which Patočka's work is approached: by focusing on his idea of freedom and opening his study with a reading of "Negative Platonism," Tava manages to show the link between the most apparently technical or theoretical parts of Patočka's phenomenology and his practical, political, and biographical aspects. While the French commentaries of Patočka tend to remain on a very abstract level, Tava's approach is closer to the way most disciples of Patočka read him.

It is also important to notice that Tava emphasizes the ethical meaning of Patočka's works not only out of philological fidelity but also because he is aware of their relevance for today's readers. This is one of the reasons why this book might not only be of interest to the growing number of those already familiar with Patočka but also to the majority of people who are still not fully aware of the actuality of a thinker who was among the first to examine the possible fates of Europe in a post-European world. Patočka's alternative to traditional metaphysics is a negative path which, as Tava asserts, might be "a possibility of philosophical survival in the context of post-European humankind" (p. 3), a path worth exploring since it may be one of the most original contributions of phenomenology to post-metaphysical thinking.

Through the experience of freedom, "the non-negative nature of the negative can emerge" (id). It is a difficult freedom, as Patočka emphasizes, because it demands that we accept our fragility, that we abandon the false securities of a non-examined, *naïf*, ordinary life.

Last but not least, Tava is also familiar with Kosík's works, which he has presented to the Italian public in an excellent anthology,<sup>3</sup> and so he is in the position to acknowledge the links between these two authors, links that have gone unnoticed for too long. Actually, if there is any limitation in Tava's book, it is precisely in the one that he himself imposed – the fact that some of the insights he has sketched are not more fully developed. Several times the reader has the feeling that the author could easily develop some of

<sup>3</sup> Tava was one of the editors of an excellent anthology in Italian of Kosík's articles and the author of a long introduction about his work, see Karel Kosík, *Un filosofo in tempi di farsa e di tragedia: Saggi di pensiero critico 1964–2000*, eds. Gabriella Fusi and Francesco Tava (Milano: Mimesis, 2013).

the issues he touches on and feels that the book's 150 pages are too few in comparison with all that Tava could still say considering his knowledge of Patočka's works.

Here we find the author assuming the familiarity of the reader with Patočka's main texts and developing new insights through a masterful knowledge not only of the published books but of all the manuscripts recently edited in the new Czech edition<sup>4</sup> and with constant references to studies published in Czech, English, French, German, and Italian.<sup>5</sup> Tava is not alone in this effort to reintegrate Patočka's thought into contemporary debates. Among the contributions to this new way of reading we should mention many authors, most of whom come from phenomenology like R. Barbaras, M. Richir, and E. Tassin, but also J. Arnason, R. Gasché, or M. Crepon,<sup>6</sup> to name just a few. It is worth remembering that before Derrida or Ricoeur two Italian thinkers were among the very first interlocutors of Patočka – Enzo Paci and Guido Neri. It is not by chance then that another Italian thinker offers us a new bridge between the Czech and the Western debates.

Avoiding any introductory remarks or biographical and contextual commentaries, the author goes directly to one of the main works of Patočka, his article on "Negative Platonism" that was, as Tava reminds us, a sketch of a wider project. As we said, we must congratulate the author for choosing this text as a starting point: by exploring the link between the notion of a dangerous freedom and the idea of Platonism – of Negative Platonism that Patočka developed at various stages of his work – Tava has the opportunity to show the link between Patočka's philosophical anthropology and his philosophy of history. It is a link which Tava unfolds in each of the five chapters as a red line, the link between freedom and some of Patočka's own concepts like "exposure," "distance," or his comments on the philosophical attitude and his difference with metaphysics

<sup>4</sup> It is worth remembering that texts which were never published in Patočka's lifetime make up by far the largest part of the ten volumes of the *Sebrané spisy*.

<sup>5</sup> Tava's effort to take into account the growing bibliography on Patočka is another one of this book's virtues. Unfortunately, however, some absences need to be mentioned. For an Italian reader with Tava's expertise, reading in Spanish or Catalan should not be a problem, and several articles, books, and dissertations on Patočka have already appeared in both languages by Spanish and Latin-American researchers like Esquirol, Fernandez Ramos, Garrido, Llorca, Ortega, Serrano Haro, and Walton. Two books dealing with the same issues as Tava's must be kept in mind, one being Tardivel's book *La liberté au principe* (Paris: Vrin, 2011), which Tava didn't have the opportunity to read because it was written around the same time as his book, and Findlay's *Caring for the Soul*, which could have been very helpful since it explores the same topics as Tava's work.

<sup>6</sup> Jóhann P. Arnason uses Patočka's ideas on modernity to build a highly suggestive work in his own *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003). Rodolphe Gasché has recently published *Europe or the Infinite Task: A Study of a Philosophical Concept* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), with two chapters devoted to Patočka. Marc Crépon has explored Patočka's thoughts on war in his book *Vivre avec: La pensée de la mort et la mémoire des guerres* (Paris: Hermann, 2008).

or ideology. Every important contribution of Patočka is mentioned and related to the whole of his thinking: his theory of the supercivilization, of sacrifice, war, dissidence...

The second chapter deals with Patočka's theory of sacrifice, his idea of exposure, and, from these, his notion of the "solidarity of the shaken." Questioning tests the certainty of what may have once been taken for granted and, in Patočka's terms, it "shakes" our presuppositions and causes us to live in increasing uncertainty.

The small but dense third chapter offers an excellent account of the affinities between Patočka and the younger Kosík. As we have said, Tava is especially well prepared to present this discussion since he has also a deep knowledge of Kosík's work. His analysis of Patočka's admiration for and critique of Kosík<sup>7</sup> allows the author to deepen and enrich our understanding of Patočka's conception of action as praxis and links it to his own personal praxis of dissidence as well as to their reflections on sacrifice, remembering in this case the figures of Palach or Sakharov.

Another chapter that adds further value to this remarkable book is the fourth one, in which we find a badly needed confrontation between two remarkable Italian thinkers, Enzo Paci and Guido Neri, both of whom were not only acquainted with Patočka but present in Prague at certain crucial moments. Patočka himself mentioned<sup>8</sup> Paci's contribution to the renewal of phenomenology as one of its most promising developments along with the work of Merleau-Ponty. It is worth remembering that Paci gave a presentation in Prague about his confrontation of Marx and Husserl that would later grow into a whole book, one of the most important contributions to the dialogue between phenomenology and Marxism. Paci's book<sup>9</sup> was translated into English<sup>10</sup> by another unforgettable figure, Paul Piccone, the director of *Telos*, the magazine that had such an important role in the renewal of Marxism in the United States. Neri became a friend of Kosík and invited him to Italy where he lectured twice. It was precisely Neri who first<sup>11</sup> showed the importance of Kosík in the last works of Patočka, in which Kosík is discussed twice by Patočka, whose late thoughts on labor can be understood as an answer to Kosík and an effort to develop his own position.

<sup>7</sup> Considering the importance that Patočka attaches to Kosík in two articles in which he discusses at length Kosík's work ("Heidegger am andern Ufer," devoted to contemporary Eastern European philosophy, in which he puts Kosík above Lukács as the main force coming from Eastern European Marxism dedicated to the renewal of philosophy; and his article on Czech philosophy, "Česká filosofie," 1969, in which he describes Kosík as the main Czech philosopher of his time), it is surprising how rarely Kosík is mentioned in most of the published texts about Patočka.

<sup>8</sup> In Josef Zúmr's interview with Patočka from 1967 (translated into French and Italian).

<sup>9</sup> Enzo Paci, *Funzione delle scienze e significato dell'uomo* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1963).

<sup>10</sup> Enzo Paci, *The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man*, trans. Paul Piccone and James E. Hansen (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972).

<sup>11</sup> Guido D. Neri, "Il mondo del lavoro e della fática," *Aut Aut* (2000), no. 299–300, pp. 167–76.

The book ends on the topic of dissent. It is here that Patočka's thought becomes most concrete and political, although always on the basis of his fundamental ethical insights. Patočka formulates the task of dissent as being "the translation into terms of a political fight of the *shaking* which characterizes the experience of the spiritual person who is prepared for sacrifice" (p. 143).

It would take too much space to do justice to every issue raised by this excellent book. We will simply insist in our conclusion that the focus on freedom and on the philosophical roots of Patočka's dissidence is not only very fruitful but also necessary to counteract a trend among some recent commentaries,<sup>12</sup> though it was already the angle chosen by his own disciples to present the meaning of Patočka's project. It is no accident that Bělohradský, explaining the ideas of Patočka<sup>13</sup> for the first time in the West, chose a very special text from Kosík's participation in the Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union in 1967, in which he quoted Hus' answer to the Concile, those famous words in which Hus explains that his reasons for heresy were grounded in his personal conscience ("my conscience would not allow me to accept it"). Reason and conscience must go together, adds Kosík, recalling what we may consider the *Leit-faden* of Patočka's thoughts from his early writings of the thirties to his "heretical" and dissident thoughts of his later years.

By presenting the ethical and political meaning of the whole of Patočka's work, including the original linkage between his ontology, his anthropological views, and his philosophy of history and ethics, Tava has made explicit the reason why we need to keep on reading the work of the "Socrates of Prague": his ideas not only have an historical meaning but are particularly relevant to the thinking of the post-European era that he was among the first thinkers to acknowledge.

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<sup>12</sup> Tava is not alone in being opposed to the trend of reading the Czech philosopher in an excessively Heideggerian way: in his remarkable book *Unendlichwerden durch die Endlichkeit: Eine Lektüre der Philosophie Jan Patočkas* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008), Filip Karfik emphasizes the main divergence between Patočka and Heidegger, which lies in the central issue of the care for the other.

<sup>13</sup> Václav Bělohradský, *Il mondo della vita: Un problema politico*, trans. Gianlorenzo Pacini (Milano: Jaca Book, 1980).