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**Patočka, the meaning of the post-European spirit and its direction**

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**Abstract**

*The Europe that was born from Plato's "care for the soul" can today no longer be recognized; it has been replaced by the self-management of the economic EU. How can we now come back to a Europe concerned about its soul, the others, and the world, reinventing itself as a new nation? Jan Patočka's thoughts on post-Europe can show us the way.*

*Starting from some clarifications on the definitely European initial meaning that Patočka detects in Socrates' "care for the soul", the purpose of this article is to examine what in this European spirit can be saved in the post-European age, and to what extent a "European nation" can still make sense. This analysis leads us, building on the visionary texts written in the seventies by Patočka, to rethink the possibilities of a reformation of European reason, and a *métanoïa* of Post-Europe.*

**Keywords:** Jan Patočka, care of the soul, reason, Europe, Post-Europe

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If one were to characterize Europe with the use of an organic metaphor, one might feel tempted to state that the soul of Europe is located in Greece, its heart is in the Czech Republic – the only country on the old continent that remained a democracy in 1938 – and its two lungs are in France and in Germany. I dreamt of Europe reverting to its ancient Greek roots: care for the soul, concern for the others and the world, universal, luminescent reason. I dreamt of a social-minded Europe that would have implemented its project of perpetual peace and united its states around liberty, responsibility, equal dignity of all human beings and solidarity of all its citizens. With Robert Schuman I thought: "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a *de facto* solidarity." (Schuman 1950) I thought that Europe would urgently require a cosmopolitan solidarity built on the rights of man and that the political will to work out a European constitution could not but be based on such a solidarity, which "will have to be widened to encompass all citizens of the Union, so that, for example, Swedes and Portuguese will be ready to vouch for one another." (Habermas 2006, 87)

Instead of that, nothing else is common to the European community as it has been built than a market economy, its currency and its finance. And, out of some incredible irony of History, Greece is the first country that was on the verge of leaving that monetary Europe. The economic Europe has been constructed regardless of the intellectual, cultural,

ethical and political Greek foundations of Europe. That Greece should be the first country to reject the economic Europe, like some graft that does not take, is actually quite understandable. After all, what is left in "common" in the so-called European "community"?

The Europe that was born from Plato's care for the soul can no longer be recognized. The age of the post-Europe described by Jan Patočka is underway. Moving away from the line drawn by Schuman and Delors to wander, the Europe we longed for quickly vanished. Can the identity of Europe be content with an economy without *oikouménè*? Can it remember *Europa* and come back to its first principles? Will we, who are Europeans from the old continent fallen down from our Greek cradle, manage to come to life again and reinvent *démokratia*? How can Europe be founded again? Under what conditions can an European "nation" arise?

The care for the soul of the spiritual Europe has been replaced by the self-management of the economic Europe. How can we now come back to the European "thing itself", to a Europe concerned about its soul, the others and the world, reinventing itself as a new nation? The project of a European nation, both *theoria* and *praxis*, both a "regulative idea" (Husserl) and a practical construction arising out of a philosophy of action, has to be worked out at fresh expense. Jan Patočka's thoughts on post-Europe can show us the way.

Thus, starting from some clarifications on the definitely European initial meaning Patočka detects in Socrates' "care for the soul" (I), our purpose is to examine what in this European spirit can be saved in the post-European age and to wonder to what extent a "European nation" can still make sense (II). This analysis leads us, building on the visionary texts written in the seventies by our phenomenologist philosopher, to wonder why and how European reason can be reformed. Can we hope for a *métanoia* of Post-Europe?

## 1. European care for the soul

In its Socratic meaning, the soul is what bears the inner determination of man. "The soul decides for itself and, to that end, it has a power of its own – the knowledge of truth and of the good." (Patočka 2017)<sup>1</sup>

Caring for the soul is first healing a mind torn between two *logoi*, at worst a mind that contradicts itself without being aware of it, and consequently says nothing (*ouden leigein*), is meaningless. "Socrates' approach in his care for the soul is determined by this tendency to find out an inner trouble, signaled by a logical or linguistic antagonism and hidden by the hypertrophia and the sclerosis of an inconsistent self." (ibid.) Therefore, the

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<sup>1</sup> It is our own translation into English as for all texts by Patočka.

first step of the therapeutics is elenctic -the refutation of the absence of problematicity in everything related to the things of the good. Moreover, the Socratic care for the soul starts with "tracing out the limit," with the famous Delphic *gnôthi seauton*, the "know thyself" showing humans their limit (know you are only humans don't go into *hubris*, don't pretend to be gods). Caring for the soul begins by drawing the limit between what humans know and what they do not know.

Only *sophrôn* humans know what they know and what they do not know. But is self-knowledge just possible? That is the whole subject – an aporia – of Plato's dialogue *The Charmides* and "Socrates has no theoretical certainty at all about the construction of self-knowledge. The problem European metaphysics has been constantly dealing with from Aristotle to the most recent thinkers is set out here for the first time." (ibid.) *The Charmides* deals with the very topical problem of the relationship between science (*épistémè*) and wisdom (*sophrosunè*), and we know all too well how our modern society wrongly tends to take the technician expert for a sage.

To Patočka, self-knowledge is a two-sided problem, one side "is inner concentration under the influence of the healing *logos*," the other is the humble knowledge humans should have of their personal limitation. The Socratic care for the soul then unfolds through two pedagogical forces, dialectics and irony. In *L'Europe et après* Patočka points out that with Democritus, and even more with Plato, the care for the soul works in a questioning frame of thought which takes the form of "accounting through reason" (*logon didonai*) including "the certainty there will be no closure" – the endless movement of an "inquiring *logos*" constantly looking for foundations. (Patočka 2007, 104-105)<sup>2</sup> Such a gaze into what is, wisely avoids *hubris*. It is built on "the renunciation to any claim to hold the truth" on the being and "care for the soul compels humans to look for what is good, to start seeking out some evident clarity on everything they think, say and do." (ibid. 112)

That shows how strong the demand for responsibility is with this care for the soul. Only this conception, specific to the "open soul", can show humans they are not given beings, "but beings who need to be borne." (ibid. 218) To the closed subjectivity, everything seems given in advance: humans, the Earth, living beings, objects, values, etc. However, what Greek history and philosophy have tried to understand is precisely the problematicity of the world of life – which, as far as it is concerned, is never given as a theme, as we have all known since Husserl. Originally, Europe means "a gaze into what is", according to Patočka. However, twisting the meaning of it, Europe gradually made a bad use of its re-

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<sup>2</sup> All the subsequent references to Patočka and quotations come from his last texts, from the beginning of the seventies to his death, are from the compendium *L'Europe après l'Europe* (Patočka 2007).

sponsibility, so to speak: Europe set itself "a demand for universal responsibility which explains to a certain extent that European mankind may have taken its form of life for that of the whole of mankind." (ibid., 235) Its tutelary presumption to want to account for the others as for itself, on all levels, political, theological, economic and scientific, made it lose its aura. (We will come back to that, supra II).

For the time being, let us briefly recall the description Patočka gives of the three aspects of Plato's care for the soul<sup>3</sup>:

- as an onto-cosmological project, care for the soul, as a driving principle, is a gaze into what is, extended to the whole being;
- the second aspect has to do with the political project of a state refounded in spirit with the soul as its structure (*The Republic*);
- care for the soul as self-knowledge, deepening the inner life of the soul, its relationship to the body and to intercorporeality -the soul is here conceived as the structure of appearing.<sup>4</sup>

The third aspect refers to the problem of *The Charmides*, as we have seen. But the problem of the European spirit is precisely that it no longer seems able to reach self-knowledge:

The curse of the European spirit (...) is that, full of itself, it is unable to understand the others and consequently does not know itself either. It has found out a host of efficient means to become the master of the world, but all have also been used – as we now see after the fall of Europe – for the purpose of self-destruction. Europe as a hegemonic power no longer exists. (Patočka 1990, 211)

Once the diagnosis is made, and even before considering whether there is a possible therapy, what are the reasons for the disease the European spirit suffers from?

## 2. From the European spirit to a post-European nation

To Patočka, the specificity of European spirituality is the will to found the gaze into what is, on the one, the universal and the inner and social knowledge of the human soul. Its historic failure lies in the *outer* path of its hegemonic conquest and its imperialistic aspiration. From now on Europe must take the *inner* path opening up to "the becoming-world of the world of life." (Patočka 2007, 40-44) The European spirit first aimed at irenic universal reason; it distorted this aim and turned it into a warlike, arrogant, and intrusive exportation

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<sup>3</sup>See especially the paragraphs 9 to 12 in Patočka 2007.

<sup>4</sup>"The soul is not only the fact that there is the being but also that the being appears, that there is a specific, constant and irreducible structure of its manifestation." (ibid., 129)

of its universalism. This exportation was carried out violently: through colonialism, through its unilateral political vision of democracy (its mono-democratism), through its ultraliberal economic expansion imposing overconsumption as a way of life, through its "technoscience" and through its neglect of classical "humanities". Patočka describes this phenomenon clearly: "the spiritual dissolution" of Europe was achieved by the development of technosciences, "the decadent culture of subjectivism", the decline of "languages and the classics which were the spiritual cement of any Europeanity." (ibid., 46-47)

The 17<sup>th</sup> century rationalism and science have gradually replaced metaphysics and religion. Eventually, their ambition to determine the whole Real and to subdue nature gradually imposed the *Gestell* gaze. Science as "a domineering form of knowledge which wants to include the whole of nature in its theory only appeared in Europe." (ibid., 227) In spite of the historical conflicts that opposed science and religion, "the spirit of European Christianity was to subject nature to men's practice by a new rationality at the service of one's fellow human being." (ibid., 228-229)

But then, what can enable the European spirit to revert to its original will ? If the care for the soul makes sense within the community, and if Plato's analogy between the soul and the community has limits of its own, the problem identified by Plato still remains and must be revived in seeking for "the specific meaning of the new community in combining intellectual distance and courageous commitment." (ibid.) In other words, the European spirit can only find itself again and be vivified through the alliance between *sôphrosunê* and *andreia*.

For instance, can we be wise and courageous enough to conceive a European "nation"? To speak of a European "nation" in the sense of a common *identity* would require that a majority of the inhabitants of Europe "feel" European. A president of Europe and a passport (for lack of a "European identity card") would be necessary but not even sufficient. Only a real community of the activities of the mind, that is to say culture and education, could give European peoples a national identity. "The spirit, as it advances towards its realization, towards self-satisfaction and self-knowledge, is the sole motive force behind all the deeds and aspirations of the nation. Religion, knowledge, the arts and the destinies and events of history are all aspects of its evolution. This, and not the natural influences at work upon it (as the derivation of the word *natio* from *nasci* might suggest) determines the nation's character" (Hegel 1975, 56).

In this age of deterritorialized flows, the notion of a European "nation" would imply conventional and ideal borders rather than natural and national ones. A European people can only exist through an activity of the mind giving it its singularity. This spiritual activity is made up of the Greco-Roman heritage, the legacy of Judaism through Christianity and

Islam, the humanist values of the Enlightenment and the democratic model with its values of liberty, equality, solidarity and secularism (*laïcité*).

Admittedly, some geographic limits can be devised for Europe: the Atlantic border in the west, the icy Arctic Ocean with Iceland in the north, the Ural River in the East – since orienting Europe is giving it some Orient of its own – and the Mediterranean Sea in the south, with cousins – Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Turkey- connecting with European institutions as associated countries. But European borders cannot be internal, that is "interiorized". There can only be borders *for (European) interiority* if they are idealized.<sup>5</sup>

Without that condition, "national borders would not be capable of securing (or trying to secure) identities, would not be capable of marking the threshold at which life and death are played out (in what in Europe is called 'patriotism')" (Balibar 2002, 94). Does the very idea of European patriotism (a non-economic one) make sense? Is it even to be desired? It is possible to conceive a nation without a homeland, whose unity is nevertheless secured by European defense and a European army. Habermas warns us: "The solidarity of citizens is shifted onto the more abstract foundation of a 'constitutional patriotism'. If it fails, then the collective collapses into subcultures that seal themselves off from one another." (Habermas 2001, 74)

What could a European "nation" be?

The European nation cannot be an international economic alliance, as is the present European Union, which citizens not only fail to appropriate but denigrate, being only sensitive to its harmful effects and remaining blind to the benefits it brings them regionally. The economic union confused the origin of Europe and its end: under the pressure of globalisation, it took for *the* beginning what could be *a* finality. "It is for us... to put some flesh on the Community's bones and, dare I suggest, give it a little more soul (...) You cannot fall in love with the single market." (Delors 1989)

The European nation cannot either be an empire, in the sense of a post-national sovereign state, which annexes old nations in the context of Europeanism or under the pretext of universalism. Nor should it be an unprecedented capitalistic financial empire, and certainly not a patchwork of old Nation-States closed in on their particularism and their nationalism as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its unity cannot be reduced to the sum total of its inward-looking parts.

Instead, the European nation could be a federation of the United States (or united regions) of Europe, whose citizens would at last share the sense of a common cultural identity – the one that recognizes differences in cultures-, with a conclusive territory whose borders

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<sup>5</sup> This decisive wording dates back to Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation* (1807) as put it Etienne Balibar (Balibar 2002, 94).

would be redefined and with common foreign and defence policies. Then the main task of the European nation would decidedly be to wipe out misery on its own soil:

A day will come when bullets and bombshells will be replaced by votes, by the universal suffrage of nations, by the venerable arbitration of a great Sovereign Senate, which will be to Europe ...what the Legislative assembly is to France... it is the object to which I shall always direct myself – the extinction of misery at home, and the extinction of war abroad. (Hugo 1849, 11)

We are still very far from the aim Victor Hugo called for. Let us come back to what, according to Jan Patočka, would enable the spirit of present Europe -that is our Post-Europe- to come to itself.

### 3. Can we hope for a metanoïa of Post-Europe?

Is there any chance for Europe to return to itself? Such is the essential question raised by Patočka, who already in 1970 perceived that Europe would have to discuss "with the cultural traditions that gave the European idea a necessary factual basis. These traditions have so far been considered as dead and meaningless, but we will have to learn to take them seriously." (Patočka 1990, 212) Europe can only be revived by transforming itself through otherness. To this end, it must give up the all-embracing, even totalitarian pretense of its rationality:

If Europe, as Husserl thought, means rationality, if rationality is synonymous with universality, there was a contradiction in claiming and keeping rationality as the exclusive property of Europe. The end of Europe may have a positive meaning. European rationality, which is unifying, may launch a bridge which will make it necessary to take seriously and think without preconceived ideas what is exactly furthest from us. (Patočka 2007, 212-214)

The Czech philosopher considers this salutary possibility with caution. Is Europe ready to open itself to multiethnic rationality? Patočka points out that Husserl's *Krisis* has already mentioned "the urgent task of deepening the foundation of European rationality, which is the only way to make it possible to have a genuine discussion with all the living traditions of the world of life *in concreto*." (ibid.) This deepening of European reason implies going out of subjectivism and its tendency to become absolute, in order to find the way to transcendental intersubjectivity. Its historical spirituality cannot be reduced to scientific and technical rationalisation: "as soon as it is extended to the reason expressing itself in ethical life, poetry, art, and religion, there is no reason why traditions quite different from our European one could not be allied to rational motives." (ibid., 210) Indeed, there are

forms of logic, modalities of human reason different from those we practice in Europe: we have to understand how they express themselves in non-European traditions in order to deepen the dialogism between them and us. Europe's task is to build such a bridge unifying modes of rationality:

The European believes mankind is one because he identifies Europe with mankind; he easily forgets that, so far, there is no unitary mankind; there are only different sets of mankind waiting for some unifying formative action. (Patočka 2007, 59)

Let us examine the case of democratic reason. Democracy is not the privilege of Europe and can never be only reduced to majority-rule ballot. Democracy is also and above all "the exercise of public reason" (Rawls 1999, 579-580) based on deliberation and the participation of citizens in the decisions concerning their public affairs. In that sense, there is a grand tradition of public debate in India, China, Japan, Iran, Turkey and in a lot of Arab and African countries.

To recognize that democratic reason at work in other cultures through going out of its unilateral, ethnocentric democratism has become a compelling necessity for Europe. That is an essential task for Europe in order to give a new life to its care for the other and return to the care for the soul without losing its own soul. To crystallize the recognition of a political globalisation of democratic history, to reform itself and take eastern democratic centres seriously, to symbolize the synergy between different cultural forms of democratic reason, such is the task of Europe.

Jan Patočka's questioning is a topical matter of urgency: "Is it certain", he wonders, "that non-European liberation movements are fundamentally identical to the struggle of underprivileged classes in Europe?" (Patočka 2007, 243) Isn't that another Europeanistic view? For more than forty years, Patočka has been warning us that the different spiritualities of non-European cultures may conflict with our hyper-rationalistic conception, which imposes its sole worldview: that is a form of *Polemos* for now and for the years to come.

Thus, only a refoundation of rationality can save Post-Europe: reviving its fundamental spiritual principle, the care for the soul. Life in the idea must contend with ideology and the open soul must contend with subjectivism enclosed on itself. Reason must conquer human understanding. The spirit of distanciation and critical review must be applied to our spiritual tradition without any Eurocentrism or expansionist rationality. "The spirit in this post-European context", Karel Novotný comments, "is that of the solidarity of the shaken," (Novotný 2012, 149)<sup>6</sup> inasmuch as it constantly rekindles problematicity, the shaking up (*thaumazein*) of the certainty of the already there, of the given. Everybody in quest of life in

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<sup>6</sup> The translation is ours.



truth can share this renewed mode of the gaze into what is. What Patočka aims at is to give a transcendental foundation to a transcultural spirituality, which could unite humans in solidarity with one another in a new form of Socratism, careful of the problematicity of the world. This spirit is open to what the other can make me discover in myself with his foreign spirituality and to what my spirit can unveil in himself.

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Such a task requires a heroism of the *logos*, a *métanoia*, a new Socratic heresy, an unprecedented choice (*haîrê*): to substitute the cosmopolitanism of spiritual Europe for the imperialism of economic Europe (constituting Europeanity through cosmopolitanism and not the opposite)<sup>7</sup>, and to substitute the universality of democratic *reason* for the imperialism of technoscientific *rationalisation*. The aim of Post-Europe must set itself is to move from rationalisation back to reason, to make sure, as Patočka puts it, that human "understanding may recover itself in reason." (Patočka 2007, 53)

European reflexion, prompted by the limitations of its technoscientific *ratio*, is destined to "fertilize extra-European reflexion." (Patočka 2007, 241) It should set itself as *telos* a new spiritual conversion of its reason (*métanoia*) in place of its cult of rationality.

Europe has no monopoly on the question of *problematicity*. The problematicity of what is, the shaking up (*thauma*) of the given meaning, the liberty to deny the non-problematic evidence of the world are present in a great many other cultures and find their equivalent in age-long Taoist, Buddhist, or Indian traditions. The only way for Europe to reform itself is to open itself to these other forms of problematicity. From now on, this is the sole condition to build a common language and a common world.<sup>8</sup>

"The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own,"<sup>9</sup> as Heraclitus put it.

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<sup>7</sup>I developed this idea in chapter III: "L'Europe de Patočka" of my book *Patočka, le soin de l'âme et l'Europe* (see Merlier 2009, 151-210).

<sup>8</sup>"Today, at a time when all the sets of mankind are becoming one, we have beforehand neither a common world nor a common language and the main task awaiting us will precisely be to create both" (Patočka 2007, 243).

<sup>9</sup>Heraclitus: Fragment LXXXIX, according to Plutarch (see Burnet 1920, 140).

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