

A *finalité politique* is at odds with the nature of European integration. There is no end goal, and that is how it ought to be. By definition, the Europe of European integration is a volatile and hybrid institution, a temporary fix. A temporary fix that has to prove itself as an appealing and convincing version of that big post-war Western experiment with capitalism and democracy. Capitalism and democracy the European way, if you wish. Key to its attraction is that it is never set in definite form, nor believes in such a thing.

Variation, nuance and transformation form the main strengths of the Europe of European integration, but also its main weaknesses. Time and again, almost every single day, these characteristics confront the Europe of European integration with fresh challenges of credibility concerning its unity, solidarity, and its resilience. These challenges are hard challenges, but they also offer unique opportunities; opportunities to live up to the European claims of human rights and their universal impact, in practice. Opportunities that can be seized or missed.

In taking on these challenges, dogma, easy thinking and fear, both for change and for continuity, are its most dangerous enemies. Research of its own history – in essence a history of management of decline – and political and practical action based on that, are Europe’s only and crucial partners in finding fresh inspiration to stimulate the imagination of a better world, and work on that in new old, European, ways, in today’s realities. In so doing, both freedom and action are crucial.

Freedom

In *Conferences of Leuven* (1965) Czech philosopher Jan Patočka claims that history is determined on the one hand by contingency and, on the other, by what he calls “the logic of the spiritual time to come”.

Just as finitude characterizes the body proper, he states, history itself is also characterized by a movement of decadence, against which humans are called to fight in an opposite direction. The alternative that looms in history is the choice between subjugation to bodily and biological life as such, and the desire for a life in freedom. Thus, history is the history of the conflict between those who remain in the circle of biological needs and those who engage themselves in the struggle of “opposition to decline” (*opposition au déclin*), that is to say to

the finitude that characterizes human existence.

Understanding our time is nothing but the beginning of action.

Indeed, each historical movement is configured as a movement of detachment from decadence, “*redressement*”, as Patočka writes. And yet, each time a new stage is reached in the struggle for freedom, it will hide within itself the menace of a new possibility of decadence. This results in the impossibility of the end of history, of a cessation of movement. If it is still possible to speak of a *telos*, it will have to be conceived as a possibility to make sense of the world, as a continual effort that aims to give direction to human action and the movement of history – in short, as a struggle. This struggle must be understood as the creation of wider and wider spheres of freedom as well as responsibility. Living for each other is therefore revealed as the sense, or even the direction of all human action and of historical movement as such. In other words, meaning must be sought in the actual reality of human affairs (in Machiavelli’s “*verità effettuale della cosa*”^[1]), i.e. in politics.

Freedom is achieved on the background of the violence that characterizes our private relationships with others, that is, as a countermovement against the violence of others and against a natural life determined by a surrendering to the necessities of life and to an inexhaustible desire. It is the consciousness of our finitude that allows us to break away from natural life. Freedom is thus given only as a negative freedom, as a movement of laceration. On this conception of freedom, history, for Patočka, ultimately reveals itself as a *rising above decadence*. And since our historical situation is an agonistic situation, this achievement requires effort, demands excellence; and requires that we understand our time, as Machiavelli already stated. The essence of existence lies in comprehension and not in knowledge. But comprehension is always also a realization, an achievement. Understanding our time is nothing but the beginning of action.

Action

As the *polis*, the space of the community in Ancient Greece, is the ground of history, and as the creation of political space is the true heritage of the *polis*, the comprehension and the rising above decadence can be achieved only within the political space. In other words, the institution of political space is for Patočka the effectuation of that which in each era is reaffirmed as the fundamental task of humanity and that coincides with what French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls in *Phenomenology of Perception* the “act of taking up” (*acte de reprise*) and later “institution”^[2]. The act of taking up is simply the change of contingency into sense.

As much for Patočka as for Merleau-Ponty, it is a matter of thinking of political action and human praxis within the movement of history. Indeed, when they outlined their philosophies of history, Patočka and Merleau-Ponty were perhaps thinking more of a phenomenology of the historicity of the things of the world and of human affairs than of a true – even if heretic – philosophy of history, a phenomenology that should have found and traced the intersections of human movement together with the movement of history and the movement of the world. Patočka speaks, in fact, of a “conception of history as *world history*, not of what is contained in the world, but as a history of the comprehension which makes humans human” and he suggests that this conception should encompass “the comprehension of both change and permanence”^[3].

Rhythm of History

With regard to the crisis of Europe, at the end of the sixth – and final – of the *Conferences of Leuven*, Patočka also indicates a new possible reading: he states that the present world, or at least the contemporary European world, is in a moment of arrest. Should the arrest, he asks, from now on be understood as an invitation to reflection?^[4]

The movement of human history is a struggle against decadence. Decadence is like a wave that rises and as it hits its peak, rolls and collapses. Depending on the perspective, one can see its collapse as a crisis or even a catastrophe, or one can glimpse in its rise the occasion for a renaissance. This is what Patočka refers to as the rhythm of systoles and diastoles in which consists the movement of history. According to this interpretation, history would be a movement without end, or a continuous accomplishment of falls, collapses and reconstructions. The movement of history cannot find rest in itself, except in a rational

reconstruction made afterwards. Despite this, we should nevertheless imagine that we can sometimes ride the wave before it collapses, by means of favorable contingencies or distinguished examples of daring and excellence, like in Machiavelli’s *Prince*. This is, within the rhythm of systoles and diastoles that characterizes history, what Patočka calls a “happy diastole”.

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So, even if we accept the crisis of Europe as definitive, still, in the midst of *problematicity*, the space of understanding opens up. The crisis itself cannot mean the end of culture, nor the end of history itself, just as the crisis of Europe does not imply the political end of Europe, or the disappearance of the European political space. Hence, we will have to reflect on the means and ends, given by this crisis, to overcome it once we have understood it. Everything depends on the possibility of completing a synthesis in the middle of conflict, as Patočka claims: “It is to comprehend that *here* is where the true drama is being acted out; freedom does not begin only ‘afterwards’, after the struggle is concluded, but rather has its place precisely within it – that is the salient point” ^[5].

There is no history without conflict, because conflict is the place of history. And the history of Europe – or perhaps history as such – is the history of the struggle against decadence, a struggle which is all to be done. The social, environmental and so-called refugee crisis that currently embroils Europe at a transnational level shall perhaps be inscribed within this rhythm of history, where the happy diastole would consist, of course, in abandoning the myth of a “finalité politique”. European integration, once understood as both means and end to overcome the crisis, shall now be limited to confront the reality of present and future challenges through collective action, as solely in the “verità effettuale della cosa” Europe can seek opportunities to live up to the European claims of human rights in practice.

Footnotes

[1] Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, Milano, Feltrinelli 2010, XV: “Ma sendo l’intenzione mia stata scrivere cosa che sia utile a chi la intende, mi è parso più conveniente andare drieto alla verità effettuale della cosa che alla immaginazione di essa”.

[2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L’institution/La passivité. Notes de cours au Collège de France (1954-1955)*, Paris, Belin, 2003.

[3] Jan Patočka, “Le christianisme et le monde naturel”, » in *Istina*, n° 38, Paris, 1993, trad. Erika Abrams, p. 22.

[4] Jan Patočka, *Conférences de Louvain sur la contribution de la Bohême à l’idéal de la science moderne*, texte établi par Valerie Löwit et Filip Karfík, Bruxelles, Ousia 2001, p. 129.

[5] Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, Chicago and LaSalle, Open Court Pub Company 1999, p. 134.

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