

The Risk of Freedom: Ethics, Phenomenology, and Politics in Jan Patočka

By FRANCESCO TAVA. Translated by Jane Ledlie. p. 208. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International. 2015. £24.95. Paperback. ISBN: 9781783483785.

In his book *The Risk of Freedom*, originally published in Italian as *Il Rischio Della Libertà* (Mimesis Edizioni, 2014), Tava recognizes that, although Patočka's conception of freedom represents a necessary condition for human beings' meaningful existence, freedom is inevitably engaged with risk, danger and contingency. Following Tava's reading of Patočka's text examining Sophocles' play *Antigone*, the understanding of freedom that Patočka's proposes leads to a 'new type of ethical action; no longer based on the safety of principles, on the division between good and bad, but on their continuous and conscious shaking, shifting itself against the current, in the opposite direction towards a depth, which is beyond any balance' (p. 26).

While, in the first chapter, Tava portrays Patočka's diagnosis of the crisis (the historical social and political background of Patočka's *supercivilisation* — a concept that explicitly refers to the communist regime of Czechoslovakia), the second chapter offers an in-depth phenomenological insight into the problem of the world as a *lifeworld*. Tava utilizes two different perspectives to examine the world and portray the conditions of Patočka's time — a background from which he evolves his understanding of freedom.

Tava's diagnosis of Patočka's era's political situation helps him to discern the two main aspects from which this particular concept of freedom emerges. Tava recognizes that Patočka's idea of freedom is related, firstly, to the problem of *negativity* and, secondly, to the problem of the *lifeworld*, defined by Patočka as '*Weltgeheimnis*: the secret of the world' (p. 34). Unlike in Husserl's phenomenology, this does not eliminate the dark, obscure, mysterious region of our existence. These concepts (negativity and the lifeworld as *Weltgeheimnis*) serve as a springboard for the concept of freedom and become ineradicable, yet, in terms of technical civilisation, they become a combated dimension of the organisation of life. However, a question arises: how in these conditions of negativity and the lifeworld (to

which the nocturnal element is central) does the category of freedom emerge, and how is Patočka's obscure and gloomy phenomenology of freedom related positively to the political realm?

Patočka's idea of freedom, as Tava argues, needs to be perceived as a counterweight to the Heideggerian idea of *Gestell* — 'the *enframing* which presents all things according to one's own intrinsic technical programme' (p. 43). Tava correctly argues that freedom evolves as a counterweight to our everyday existence. Freedom appears when one is able to break from the realm of the everydayness, which, in principle, calls for life, which, as Patočka argues in his *Heretical Essays*, 'leans out into the night, into struggle and death' (HE, p.131).

Tava emphasizes that the action leading from human beings' enslavement by *Gestell* to freedom is the act of *sacrifice*: 'a movement which is anchored in becoming historical, lived through suffering and without the certainty of success, without recognition, without the hope of achieving anything positive' (p. 44).

Tava further questions how the 'philosophical message [of sacrifice] can take on a political force with an uncalculated capacity' (p. 45): '[A] person's most effective weapon lies in [...] her ethical resistance, the inadequacies of the system, starting with willingness to sacrifice, intended as an extreme attempt at re-establishing a discrepancy or difference between [...] the means and the ends of our actions' (p. 45). Tava highlights Patočka's idea that the act of sacrifice, despite initially being a philosophical message, takes on a political force as an act of bravery that cannot be accomplished without personal involvement (p. 46).

In this context, Tava examines the materialisation of the concept of sacrifice in the *realpolitik*, which once took the form of the dissident movement of Charta 77 in Czechoslovakia, whose task was to 'destabilize, a corrosion of confidence' (p. 143) of the political system that, in principle, could be brought forward only by 'a spiritual person who

is prepared for sacrifice' (p. 143), while the objective of this action was to 'reawaken a new sensitivity' (p. 143) within the political realm.

Although Tava's book undoubtedly represents the most succinct and lucid explanation of the problematic concept of freedom in Patočka's phenomenology, and portrays the consequences of his philosophy and ethics in the form of the politics of dissidence, the book does not explicitly discuss the relevance of Patočka's idea of freedom to the contemporary social and political enquiries beyond the political practice of Czech dissidence. The answer to this question is left open to further interpretations.

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