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THE LOST TELOS OF EUROPE: FILLING THE GAP BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

abstract

This paper proposes a genealogical reflection on Europe and on its spiritual roots, trying to avoid both a naïve Europeanism and an equally naïve Euroscepticism. On the basis of Husserl's and Patočka's analysis, we see the essence of Europe in a contingent telos, identifying the common origin of philosophy and politics in the Greek polis and pointing out with Arendt the great challenge of the present generation in a creative reappropriation of tradition, leading to a rediscovery of the public realm. We compare Arendt's try to reconnect the political concepts back to the intersubjective experience enlivening them with Husserl's foundation of the European sciences in the lifeworld, finally seeing in the activity of judgement a bridge between philosophy and practice, private and public sphere, as well as a way for a democratic foundation of the common space.

keywords

Polis, Lifeworld, Intersubjectivity, Contingency, Responsibility

*Freiheit wäre, nicht zwischen schwarz und weiß zu wählen,
sondern aus solcher vorgeschriebenen
Wahl herauszutreten
(Adorno 1997, 150)*

- 1. Europeanism and anti-Europeanism: some methodological remarks**
- It has become common to speak of “the EU crisis”, not only from a financial point of view, because of the economic differences between member States, but also from a spiritual one. We achieve a better understanding of current situation by considering the present crisis not primarily as a crisis of the EU, but rather – if this is something more than a geographic concept or a combination of institutions – as a crisis of European humanity along with its concept of history. According to the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, the basis of the perception of Europe as something united before the two world wars was the conviction “*qu’il n’y a qu’une histoire de l’humanité une, se déroulant selon un cors linéaire et d’un seul tenant*” (Patočka 2007, p. 59). The end of this belief coincided with the transition to a “post-European” age (2007, p. 58), whose advent did not of course mean the end of European humanity, but the end of a universal, linear, coherent history (the philosophical “*Geschichte*”) and a return to a plurality of factual histories (*Historie*). Patočka’s work *L’Europe après l’Europe*, whose brilliant analysis will be one of my lines of investigation, opens precisely with these considerations. Faced with the increasing complexity of the world, the traditional European periodisation of history in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Modernity appears to be one-sided and the Husserlian faith in Europe as “*historisches Leben aus Ideen der Vernunft, aus unendlichen Aufgaben*” (Husserl 1954, p. 319) is deeply shaken. One of the most relevant characteristics of the post-modern age is exactly the transformation of the diachronic dimension of life into a virtual, global present. In this regard, “post-modern” and “post-Europe” can be considered as synonyms.
- In spite of this situation, the present paper tries to suggest that philosophy can still play a role, not so much in producing answers, but rather in asking the right questions, provided that it renounces any ambition to restore a philosophy of history, rediscovering, if anything, its relation to contingency and politics, also bearing in mind its origin from the Greek *polis* and the research of the common good. Giving preference to Hannah Arendt’s analysis, I propose to read the present crisis of Europe in terms of a “catastrophe of the *polis*” (Patočka 2007, p. 13) and of the public domain. As is well known, Arendt refuses the philosophical category of necessity as well as the Hegelian historicism, claiming the contingency of human action and pointing out the link between freedom and politics, the private and public realm. A link that

arises from the intersubjective dialogue and has its model more in the practice of storytelling than in the definition of truth through objectivistic criteria.

Insofar as it is the expression of a “horizontal”, not strictly teleological attitude towards history (see also Guaraldo 2003), this standpoint might suggest to us the correct way of facing the present situation, making it possible to safeguard the differences in the European Union, at the same time conserving its unity. In fact, the present challenge is to avoid both a naive nationalism leading to the break-up of the EU and an imperative necessity prescribing a predetermined direction to the European processes, as if the united Europe were a matter of fact and not a work in progress. As also Patočka remarks, “*l’humanité une n’est pas un fait, mais un problème*” (2007, p. 60). This article moves then from the conviction that the “*telos Europe*” is something which has still to be put in place, if it is not meant to be a homogenisation of identity, but a peaceful co-existence and freedom.

It is worth noting before anything else that the current crisis is not the first one that European humanity has been faced with, since the steps made towards the foundation of the European Union were precisely a reaction to the deep crisis at the end of World War II. Already in the Seventies, Patočka regretted Europe’s loss of political pre-eminence on the world stage, noting the discomfort of the small European States faced with the biggest countries and remarking the absence of an effective co-operation among the national States, since the need for unity was frustrated by the incapability of finding a unifying model (2007, 47). Nowadays, we still have to acknowledge that Europe has apparently failed in finding a common ground beyond a monetary policy.

Patočka’s reflection focuses on Europe’s self-destruction and replacement by its “heirs”: on one side the “natural” descendants of Europe (the United States) and, on the other, the “pre-European” civilisations (foremost China and the Muslim world).

His considerations confront us with the following coincidence: “*La fin de l’Europe comme puissance historique, la fin de l’entité qui, s’élevant au-dessus du reste du monde, avait tenté en vain d’asseoir sa domination sur toute la surface de la planète, va de pair avec la généralisation de l’héritage européen*” (Patočka 2007, p. 42).

However, such a generalisation concerns only the technical, scientific and economic aspects of contemporary life. This fact cannot be explained simply by the different backgrounds of non-European countries: it has deep roots in the European philosophical tradition, namely in the historical splitting (“*Spaltung*”) of reason between scientific *praxis* (what Horkheimer and Adorno later called “instrumental reason”) and metaphysical thought. Since the modern age, scientific progress has become more and more independent from the progress of ideas. Nevertheless, as Patočka suggests, it is not a matter of choice between a spiritual or a material point of view, setting moral values against economic interests. First and foremost, we should rediscover the common element between Plato and Democritus, namely reflective thinking as the pursuit of knowledge and “care of the soul”:

L’histoire de l’Europe se distingue, non pas par une mystérieuse prééminence des facteurs idéaux sur les déterminations socio-économiques, mais parce qu’on a ici entrepris d’emblée de former la réalité prédonnée, la réalité apparaissante, par un regard dans la structure de la nature, de l’âme, de la société, c’est dire par la réflexion” (Patočka 2007, 43).

The matter is not whether we need “more Europe” or “less Europe”, whether to be Europeanist or anti-Europeanist; the issue is *what* kind of Europe we do want. And we can answer this question only by phenomenologically asking ourselves “*how*” (through what practices and raising what questions) we can come to a decision about the direction in which the European

2. The “adventures” of European inheritance

Union should move, reflecting on the very sense of this operation. In my opinion, it is only by gaining a critical, conscious relation to the past that it is possible to imagine a future for the EU. The fact that we are asking for a different Europe is a clue that history is something contingent, that our present reality is the outcome of human processes and actions: far from being a “dead result”, European institutions, as well as European financial, social and integration policies, are something that can be discussed again. The issue is if we are up to this discussion or not.

According to Patočka, European inheritance is something more than technical progress. It is the intellectual life which he describes as “*acheminement vers l'être plutôt que vers l'avoir*”, “*soin de l'ame*”, “*regard dans ce qui est*” (2007, p. 267), within a tradition that goes from Socrates and Plato to Heidegger's identification of “Care” as the Being of *Dasein*. This “*regard dans ce qui est*” implies of course a deep connection with the perception of time, namely with the acknowledgement of our finitude, which is in the end what distinguishes us as historical beings. It is not by chance that temporality plays a prominent role in Husserl's phenomenology, insofar as all our perceptions are temporal processes and things are given to us always through “*Abschattungen*”; each present is deeply correlated with both past and future. In this sense, Patočka states: “*Or, le logos, n'étant pas passivement donné au préalable, exigeant au contraire d'être activement réalisé, représente un élément qui est éminemment relatif à l'histoire*” (2007, p. 249). If ancient philosophy has hypostatized rational truth, seeing contingency as “the price of freedom”, and modern philosophy (especially the dialectical materialism) has made of factual truth something absolute, fighting the proposition “it might have been otherwise” and its apparent arbitrariness – on the other hand this contingency represents the essence of history, which is “the only realm where men are truly free” (Arendt 1968, p. 243).

It is precisely within this horizon of freedom and possibility, in this ability “to make history” and to live historically that we can find one of the most important differences between European humanity and all the others. If it were not for this attitude, the idea of “*telos*” would have been unimaginable. Exactly in this critical relation to the past and in this reasonable hope for the future we can find a preliminary answer to the question on how we can come to a decision on Europe's true essence and mission. Furthermore, we can see the political value of philosophy and the philosophical value of politics in the fact that both of them put in place a re-negotiation of tradition. It was precisely this ability that historically led to a *qualitative* progress and, for example, to the theorisation of human rights.

3. **The future in danger: a socio-philosophical analysis** What prevents the rediscovery of the phenomenal life behind the concepts of our political and cultural tradition – and, thereby, the historical self-knowledge of European humanity – is the occurrence that together with the awareness of our tradition we have lost, as Arendt says, “the dimension of depth in human existence”. Philosophers such as Husserl or Heidegger have taught us that existence is not the mere, tautological being in the present like a thing among things, but an intimate relation with our own being in terms of possibility, which means in the end “to care about one's own stature in the universe” (Arendt 1968, p. 275). Thought can occur only on the basis of *Dasein*, of the temporal structure of human existence, which is plural and dialectic in itself. If we are not able to imagine a future different from the present, it depends first of all on the fact that we do not feel settled in a permanent world, i.e. the *Lebenswelt* in which Husserl saw the common ground of intersubjective experience. Not only the natural sciences, but also politics have forgotten their origin in the life-world. As is well known, Husserl saw the cause of the crisis of European rationality in the “physicalistic objectivism” which produced a distance between the qualitative world of experience and the quantitative, mathematical one of science. The European sciences are no longer able to answer the question

of the sense or non-sense of human existence and they produce an alienated humanity, which is no more able to reconnect with its own essence: “*Bloße Tatsachenwissenschaften machen bloße Tatsachenmenschen*” (Husserl 1954, p. 4). Science has thus become mere know-how, losing its relation to thought.

The same distance occurs nowadays between people and politics. The widespread abstaining both in national and in European elections reveals the increasing disaffection and mistrust of people towards politics in general and towards the EU in its present form. After the so-called “end of ideologies”, globalisation, the growing complexity of political and economic processes and the increasing importance of the market have contributed to making politics something unintelligible for most people.¹ The economic crisis, along with a frustrated need for representation, has then led to a further deepening of the gap between citizens and European institutions, promoting the spread of conservative and anti-Europeanist movements. Again, we argue that the question is neither to remain in the EU nor to leave it, but if European humanity is still a historical subject, if it is up to its historical task, that is to say if we are able to act as historical beings or not: “*l’homme de l’ère planétaire saura-t-il vivre de manière effectivement historique?*” (Patočka 2007, p. 36).

And so we return to the temporal structure of existence mentioned above. Quoting Arendt, who identifies the task of each new generation precisely in this activity of “paving” the distance between past and future by means of a creative and original appropriation of tradition, I want to stress that nowadays “the trouble [...] is that we seem to be neither equipped nor prepared for this activity of thinking, of settling down in the gap between past and future” (Arendt 1968, p. 13). The issue is a lack of historical sense, a forgetfulness of the past that Arendt associates with the general crisis of authority from the modern age onwards, whose philosophical meaning is the “loss of worldly permanence and reliability” (Arendt 1968, p. 95). This phenomenon – which has been analysed also by other philosophers, such as Koselleck, who referred to the modern acceleration of historical time by speaking of “past future” (“*vergangene Zukunft*”) – would not be in itself something bad and it is not to deplore, since if on the one hand tradition is a “thread”, on the other hand it can be a “chain”, so “it could be that only now will the past open up to us with unexpected freshness and tell us things no one has yet had ears to hear” (Arendt 1968, p. 94). If balanced by the activity of thinking, this loss of tradition does not represent a danger for identity, because it always remains the possibility of referring to the past within a coherent experience. As Arendt remarks, even if thought appears and happens in the time of history, it has a “non-time-space”, representing a sort of spiritual gap in the concrete being. Unlike culture and tradition, which are the *results* of this activity of human thinking, it always has to start anew, knowing its origin but not its end. It is exactly this gap, this non-coincidence between being and thought that makes it possible for us to preserve freedom and possibility, rediscovering our criticism against the supposed necessity of reality.

In the third Appendix of the *Crisis*, Husserl expresses the phenomenological belief in the possibility of reactivating the original sense of the European sciences, making their origin happen again and thus considering it not as a past event resulting in a dogmatic tradition, but as the correlate of a living consciousness, which in the end prevents truth from disappearance. In the same way, Arendt sees in the activity of thought – and not in a nostalgic looking back at tradition – the possibility of saving truth “from the ruin of historical and biographical time” (Arendt 1968, p. 13), or better, the possibility of saving the space where truth can

¹ According to the French sociologist Pierre Rosanvallon, the detachment of citizens from politics and their scepticism towards it is due to a low level of legibility (“*lisibilité*”) of governance processes (Rosanvallon 2008, p. 313).

appear (Arendt 1968, p. 14), and in her work *Between past and future* she tries “to discover the real origins of traditional concepts in order to distill from them anew their original spirit which has so sadly evaporated from the very key words of political language” (Arendt 1968, p. 15). We may have to conclude that European humanity has lost its habit of thinking, here “thought” meaning neither the hypostatised faculty of reason, nor a logical, mental process, but primarily a *critical attitude* confronted with living experience, able to stand “between the clashing waves of past and future” (Arendt 1968, p. 14) and conceived as an *intersubjective practice*. As we will see, Arendt considers thought not as a solitary, philosophical activity, but – both in the case of political opinions and of theoretical judgments – as an intersubjective confrontation between different, even conflicting points of view. It is not by chance that she defines thought as a “dialog between me and myself”.

Now, as said above, thought comes from living experience and has to be referred back to it. We can identify the main cause of the widespread pessimism towards the future in an increasing incapability of remembering our past and seeing the present neither as something defective nor as a mere transition, but as a meaningful experience disclosing its novelty and reinterpreting both past and future out of a deterministic model. We can see exactly in a fatalist attitude towards the future, as well as in a process of reification and hypostatisation of virtues and behaviours,² the main cause of the present crisis of politics and of the public space. Such a deterministic view seems to characterise the present way of looking at global changes, which are considered to be ungovernable, or better, governable only in their technical features but not in their direction. The technical governance of change seems to belong to few people and institutions, and public debate often comes *ex post*, when the decisions have already been made.

One of the main issues of Beck’s theory of “risk society” is exactly the replacement of responsible decisions by a management of risks. As also Agamben emphasises, politics has blended into administration, becoming a mere management of consequences, instead of being free, creative projection forward. Without this condition there cannot be responsibility, and without a responsible action there is no more history, if history is in Arendt’s words “this fundamental experience of action” that begins with the advent of the *polis*, i.e. with the advent of politics. According to Arendt, the main feature of action is its *unpredictability*, which does not exclude responsibility but is rather its condition of settlement. Now, unpredictability is in a certain sense the essence of our age, but in the negative sense of an irrational core that limits rational knowledge and moral action. This is what Beck means when he refers to globalisation with the expression “organised irresponsibility”, describing the fact that the system allows its members “to physically act, without acting in a moral and political way” (Beck 1992, p. 33), in the sense that the absence of a central government makes it difficult to identify the subjects who are responsible for global actions and processes. Now, as also Beck remarks, this situation poses new challenges to a “cosmopolitan democracy”, and I believe that the way out both of determinism and uncontrolled randomness, as well as the way for reconnecting unpredictability and responsibility, is through the rediscovery of the intersubjective reason that Husserl saw as Europe’s *telos* and that Habermas distinguished both from instrumental reason and its irrational alternatives, calling it “communicative action”.

4. **The philosopher and the citizen: features of an ideal community** At this stage it is useful to clarify the sense in which concepts such as “possibility” and “political action” are here understood. The word “possibility” should be interpreted in Heidegger’s sense and not as a synonym of “virtuality”, since the latter is rather the

2 For example, reliability has ceased to be a moral category and has become an economic parameter.

negation of authentic possibility, which has much more to do with existential potentiality than with rational control. It is a question of distinguishing between the various concrete possibilities and possibility as such, which does not coincide with any of them, but is rather their “transcendental” condition. If economic statistics and the media make us get used to perceiving future possibilities as preformed, making statements on future tendencies or events as if they were already present and only had to be set into action, it is worth drawing attention to the openness to possibility as such, pointing out that future statements are not self-evident and can always be questioned. Correspondingly, we should distinguish Arendt’s notion of “political action” from a technical procedure, reconnecting it to the intentionality which has been mentioned at the end of the previous section. Fundamental in this sense is, according to Arendt, the faculty of judgment, insofar as it constitutes the best way of “sharing-the-world-with-others” (Arendt 1968, p. 221); by expressing a judgment “I can make myself the representative of everybody else” (Arendt 1968, p. 242) and not only my opinion ceases to be something particular and merely idiosyncratic, but also my identity can appear and come into being as such (Arendt 1968, p. 223). This life beyond the limits of individual constitution is the *bios politikos*, in which we can see along with Arendt the only possibility for the individual to become aware of his opinions and to experience himself as someone whose action makes the difference. Even if the opinions are different, they refer to the same world, but there is no experience of a common world, and no experience of the self, outside the intersubjective practice and the public realm disclosed by political action. In Arendt’s interpretation, the modern crisis of authority and education descends from a crisis of the public realm, of the political action that discloses a common world being in the present.

We shall point out in the non-self-evidence of judgments stressed by Arendt the criterion of democracy and political freedom: the reason why Arendt sees politics (and not philosophy) as the very realm of freedom is that, unlike a statement of truth, opinions result from a discursive, common practice: “a particular issue is forced into the open so that it may show itself from all sides, in every possible perspective, until it is flooded and made transparent by the full light of human comprehension” (Arendt 1968, p. 242). This discursive practice is in Arendt’s opinion anterior to any official constitution of the public domain or form of government (Arendt 1958, p. 199) and represents the true essence of politics. As a consequence, Arendt defends *doxa* and persuasion against *episteme* and demonstration, criticising the political philosophy from Plato onwards and rediscovering Socrates’ attitude to dialogue.

However, I want to quote Patočka’s words again, in order to introduce my point of view, which moves from Arendt’s idea of deliberative democracy but, differently from her, stresses the political and practical value of philosophy, seeing a deep relation between active life and contemplative life: “*la métaphysique est essentiellement pratique et, partant, liée à une possibilité de vie en commun, e le souci de l’âme est au bout du compte le souci de la vie humaine au sein d’un État, non pas bien sûr de n’importe quel État, voire d’un État qui n’existe pas encore (actuellement), d’un État de la justice*” (Patočka 2007, p. 273).

Precisely this awareness of the non-coincidence between justice and reality, “is” and “ought”, makes it possible to avoid the philosopher’s temptation to rule in the name of a dogmatic truth, that Arendt criticises in Plato, seeing in it the seed of totalitarianism. Once again, we refer to Husserl’s and Patočka’s phenomenology, in order to remark that if philosophy is a sort of “insight”, a “seeing what-is” (“*regard dans ce qui est*”), the here mentioned being is nothing separate from human affairs, but it actually represents the inner normativity of the “life-world”, which always is the correlate of an intersubjectivity and is provided with what Husserl calls a “general style” (*Gesamtstil*). On one hand, Arendt deplores Plato’s opinion that politics should have its criterion in something transcending human affairs. On the other, she herself

suggests an intersection point between philosophy and politics, identifying it in the “*cultura animi*” seen as “right love of beauty”: “Could it be that this right love of beauty, the proper kind of intercourse with beautiful things – the *cultura animi* which makes men fit to take care of the things of the world and which Cicero, in contradistinction to the Greeks, ascribed to philosophy – has something to do with politics?” (Arendt 1968, p. 215). As Arendt rightly claims, Plato’s rebellion against the *polis* is more aimed at assuring the sake and safety of the philosopher than that of the *polis* (Arendt 1968, p. 107). Yet it can be argued that defending the freedom of the philosopher also means safeguarding the right of anyone to question the given opinions as Socrates did, aiming at truth seen as something general and impartial.

In conclusion, politics would be pointless if there were not some values enlivening it, if there were not – to quote Patočka – “things worth suffering for”, namely truth, art and culture. The *bios politikos* is inseparable from the ideal of a “good life”, in the same way that the philosopher is inseparable from the *polis*. If Patočka identifies the link between philosopher and *polis* in the care of the soul as “*regard dans ce qui est*”, Arendt similarly argues that politics rests on an imperishable ground, revealing its affinity with beauty, which is “the very manifestation of imperishability” (Arendt 1968, p. 218).

It is precisely in the “care” understood as *cultura animi*, and more in general in the reaffirmation of the humanistic culture resulting from it, that it is possible to point out Europe’s endangered identity and at the same time what is needed to overcome the present situation, as already happened after 1945. Like Arendt, we shall therefore underline the relevance of education (in its similarities to the *paideia* of Plato’s times) for the “cultivation” of citizenship and political awareness, of “a mind so trained and cultivated that it can be trusted to tend and take care of a world of appearances whose criterion is beauty” (Arendt 1968, pp. 218-219).

We can think of ourselves as citizens of the EU only if we primarily feel ourselves as citizens of a common world, if we are still able to share the same reality, so the way out of the spiritual crisis of the EU is neither through a sacrifice of States’ specific identity and sovereignty, nor through a return to the national States. In fact, we can preserve the differences, only by recognising them on the basis of an intersubjective speech. In this connection, philosophers can help in order that the mechanisms leading to political consensus become more transparent, making people rediscover the habit of discussion and problematisation, exercising their freedom and participating in the construction of their future. Social justice and political participation are the conditions for Europe to be an authentic “togetherness in diversity” (Adorno 1973, p. 150), remembering its mission insofar as it is the birthplace of rights.

As mentioned above, judgment as the ability of distinguishing, both in ethics and in aesthetics, is the link between politics and philosophy, the bond that holds the philosopher in the practical realm. Now, if Arendt praises the transparency of opinions versus truth statements, I want to refer to the platonic etymology of the word “philosophy”, which nominates the love of truth and not the possession of it. It is this love of truth that provides the philosophical activity with a potential of emancipation which is precious for the whole of society. If we mean by “seeing” the capability of becoming aware of the world surrounding us, we can better understand Plato’s viewpoint, according to which – as Arendt critically remarks – “even those who inhabit the cave of human affairs are human only insofar as they too want to see” (Arendt 1968, p. 114) and “what makes men human is the urge to see” (Arendt 1968, p. 115).

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