

“Patočka on Ideology and the Politics of Human Freedom”

by Eric Manton

Since the fall of the Wall in 1989 and the end of the great ideological battle of the Cold War during the 20th century, there has been a desperate search for some new dogma to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of Communism. In post-Communist Europe, this gap has been replaced by the re-emergence of organized religion, adoption of new age cults, and the resurgence of nationalism. The search has also included questions concerning the structure and nature of developing political cultures. The “official” transformation processes has dealt with political systems and the creation of new political parties based on various “orientations”, leading to the re-appearance of ideologies. This transformation has led to the debate of whether to import western models, renew older traditions, find a country’s own path, or even the possibility of discovering the elusive “third way”. So in spite of the “end of history” (which has continued notwithstanding its apparent demise) these queries and postulates about preferred political systems persist.

Missing from this ideological debate on how to transform political institutions, how to realign towards “acceptable” orientations, the adoption of European values, and the causes behind the growth of extreme nationalism and xenophobia, is the examination of the nature of ideology itself. The rise of these new ideologies has been one of the most dangerous phenomena in the post-Communist era. This essay presents Patočka’s analysis and critique of ideology and asks whether Patočka’s views are still relevant today.

The first task is to define what is meant by ideology. The historical definitions according to the ideologists and Marx’s “false class consciousness” shall not be directly employed here, though there are certain similarities to Patočka’s usage of the term. Just to provide a general sense of the word, Roger Scruton defines ideology as

Any systematic and all-embracing political doctrine, which claims to give a complete and universally applicable theory of man and society, and to derive there from a programme of political action.¹

Jan Patočka is mainly known as a phenomenologist and philosopher of history and not as a political philosopher or one who reflected on contemporary political events. He even refers to himself as an “abstract philosopher.”² Patočka, however, always considered philosophizing the “most important and most intensive *praxis*,” as that part of *praxis* that lights the way through the darkness for the “real” acts and therefore demands as much courage, dedication, and responsibility as those acts themselves.

This “abstract philosopher” was a witness to some of the most significant politico-philosophical events of the twentieth century. After growing up during the Great War, Patočka studied philosophy in the “democratic island” of Czechoslovakia led by the “philosopher-king” T.G. Masaryk. He spent several months in Berlin in 1933 during the rise of National Socialism and nine months in Freiburg while Heidegger was Rector. Before World War II, he co-founded the *Cercle philosophique de Prague*, which was a refuge for

¹ Roger Scruton, *A Dictionary of Political Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 213.

² Jan Patočka, “Harmonism moderních humanistů” (Harmonism of Modern Humanists), in *Péče o duši* (Care for the Soul), vol. 1 (Prague: Oikoymenh, 1996), 353

philosophers escaping the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, and he even planned on relocating Edmund Husserl to Prague.

During World War II, the Nazis closed all the universities, and Patočka was forced to dig tunnels. In 1945, he was finally able to teach but only until 1948 when he was kicked out for refusing to join the Communist Party. This pattern was later repeated after the Prague Spring in 1968.

Thus, it is interesting to see how such an “abstract philosopher” reacts to these tumultuous events unfolding around him. Patočka reacts according to what he considers to be the most authentic manner of being human—he reacts philosophically. After experiencing National Socialism, he studied and translated Herder. Before and after Munich, he defended Masarykian humanism against those who weakened it by dogmatization. After the war, he analyzed the nature of socialism, which was soon to dominate half of Europe. It is during this time that Patočka investigates particular ideologies as well as ideology as such. This philosophical journey eventually leads to the backbone of his personal philosophy, Negative Platonism.

In his 1939 article “Life in Balance and Life in Amplitude,” Patočka describes two attitudes toward life, human beings, society, and philosophy. The first attitude, which includes Enlightenment humanist thought and its offshoots, conceives of the person as essentially harmonious and balanced. Human nature and the process of history are fundamentally aimed toward the realization of this innate state. All human activity has harmony, balance, and happiness as its orientation. Human beings may be incomplete and imperfect, but this will be remedied by the appropriate measures of education and social organization. Patočka criticizes this attitude for its closed concept of Man, its tendency to resist and suppress (even violently) anything which is not “normal,” to ignore or discount anything that shakes this balanced picture of life, and to see society as basically a technical problem that can be solved through rationality or a necessary historical development. He attacks this attitude for its deterministic approach to the concept of Man and all social activity. He says that the life in balance sees Man as

a finite, closed creature enclosed in a firm form of life, and thus history is a finished process, searching for balance is justified as striving for the aim of human society and all of the failures of our social efforts are only imperfections which will finally someday come to fruition.³

Thus in 1939, on the brink of one of the greatest ideological struggles, Patočka comes up with the audacious claim that all of the bitterly warring sides are fundamentally the same in their attitude toward life! According to Patočka’s analysis, Enlightenment humanism, Herderian humanism, and Marxian social humanism—which are the theoretical bases for liberal democracy, Nazism, and Communism—view Man, society, human activity, and even history in very much the same way.

In his 1946 article “Ideology and Life in the Idea,” Patočka analyzes socialism, especially in its Hegelian historicism/historical materialist form, as well as ideology as such. In this critique, Patočka focuses on how ideology relates to the concept of Man, which it employs, and to the role of freedom. (The equivalent to the “concept of Man” in the contemporary liberal debate would probably be the “conception of the person.”) Patočka does

³ Jan Patočka, “Životní rovnováha a životní amplituda” (Life in Balance and Life in Amplitude), in *Péče o duši* (Care for the Soul), vol. 1 (Prague: Samizdat Archive Collection, 1987), 175

not try to give an exhaustive analysis of the phenomenon of ideology, but rather highlights that which he considers the most significant characteristics of ideology.

Patočka distinguishes between what he calls the concept of Man, ideology, and the Idea of Man. A concept of Man is a theory about Man, which sees Man externally and does not engage Man, a theory among other theories. Ideology is based on a certain concept of Man but does engage Man by directing him in view of some social aim that is a more important factor than Man himself. For Patočka, therefore, ideology “accommodates those of our tendencies, needs, and forces that lay dormant in us, so as to lead, direct, and draw them together for the needs of social action.”⁴ The Idea, on the other hand, appeals to Man to “be in the Idea, to exist in the Idea.” The Idea of Man is the idea of human freedom.

The main point of this critique is that ideology grasps, binds, and seizes Man externally, as a force in “the overall complex of forces.” These forces are used toward some aim and everything, including the will and activity of the individual, is significant only in terms of this aim of the ideology. Ideology is where Man is defined in positive, concrete, rigid terms, where the nature and aims of Man have already been determined, where an “ideal” state exists but is just waiting to be realized. This means that the problem of society is a mere technical, administrative, “procedural” problem of organizing individuals as components within a collective framework according to certain established laws that will, in the end, lead to the desired social goal. “Here Man is a pure object of action and organization.” In seeing Man as a tool and having the aim of the ideology take priority over all, ideology can claim the right to justify the means including using individuals as part of those means. Patočka shows the strength of ideology in the complete mobilization of entire countries for the cause of the ideology, going so far as to sacrifice everything external, as well as one’s life, for this ideology.

It would be very dangerous, under these circumstances, if such an extremely prevalent conviction in which Man is a mere minute item in the general accounting of nature would further assert itself today. If this is so, then the problem of human society is a mere technical and tactical problem. This is the method by which fascism, in its different varieties, assessed the question of political forces. Any means is technically good if it is effective; and the effect depends on whether we secure for ourselves the safe mastery of available forces. Man is such a force, controllable from without as well as from within; care for his economic security, give him a place within the mass selfconsciousness, organize his mind with propaganda, his recreation and entertainment with the appropriate measures, and he will belong to you completely. He will even think that he is free and that all of this is the authentic realization of Man. Whoever it does not suit is dealt with as a detrimental, useless force—it is necessary to ruthlessly neutralize him. I think that the expansion of such an ideology must always again lead to similar attempts of fascism, may be more clever and more successful, but essentially always to the similarly desperate human attempts, since there is no place in them for the Idea.⁵

As in the previous article, Patočka points out the dangerous consequence of such an ideology in that it will suppress and even eliminate those who dare not to live according to the particular scheme or who question its validity. Thus there is no room for searching, for questioning, for individuality, for the different, for the “non-normal”; there is no room for the experience of freedom, for the Idea, for philosophy—if these cannot be controlled and put to

⁴ Jan Patočka, “Ideology and Life in the Idea” (Ideologie a život v ideji), in *Two Articles by Jan Patočka*, trans. Eric Manton (Prague: Center for Theoretical Study, 1996), 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

the use of the ideology, then all must be eliminated as a danger to the positive, secure ideology.

In spite of his attacks on ideology, Patočka is aware that the nature of political systems is more complex. In his analysis of socialism, he points out that it is at the same time an Idea, an ideology, and a concept of Man, but these three aspects are undifferentiated within it. Marx did not want simply to build “pure theory,” but to transform Man. His socialism promoted human freedom—freedom from economic oppression and the exploitation of Man by Man. Unfortunately this freedom is an exterior, future goal which shall be brought about by a process outside of Man, something “meta-human,” instead of being precisely this realization process itself. However, Socialism also contains a definition of Man viewed externally as a force among forces and an ideology that organizes those forces. Since these aspects are undifferentiated, the internal appeal for the emancipation of Man can be used to hide or even precisely to justify the enslavement of Man; or on the other side, the concept of Man can be academically isolated as “pure theory” to disassociate it from both the messiness and abstractness of the existential Idea of Man and the dangerous political manifestations of the theory as ideology. Thus, while these existential, sociological (or anthropological), and political aspects are fundamentally interconnected, they must be clearly differentiated. Their interconnectedness cannot be avoided and their undifferentiatedness can be disastrous.

With this critique, Patočka is not trying to replace a particular concept of Man with another that will lead to a new, improved ideology. Nor does he suggest a set of institutions that will avoid the harmful consequences of the materialization of Man. Instead Patočka emphasizes that which should not be forgotten during the building of political theories and ideologies, that which needs to supervise these theories to ensure that they do not lose sight of their original intent, thus allowing them to be corrupted and abused for contradictory purposes—the Idea of Man, the experience of human freedom.

Patočka notes that even though ideology has the capability to completely manipulate humanity, alter its social structures, transform its external definition, it is insufficient for addressing the fundamental questions of human existence and political inquiries into the good life.

Ideology can be strong or weak; ideology can prevail or be suppressed; people can believe in it or not, they can transform it and misuse it for their own purposes; they cannot, however, live in it completely, they cannot realize it in themselves nor realize themselves through it. Something else is needed for this; external successes and failures can never be completely convincing as long as life decisions are concerned, about where is the genuine, where is the ultimate human truth; and as long as people judge things only ideologically, not in relation to the Idea, there is no way out of relativism and skepticism.⁶

Thus what is it that ideology, which sees Man only externally, denies Man? What is it, the elimination of which implies the abdication of Man? The Idea of Man, according to Patočka, “must be embodied and this embodiment in life concerns our most personal inner core and can never be indifferent towards this inner core.”⁷ That which is lost is the manifestation of the inner core, the manifestation of inner freedom, the fundamental capability to experience human freedom, freedom which is at the same time embodied and personal, a freedom within the world which allows us to transcend the world.

⁶ Ibid., 3–4.

⁷ Ibid., 2.

With the experiences of the war, Patočka illustrates the re-emergence of the awareness of human freedom, of that which goes beyond the products of historical forces, societal regulations, socially-constituted identities, or the “original” state of nature.

We all experienced and are experiencing how far Man is in our world a mere object of forces which extend beyond him... How then would it be possible—due to that which we have witnessed, in spite of its frailty—that right in the fall, in sacrifice in the *middle* of the struggle, without the result having been attained, thus outside of justification by this result, can Man be glorified and fulfilled?... This is not mere external coincidence; this is the limit beyond which it is no longer possible to catch Man, and consequently to pursue, to persecute him; the limit on which he must remain standing. And he who persists on the limit unbroken, not deprived of his ultimate meaning, has fulfilled himself as much as it is at all possible for Man: he has remained free.⁸

This limit that Man can reach is the *chorismos* and the experience of the mystery of the *chorismos* is the experience of human freedom. Through this experience, Man becomes aware of his capability to be more than he just seems to be, more than merely material, more than just determined.

In his essay “Negative Platonism” of 1953, Patočka characterizes the *chorismos* in terms somewhat similar to Husserl’s *epoché*. The *chorismos* is a separation in itself. It is a distance—or a distancing—from all objects, from all objectivity, from all subjectivity, from all that is posited as a thing, from all positivity. In this distance, in this negativity, on the edge of the *chorismos*, we discover freedom.

The mystery of the *chorismos* is like the experience of freedom, an experience of a distance with respect to real things, of a meaning independent of the objective and the sensory, which we reach by inverting the original, ‘natural’ orientation of life.⁹

This crucial human possibility of experiencing freedom is not the innate liberty of the liberal tradition—i.e., a freedom by default—but rather an effort, a striving, *askein*,¹⁰ that goes beyond secure dogma and constraining ideology and thus can appear disquieting, dangerous, and unnatural.

It is the experience of a risk we can take or avoid... The experience of freedom is one of an achievement, of a freedom gained, not a peaceful possession of it. For that reason too, it is possible that there are people who have no experience of freedom themselves and that they are far more numerous and “normal.”¹¹

Though this experience of freedom may be rare, Patočka insists that it is not elitist, but rather “it is relevant and valid for all; without it human would not be human.”¹²

Freedom plays a central role in Patočka’s thought on philosophy and politics. He says that politics and philosophy emerged together in the ancient *polis* as expressions of freedom. In his later work, Patočka’s reflections on the role of freedom in the political realm correspond closely to those of Hannah Arendt. In the early 1970s, Patočka develops his concept of *ἐπιμελίσταις τῆς ψυχῆς*, the Care for the Soul, which has three levels: the ontocosmological, the political (*the care for the soul in the community*), and the existential (*the care for the soul in the aspect of its inner life*).¹³ Unfortunately, a detailed exposition of how these thoughts lead to the “solidarity of the shaken,” Charter 77, thoughts on “open society,”

⁸ Ibid., 6–7.

⁹ Jan Patočka, “Negative Platonism: Reflections Concerning the Rise, the Scope, and the Demise of Metaphysics—and Whether Philosophy Can Survive It,” in Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings, ed. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 198

¹⁰ *Askein* (ἄσκειν in the Greek original) is the term for effort, striving, or task.

¹¹ Patočka, “Negative Platonism,” 193.

¹² Ibid., 194.

¹³ Jan Patočka, “Platon a Evropa” (Plato and Europe), (Prague: Samizdat Archive Collection, 1979), 116.

and especially Václav Havel's ideas about "living in truth" and civil society, will have to be left for another time. The key aspect here is that freedom, for Patočka, is both the form and content of politics, the procedure and substance of both politics and philosophy.

That is politics in its original definition: life from freedom and for freedom. But freedom is equivalent to a space for thought, i.e., the realization that freedom is not a thing among things, that free existence stands on the border between what exists and what cannot be called existing, since it frees man from the dependence on things in order that he might perceive them and place himself outside of them, understand them and his own position among them.¹⁴

For Patočka, the Idea of Man continuously remains the same. Only the front against which it resists, changes in different historical circumstances.

The Idea of Man, the experience of the *chorismos*, the possibility of Man to be more than he merely seems to be, more than just material, more than solely determined, more than a socially or historically constituted product, the experience of human freedom, should not be denied. It is that which makes us truly human; on the edge of the *chorismos* our most human characteristics appear. Thus Patočka's criticism is of any ideology that does not recognize, or even tries to suppress, this capability and reduces Man to a thing among things, a force among forces, to be molded, controlled, used, and eventually, abused.

Over the last years, Europe has seen the rise of extremism, nationalism, and now the re-emergence of totalitarian tendencies in both the East and the West. We are witnesses to competing ideologies in global "civilizational" conflict, unending war, repression and violence and human rights abuses, and wars fueled by identity-based ideologies. People are continuously being used and abused in the name of ideologies imposed upon them. The optimism after the end of the Cold War gave way to disappointment in the face of new mass violations of human dignity. Then came the present pervasive state-induced fear as a means of controlling populations.

Any ideology that neglects, or eliminates, human freedom—the Idea of Man—will betray humanity, and will only lead to another totalitarianism, perhaps, as Patočka said, more clever, more manipulative, with better propaganda, but nevertheless, just another mass-enslavement. Moreover, it is desirable, or even necessary, to have the Idea of human freedom at the heart of any concept of Man, of any political system. The key resistance to these ideologies, these new fronts, is not countering them with an opposing ideology, but rather through the idea of human freedom and its application in this world. Patočka's message addresses the contemporary manifestations of what he experienced first-hand 60 years ago and has withstood the test of time.

Patočka's critique of ideology in 1946 followed the dark years of the struggle between Fascism, Communism, and Liberalism. In the following years, he would live through Stalinism, "Socialism with a Human Face," "Normalization," and finally, at the end of his life, he became a part of and then a martyr for Charter 77, a movement whose core was precisely this Idea of human freedom. On 13 March 1977, a few days after eleven hours of police interrogation connected with his dissident activities, Jan Patočka died. What he struggled for in 1946 and what he died for in 1977 is still relevant today.

¹⁴ Jan Patočka, "An Attempt at a Czech National Philosophy and Its Failure," in T. G. Masaryk in Perspective, ed. M. Capek and K. Hrubý, trans. M. Suino (Ann Arbor: SVU, 1981), 1.

Ideology, programs, thoughts, notions, and concepts come and go; the Idea of Man remains. But this Idea is neither a scholarly creation of constructive reason, nor a fairy tale of some kind of other world. It is what eternally remains with Man whenever the situation into which he is put appears to him as a fundamental threat to his entire inner being. This could not even not illuminate this war. We also want the Idea to illuminate this peace and its struggle for a new Man, for the rebuilding of his social relationships. Thus let everything which happens in this direction be judged by this Idea!¹⁵

¹⁵ Patočka, "Ideology," 7.