

THE POST-COMMUNIST MANIFESTO¹

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Abstract: The essay is the critical reflection on the current state of global politics. It points to the importance of reconnecting politics with more substantial “human affairs”. The search for new understanding and conceptual tools is necessary on both sides of the political spectrum, however, the left should press for its lost identity more urgently. But what is even more urgent is the planetary vision based on reflexive rationality and a politics of dialogue, respect for the environment and civil society, overcoming obsolete and pointless political strategies and forms of life. Knowledge and nature are to be taken as public assets.

Keywords: new left, rhizosphere, *nomos*, capitalism, communism, planetary technopolis, sur-civilization.

When someone asks us where we stand politically... instead of answering we should cross-examine the inquirer: what does he think of human beings, nature, history, collectivity, the state, and law? “Politics hurries to put out the light so that all these cats will be black”, wrote the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, almost eighty years ago. Politics managed to put out the light a long time ago; all ideas seem equally emptied out and helpless. Post-communist countries have especially embraced the notion that all criticism of capitalism is just a prejudice from the communist past.

Turning the light on means reconnecting politics with the questions of what is a human being, nature, history, collectivity, the state, and law? Otherwise, adds Ortega y Gasset, the right or the left would just be two of the infinite ways that a person can choose, if one wishes to become an imbecile.

The difference between the left and the right has a different meaning in every democratic society; it however has the same function: ensuring that the conflict between the two makes the society open to criticism of itself. This opposition increases the weight of criticism in the public space, and it may become a political agenda. There is no alternative to this system; had it not been for the conflict between the left and the right, society would have become rigid and degenerate. The present left does not however offer any persuasive analysis of the

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present day crisis, it only offers Keynesian solutions that are also being proposed by the right, wrote the right-wing French economist Guy Sorman. Yes, the left has emptied itself out: instead of using the present crisis to resolve discrepancies within the system, it is helping to mask them.

The consequence of the left being emptied out is the catastrophic decay of the ability of democratic societies to learn from their blind alleys. Not just societies but also individuals often find themselves in a state of such stupor that they cannot learn lessons from anything other than catastrophes. The present financial crisis showed that our society had been taken over by fundamentalists who could not learn even from catastrophes.

The era of theses is long past so I will not call my post-communist manifesto *Nine Theses for the New Left*. I however know the word rhizosphere which is a botanical term for “the region of the soil overgrown with the roots of a plant”. *Nine Rhizospheres for the New Left* would on the other hand make a rather bizarre sub-headline of my Manifesto so let us be a bit less pretentious—nine topics that define the soil in which the new left must grow its roots.

The Scandal of a Tradition

The Museo del Prado in Madrid houses the painting by Francisco de Goya titled *The Third of May, 1808*. At the foot of a mountain, the place now called Moncloa, French soldiers are shooting captured Spanish patriots. They are standing in a row, guns pointing; one cannot see their faces, and the hats of their uniforms cover them. The faces of the patriots who are being slaughtered are however visible. In the center of the painting there is a man standing in the light, wearing a white shirt on his body and an expression of resistance as well as horror on his face. Those who have already been shot are lying around; they too have faces, of reconciliation and they show the slight reflection of those they were thinking about in the moment of death. In Goya’s interpretation faces only belong to the natives, to the people bonded with the soil which the soldiers of Napoleon invaded upon orders. They have no conscience, and thus also no faces.

In *The Communist Manifesto* we read that the bourgeoisie, by its rapid improvement of all instruments of production and means of communication, draws all, even the so-called barbarian nations into civilization. And it made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependant on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West. Even less than one hundred years after that Henry Ford proclaimed the same in a less philosophical manner: history is more or less bunk. We don’t need tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker’s dam is the history we make today. Ilya Ehrenburg gave an account how Bolsheviks destroyed all statues because they were planning to make new ones, more beautiful. All traces of tradition had to disappear in the flames of “the new era”.

The right and the left, the way they formed in our civilization still did not answer the question posed by Goya’s painting: On which side should we stand in the fight between tradition and the critical reasoning of the Enlightenment?

In their classical volume *Guatemala: una interpretación historicosocial (Guatemala: A Socio-Historic Interpretation)* the sociologists Carlos Guzmán-Böckler and Jean-Loup

Herbert found a deep solution to explain the cruelty of the Spanish conquerors in America. Just shortly before the *conquista* the Spanish chased out the Jews from their country, finding them incompatible with the Spanish nation. In America, they once again encountered the spectre of Tradition, the resistance against the truth revealed. They were so scared of this spectre they had to drown it in blood.

German philosophy fought the same spectre. In Hegel's essay on the German constitution we can find the thesis that Jewish particularism, the Jewish insistence on tradition is a form of madness. Madness is nothing but the complete separation of an individual from the species. In its fondness for particularism, he said that the Jewish nation reached madness, and became incompatible with other nations, regarding their communal spirit. The Jewish people were held to be mad because they did not want to give up their tradition, although "reason" commands them to do so.

However, in the post-modern era *everything* is a tradition—even reason itself. Does that mean that reason should not be a judge to traditions any longer? Reason in itself is a tradition which however promotes the right of every individual to judge all traditions, even those they belong to. The new left must defend the right of reason to judge traditions without turning us into an execution squad as portrayed in the Goya's painting.

We can delineate the first rhizosphere to which the new left must plant its trees by this question: *Is the foremost human right the right to tradition, or the right to critique every tradition?*

The Look of the Other

In my book *Společnost nevolnosti* (*The Society of Uneasiness*) I bring to mind the theorem of incompleteness and inconsistency by the German mathematician Kurt Gödel, in a surprising generalization by the Czech neurologist and psychiatrist Cyril Höschl: all those who have ever dedicated themselves to any kind of a problem soon realize that wherever they were, they could not go any further without a look from the outside, or even outside help. The need to take a look from the outside is one of the radical needs of human beings. And this means that its gratification depends on the structure of the entire society (or on changing that structure).

The need of the look from the outside cannot be gratified in a society devoid of trust among people, or one where we fear authorities. It could be gratified only in societies that are friendly, where we experience the look from the outside as the care of ourselves without having the monotheist fear of "The Great Other" in whose name we shall be subjected to "The Final Judgment". I propose to define "reason" in a minimalistic way here. It is the art of accepting in a friendly manner the look from the outside. Is however our industrial *Sur-civilisation* capable of facing the look of the Other? Does it not reduce every Other to the mere "erroneous embodiment" of oneself?

Following the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, I shall use the term *reflexive rationality* to refer to that kind of reason that does not seek its foundation in some kind of *ego cogito*, from which it would derive solid chains of theses to bind the world and other people. Reflexive reason is the reason that seeks its most solid foundation in the look of the Other that cannot be faced in its own consciousness, but only in the noise of the agora.

Modern reason thus must above all else face the look of the “patriots” in Goya’s painting, because in their faces the *nomos* of the land is reflected. The point of departure for the environmentally-conscious criticism of industrial Sur-civilisation must be the point of facing the look of the natives. *Reflexive rationality is the second rhizosphere where the new left must plant its roots.*

The Mole’s Sacrifice

An Aztec tale tells the story of a young man who had his cloak of beautiful feathers burned through by the Sun. He got angry, captured the Sun and tied it to a tall cliff. The world was thrown into darkness and cold. The animals embarked to find the Sun, they stumbled through the darkness, and finally only the mole made it. The shackled Sun begged for help— “My friend the mole, bite through these ropes and I shall bring you all light and warmth!” However, it was unable to turn away to protect the mole’s eyesight from its shine. The mole liberated the Sun, all plants and animals rejoiced—but he was unable to see that beauty because he was blinded and destined to spend his life underground. In the foundation of every *nomos* of a country there lies a sacrifice of this kind.

The Greek word *nomos* is translated as “the law”; however, the original verb “*nemein*” meant “to divide” and “to shepherd”. In the heart of every tradition is the division of the land that allows natives to shepherd their herds in peace. Faceless soldiers of modernity however do not recognize the traditional *nomos* of the country derived from customs and myths; they intend to subject the *nomos* of the country to what they call *logos*. They want to replace the tradition with laws derived from reason. A *nomos* of a country could never be derived from reason. Individuals and groups seek the most effective means to attain their goals—they act rationally. By their actions they integrate into the whole of a society which grants a higher status to the successful ones over those less successful. Rationality thus has two sides: one is effectiveness in attaining goals, and the other is the corresponding representation of the whole of the society we wish to integrate into by attaining our goals. The representation of the whole of the society could never be calculated by equations of economists, physicists, or defined based on experiments run by natural scientists. It is always the heritage of the past, the mother tongue, relationships with neighbors we share the land with; it is a piece of a shared narrative. *Nomos* cannot be derived from *logos*, it is based on “illogical” civil virtues into which there was written the living memory of “the moles” whose sacrifice made it possible. If it was not for them, rational individuals would quickly turn into a society of madmen who “logically” only chase their goals.

Whoever takes virtues seriously is usually considered to be a fool—this is a great topic of Christianity. Communism has a form of a Christian core that was turned by communists into a tragic farce. What I have in mind is the idea that the interest of the whole could only be achieved through sacrifices that the “new communist people” must face—such as volunteer work, youth brigades, living in communities and condominiums. In one of his speeches Che Guevara proclaimed volunteer work to be the backbone of the communist economy. The third rhizosphere where the new left must implant its roots is the relationship between Sacrifice and Reason. Without moles it is not possible to define a *nomos* of a land that would effectively limit the rational pursuit of selfish goals. *But who should it be?*

The Society of the Spectacle

One of the most influential books of the sixties was *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord. In the book he describes the logic of spectacular power that transforms every opposition into a mere spectacle—and thus absorbs into itself everything we until now have referred to as critical thinking: our ability to see discrepancies in a society and arrange them into a discourse, which becomes a loophole through which the moment of eternity gushes into the world that is marching towards its extinction—and this makes a change in the order of the world. Is such discourse even possible anymore?

Thesis 59 of Debord's book reads: Complacent acceptance of the status quo may also coexist with purely spectacular rebelliousness—this expresses the simple fact that dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity... Yes, dissatisfaction is a spectacle with famous heroes that we identify with and imitate. Fame—even infamy—is a profit making enterprise because even its aversion may become just another type of commodity.

The spectacular monster has been growing and getting stronger since the sixties. Why is it so powerful? From the beginning politics has been linked to the term “representation” which may be further linked to theatre. Politics represents a whole by one of its parts, and this right to represent the whole is granted by the majority of people forming the whole. Spectacle de-politicizes representation by turning it into pure entertainment.

We may perhaps mark the fourth rhizosphere by this topic: How to liberate representation of the whole—which is the core of politics—from the spectacle that reduces it to entertainment? I think here the decisive role could be taken up by *parallel communities in the blogosphere that are capable of performing some form of “de-institutionalization” of politics.*

Human Rights

Proclaiming the rights of our “white Us” of the Greek-Roman-Christian origin to be “human” rights is imperialistic rhetoric, and nothing more. We must be sympathetic to the suffering of others—for instance with millions of Americans who do not have the right to medical care. This is however not a matter of “human” rights, but rather a matter of an unfair society.

This ambitious formula could make sense only if it referred to the access of people to public and common property and its rightful administration. A common property could be defined firstly by not being divisible according to quotas, or by the amount of payments by customers—e.g. safety in a country, the quality of air or water, health, or the care of language or culture. Secondly, that it is not possible to exclude others from the utility provided by this property—when we clean the air in a city we cannot exclude those who did not contribute from the benefits of cleaner air.

Common properties or commons are those properties that could be destroyed by unregulated exploitation—for example common pastures, transportation networks, healthcare, municipal parks, but also Amazonian rainforests or oceans. The quality of life in this millennium depends above all on rational administration of common properties, on the fair *nomos* of the Earth, and thus also on the quality of civil society that would create and protect public and common property through its “volunteer work”, collective activities and its willingness to pay higher taxes.

The fifth rhizosphere is defined by this topic: dependence of humankind on public and collective property is growing steeply, and for this reason we must also increase the ability of humankind to agree on its shared administration and ensure it by higher taxes. *The politics of solving crises by lowering taxes is criminal demagoguery.*

The Planetary Technopolis

The word externality means losses or profits incurred by person A by actions of person B without person A providing permission to make the actions of person B legal. As long as there is one person on the planet excluded from the group of people who must provide permission to make the actions of person B legal, there will be externalities in the world. The issue of externalities moved into the center of global economics and politics because we stand in each other's way within the single planetary technopolis—some of its suburbs include less populated places we refer to as “rural” just out of tradition.

In his book *Blue Planet in Green Shackles* the Czech President Václav Klaus claims that externalities represent only a small part of the space of interpersonal interaction. It is an example of what Marx referred to as *false consciousness*. The planetary technopolis may only survive if its citizens admit that externalities are not an exception there but rather a rule; and they will struggle to grant the right of veto to all victims of externalities. It is tragic that the left failed to take advantage of the present crisis of the automotive industry and radically redirect investments into public transportation, and thus redistribute catastrophic externalities of the transportation system based on private automobiles.

Sociologists refer to problems of the planetary technopolis by the acronym NIMBY which represents the sentence Not In My Back Yard! Landfills for instance serve everyone in the technopolis but no one wants them “in their backyard”—everybody is trying to push them away to some “vacant spot”.

We could formulate the topic of technopolis in this manner: It is necessary to deepen radically democracy so that we can be able to resolve NIMBY disputes: this is the agenda of proponents of so called *deliberative democracy*, in which public decisions are the result of the widest possible dialog among citizens rather than among politicians or specialists.

The Myth of the Turning Point

The rhetoric of opposing the system peaked in the context of the rebellious sixties, but not only that—this era was also the time of “discontinuity rhetoric”. It proclaimed that in the history of capitalism there came “a turning point in the position of human beings”; in the new post-capitalist knowledge society a person would be evaluated based on their specifically human qualities such as inventiveness, intelligence, and independence. The post-industrial society is now developing towards overcoming the alienation of humans.

The turning point rhetoric brings light into new possibilities of democratic capitalism yet does not resolve its terminal discrepancies, they only take up a new form. A quest for truths on which the West built its civilization's authority is now changing into a quest for truths patentable by multinational concerns that employ the scientists. Universities above all must fight by all means against reducing education to “doing business with patentable truths”.

Genes, information, languages—just as water, air, oceans—are inalienable *commons* and we need to fight their privatization just as we fight totalitarianism, even if it takes violence. The seventh rhizosphere of the new left could be defined by this topic: The more knowledge becomes a decisive power of production, the less legitimate it would be to produce it and distribute it under the regime of private ownership. *What type of regime corresponds to defending knowledge as a public property?*

Sur-civilisation

In his unpublished paper from the fifties the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka described capitalism and communism as two forms of *Sur-civilisation*. This is his term for a civilization which does not have “religion” as its core, or any other stirring form of the divine, but rather a techno-science, “accumulation of the means” by anonymous functioning of the system.

As a key fact of the 20th century, communism in all of its historical versions—especially the Eurasian form—was not a struggle to resolve internal discrepancies of *Sur-civilisation* but rather a struggle to become a subject of *Sur-civilisation*. The dialectics of capitalism vs. communism is thus not the dialectics of resolving discrepancies of *Sur-civilisation* but rather of making these discrepancies even deeper.

The discrepancy that defines *Sur-civilisation* in all of its manifestations is referred to by Patočka simply as *distinction*. The Immense accumulation of power over nature and people which is the core of *Sur-civilisation* caused ever more crushing instances of “distinction” in the form of different catastrophes; the distinction being between what is in the power of science-based actions by humans, and what in principle cannot be subjected to human actions. In the later history of *Sur-civilisation* this distinction appears as the conflict between goal and meaning. The solution of this conflict cannot be avoided only, it can only be postponed until “tomorrow”.

The first, “moderate” form of *Sur-civilisation* is marked by the belief in the automatic growth of general well-being based on market rationality. It is not trying to resolve the issue of the difference between goal and meaning, it is parasitical on existing answers.

The second “radical” form of *Sur-civilisation* is communism. It does not evade the question of meaning, it wants to answer it and thus become a successor to all religions, a liberator of humankind from all illusions of the past, and it is driven by the belief that meaning is something being created by humans in their history.

Capitalism is irresponsible but it opens a free space for human actions; communism is responsible but subjects humans to totalitarian power and thus empties out their lives.

Both forms of *Sur-civilisation* are equally decadent and equally guilty.

The eighth rhizosphere could be defined by the following topic: The living core of communism is historical materialism that refuses hypocritical paddling in the pools left over in *Sur-civilisation* as remains of religions—it wants to resolve the difference between goal and meaning anew. The living core of capitalism is the belief that the question of meaning cannot be resolved by power, but it has to be “left to humans” because a meaning cannot be produced and distributed. *Is it possible for these two living cores of Sur-civilisation to somehow interconnect and thus lead to a revolutionary change?*

No Aura

In his posthumously published interview Martin Heidegger claimed that philosophy or any other human idea or desire will not be able to change the present state of the world—only some kind of a god can save us. One of the most quoted texts of the 20th century is an essay by Walter Benjamin on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. Reproducibility liberates a work of art from its individuality within the tradition in which it was created. The work thus loses its “aura”; it pries itself from the shell of authenticity and uniqueness which turned it into “an object of cult”. The unique “act of creation” is replaced by serial production, repetition, duration—without aura.

Even human beings have lost their aura today, and for the same reason—it is (bio)technologically reproducible. Their uniqueness is dissolved as its guarantor dissolves—the almighty and all-knowing God of Christians.

The experience of reproducibility brings along a form of a liberating shock: We are nothing but one of the forms of life on this planet, nothing more; we are not unique, we are not original, we share most of our genetic information that is necessary for our reproduction with trees and mayflies. And we can be cloned. The time has come for the advent of a god for a person without an aura, a person who is reproducible. I would thus like to define the ninth rhizosphere by the topic of *the advent of this god*.

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