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### **The Philosopher's Self-Image as a Guiding Thread for Philosophy of Culture?**

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#### **1.**

The question of the place, role and tasks of philosophers in postmodernity is perplexing and complicated. I am going to talk here about French and American thinkers, but always having Central Europe in mind. And the question of the social, cultural and political status of philosophers in postmodernity is one of the most intriguing today, especially considering its self-referentiality: philosophers asking questions about themselves...

Let us refer here first to several points of interest, several catchwords that evoke the whole complicated heart of the matter: Martin Heidegger, one of the greatest philosophical minds in the twentieth century, with his Nazi illusions in 1933 and later, Paul de Man, the future founder of the American deconstructionist school of literary criticism, in the years of 1940-42 and later (that "later" being no less important for current discussions), the *Historikerstreit* in Germany among German historians and philosophers in the eighties. I would say the following: the material for the discussions that are of interest to me today are the most traumatic events of the twentieth century and the behavior of the philosopher, or in broader terms, the intellectual, associated with them. We can add to them Sartre's conception of the "committed literature", Georges Bataille's fascinations with the war, Maurice Blanchot's fascist texts from the pre-war "Combat" journal, "Maoist" involvement of the French intellectuals in the hot sixties, Michel Foucault's enthusiasm with respect to the Iranian "spiritual revolution", Noam Chomsky's (as well as Jean Beaufret's) basically positive attitude to "revisionist" historians who negate gassing in Auschwitz etc. If we add that all, we can see a certain complex of questions and issues the penetra-

tion of which may be one of today's "tasks of thinking", one of organizing principles within philosophy of culture.

My idea in the present paper is that it is perhaps worthwhile to treat the recent philosophical "affairs" or "cases" somehow collectively. Not much perhaps can be revealed by just one of them, but the discussions in question are in fact similar to one another, at least when we look at them from the perspective of the question of freedom and responsibility of the philosopher (the intellectual) today, or from that of his social and political self-image. I hope that the questions asked about not so distant past, about those political fascinations and those political seductions, will help us, following Jean-Luc Nancy, to think about ourselves, our present history, perhaps even – our future. Therefore I would like to skip in my considerations Heidegger himself or de Man himself, leaving them to Heideggerians and deconstructionists, respectively. What I see as important is what the history of the two thinkers can tell us about our history, about ourselves here and now. For, I suppose, the rethinking of past choices, attitudes, past silences, writing, and activism is the rethinking of the constitutive elements of our not so distant past rather than rethinking of some "aberrations", "mistakes", human "failings" or "weaknesses" (to use several descriptions applied to Martin Heidegger). And what we mean here is the thought that deliberately served ideology, that hid behind it, profiting from it. That gap is very important – we mean using ideology in promoting one's own thought in a naive belief that one (as an intellectual, as a philosopher) can be the "guide of leaders". That is precisely the affiliation to a greater power, so criticized by Richard Rorty recently.

Let us remind now briefly a couple of penetrating questions and statements that could be heard recently in the context that interests us here in thinking about the self-image of the philosopher. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in *Heidegger, Art, and Politics* says the following: "Heidegger's commitment in 1933 was neither a mistake nor a fault" and it is "totally coherent with his thought" – it is not a product of a mistake that just happened to a thought but it reveals what constantly threatens that thought, reveals its danger. Emmanuel Levinas in "Comme un consentement à l'horrible" asks: "But does not his silence on the subject of gas chambers and death camps in the times of peace testify to the depths of a soul totally inaccessible to compassion and to as if consent to a horror?" Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his "Return from Syracuse", says the following: "In 33 and 34 Heidegger thought that he followed his dream and fulfilled his deepest philosophical mission when he attempted to revolutionize the university from the bottom". Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and 'the jews'*: "In his dossier, the most serious accusation was written on blank pages: it was his stubborn silence about the Holocaust".

In the school of American deconstructionists – to change the terrain for a moment and pass on to the aftermath of de Man's "affair" in the States – there

appear such essential questions as "is the work I am doing complicit with something that associating me with would appall me?" (Deborah Esch asks). We want to know who we are sleeping with, we need "safe criticism"... From the *Responses. On Paul de Man Wartime Journalism* volume there emerges a picture of polemics about de Man as a field of a final struggle with deconstruction as such: it is, namely, the greatest threat to the American nation, its common public number one enemy. As Derrida explains in his "Biodegradables", the real stakes "were not only, and not first of all, de Man of the 1940-42, but the deconstruction of 1989". And I suggest that it is interesting to have another look at that hot debate from a distance and see it as a manifestation of current discussions not about a concrete biographical and philosophical issue, youthful years of a significant literary critic in hard times, but as a discussion about the place in society, tasks and obligations of the intellectual in postmodernity.

Let us give it a thought – what may underline such focusing of attention and intellectual energy on seemingly easy questions pertaining to life on the one, and work on the other hand of several figures of the twentieth century philosophy and literary theory, or on absurd and seemingly easily refutable statements of several revisionist historians of the Holocaust – to refer for a moment to the so-called "Faurisson's theses" in France. So once again: Heidegger, de Man. What did Heidegger say and what did he keep silence about when others were silent or were leaving Germany, and when others were speaking after their return to Germany following the second world war? Why did he kept silence about the Holocaust until his death, even in his famous testamentary "Der Spiegel" interview, even in his conversation with Paul Celan who waited for it so much; was not his silence "unbearable" and "inexcusable" as Lyotard in *Heidegger and 'the jews'* and Lacoue-Labarthe in *Heidegger, Art, and Politics* put it? Was Paul de Man a (hidden) anti-Semite during his whole life or just during his Belgium "collaborationist" years and what may have stood behind his "aestheticism" or even "quietism"? Is there really anything morally disturbing that binds Nietzsche, Heidegger, de Man and Derrida? And finally Robert Faurisson explicitly negating gassing in Auschwitz: what did he betray that he managed to cause such an intellectual storm in France of the early eighties, that the wound was so deep that required years-long polemic simultaneously from various sides (e.g. of Lyotard in his splendid book, *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute*, or of Pierre Vidal-Naquet in his *Assassins of Memory*). How is one "to live with Faurisson" (regarding that case broader), how to "discuss" with him without according him the status of an equal disputant (which on ethical grounds seems just impossible)? These were some recent ethical questions in France to cope with. How weak must be the place of the intellectual in French culture today that such a Faurisson is able to engage in his discussions so many philosophers? Questions put on the margins of these "affairs" are appearing all over the world: what is "freedom of the intellectual", "freedom of the philo-

sopher", and what is their "ethics". When the unshaken life of former leaders of human souls is disturbed, they start to engage in self-analysis, start to take care of themselves or of their predecessors, looking for their own self-definitions. When their self-image trembles, what also trembles is their place in culture, lifelong vocation, the meaning of their work and of their questioning of the reality.

## 2

The point I want to make here is that it is not accidentally that these discussions mentioned here as examples are important today – some two or three decades ago nobody except specialists would really care about them, nobody would pay much attention.

The "facts" about Heidegger were quite well known in recent fifty years but it was only in the late eighties in France that the inspiring discussions took place – when questions that intellectuals asked (among them – philosophers, an important distinction to be carefully drawn) began to be also about themselves. The questions are born out of the concern for their image in culture, for their "mission" in it (as modernity used to see it). Heidegger's "affair" engaged to various degrees some from among the greatest French and German minds of the end of the century, just as de Man's "affair" raised highest emotions in America – and questions asked were philosophical ones concerning the philosopher's "life" and "work", "work" referred to "life". They were about a betrayal of a certain modern ethos that was formed in the times of Dreyfus' affair in France (Zola: *j'accuse!*), of a certain morally obliging way of life of the philosopher in culture.

Thus, the question is of the intellectual, freedom – and responsibility that stops that freedom at some point (and may lead to significant discussions from Zola to Benda to Sartre, and then recently in America to Noam Chomsky, Paul Bové and Edward Said).

Now I would like to show two extreme attitudes towards philosophy in post-war years (in France), still available to us as the horizon of our choices: a Hegelian and the Nietzschean one. I mean here the Hegel of Alexandre Kojève and the Nietzsche as read by Derrida, Klossowski and Deleuze. Kojève (in his "Hegel, Marx, and Christianity") said the following: "the future of the world, and thereby the meaning of the present and the meaning of the past will depend, in a final analysis, on the contemporary interpretations of Hegel's works", to put it briefly - the future of the world will depend on whether we will be reading Hegel. It is important, I suppose, to remember the permanence of that belief in the value of philosophy (common, incidentally, also to Husserl from his last Prague and Vienna lectures, and Heidegger after his "turn" to whom a

paraphrased saying can be attributed: the future of the (German) world – but also of Europe – will depend on whether we will be reading Hölderlin). Hegelian questions, as we know, had dominated (almost) whole post-war French thought – as Michel Foucault said in his opening Collège de France lecture in 1970: "all our epoch attempts to flee Hegel". The abrupt contrast to – and an antidote against – the hegemony of Hegel was (rediscovered and reinterpreted) Nietzsche. The passage from Hegel to Nietzsche happened in the French culture in the sixties, and since then it has rarely come to philosophical minds that the (Kojévian) "future of the world" may depend on a "reading of Nietzsche", or on a reading of any other philosopher, for that matter. The philosopher who puts it most explicitly is Richard Rorty, bringing about a storm of criticism from all sides, both from political and philosophical right and left.

Another point is the following: one might consider whether the pair of Hegel/Nietzsche read in that way (the former of the Marxist and Heideggerian Kojève and the latter of Deleuze, Klossowski and Derrida) is not parallel to the pair of modern and postmodern intellectuals. Asking what the intellectual was supposed to do according to readings of Hegel and Nietzsche, and how the French thought made a radical change from Hegel to Nietzsche in the sixties (and then again, with a new generation of philosophers who publish manifestoes *Why Are We Not Nietzscheans?*, as some argue, once again away from Nietzsche in the nineties) – we are asking about a (new) figure of the intellectual today, as the change of its status may also result from that turn. Nietzsche may be a key point in today's discussions of the role and tasks of the philosopher, starting with Derrida and Deleuze, *Anti-Oedipus* of the latter and Guattari, Lyotard from *Libidinal Economy* or – in the USA – Allan Bloom on the one hand (with his "Nietzscheanized America" from *The Closing of the American Mind*) and Richard Rorty on the other (with his Nietzsche contrasted with Heidegger in *The Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* – the one whose fault was "taking philosophy – too – seriously", as the title of his review of infamous Victor Farias's book says). "The New Nietzsche" in that context turns out to be a significant point of reference in discussions of the intellectual today (especially considering the opposition of a new generation of French philosophers defining themselves against him as well as against post-structuralists on the basis of different social tasks of the philosopher).

Thus, to sum up, one could think of two poles in thinking about the role of philosophy in culture and politics and about two respective self-images of the philosopher in culture: on the one of them there would be Hegel (and Kojève, as well as the "serious" Heidegger getting others read Hölderlin) who make the history of the world dependent on philosophy; and on the other there would be Nietzsche as a model of self-creation who does not care about public matters too much.

## 3

There is a constant theme in the philosophical tradition – there is a group of people who know more than others as they have an access to truth, who discover truth with power of their intellects and – if need be – may present it to the world in a softer, comprehensible way. The philosopher-prophet used to tell others "what to do" (as Foucault's "universal intellectual"), used to be an unquestioned authority because he knew the deepest – i.e. philosophical context (the metaphoric of tearing away surface layers to get to the hidden essence is not accidental here). He used to be the authority looking at anything "from a philosophical point of view" i.e. that of the world, humankind, reason, the universal rather than the particular, the eternal rather than the transient etc. The conversation with him used to require rising to the philosophical level on the part of his interlocutor. As Richard Rorty put it in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* – the philosopher used to express his opinion in all matters, his voice being the most important one in ongoing discussions.

I think it is possible to catch a glimpse of the account of the contrast between modernity and postmodernity through the figure of the main hero of modernity i.e. of the intellectual, produced for its needs and who, with questioning of it, may recede towards a less prominent role in culture. The traditional intellectual recedes as part of the world that disappears together with modernity – that is the question discussed for twenty years in philosophy and sociology. The traditional intellectual with a superior status in culture in the past (as shown by e.g. Richard Rorty) in postmodern philosophers's view has to start looking for another place in it; thus there return such questions as: do intellectuals as products of modernity paradigmatically from Zola to Sartre have any significant future in postmodernity? Are they as species doomed to be extinct? Is the very category of "postmodern intellectual" contradiction in terms? What are the tasks of the said postmodern intellectual? What are his obligations, if any – and to whom? Is he to be a social critic and what is his moral and political responsibility today? Is philosophy as a discipline well prepared to such postmodern challenges? Does it react to what is going on in culture today?

## 4

Still another question, to close my remarks, is the role of intellectuals in Central Europe in the times of huge social transformations and the usefulness of Western discussions referred to here for the consciousness of intellectuals in our part of the world. The question could be put in the following way: what

can we, inhabitants of postcommunist Central Europe, expect from the so-called postmodern thought? Is postmodern thought an intellectual challenge to us, is it worth being thought over by us, with respect to our questions and our problems? The very question about the intellectual in that part of the world is extremely important, I suppose. His place, role and status is – to some degree – only in the process of formation now, in a new and somehow unexpected situation following 1989, that *annus mirabilis*, therefore I strongly believe that questions asked in postmodern thought with respect to the intellectual may turn out to be interesting. I have personally come to the conclusion that it is worthwhile to try to make use of experiences of postmodern philosophy, bearing in mind that it is a radical thinking which appeared in a different cultural (and economic) situation. The thought of Rorty, Derrida, Lyotard or Foucault may be useful, responding to a different degree to our double – Central European and postmodern – experience. Not all its questions are equally burning, but also not all of them are sufficiently exposed there from our perspective. So I believe potentially there are many essential connections and parallels, points of convergence and questions equally important in the West and in Central Europe. Nevertheless, the urgency of thinking through certain questions is greater here than in the West because what is at stake here is the very fragile social future, still indeterminate and still not fully clear. While the West goes on to a large extent no matter what philosophers and theoreticians think, here social thinking can – although not necessarily has to – undergo potentially bigger transformations owing to philosophy and theory. Thus the responsibility of the intellectual seems to be much more serious than e.g. in the USA, hence the need of thinking about his ethics, hence the need of thinking about some essential questions from a different perspective – perhaps the one in which the place of the intellectual is not so determinate, and so degraded, as in the West.

And finally, let me stress how important it is to look at several recent hot debates in philosophy from this particular perspective of the self-image of the philosopher himself. All I wanted to show in the present paper was that when looked at from such an angle, the ethical and philosophical discussions addressed here gain an additional sense. The main question is thus the following: who are philosophers? What are they going to achieve? What is their relation to society and to culture? What are their tasks and obligations and to whom? What is their self-image today? All we may be sure is that the traditional self-image of the philosopher is trembling; whether it actually gets changed, or whether it can get changed at all, is an important issue within philosophy of culture.

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