

The Social Construction of the Life World

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Patočka, Jan (1907–77)

Jan Patočka was of the contributing leaders of the Czech philosophical community during the twentieth century. After initial outline and insight into the biographical administrations in the career of this man, a closer analysis will be granted to one of Patočka's innovative philosophical theories. He was responsible for treating and addressing two philosophical issues during the span of his academic and philosophical career. During the earlier days of Patočka's career he was concerned with the phenomenological topic of the German word simply known as 'Lebenswelt', however his interests shifted towards the philosophical problem of history during the latter half of his career. It is the former of these two theories which will be addressed in this dissertation with greater detail. After Patočka's biographical influences and philosophical dispositions are outlined it is useful to employ a sociological theory of world construction to comprehend his understanding of important philosophical themes. This sociological framework employs three technical terms which require sufficient explanation and qualification and only then can Patočka's insight regarding the 'Lebenswelt' be tested for a possible synthesis.

Part I: Biographical Influences and Achievements

Jan Patočka was born in the northern Bohemian town of Turnov on June 1st 1907. He died in Prague seventy years later under a certain amount of suspicion. One of the leading Czech philosophers of the twentieth century, Patočka studied in Prague, Paris, Berlin and Freiburg, where he was a pupil of the notable Husserl.¹ During the period just prior to the Second World War he was the secretary of the Czech-German as *Cercle philosophique de Prague*, this was a group that became an ideological centre of the phenomenological movement. In 1935 Husserl was invited to Prague and the lectures he delivered were the basis for his final book *The Crisis of the European Sciences*. Jan Patočka, Husserl's

¹ Josef Zúmr, "Jan Patočka In E. Craig (Ed)," London: Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, (1998). (Retrieved 10 December 2007). <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/N070>

pupil, became the most important representative of phenomenology in Bohemia.² By this time Patočka had established himself as a prominent figure in the philosophical community and he was awarded a chair position at Prague's Charles University as a result of his work "*The life-world as a philosophical problem*" (the later topic of discussion).

Patočka's philosophical and academic ambitions were quickly stifled by the occupying Nazi forces. During the Nazi occupation and the following six years of the Second World War, the continuity and regularity of philosophical investigation in Bohemia was interrupted. Universities and colleges were closed down and severe censorship was introduced. Some important philosophical figures were executed, some imprisoned in concentration camps and others forced into exile. At this time Patočka maintained a low profile and was employed as a grammar teacher while the Universities remained abandoned. The end of the war, however, did not mean a return to pre-war conditions. Conditions such as democracy, open market economic structure which are conducive to philosophical speculation were no longer available. The shift towards socialism created a new situation, a shift which also could be seen in Patočka's views and focus from phenomenology to the philosophy of history.³

The latter part of Jan Patočka's career was mostly characterized by underground philosophical activity, however he was a major contributor to what would soon become an emancipated Czechoslovak state. After the conclusion of the Second World War he returned to his university post but was dismissed for political reasons in 1949. He could, however, carry on his scientific work at the Academy of Sciences. The defeat of the 'Prague Spring' in 1968 saw the subsequent inauguration of another totalitarian regime, this time at the behest of the Warsaw Pact and invasion of Soviet forces now occupying Czechoslovakia. The majority of philosophers in the movements discussed above were dismissed from their posts at universities and research institutions, were prohibited from publishing and their books were removed from public libraries. Those who did not leave the country were compelled to work as unskilled manual workers. This gave rise to vigorous unofficial intellectual activity. As a result, Jan Patočka was responsible for organizing and participating in illegal lectures and seminars. At this time he also joined an opposition movement against the Communist regime and was co-author of the political manifesto called Charter 77. This piece of political literature regarding human rights would go on to play a major role in overturning the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Sadly, Jan Patočka did not live to see the fall of the oppressive communist regime. He died suddenly in Prague in March of 1977 due to a heart attack

² Josef Zúmr, "Czech Republic, philosophy In E. Craig (Ed)," London.: Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, (1998). (Retrieved 2 December 2007).

<http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/N010SECT3>

³ Josef Zúmr, "Czech Republic, philosophy In E. Craig (Ed)," London.: Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, (1998). (Retrieved 2 December 2007).

<http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/N010SECT3>

after a series of police interrogations. Charter 77, and his name became a symbol of moral resistance against totalitarian power, and of the struggle for human rights.⁴

Patočka's Philosophy: A Brief Overview

Patočka's philosophical and intellectual upbringing follows the humanistic tradition of Czech thinking which started with Jan Hus, the founder of the Czech Reformation. This philosophy proposes that philosophy is an intellectual tool that can lead the individual from the emptiness of daily banality to full humanity. The philosopher can be understood as one who has, or is striving towards breaking through the cycle of demand and consumption, and who has elevated themselves above the world towards permanent values. Patočka formulated this philosophy based on his understandings of the phenomenological concept of '*Lebenswelt*' which is best described as "the world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life, as sharply distinguished from the objective "worlds" of the sciences, which employ the methods of the mathematical sciences of nature; although these sciences originate in the life-world, they are not those of everyday life."⁵ The life-world includes individual, social, perceptual, and practical experiences. Patočka suggests that humans control this world, and are likewise controlled by it by three different forms of movement. The first movement is that of acceptance, or 'taking root'; the means by which one can find one's place in the world. The second movement is defensive, or the labour and toiling performed by humans in order to continue existence in the world and secure primary needs. The final movement is the movement of truth and transcendence. This third stage is where humans step over, or transcend the simplicity of matters given to them directly and come to understand the world as a whole.⁶

The phenomenological concept of '*Lebenswelt*' or life-world is a curious one indeed. It downplays the importance of the inborn empirical emphasis of the sciences and places a higher importance on the subjectivity of the individual. The objectivism of science obscures both its origin in the subjective perceptions of the life-world and the life-world itself. In analyzing and describing the life-world, this particular type of phenomenology is determined to show how the "world of theory and science originates from the life-world, strives to discover the mundane phenomena of the life-world itself, and attempts to show how the experience of the life-world is possible by

⁴ Josef Zúmr, "Jan Patočka In E. Craig (Ed)," London: Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, (1998). (Retrieved 10 December 2007). <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/N070>

⁵"**life -world.**" *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2007. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 11 Dec. 2007 <<http://search.eb.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/eb/article-9048206>>.

⁶ Josef Zúmr, "Jan Patočka In E. Craig (Ed)," London: Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, (1998). (Retrieved 10 December 2007). <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/N070>

analyzing time, space, body, and the very givenness or presentation of experience.”⁷ Patočka’s interpretation of ‘*Lebenswelt*’ is constituted by this three step process in which humans control the world and are likewise controlled by it. It would be of great interest to discuss how humans create and control their own social world, and of even further interest to discuss how humans are bound by this world that they inhabit and created. Therefore it is useful to employ a social philosophic theory of world construction that has a similar three step process which coherently addresses the way in which human beings socially construct their reality, and world in which they live.

Part II: Social Philosophical Construction:

In a social philosophic view the social world of the human being is a dialectic phenomenon in that it is a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts back upon its producer. However, it is important to enquire into the process of how this act of social production occurs, and the means by which it gains status as an entity of its own. This process is divided into three stages known as externalization, objectivation, and internalization. These steps are necessary for individuals to construct a social world in which they may exist. Human beings as ‘*Homo Sapiens*’ are faced with a peculiar and seemingly odd position in the animal kingdom. This oddness is apparent when regarding a human in its relationship both to the body and to the world. Unlike the other higher mammals, who are born as an essentially completed organism, humans are curiously ‘unfinished’ at birth. ‘The unfinished’ character of the human organism at birth is closely related to the relatively unspecialized character of its instinctual structure.⁸ This means that the human being in its most primal form lacks a blueprint that guides its moral and instinctual orientation. This blueprint is then imposed during stages throughout the life world of every individual.

Externalization is the first step in this process, the initial stages of world construction. Similarly to Patočka’s initial stage, this is the means by which one takes a place in the world, and asserts a relationship to the world. Externalization is a human’s first interaction with its environment and is constituted by the ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and the mental activity of humans. Because human beings do not have a specific or given relationship to the world, they must continuously establish and develop a relationship with it. Human beings do not only construct and produce a world, but they also produce themselves. Even more precisely,

⁷ "life-world." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2007. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 11 Dec. 2007 <<http://search.eb.com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/eb/article-9048206>>.

⁸ Peter L. Berger, “Religion and World-Construction,” *The Social Reality of Religion* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books 1973) p. 13-37.

human beings construct and produce themselves in a world.⁹ More often than, these human beings are oblivious to this power in which they possess in shaping both the physical and mental world around them. What appears at any particular historical moment as 'human nature' is itself a product of human being's world building activity, is a world that must be fashioned by human's own activity. Such examples as 'the family', 'the economy', 'the state', and so forth all share in common with a specific level of conclusivity; human activity is the underlying substance.¹⁰

The second phase of this process is objectivation; this is the stage in which externalizations begin to gain autonomy. Objectivation can be understood as the part of the process where the constructions, products, and all other human activity is regarded as a part of the objective world.

This phase sees the attainment by the products of human activity (again both physical and mental) of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. The humanly produced world becomes something 'out-there', constituted by objects, both material and non-material, which are capable of resisting the desires of their producer. Therefore the humanly produced world attains the character of objective reality.¹¹ An obvious objectivated reality would be for instance language. Human beings invent a language and then they find that both their speaking and his thinking are dominated by its grammar. Linguistic representations and symbols are human products which are specific to context from which they arose. Cultural and geographical influences are obvious factors in the inception and development of language, however another there are other conditions which contribute to the usage and development of case specific language. Language in this sense, is not necessarily the literal biological function of speaking, it also constitutes social code, ritual, culture, text, and so forth. Patočka's second movement is listed as the labour and toiling performed by humans in order to continue existence in the world and secure primary needs. In order for human beings to move about the structures of the world they have devised, they must first employ the language with a level of specificity and skill in order to accomplish certain tasks. In short, to survive. Furthermore, human beings have also concocted institutions, which come to confront them as powerfully controlling and even menacing or hostile implements of the external world.

Objectivated entities such as legal, political, and even economic institutions are granted a powerful and often coercive position over the humans and society that created them. Institutions, roles, and identities exist as objectively real phenomena in the social world, though they and this world are at the same time nothing but human productions. Patočka's second stage of movement applies here in similar fashion to the example of language. In

⁹ Peter L. Berger, "Religion and World-Construction," *The Social Reality of Religion* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books 1973) p. 13-37.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

order for a human being to secure and stabilize their existence they must be able to manoeuvre and manipulate these objectivated structures on their own terms. Objectivation, the second stage in the process of social construction addresses the forms of human activity that have attained status of objective reality.¹²

Internalization is the final phase in the construction of social reality for human beings, and can be understood as a reappropriation by humans of the same objectivated reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into structures of the subjective consciousness. Internalization implies that the objective facticity of the social world becomes a subjective facticity as well. Once again, language lends itself as a paradigmatic model of this process in that language confronts the individual as an objective facticity. An individual will subjectively appropriate it by engaging in linguistic interaction and social exchange with others. The language exists because he, along with others, continues to employ it. It is impossible to use a language without participating within the constraints of its specific structure and order. Upon discovering this process the individual will understand the dynamics of social construction, and created meaning. This final concept is cogent with Patočka's final movement of understanding the world as a whole. However, both in Patočka's system and the world-building system, many individuals fail to grasp the final stage, which only further perpetuates the existence of human beings in the emptiness of daily banality and routine.

Conclusion:

Final speculation suggests that it proves useful to employ the strategy regarding world-building and the social construction of reality to understand Patočka's conception of the '*Lebenswelt*' and the movements through it. Patočka suggests that humans control the world, and are likewise controlled by it. How this process occurs can be explained by the similar three step process of world building. "It is through externalization that society is a human product. It is through objectivation that society becomes a reality *sui generis*. It is through internalization that man is a product of society."¹³

¹² Peter L. Berger, "Religion and World-Construction," *The Social Reality of Religion* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books 1973) p. 13-37.

¹³ Peter L. Berger, "Religion and World-Construction," *The Social Reality of Religion* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books 1973) p. 13-37.