

Aspen E. Brinton

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# Confronting Totalitarian Minds

Jan Patočka on Politics  
and Dissidence

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*In memory of my father*



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# Acknowledgments

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me remember that all of us may someday become the practicum for our own ethical theories.

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This book was written through tumult—personal, professional, and political—and each conversation really did matter, and each moment of support, however small and despite the cliché, really did make a difference in bringing this book into existence. The final conversation that brought this book into print, with Michael Baugh, editor at Karolinum Press, included more living-in-truth than most normal conversations in academic publishing, and I will always be thankful for the unexpected yet conscientious response to the multifaceted tumult of this book's life-world. I would also like to thank Sydney Murray, Courtney Latourrette and Alexander Tyree for their assistance in the final preparation of the manuscript.

The prospectus for this book was the next thing I wrote after I composed and delivered the eulogy for my father's funeral, and so this is dedicated to his memory, but also in memory of all those who, like him, survived the destructiveness of war, experienced 'the front' in all its forms, and lived and died with war in their souls.

# Preface

An umbrella opens. A tear gas canister explodes. Bodies march. A mural is painted. Someone addresses the crowd from atop a car. A mind goes blank at the sound of gunfire. Time stops. A body goes limp as the handcuffs are put on. Cameras livestream. Banners unfold. Riot police line up. Flags fly and are trampled. Images appear on a billion tiny screens. Crowds swirl. Articles are written. A Molotov cocktail is thrown. Appeals for help go viral. Commentators speculate. The bodies come and go, talking of history, hoping for freedom, trying to speak the truth about power and existential solidarity. They will return, and the questions persist: Why do they go? What if it all goes wrong? What will history say?

This book tries to illuminate dissident politics as something that *might* make human life seem more meaningful in the midst of the nihilism, despair, and existential crises wrought by modernity's political conundrums and calamities. By using Jan Patočka's ideas as lenses to examine the words of activists and dissidents across time and place, it seeks a glimpse at alternate forms of political thinking that might become antidotes to the totalitarianisms within our minds and political bodies. What is owed to Patočka in formulating these new (but also very old) questions should become clear in the chapters that follow, but what is owed to our contemporaries still working against the totalitarianisms of today should be the beginning, if only because it all must come back to these human confrontations with totalitarianism in the end. A few words to begin, then, from dissidents of the last decade, those who made headlines in recent memory, but who somehow also came to embody the ideas of this book.

Denise Ho is a spokesperson for the non-violent protest movement still ongoing in Hong Kong in 2020. She gave a speech at the Oslo Freedom Forum in 2019, describing the background to her life and activism:

The Umbrella Movement in 2014 proved to be a defiant move in a city where the majority of the population has always been so politically indifferent. Why were these young students courageously standing up to this giant machine, one that so many people were fearful of? Walking down the occupied streets of Harcourt Road, I remember seeing all these magnificent expressions of thought and creativity, something that I had never seen in my city. Graffiti, sculpture, art installations, small patches of farming, and our own posted mosaic version of the Lennon Wall, and even a temporary study hall... As a Hong Kong-born singer-song writer and a daughter of an immigrant mother who had spent her teenage years in Montreal, and also, the first female singer to have come out openly in Hong Kong, I had always felt out of place in this city... It was only until this moment, among the aspiring crowds of the Umbrella Movement, that I finally felt a real sense of belonging to this place where I have always called 'home'...

After my involvement in the Umbrella movement, I was banned from China... so I launched a campaign to crowd-sponsor my concert... I built my own system... and also improvised local tours in different districts of Hong Kong. We sang on trams and underground live houses and on sidewalks and even in local shops... By creating socially innovative art, music, and events, [and] by breaking rules and reinventing the game, I want to pass on this message to the younger generations. Create your own possibilities, even when all odds are against you... Fear grows in spaces where we feel alone, judged, and cut off. The key is to not get discouraged and intimidated by the bigger picture. But rather to look within and around ourselves, to find people with similar values and identify the possibilities that exist in our own spaces. By focusing on our everyday lives, on our skills and passion, we can and will reignite our courage... Do your best in what you do best... Live the life that you envision for generations to come. When the system does not provide for us, we take things into our own hands. Our fate is what we make of it. By reconnecting with ourselves we will reconnect with others. And finally, we will reconnect with our flexibility in finding answers as a humanity collective.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Denise Ho, "Under the Umbrella: Creative Dissent in Hong Kong." Oslo Freedom Forum, May 27, 2019. Transcribed from video. <https://oslofreedomforum.com/talks/under-the-umbrella-creative-dissent-in-hong-kong>.

Extinction Rebellion, an organization that uses non-violent civil disobedience to highlight environmental problems related to climate change, describes its mission on its website:

Our world is in crisis. Life itself is under threat... We hear history calling to us from the future... It's a future that's inside us all—located in the fierce love we carry for our children, in our urge to help a stranger in distress... And so we rebel for this, calling in joy, creativity and beauty. We rise in the name of truth and withdraw our consent for ecocide, oppression and patriarchy. We rise up for a world where power is shared for regeneration, repair and reconciliation. We rise for love in its ultimate wisdom. Our vision stretches beyond our own lifespan, to a horizon dedicated to future generations and the restoration of our planet's integrity. Together, our rebellion is the gift this world needs. We are XR [Extinction Rebellion] and you are us.

This is the time. Wherever we are standing is the place... We have just this one flickering instant to hold the winds of worlds in our hands, to vouchsafe the future. This is what destiny feels like. We have to be greater than we have ever been, dedicated, selfless, self-sacrificial...

Time is broken and buckled, and seasons are out of step so even the plants are confused. Ancient wisdoms are being betrayed: to everything there was a season, a time to be born and a time to be a child, protected and cared for, but the young are facing a world of chaos and harrowing cruelty. In the delicate web of life, everything depends on everything else: we are nature and it is us, and the extinction of the living world is our suicide...

Each generation is given two things: one is the gift of the world, and the other is the duty of keeping it safe for those to come. The generations of yesterday trust those of today not to take more than their share, and those of tomorrow trust their elders to care for it... The contract is broken, and it is happening on our watch. A pathological obsession with money and profit is engineering this breakdown...

Tell the Truth is the first demand of Extinction Rebellion, using fearless speech, Gandhi's 'truth-force' which creates a change of heart...

Humans are by nature cooperative, and times of crisis can be times when life is lived transcendentally, for a purpose beyond the self. No individual alone is fully human, as the African concept Ubuntu shows: our humanity results from being in connection with each other. Believing that there is no Them and Us, only all of us together, Extinction Rebellion

seeks alliances wherever they can be found. We are fighting for our lives and if we do not link arms, we will fail because the forces we are up against are simply too powerful. We need you...

For our deepest longings are magnificent: to live a meaningful life, to be in unity with each other and with the life-source, call it the spirit, call it the divine, call it the still small voice, it doesn't matter what it is called or how it is spelled if it guides us in service to life...

This vision has a map. It is the map of the human heart. Believing in unflinching truth, reckless beauty and audacious love, knowing that life is worth more than money and that there is nothing greater, nothing more important, nothing more sacred than protecting the spirit deep within all life.

This is life in rebellion for life.<sup>2</sup>

“March for Our Lives,” an organization in the United States started by secondary school students, works against gun violence. As written on their website:

Everywhere we look, gun violence is decimating our families and communities. Whether it's the mass shootings in shopping malls, concerts, schools, and places of worship, the retaliatory gun violence in urban neighborhoods haunted by the legacy of economic disinvestment, racism, and poverty, or the solitary suicides committed nationwide with increasing frequency, gun violence adds up: over 100 Americans die from it every day. 100 lives lost every single day. We started March For Our Lives to say, “Not One More.” No more school shooting drills. No more burying loved ones. No more American exceptionalism in all the wrong ways. But we cannot do this alone.<sup>3</sup>

The Sudanese Professionals Association issued the “Declaration of Freedom and Change” in Khartoum on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019:

We, the people of Sudan across cities and villages, in the north, the south, the east, and the west; join our political and social movements, trade unions and community groups in affirming through this declaration that we

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2 “Why We Rebel,” Extinction Rebellion, curated by Jay Griffiths with XR UK Vision team, accessed January 4, 2020, <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/about-us/>.

3 “Peace Plan: Conclusion,” March for Our Lives, accessed January 30, 2020, <https://marchforour-lives.com/peace-plan/>.

will continue the course of peaceful struggle until the totalitarian regime is removed and the following goals are achieved: First: The immediate and unconditional end of General Omar Al Bashir’s presidency and the conclusion of his administration. Second: The formation of a National Transitional Government. This transitional government will be formed of qualified people based on merits of competency and good reputation, representing various Sudanese groups and receiving the consensus of the majority... Third: Putting an immediate end to all violations against peaceful protesters, repealing of all laws restricting freedoms of speech and expression; and bringing the perpetrators of crimes against the Sudanese people to fair trials in accordance with accepted national and international laws.

By signing this draft declaration... we affirm that we will continue taking to the streets and leading the nonviolent struggle, until our demands are met. We call upon our brethren in the armed forces to take the side of the Sudanese people and to refrain from supporting Al Bashir by participating in the brutalizing and killing of unarmed civilians.<sup>4</sup>

In 2013, a group of protesters assembled in Istanbul to try to prevent the authorities from cutting down the trees in Gezi park. After protesters were abused by the police, a coalition formed to support the protesters by calling for democratic accountability. Together these groups issued a statement, “We are Taksim Solidarity. We are Here.” These are excerpts from the statement:

Taksim Solidarity is comprised of 124 trade unions, political parties, community groups, sports club fan groups, and initiatives embracing diversity and expressing demands in a peaceful, democratic way. It is supported by environmentalists, artists, journalists, and members of the intelligentsia.

Taksim Solidarity’s demand for a healthy urbanization and liveable city, merged with the cries of millions for more freedom and democracy, reflects a social sensitivity symbolized by Gezi Park. The creative genius of the young, the warm embrace of mothers, the power of the working

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4 “Declaration of Freedom and Change,” Sudanese Professionals Association, January 1, 2019, <https://www.sudaneseprofessionals.org/en/declaration-of-freedom-and-change/>.



classes and the loud and clear voices of women, the “we are here too” cries of the LGBT community and the revitalized oldies have come together to turn an irreversible page in the democratic history of this country... These spontaneous countrywide civil society initiatives have unfortunately been confronted with tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets. Four youths have lost their lives as result of violence by the police and their accomplices. How inhuman and incomprehensible is it that the government has still not shown any empathy with the families who have lost their beloved children?

Democratic demands can undoubtedly be met by democratic means. Our society needs an approach by the public administration perceiving the issues, demands, and expectations and taking steps for their solution. We are worried about the criminalization of democratic reactions and the treatment of everyone as guilty, as terrorists, and the use of police force pushing issues to intractability.<sup>5</sup>

Historian Marci Shore interviewed those who protested against the Ukrainian government of Victor Yanukovich in the winter of 2013–2014. These are a few moments from *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of a Revolution*:

There were moments when Markiyian was certain the revolution had been lost. Yet he kept going back. Once someone asked why he was standing there freezing on the Maidan if he believed all was about to be lost? His only answer was that it was his choice.<sup>6</sup>

‘I had not understood the moment when a person is ready to die. And there I understood it... it’s a departure, a movement beyond the confines of the self, when you experience being with people who are ready to die for you, to make themselves vulnerable for you, to carry you if you’re wounded... a willingness appears—it’s a kind of rapture, a wonder at the possibilities given to man, and enormous gratitude towards others, simply

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5 “We are Taksim Solidarity, We are Here!” July 19, 2013, <https://www.taksimdayanisma.org/taksim-dayanismasi-biziz-biz-buradayiz?lang=en>. With thanks to Ezgi Yildiz for a conversation about how ‘solidarity’ and ‘civil society’ translate into Turkish.

6 Marci Shore, *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) 58.

a *Begeisterung* with generosity and devotion. And an experiencing of an enormous solidarity.<sup>7</sup>

His shoulder had been battered, but he was not scared away, he stayed on the Maidan. ‘Your mother must have been very upset,’ I said. ‘But she let you go back?’ ‘My mother was making Molotov cocktails on Hrushevskiy Street.’<sup>8</sup>

Tatiana Aleshka was on the streets in Minsk as ongoing protests emerged against the fraudulent reelection of Belorussian President Aleksandr Lukashenko in August 2020:

The city has woken up, and people have gone out into the streets to form a human chain of solidarity and to peacefully protest... It is impossible to fall asleep in a city where thousands of people remain behind bars for no reason, where they are humiliated, beaten, and mutilated with full impunity. It is impossible to fall asleep in a city overflowing with security forces, where you can be beaten or have your arm or leg broken, simply because you are waiting for information about your husband, brother, or daughter near the walls of a prison... Yet entirely peaceful protests and demonstrations continue in this city for the third day... The atmosphere is indescribable; words cannot do it justice... When you see it for yourself, when you stand holding flowers on the streets of the city, when you talk to strangers as if they are old friends, it can seem like there is hope... You feel happy to belong to such a people, to form a part of it! But you understand deep within you that they don’t touch you only because the order hasn’t been given... I myself, my friends and acquaintances, along with millions of people in the country don’t need directions to come out to protests. We have had it up to here with life in Lukashenka’s totalitarian state. We don’t need a director to show us where and when to go and what to do.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Shore, *Ukrainian Night*, 125. “Begeisterung” is not translated in Shore’s text. The closest translation in this context might be something like exaltation or communion, but the German word also implies being overcome with a spiritual force or presence.

8 Shore, *Ukrainian Night*, 42.

9 Tatiana Aleshka, “For All Those Who Are Interested in Events in Belarus, and for All Those Who Are Asking What Is Happening Here,” trans. Markian Dobczansky, IWM Chronicle from Belarus, August 18, 2020, <https://www.iwm.at/chronicle-from-belarus/tatiana-aleshka-for-all-those-who-are-interested-in-events-in-belarus-and-for-all-those-who-are-asking-what-is-happening-here/>. Originally posted in Russian on Facebook, August 15, 2020.

The Black Lives Matter movement in the United States responded to the videoed killing of George Floyd by a police officer, as well as the killing of many other African Americans by the police, with widespread and ongoing protests about racial injustice. Solidarity protests occurred around the world throughout the summer of 2020. These were the two main rallying cries shared by protestors globally:

“No justice, no peace.”

“I can’t breathe.”

# Introduction

*“Because no one can write about Plato  
who has not had the Platonic worldview  
opened up from inside oneself.”<sup>1</sup>*  
– Jan Patočka

In various Prague basements and living rooms in the 1970s, Czech philosopher Jan Patočka led seminars on the question of how philosophy might “help us in the distress... [of] the situation in which we are placed.”<sup>2</sup> Patočka’s own distress included being forbidden to teach publicly and living under conditions of censorship in Communist Czechoslovakia. Having retreated to private spaces to do his work, he confronted his situation by leading conversations with students and other intellectuals that

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- 1 “So kann niemand über Plato schreiben, wem nicht die platonische Weltansicht sich vom innen aufgetan hat.” Jan Patočka in Eugen Fink und Jan Patočka, *Briefe und Dokumente 1933–1977*, ed. Michael Heitz, and Bernhard (München: Karl Alber, 1999), 95. (my translation)
  - 2 Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, trans. Petr Lom (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002)
    1. The word “distress” here is a translation of the Czech *nouze*, which Patočka uses again at the end of these lectures to describe the general situation and condition of life at his historical moment. It can also be translated as “basic need,” implying that a state of *nouze* is one where basic needs of food, water, and shelter are not fulfilled. Yet it is used in both a psychological and physical way relating to needs, and in some older usages refers to a situation where one’s free will is taken away by the conditions of the situation, that is, a form of distress imposed from the outside and irremediable through individual action. Patočka is probably playing with all of these meanings together in choosing to describe philosophical reflection as something that can be done in a state of *nouze*, while acknowledging that the distress is produced from the constraints of the external situation. With thanks to Hana Fořtová for a clarifying discussion on this word.

were later compiled and translated as *Plato and Europe*.<sup>3</sup> Patočka believed that reading Plato in such a situation could begin to alleviate the distress he shared with his listeners.<sup>4</sup> In 1977, Patočka would be asked by Václav Havel to become one of the spokesmen for Charter 77, a group of dissidents that aimed to call out the Communist state's hypocrisy and human rights violations. The police interrogation that followed his involvement in Charter 77 would lead to medical complications and Patočka's death. His *Plato and Europe* lectures became some of his last philosophical work, one culmination of a life spent studying not just Plato, but also the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and the history of Western philosophy more generally.<sup>5</sup>

Patočka's turn toward political action in 1977 is the basis for probing the wider oeuvre of his philosophical work for insights into new ways of thinking that might change the way we frame our distress about our own political situations. This exploration asks whether Patočka's philosophical thinking can reveal insights valuable to all those in political distress in different times and places. Following the spirit of Patočka's philosophical project as it might be relevant to perennial ideas about political engagement and dissidence, the goal here is to reconstruct his ideas for a broader audience of dissidents, activists, and engaged global citizens, arguing that his insights are valuable for understanding dissident politics, as well as helpful for critically examining our ways of thinking about political theory.<sup>6</sup>

- 3 These lectures are 'compiled and translated' into a book, but the lectures were not originally written. As editor and translator Petr Lom explains: "*Plato and Europe* is a series of lectures Patočka delivered in the homes of friends after his last banishment from the academy just three years before his death. Thus what follows are transcribed, unedited conversations—left unedited and as literal as possible in this translation. The material is striking not only because it represents a high point of lifelong meditation, but also because of the urgency and unpretentious honesty it contains." *Plato and Europe*, xvi.
- 4 The conditions of early 1970s Czechoslovakia were distressful given the occupation of the country by Soviet forces in 1968 and the ensuing censorship and repression of independent culture. See Milan Šimečka, *The Restoration of Order: The Normalization of Czechoslovakia*, trans. A.G. Brain (London: Verso, 1984).
- 5 Patočka's *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, trans. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd (Chicago: Open Court, 1996) was also written during this time and is seen as another culmination of his life's work. Translator Erazim Kohák writes that his first English translation was from "a barely legible typescript copy of the samizdat *Edice Petlice* edition of 1975, smuggled out of Czechoslovakia and too faint even for photocopying." (*Heretical Essays*, 156). *Edice Petlice*, "Padlock Editions," was the underground press run by Ludvík Vaculík. Subsequent versions after 1989 were circulated and used for the published English translation.
- 6 This argument builds upon previous commentaries about Patočka's role as a dissident. See: Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Jan Patočka: L'Esprit de la dissidence* (Paris: Michalon Le Bien Commun, 1998); Aviezer Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka*

To make this argument, Patočka's ideas are put into conversation with other dissident-philosophers, those perhaps more well-known: Václav Havel, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mahatma Gandhi, anti-nuclear activists, and global environmentalists. The justifications for these choices will be further elaborated in the chapters that follow, but in general these represent historical moments of dissidence that align conceptually with Patočka's main ideas, but also have familiar global resonances with wider audiences. By using these examples, the result is a series of textual 'conversations' designed to ask why it is that standing up against received opinions and established power structures might be worth our time. Why dissent? Why protest? Most people understand that sometimes dissenting can change political structures, but what about when it seems like nothing will change? What can we do when the powers of 'business as usual' are too strong and overwhelming? How is it that some people can carry on dissenting and protesting in conditions of hopelessness and difficulty, when others never think of even beginning such a risky task? Patočka's work can give us glimpses into the depth of these questions, and the dissident-interlocutors in each of these 'conversations' will add further insights when refracted through Patočka's categories.

## **Political Distress and Plato's Cave**

Patočka chose to talk about political 'distress' in his underground lectures through the lens of Plato's ideas, and Plato's description of a prisoner leaving his 'cave' might be one of the earliest descriptions of a dissident in a philosophical text. The image has been rewritten countless times, and in some ways, it will be rewritten here yet again within this series of conversations. Plato's cave is not only one of the most iconic and persistent images from the history of Western philosophy, but it is also a story of both political and intellectual liberation: a group of

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*to Havel* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Barbara J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003); Simona Forti, "The Soul as a Site of Dissidence," in *Thinking After Europe*, eds. Darian Meacham and Francesco Tava (London: Rowan and Littlefield, 2016) 57–74; Jiří Příbáň, "Resisting Fear: On Dissent and Solidarity of the Shaken in Contemporary European and Global Society," in *Thinking After Europe*, 39–56; Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Jérôme Melançon, "Jan Patočka's Sacrifice: Philosophy as Dissent," *Continental Philosophy Review* 46, no. 4 (December 2013): 577; Emilie Tardivel, "La subjectivité dissidente. Etude sur Patočka," *Studia Phaenomenologica*, no. 7 (2007): 435–463.

people sits chained in a cave facing a wall of images produced by the shadows of puppets, and those who are chained have come to believe that the shadows make up the full extent of their reality. This might represent all of us, Plato claims, unless we come to realize the ways we are all chained, in particular how the images around us continually entrap us and further our mental enslavement to others' ideas. We are duped, or so is suggested, unable to turn around to see the world outside the cave until we learn to think in a different way. Education of a certain sort can make us self-aware enough to begin to free us from our many caves, and Plato calls this form of education 'philosophy.'<sup>7</sup> This is not what we think of as professional philosophy today, nor is it exactly a 'philosophy of life' in the popular sense; instead, it is a certain way of structuring one's thoughts, a method of reasoning where one can come to see the shadows as shadows, and by seeing and thinking in a different way, get turned around and out of various caves of illusion and moving towards the sunlight of new realities.

When Patočka described the significance of Plato's philosophy for understanding the political distress of his situation, he remarked how "Plato himself forces the philosopher to return to the cave. Philosophers must return to the cave out of duty, even if they do not want to, because something like human life, that is, life where care of the soul is possible, is only realizable under these conditions."<sup>8</sup> Reading Patočka's lectures and his descriptions of Socrates-the-philosopher returning to the cave to help free others, one can imagine Patočka in the smoke-filled rooms of the Czech dissident underground, taking the role of the philosopher who is trying to help his non-philosopher audience figure out how to care for their souls and confront the stifling 'normalization' of totalitarian political conditions.<sup>9</sup> Given his circumstances, Patočka might have

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7 See Books 6–7, "The Republic," in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: Pantheon Books 1961), 720–772.

8 As Patočka writes: "For Aristotle all of philosophy is within the Platonic cave. You know that Plato himself forces the philosopher to return to the cave. Philosophers must return to the cave out of duty, even if they do not want to, because something like human life, that is, life where care of the soul is possible, is only realizable under these conditions. For that reason they have to return to the cave; it is their duty, and should they resist, force must be used against them. Aristotle returns to the cave, but without violence." *Plato and Europe*, 189.

9 By 'normalization' I refer to several uses of the word: the period following the invasion of the USSR into Czechoslovakia in 1968 was generally known as the time of 'normalization,' where the political, social and cultural openings and intellectual ferment of the Prague Spring in 1968 were shut down after the invasion. One account of this political and intellectual process can be found in the work cited above, in addition to Milan Šimečka, *The Restoration of Order: The Normalization of Czechoslovakia*. The process of 'normalization' also has deeper

been living out the Socratic return to the cave, exercising his duty to use philosophy to illuminate the collective distress of his society and recover some modicum of humanity from a dehumanizing political situation. The rest of his *Plato and Europe* lectures elaborate what it means to ‘care for the soul,’ including the history of the idea, its political and existential consequences, and how caring for the soul can impart transcendence into mundane situations.<sup>10</sup> (See Chapter Two for a full description of ‘caring for the soul.’) Patočka wanted to use philosophy for elaborating what it meant to find a modicum of transcendence within history and political action; he then confronted his collective ‘distress’ by suggesting Plato and other philosophers might help us think beyond our entrapments and help us come to believe that we can (and should) make ourselves an active part of history’s unfolding possibilities.<sup>11</sup> This history is ‘heretical,’ according to the title of another of Patočka’s later works, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, and within his heresies are various kinds of dissidence that will be elaborated in later chapters.<sup>12</sup>

In the more than two thousand years since Plato’s parable about knowledge and ignorance entered into the human conversation about how to live a good life by thinking in a new way, this seductive allegory of the cave has inspired unending interpretations, some of which are clichéd, others helpful, and many obscure in their philosophical

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philosophical references from Foucault’s idea of normalization developed within *Discipline and Punish*, where he describes how institutions of all kinds—political, social, and cultural—force us to think in ‘normal’ categories and thus shut down critical thinking before ‘not normal’ thoughts are even formed. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). Patočka (via Plato) asks us to see the world in a way that might prevent this normalization, where phenomena are encountered in their truthfulness, revealed under the terms of Heideggerian *aletheia*. This is rooted in the larger approach of phenomenological philosophy towards understanding how things appear in the world, and how those appearances change and are affected by time, place, and being. See Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008). Also see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

10 For a technical philosophical analysis of the way Patočka interprets Plato throughout his wider oeuvre, see Filip Karfík, “Platons Bestimmung der Seele als Selbstbewegung,” in *Unendlichkeit-werden durch die Endlichkeit: Eine Lectüre der Philosophie Jan Patočka’s* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Newmann, 2008), 101–129 and M. Bernard, “Patočka and Plato: The idea of a politics of the soul,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 3 (2017): 357–370.

11 This is not the same thing as “historical progress”; see discussion of history below and in Chapter Two.

12 It is ‘heretical’ in a variety of senses, and there is scholarly debate about various senses of the ‘heretical’ in his work. See: Ludger Hagedorn and Yvanka Raynova, eds., *The Heretical Perspectives of Jan Patočka: 1907–1977* (Vienna: Axia Academic Publishers, 2018) Implicitly the structure of this book argues that it takes multiple senses of heresy to create a dissident, so various perspectives on Patočka’s ‘heresy’ might be relevant and useful.



technicalities. Due to such interest and proliferation, however, no one has ever been able to assign the allegory of the cave to the mere past; it lives on indefinitely, and the cave reappears in the actions and ideas it has produced across different historical eras and within various cultures. In Plato's world, Socrates the philosopher was condemned to death for 'corrupting the youth' and 'believing in false gods'; in every age, people believe there is *something* that corrupts the youth, and every age and era has its 'gods' (literal and metaphorical) that can be denied.<sup>13</sup> Every new student who reads Plato must, therefore, reread the allegory of the cave into a present situation. Patočka's lectures in *Plato and Europe* were indeed such a rereading, and so too might this account of Patočka's thinking be yet another. To return to the cave to help others liberate themselves from false ideas, to undertake the practice that Patočka calls 'care for the soul,' and then to practice solidarity and dissident politics—these cannot be mixed together as identical kinds of thinking and action, but they are all interrelated ideas one can discuss alongside Patočka's life and thought. The way he philosophizes about these practices and evokes the potential interrelationship between philosophy and politics, I will argue, is the articulation of a particular vision of human life that should command our attention and thought.

## Dissident Methods

'Dissident,' however, was not what Patočka called himself for most of his life, so this approach is not without some necessary caveats. While he wrote and studied topics not directly in line with the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy of his Communist state, until Charter 77, he did not become actively involved in 'the politics of dissent' in the 'public sphere.'<sup>14</sup> Given

13 See Plato, "Apology" and "Crito," in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 3–39.

14 This has led some to claim that the most important part of his work was not related to his dissidence. For example, Edward Findlay argues that it was a separate task. Edward Findlay, *Caring for the Soul in the Postmodern Age: Politics and Phenomenology in the thought of Jan Patočka* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). More recently there has been emerging consensus that Patočka is not just a contributor to phenomenology, and more attention has been given to the political implications of his work. See: Ivan Chvatik, "Solidarity of the Shaken," *Telos* 1992, no. 94 (December 21, 1992): 163–166; Ivan Chvatik, "The Responsibility of the 'Shaken': Jan Patočka and his 'Care for the Soul' in the 'Post-European' World" in *Jan Patočka and the Heritage of Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 263–279; James Dodd, *Violence and Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2009); *The New Yearbook of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy XIV-2015: Religion, War and the Crisis of Modernity, A Special Issue*

the context of his situation, however, the argument here is that ‘politics’ was implied through and within any rejection of the official discourse and ideology of the Communist state, even if those who gathered together in alternative ‘underground’ spaces ironically called their actions ‘anti-politics.’<sup>15</sup> Charter 77 famously claimed it was not political—perhaps ironically, or perhaps to lessen the brutality the signatories knew would be forthcoming from state authorities. Political dissidence was implied, however, by the circumstances of Patočka’s writing and lecturing in the underground, especially when he chose to keep doing philosophy when he was not ‘officially permitted’ to be a professor in public at a university. His audience of students and intellectuals would have understood his underlying unorthodox and ‘dissident’ intention as he set about outlining their mutual “distress” using philosophy and holding an underground philosophy seminar. In his *Plato and Europe* lectures, Patočka assumed in his audience a common experience of repressive politics, and used philosophy to illuminate the cave of existence for that audience. By the end of these lectures, he suggested that caring for the soul was a way of moving toward potentials for the liberation of one’s mind, even if one’s body had to remain enchained due to the politics of the time. Patočka thought Plato represented the beginning of European historical

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*Dedicated to the Philosophy of Jan Patočka*, vol. 14, ed. Ludger Hagedorn and James Dodd (New York: Routledge, 2015); *Über Zivilisation und Differenz; Tschechische Philosophen im 20. Jahrhundert: Klima, Rádl, Patočka, Havel, Kosík*, ed. Luger Hagedorn, trans. Joachim Bruss and Markus Sedlaczek (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2002); Richard Kearney, “Poetics and the Right to Resist: Patočka’s Testimony,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 2, no. 1 (1994): 31–44; Francesco Tava and Darian Meacham, eds., *Thinking After Europe*; Laignel-Lavastine, *Jan Patočka: L’Esprit de la dissidence*; Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Esprits d’Europe: autour de Czesław Miłosz, Jan Patočka, István Bibó* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2005); Melançon, “Jan Patočka’s Sacrifice: Philosophy as Dissent,” 577; James R. Mensch, *Patočka’s Asubjective Phenomenology: toward a New Concept of Human Rights* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2016); Cerwyn Moore, “Heretical Conversations with Continental Philosophy: Jan Patočka, Central Europe and Global Politics,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2009): 315–331; Cerwyn Moore, “Jan Patočka and Global Politics,” in *International Relations Theory and Philosophy: Interpretive Dialogues*, eds. Cerwyn Moore and Chris Farrands (London: Routledge, 2010), 46–59; *Jan Patočka: philosophie, phénoménologie, politique*, ed. Marc Richir and Etienne Tassin (Grenoble, France: Editions Jérôme Million, 1992); *Phenomenologies of Violence*, eds. Michael Staudigl (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Academic Publisher, 2013); Francesco Tava, *The Risk of Freedom: Ethics, Phenomenology and Politics in Jan Patočka*, trans. Jane Ledlie (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015); Tucker, *The Philosophy and Politics of Czech Dissidence from Patočka to Havel*.

15 For the way in which dissident communities framed themselves as practitioners of ‘anti-politics,’ see: Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe*; George Konrád, *Antipolitics: An Essay*, trans. Richard Allen (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984) and A. Brinton, *Philosophy and Dissidence in Cold War Europe* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016).

consciousness,<sup>16</sup> so he used lectures about Plato (among many other inspirations) to describe the shared distress of an historical moment; with Charter 77, he then stepped into history through his own political actions.<sup>17</sup>

Since his death, scholarly recognition from various disciplines, including mostly intellectual historians and philosophers, has emerged arguing that Patočka's political action was connected to his philosophical ideas.<sup>18</sup> I follow in agreement with the basic intuition of these scholars, building off their assertions and arguments about the political relevance of Patočka's ideas for the discipline of political theory. This elaboration for political theory seems necessary at this moment in time, as the majority of the scholarship in circulation about Patočka is not directly concerned with digging deeply into his political thinking, and is instead concerned with his contribution to the study of Husserl, Heidegger, phenomenology, and Czech history.<sup>19</sup> These commentaries do not necessarily approach

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16 In *Plato and Europe*, Patočka asks: "What is the source of European history? What is at the birth of Europe? And our hypothesis is the thought in which is resumed all European reflexive effort hitherto, that is, the thought of the care of the soul. The thought of the care of the soul has its first formulation in the Platonic teaching," 212–213. In another place in the *Plato and Europe* lectures, he explains: "Through catastrophes, this heritage is kept alive, and this is why I suppose that perhaps it might be possible to dare to suggest the thesis that Europe—especially Western Europe—but even that other one, arose out of the care of the soul. This is the embryo out of which arose what Europe used to be..." *Plato and Europe*, 89. See also: R. Gasché, "Patočka on Europe in the Aftermath of Europe," *European Journal of Social Theory* 21, no. 3 (2018): 391–406.

17 Patočka's most explicitly political work includes the essays he wrote directly in response to the Charter 77 movement. These include "Obligation to Resist Injustice" and "What We Can and Cannot Expect from Charta 77," both in *Jan Patočka Philosophy and Selected Writings*, trans. Erazim Kohák (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), 340–347. Other essays from this period include "On the Matters of The Plastic People of the Universe and DG 307." In *Sebrané spisy [Collected Works] vol. 12*. Praha: Oikoymenh, 2006: 425–427. Translated by Paul Wilson as "The Planetary Game," *Ethos*, Vol. 2, Nr. 1 (1986): 15. Reflecting on this last text in particular, Jozef Majernik has argued that Patočka's political turn was consistent with his commitment to the ancient Greek sense of the good life, in connection with a sense of what 'living in truth' as a philosopher meant to him in light of the problems of Communism: "Jan Patočka's Reversal of Dostoevsky and Charter 77," *Labyrinth: An International Journal for Philosophy, Value Theory and Sociocultural Hermeneutics* 19, no. 1 (2017): 26–45.

18 See note 14 above.

19 For recent work in phenomenology that analyzes Patočka's ideas of asubjective phenomenology, sense and perception, movement, embodiment and corporality, his critique of technology and his overall contribution to phenomenology, see: Renaud Barbaras, *L'ouverture du monde: Lecture de Jan Patočka* (Chatou, France: Les Editions de La Transparence, 2011); Renaud Barbaras, *Le mouvement de l'existence: Études sur la phénoménologie de Jan Patočka* (Chatou: Les Éditions de la Transparence, 2007); *Jan Patočka: Phénoménologies asubjective et existence*, ed. Renaud Barbaras, (Paris: Association Culturelle Mimesis 2007); *Jan Patočka and the Heritage of Phenomenology: Centenary Papers*, vol. 61, *Contributions to Phenomenology*, eds. Erika Abrams and Ivan Chvatik (Dordrecht: Springer, 2001); *The Phenomenological Critique of Mathematization*

his work as if the political drama of his death had defined his life, and argue instead that his main contribution to contemporary philosophy is his work on phenomenology and its impact on Continental philosophy, and that his main contribution to Czech philosophy is his analysis of Comenius and Masaryk, important figures in Czech intellectual history.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to these more sustained conversations, the scholarship

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*and the Question of Responsibility: Formalisation and the Life-World*, eds. Ivan Chvatik, Lubica Učnik and Anita Williams (Cham: Springer, 2015); Ivan Chvatik, "Jan Patočka's Care for the Soul" in the 'Nihilistic' World," (lecture at the 41st Annual Meeting of the Husserl Circle, New York, June 21–23, 2010), [http://www.husserlcircle.org/HC\\_NYC\\_Proceedings.pdf](http://www.husserlcircle.org/HC_NYC_Proceedings.pdf).; Cristian Ciocan and Ivan Chvatik, "Jan Patočka and the European Heritage," *Studia Phenomenologica*, vol. VII (Bucharest: Romanian Society for Phenomenology and Humanitas, 2007): 9–15; Dragos Duicu, *Phénoménologie du mouvement: Patočka et l'héritage de la physique aristotélicienne* (Paris: Hermann, 2014); Filip Karfik, *Unendlichkeitwerden durch die Endlichkeit: Eine Lectüre der Philosophie Jan Patočka's* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2008); Eddo Evink, "Surrender and Subjectivity: Merleau-Ponty and Patočka on Intersubjectivity," *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology and Practical Philosophy* V, no.1 (June 2013): 13–28; Simona Forti, *The New Demons: Rethinking Power and Evil Today*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); *Jan Patočka. Liberté, existence et monde commun*, ed. Natalie Frogneux (Argenteuil: Le Cercle Herméneutique, 2012); Michael Gubser, *The Far Reaches: Phenomenology, Ethics and Social Renewal in Central Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); *Andere Wege in Die Moderne: Forschungsbeiträge zu Patočka's Genealogie der Neuzeit*, eds. Luger Hagedorn and Hans Reiner Sepp, (Würzburg, Germany: Königshäusern and Neumann, 2006); Hagedorn and Dodd, *The New Yearbook of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*; Hagedorn, Bruss and Sedlaczek, *Über Zivilisation und Differenz; Tschechische Philosophen im 20. Jahrhundert: Klima, Rádl, Patočka, Havel, Kosík*, ed. Luger Hagedorn, trans. Joachim Bruss and Markus Sedlaczek (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2002); Giovanni Leghissa and Michael Staudigl, *Lebenswelt und Politik: Perspektiven der Phänomenologie nach Husserl* (Würzburg: Verlag Königshausen & Neumann, 2007); Sandra Lehmann, *Der Horizont der Freiheit: Zum Existenzdenken Jan Patočkas* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2004); Vladimír Leško, et al., *Patočka a novoveka filozofia* (Kosice, Slovakia: Univerzita Pavla Jozefa Safarika v Kosiciach, 2014); Vladimír Leško, et al., *Patočka a filozofia 20. storočia* (Kosice: Filozofická fakulta UPJS v Kosiciach, 2015); James Mensch, *Patočka's Asubjective Phenomenology: Toward a New Concept of Human Rights*; Philippe Merlier, *Autour de Jan Patočka* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010); Christian Rabanus, *Jan Patočkas Phänomenologie interkulturell gelesen* (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2006); *Jan Patočka: philosophie, phénoménologie, politique*, ed. Marc Richir and Etienne Tassin (Grenoble: Editions Jérôme Millon, 1992); *Myth, philosophy, art, and science in Jan Patočka's thought*, eds. Miloš Ševčík and Vlastimil Zuska (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2014); Emilie Tardivel, *La Liberté au Principe: essai sure la philosophie de Patočka* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique Vrin, 2011); Lubica Učnik, "Esse or Habere. To Be or To Have: Patočka's Critique Of Husserl And Heidegger," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 38, no. 3 (October 2007): 297–317; Lubica Učnik, *The Crisis of Meaning and the Life-world: Husserl, Heidegger, Arendt, Patočka* (Athens: Ohio UP, 2016).

20 Patočka's works on the history of Czechoslovakia, Comenius, and his studies of T. G. Masaryk can be found in his complete works, volumes 9–12 and 21–22: Vera Schifferová, ed., "Komeniologické studie I," in *Sebrané spisy Jana Patočky*, vol. 9 (Prague: Oikoymenh, 1997); Vera Schifferová, ed., "Komeniologické studie II," in *Sebrané spisy Jana Patočky*, vol. 10 (Prague: Oikoymenh, 1998); Vera Schifferová, ed. "Komeniologické studie III," in *Sebrané spisy Jana Patočky*, vol. 11 (Prague: Oikoymenh, 2003); Karel Palek and Ivan Chvatik, eds. "Cesi. Soubor textu k českému mysleni a českým dějinám," in *Sebrané spisy Jana Patočky*, vol. 12 (Prague:

about Patočka's political ideas can seem, at least superficially, somewhat more episodic. While this account is meant to add one more fragment to the conversation about Patočka's political ideas already happening in European circles, it is also meant to try to cohere a line of conversation very much already in existence about the importance of politics in his work, therein generating more conversation about Patočka's ideas within comparative political theory, bringing in both global voices and Anglo-American political theory. Such an analysis might very well have fallen into obscurity given the lack of name recognition of its primary subject to these audiences, so it seemed important to put Patočka's ideas into conversation with more well-known figures like Havel, Bonhoeffer, Gandhi and important activist voices from well-known historical and contemporary contexts. There are many other dissidents who might also belong here as relevant interlocutors, and choices of inclusion and exclusion are always difficult and costly; those chosen here are meant to be representative examples, never fully adequate to show every relevant aspect of Patočka's ideas, but hopefully evocative enough to promote further conversation and research.

By bringing together the viewpoints of various authors on the topic of dissident politics in order to illuminate the importance and applicability of Patočka's ideas, patterns emerged that inevitably went beyond the scope of Patočka's specific assertions. Perhaps controversially, I have chosen to analyze those general patterns of thinking and emerging forms of dissidence, especially in the concluding chapter. As there are many voices in the discussions that follow here, the reader should be forewarned that the conversations on occasion become more than the sum of their parts, and patterns of argument will sometimes go beyond a summary of what Patočka said or did not say. While the methodology of a scholarly philosophical commentary usually entails stopping at the border between what the philosopher said and what the commentator thinks (and the struggle to find that border with accuracy), the methodology of political theory

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Oikoymenh, 2006); Vera Schifferová, Ivan Chvatik and Tomáš Havelka, eds. "Korespondence s komeniologi I. S přílohami o Chartě 77, norském vydání Kacířských esejí aj," in *Sebrané spisy Jana Patočky*, vol. 21 (Prague: Oikoymenh, 2011); Vera Schifferová and Ivan Chvatik, eds. "Korespondence s komeniologi II," in *Sebrané spisy Jana Patočky*, vol. 22 (Prague: Oikoymenh, 2011). From different publishers: Jan Patočka, *Dvě studie o Masarykovi* (Toronto: Sixty-Eight Publishers, 1980); *Jan Amos Komenský (II). Nachgelassene Schriften zur Comeniusforschung* (Sankt Augustin: Richarz, 1984); Vladimír Jochmann, Pavel Kouba and Ivan Chvatik, eds. *Co jsou Cesi? Malý přehled fakt a pokus o vysvětlení / Was sind die Tschechen? Kleiner Tatsachenbericht und Erklärungsversuch* (Prague: Panorama, 1992); *Schriften zur tschechischen Kultur und Geschichte*, Klaus Nellen, Petr Pithart and Miroslav Pojar, eds. (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992).

entails building toward an argument with implications for praxis, that is, for how to do politics in the world based on a set of ideas. Philosophers might challenge this method as going out of bounds, yet political theorists would read a ‘merely’ philosophical commentary and ask: ‘So what? Why does it matter for how we do things?’ This account is an attempt at engaged political theory, and therefore it will sometimes move forward into the practical details of this author’s own chosen examples of the problems Patočka only abstractly evoked.

Even if this method challenges the conventions of philosophical commentaries, the hope is to encourage readers to appreciate why the ‘merely philosophical’ debate about Patočka’s works should be read and studied more deeply and thoroughly.<sup>21</sup> It is necessary to approach all dissidents’ writings by first trying to understand the dissident’s own self-understanding.<sup>22</sup> Who one is to oneself matters for what one does in the world. Patočka saw himself as a philosopher first and foremost. So, while this is a political-theoretic approach, it should lead back to philosophy and to Patočka’s understanding of a ‘philosopher’ as someone responsible for turning others around in the cave through the right use of powerful ideas and arguments. Patočka’s arguments shed light on how dissidence requires a certain understanding about what it means to act in the world through a philosophy of history, including how to dwell within that world while simultaneously transcending it. To understand this approach, the method of presentation calls for an integration of philosophy and historical thinking to illuminate politics, even if this is neither a history book nor exactly a philosophy book. As an attempt at political theorizing with philosophical texts, it might seem nonetheless *too philosophical* to some political theorists. If the main protagonist is indeed a philosopher, though, much of what is required to explain his existence and action is philosophical. The problem of what makes people (including philosophers) engage and act in the world politically, especially in the case of dissidence against perceived injustice in governmental systems, is still the main question at stake within these philosophical explorations.

The governments and political systems addressed in these dissident conversations can then include not just totalitarian Communist regimes,

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21 See notes 14 and 19 above.

22 I have written more extensively about the importance of seeking the dissident’s own self-understanding through a certain kind of hermeneutic investigation in another book. See Brinton, *Philosophy and Dissidence in Cold-War Europe* (London: Palgrave, 2016).