

WHY STILL PHILOSOPHY? – ONCE AGAIN*

Abstract: The intention of this paper is to revisit, once again the question asked by Adorno and Habermas and other contemporary thinkers under different headings, few decades ago. The author is suggesting that nowadays philosophy requires a final departure from the idea of having single and perennial face, and that this would not only allow, but also enable philosophy to test its various faces freely, that is, without norm or limit set in advance. At the same time, by creating such “liberal” climate philosophy would no longer be frightened by the possible answer, and hence would no longer dramatize the very question of “why still?”. Even if philosophy turns out to be far less than the mission it once bestowed upon itself.

Key words: philosophy, critique, enlightenment, education, consumerist society, cultural industry, school, teaching.

The title of this paper, as you know, is borrowed, and it is only the “Once again” that saves it from a double impudence. The first one being that such a broad, immense, crucial question is asked at all, and that the author is making a claim, ambitious to the verge of indecency, to offer a sort of answer. The second impudence is that after names such as Adorno and Habermas, as well as others under different headings, someone still dares to attempt this topic.

In 1962, Adorno posed the question “Why still philosophy?” in a brief article with the same title. His diagnose is that philosophy has established itself as a particular discipline that obeys the dictate of specialist knowledge, and has renounced any distinct and genuine substance it could claim as its own. By doing so, argues Adorno, philosophy has announced its bankruptcy toward real social purposes. Such transformation of philosophy is seen by the critical theorist, as

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its twilight. The philosophy has anaesthetized itself, it has deprived itself of a critical cutting edge aimed at reality, has lost its function as social corrective. Adorno believes that freedom and critique are at the “very heart of philosophy” and that this is precisely what is lacking in its contemporary form, as embodied in the schools of ontology and positivism. “If philosophy is still necessary, as it has always been – he wrote – it is as critique, as resistance to the expanding heteronomy, be it in the form of a helpless attempt of the thought to master itself and to expose imposed mythology”. Philosophy thus defined, at that historical moment, does not want to add a new critique to the inconsolable chain of philosophy, but instead to announce a certain hint of hope that “un-freedom and subjugation will not have the last word”. Paradox and resignation are the marks of this thought, and they are readily accepted by it. The condition of philosophy is such that, in order to think at all, it is necessary to think a transformation of the world that thought sees as unchangeable. Under these circumstances, argues Adorno, the power of resistance and non-acceptance remains the only measure of philosophy today. This requires from the philosopher to assume a particularly tragic stance: to take it upon himself to conceptualize the satanic structure of the world and to be aware, simultaneously, of the blindness of thought itself and to self-consciously forfeit the projection of any positive alternative. Adorno seems to hold that it is only in this way that otherwise needless, dysfunctional, perhaps even impossible philosophy might survive in these adverse times.

Nine years later, in 1971, as a response to Adorno’s text Habermas writes his own *Why still philosophy?* Here, the last trace of the heroic tragism disappears. Habermas has noticed that the paradoxical figure of a totalizing self-critique of Reason accompanies like a shadow every instance of great philosophizing since the end of great philosophy, namely since Hegel. After the master-thinkers with their grand and perennial philosophy, a type of philosophy represented by the more successful teachers and writers has appeared. This sort of thought could understand philosophy only as critique. Critical of its philosophical origins, of the traditional way of positing the relation between theory and practice, of the demand for totality of metaphysical knowledge and the religious interpretation of the world, and finally, of the elitist self-understanding of philosophical

tradition, philosophy runs the risk of robbing itself of any particular content and, turning into an “empty exercise of self-reflection performed on the objects of its own tradition, while being itself unable to master any systematic thought”. This type of philosophy as destruction of thought, promoted by Nietzsche, and continued by Heidegger, Adorno, and Derrida, this philosophical style that is attached to individual erudition and personal representation, this philosophy understood as critique is withdrawing from the scene and, according to Habermas, its new face is being announced: as “non-scientistic philosophy of science”. For this philosophy the question of “why still philosophy” would not be a question at all.

However, in both these cases, philosophy survives as one or the other kind of critique. Its indispensable as well as socially desirable *and* beneficial place in the future still lies in the sphere of social critique. Whether the critique be exercised relentlessly and desperately from the perspective of a “critical utopia”, or in the less generalized form of specific moves within immediate political confrontation. Does the current condition of philosophy support such diagnoses and prognoses given by Adorno and Habermas? It seems that in spite of their hopes and their visions, the changes over the past decades have given evidence of a transformation of philosophy’s former face towards what these authors could not help but interpret as its public, popular, profane, and farcical face. The survival of the philosopher’s calling has become “mundane” to such extent that a *recall* of the philosopher is more appropriate term. Philosophers no longer recognize themselves even at places where their fledgling audience recognizes them, quite suddenly and completely unexpectedly. Some years ago, in the USA, series of lectures were organized on a set of practical-ethical evergreen issues (abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, business ethics, cloning, etc.). Instead of the expected several dozen, several hundreds of not very cheap tickets were sold. This was the news, then. The news that, even for philosophy, even today, there is interest.

Leaving aside for the moment what kind of philosophy – the question is: who is interested? Maybe, we do not really want to know the answer. No doubt, there is such a thing as popular philosophy, as illustrated by the success of Jostein Gaarder with *Sophie’s World*, as well as that of Jeanne Hersch, Luciano De Crescenzo and a longish

succession of other authors with similarly fictionalized, adapted-to-current-taste, impressionistic, patchworky and in all the necessary ways applied histories of philosophy. As in any other matter, here also we may find brilliant and gifted creations, as well as the other sort. And both kinds seem to have their readers, quite a few of them. Who, then, gets immersed in a philosophical ambiance on these occasions, and what is this ambiance like? Do these lay readers wear black sweaters and smoke pipes like in times when existentialism was fashionable; do they have glowing eyes, full of devoted commitment and anticipatory premonition like the phenomenologists? – According to my evidence, today even this fashionableness has gone. What is more, one could argue that, in these readings, an overt anti-philosophy is at work in the guise of philosophy.

You may not share my opinion, you may consider it too severe, but I can't help feeling that something unspeakably insulting and frivolous is emerging here. For, philosophy – like literature, from the same perspective – has become pure exoticism, pacified and localized. Philosophical readings are now consumed in a vulgar manner. An equally vulgar manner as it has become customary today to go to the theatre in order to take a rest from daily concerns, in order allegedly to reanimate the suffering soul and relax it by gluttonously nibbling at “sublime” topics it is otherwise deprived of. To put it bluntly, for therapeutic purposes, and also for utilitarian ones – in order for the owner of the soul to improve his resume. This is a pragmatic, controlled escapism, directly at odds with the “cause” of philosophy which has always refused relaxation, refuge, consolation, playing the role of a social-care or a therapist. If anything, to philosophy we can ascribe the desire, and a certain success, to stay non-pacified, to awake and provoke, to doubt and pester. To all of us who have been raised on the stance of “vigilance against any absolute”, on the imperative of persistent questioning, on splitting hairs, on undermining, problematizing, irreducible inquisitiveness, hyper-criticism, disputing up to the hilt, non-forgiveness, musings on everything; raised on obligation to restlessness, to intellectual devilishness, to bestial neurosis of curiosity and groundbreaking – these “readings” appear not as philosophy's new face, but as nothing less than a treason, a shameful simulation of what philosophy used to mean, what it has ever meant.

All of a sudden and unawares, we have found ourselves in a time that, unexpectedly and not following the philosophical protocol, has “surpassed” Hegel. In a time of explosive recognition and simultaneously termination of his – and generally theoretical – imperative, at a time of non-dialectical obsolescence of critique, proclaimed by Lyotard more loudly than by others: “Hegel did not die of critique (on the contrary, he lives of it), he died in affluence, he passed away of well-being, he perished of health”. All of a sudden we have been left empty-handed since our only tradition has become precisely the critique of any tradition: the anti-authoritarian stance of the shrewd and all-penetrating gaze of the critical theorist. It is easier to name those relevant authors who have not, than those innumerable ones who have in this vein spawned eulogies to Critique. And then, we were surprised when the Critique itself was mannered, fictionalized, sedimented, established, and made toothless, when – emptied of normative contents – it grew into what Kant, not without disparagement, called “the scholastic concept of philosophy”. So nowadays, the only thing that remains is to teach philosophy – as such, as a sort of lore – to students in schools.

Actually, it was precisely the institution in which Enlightenment thinkers invested so much hope – that is, the school, in its mass incarnation – that has disclosed all the limitations of the scholastic concept of philosophy. For, philosophy has had the same destiny as the idea of education, which, disfigured, got drowned in the world of functionally administered and – by the Opium of consumption – (dis)ideologized society. Once the pride, sublimation and criterion of humanity, classical education has everywhere been ranking insultingly low. Here I mean that sort of general, non-profitable education, one that does not train for useful profession or a trade. Such education has become at best a rather unfortunate choice, among many other more fortunate ones. Admittedly, ‘it still holds some prestige for well-to-do wives of successful men, but otherwise it is reserved for men who have failed in the market world’ (This is a quote from a speech made by former Serbian Minister of Education.) Philosophy in its own right is valued just as any other collector’s hobby, just as much as to be asked, as Brodsky has: “Oh, you write poetry, that’s nice; but how do you earn your living?” This outcome of the epopee of philosophy could be interpreted as a satanic conspiracy of the un-

thinking world, or as a just punishment for its presumptuous theoretical projects, or simply as an indifferent course of a mini-history. Probably no one harbours any illusion as to the impossibility of appeasement, obsolescence and withering away of education, defined in the old-fashioned way, and of withering away of the old ancient art of philosophizing, along with other old and lately so unnecessary trades.

The already socially controlled, and after the principles of political and economical power hierarchically organized, institutions of knowledge – for example, Universities in the States – have been ghettoized, located at campuses, equipped with all the necessary requirements, but shielded from the eye and the ear of the public. It is already in this “geographical” way that they are precluded from any more serious intervention in the arena of public action, for which they anyway lack internal strength or motive. Their erstwhile respectable walls no longer inspire reverence in anyone, and they can only serve as scenery for tourist guidebooks. In the same way as it happened with all subversive movements, a sort of taming has taken place of the entire institution of education: by cultural industry, Hollywoodization, spectacularization, and, finally, by making it acceptable and benign through dosed legalization, through processing and recycling in the consumerist machine. If the surrealists have arrived into elementary-school readers, abstract expressionists into the offices of business executives, Marx into economics textbooks and Paul McCartney has become a ‘Sir’, then it is difficult to imagine any oddity, challenge, or subversion that the market of ideas will not digest and devalue. Powerlessness is general, not because of censorship or the blunting of the critical edge, but because critique itself has become ritualized. Adorno writes somewhere, thinking of Descartes and Kant, that in earlier times philosophers were writing toadying letters to the rulers, while at the same time in their works subverting the absolute power of these. Nowadays, on the contrary, one has casual lunches with statesmen; one can, moreover, tell them all sorts of things, but their payroll is strictly respected.

And finally, let us not forget that within the educational institutions themselves there is something like an audience; true, a closed one, which, thanks to compulsory attendance, has long been uncommitted; it is not the erstwhile community of the learned and the less

learned that will become more learned all together in shared devotion to the Truth. Today, at school, you no longer have before you – like Plato and Aristotle in their time – an intellectual audience pledging allegiance to philosophical education, but students who, to be honest, are not voluntary listeners to your lectures. They are, to be sure, “genuine philosophers” in terms of readiness to ask that characteristic philosophical question of “why?”. I concede that I may be speaking from the limited experience of the country I come from, where philosophy is taught in the final year of secondary school. It is up to you to believe me or not that, over there, the students start from where philosophy has painfully arrived: they advance from a destructive questioning of the validity of philosophy. At that, their position is clearly pre-centered and articulated in the following way: “What good is this *to us*?”. This is the question they ask not just in regards to the subject of philosophy, and definitely not by way of a philosophical exercise. They pose this question to the entire classical education, to the entire idea of the Greek *Paideia* and the German *Bildung*, to the entire non-narcissistic philosophical heritage, de-centred from the functional ego, the heritage in which the history of Enlightenment, as becoming human, has invested so much. We might rightly argue that they have discarded this idea and this heritage, under the authorization of the contemporary social construct or the logic of capital or psychical convenience or value conformism or whatever, without having ever reached them in the first place: but does it make any difference? Does this challenge their right to contest? So, the frontline has doubled, and schizophrenia becomes inevitable. We, philosophy teachers, have found ourselves in a role we did not have in mind when we were choosing our calling. We are literally stuck in a tragi-comical drama, playing no longer the hero – for heroic times are long gone by – not even an anti-hero. Perhaps most accurately put, we are playing a post-hero, worthy of some compassion but not of sympathy, who barely manages to reformulate the phrases that he knows have been invalidated for almost two centuries by the self-awareness of the philosophical reflection on the “misery of philosophy”; the phrases on sublimity and timelessness, authenticity and universal meaningfulness of philosophical problems. To make things worse, we know that we must appear like someone who in the classroom assumes the posture that we, more

than other people, consider inappropriate and unbecoming; we speak, inadvertently, in that solemn and didactic tone, our finger in the air – in the absence of an officer’s baton. Even if in self-defense, even if self-consciously, in any case we realize that, according to the yardstick of an unsympathetic audience, we inevitably advance in an aggressive, arrogant and patronizing manner.

It is difficult to suggest a definite exit strategy from the situation philosophy has found itself in, together with those who feel qualified, or are called upon, to pass on and diffuse the philosophical lore. In attempt to find a way out of the impasse, two strategies are used. One is to turn philosophy into a museum piece or a relic from the past (as to be a museum curator is quite nice job). The other is to “update” philosophy all the way to treacherous banality and vulgarization (the vigilant “know-it-all” also has his share of honors). At any rate, the hostile world now passes judgments on philosophy, rather than vice versa. It is philosophy that is nowadays asking for space and accommodation, adapting itself and striving to survive. It is problematic, not in the manner it used to be, no longer by regenerating itself through increasingly relentless self-criticism, but precisely in its very texture, futile as it is, in that unproductive critical figure, in that thematization whereby it is conclusively put on stake, asking no longer “why at all” but rather “why still”. Having said this, and bearing in mind its one-time pretense and status, one could certainly claim that philosophy is irretrievably on the defensive. The philosopher, as well as the one who teaches and questions its heritage, would in this constellation have to somehow remain loyal to philosophy, even after having completed the critique and self-critique of philosophical thought. He would have to ensure that the autonomous philosophical challenge of philosophy does not get bogged down either in total ruin and euphorically blinded subjection to outside powers, or in the characteristic simulation of autarchy and haughty autism. In other words, neither in the social functioning, nor in a proud existence on welfare. It is only in such way tempered philosophical erudition that would be capable of assembling the decanted, independently floating forms of contemporary philosophy. The full range, from neuroepistemology to deconstruction, and call upon them as witnesses to a current endeavor to announce an uncertain, but not unpromising future out of the rich tradition. This however would require a departure from the idea that

philosophy has a single face – perennial, critical, scientific, whatever – and allowing it to test its various faces freely, that is, without norm or limit set in advance. Maybe the time has come to create such a climate, in which philosophy would itself no longer be frightened by the possible answer, and hence would no longer dramatize the very question of “why still?”. Even if philosophy turns out to be far less than the mission it once bestowed upon itself. For, that *less* would by no means be little.

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ČEMU JOŠ FILOZOFIJA? – JOŠ JEDANPUT

Sažetak

Namera ovog rada je da još jedanput iznova propita samo ono pitanje statusa filozofije koje su unazad nekoliko decenija postavili Adorno i Habermas, kao i drugi savremeni mislioci u drugačijim formulacijama. Autor sugerše da filozofija danas potrebuje konačni raskid sa idejom posedovanja jednog i perenijskog lika – što bi joj ne samo dozvolilo, nego upravo i omogućilo da, bez norme i granice postavljene unapred, slobodno iskuša svoje različite likove. U isto vreme, stvaranjem ovakve “liberalne” atmosfere u pogledu vlastitog određenja i samorazumevanja, ona više ne bi bila zastrašena mogućim odgovorom, pa stoga više ne bi ni dramatizovala samo pitanje “čemu još?”. Čak i ukoliko se posle vlastitog dovodenja u pitanje ispostavi da je njeno značenje mnogo manje nego ona misija koju je jednom sebi namenila.

Ključne reči: filozofija, kritika, prosvetiteljstvo, obrazovanje, konzumentarističko društvo, industrija kulture, škola, učenje.