

# CRISIS AS THE DISCRIMEN OF PHILOSOPHY<sup>1</sup>

It would seem that what in the closer and the wider social surroundings concerns, affects and effects us as “crisis” has already become something completely quotidian and persists in everything as a sort of an eternity. Today’s “state” and – announced through it – its “stagnancy”, so to speak, by themselves call for a critical philosophical deliberation upon *the crisis of this time*.<sup>2</sup> Of course, it is necessary to accentuate, that the experience of a confrontation with any and every kind of life-world crisis has for philosophy always been denoted as being *critical*; upon this also the notion of philosophical experience as such is based, as it was decisively defined, for instance, by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In this elementariness of critique we could perhaps find an incipient criterion for a philosophical confrontation with the circumstance of the crisis of this time.

On the other hand, we are reminded of this philosophical codetermination of *crisis*, which demands *determinacy of action*, of *critique*, which requests

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2 Cf. also the small book by Slovenian philosopher Ivan Urbančič entitled *O krizi. Epilog k Zgodovini nihilizma* [*About Crisis. An Epilogue to The History of Nihilism*]; Slovenska matica, Ljubljana 2011.

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*exactitude of terms*, and of *criteria*, which need *determinateness of judgment*, by the very Greek origin of the word “crisis”. “Krisis” in the meaning of “distinction”, “dispute”, “judgment”, and of, first and foremost, “decision” (by which, for instance, games of combat begin), is derived from the verb *kríno* meaning “(I) distinguish”, “(I) choose”, “(I) judge”, “(I) come into the clear” (etymological connection with the German word “rein”). As one of the key philosophical concepts it also occurs in a central passage of Parmenides’ poem *Peri phýseos*, which is in itself attuned to a sort of “a putting to the test”, to “krisis” as “distinction”, “decision”.

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In fragment no. 8 (15-) Parmenides in the name of the goddess *Díke* thus announces the decision/judgment (*krisis*) upon the question, whether (being) *is* or *is not* (is rather nothing) (*éstin hè ouk éstin*); this assertion is followed by the determination, how it is decided (*kékritai*) what necessity (*anángke*) is, namely: that to follow the path, that (being) is, is the only possibility, while the other path is unthinkable and unreasonable (*anóeton*). Those who think that being and nonbeing are the same Parmenides scolds as being “the undiscerning herd”, *ákrita phýla* (fragment no. 6).

Does Parmenides’ indication of *krisis* of the paths between being and nonbeing still offer an incentive for a philosophical confrontation with the crisis of this time, or have we found ourselves not only at the crossroads, but also at a dead end? It is in this sense that we would like to discuss “crisis” as *the discrimen of philosophy*.

Such an attempt at a deliberation upon today’s state of crisis from within the horizon of philosophical critique is immediately faced by the impediment of the very situation of crisis disclosing a certain meaningful “non-situatedness” of philosophy within it. The crisis of this time passes by – in a special and as yet undefined sense – *past philosophy* and is in the least concerned with it, not even with that, which around philosophy has been wreathed as the complex of humanistic and social sciences, or – by the name of a pretty, yet by now already “timed” lady at Humboldt’s court – *die Geisteswissenschaften*. Nowadays no one dares to re-mind, and much less to re-think, that also, for instance, economy belongs in their midst. How do we, philosophers and humanists, accept this circumstance of unacceptance; to what extent do we deem it unacceptable; what kind of interpretations of crisis do we endeavor,

and which social changes do we advocate, may for the manifestation of the crisis of this time be in itself of no avail. It is the circumstance of this time, with which we as philosophers perhaps must make our peace. It would seem that in the element and the dimension of the crisis of this time philosophy can only contribute to the spurious criticism, in itself perhaps, if not the primary accomplice, at the very least compliant with the crisis.

Philosophy – be it servile in compliance or the deserving accomplice of the crisis – not only no longer can presume to occupy the leading position of the master of the thought of its time, to which Hegel in his time appointed it, but also in every regard proves to be useless for today's system of production and consumption. It can calmly surrender to leisure, *scholé*, from exhausts of which, according to Aristotle, it also sprouted.<sup>3</sup>

Ethical and moralistic adjudicators of all kinds, political agitators of all colors, religious converters of all beliefs, sworn searches of truth and nothing but the truth, already sense that their time has come, they are already preparing their cudgels, but in all this philosophy has become extinct. And it would seem that the groundlessness of philosophy grows together with the deepening of the crisis of this time.

Thus we could end the discussion of a philosophical confrontation with the crisis of our time before we have really begun. It is obvious that with philosophy in regard of a confrontation with the crisis – in plain sight for everyone to see – we come nowhere. And yet: what of *this obviousness*? Is it right that we leave it in a sort of self-evidence? Is it right that we remain without understanding and deaf to it? Is it not necessary to expressly listen to this directly indicated obviousness, even though reading in it nothingness and emptiness, and to *face it eye to eye*? Are we not only through a reading of this “nullness [ničiče]” offered a possibility to discuss the prospect of a philosophical confrontation with the crisis of this time, for otherwise such a confrontation would miss the essential philosophical *on-look* [uočenje] or *on-gaze* [uzrtje], and would not mirror nothing?

*But perhaps it would rather mirror nothing than have nothing to mirror?* Of course, we can immediately recognize the reflection of nihilism according to

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3 Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* VII, 15, 1334a 23–33.

Nietzsche's characterization of *European nihilism*, which has in the meantime become – as we can also assert for today's crisis in all of its effects – global, planetary and even interplanetary, for it watches (over) us and controls us from satellites. Within thus changed perspectives we could perhaps reenact Plato's parable of the cave, through which he attempts to assert a hyperuranian (over-heavenly) notion of philosophy as the theory of ideas ("on-gazings", "on-lookings"), which nonetheless has to struggle its way out from the submersion into the underground cave – that is to say, from the hollowness of a nothingness – through undergoing a demonic *krisis* of being dragged from the cave.<sup>4</sup>

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The philosophical eye-sight is acquired in struggle, and needs to be brought to light in its obviousness, which also holds true for the confrontation with the crisis of this time. As such this kind of confrontation forms an internal view or, so to speak, an internally hollowed-out vision of philosophy, insofar as it stays attentively hearsome in observing (to) itself and can, in accordance with Plato's authoritative insight that also Jan Patočka still recognized as the spiritual essence of Europeanness, be defined as "the dialogue of the soul with itself".<sup>5</sup> This contemplative twofoldness of seeing and hearing is mirrored in *be-gazing* [zrenje]. Time and space also appear only on the mirror of such a gaze.

Of course, we could reject such a positioning of philosophy as a simple retreat into contemplation, away from the serious problems of social reality of this time. But contemplation, as the Latin word "contemplatio" suggests, is supposed to mean "to go together with time", "to be contemporary", and thus to ascertain, wherefrom the reality of time is formed, what actually passes as and comes to the resolution in reality. Contemplation has its *tempus* and its *templum*.

4 "And if," said I, "someone should drag him thence by force up the ascent which is rough and steep, and not let him go before he had drawn him out into the light of the sun, do you not think that he would find it painful to be so haled along, and would chafe at it /.../" (Plato, *The Republic*, 515e; transl. by Paul Shorey; cf. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D7%3Asection%3D515e>; access: 12<sup>th</sup> May 2015).

5 Cf. Jan Patočka, *Ketzerische Essays zur Philosophie der Geschichte*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1988.

The famous contraposition of *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* is not the reason why today “the contemplative attitude” is widely rejected, for the possible space of action and activism, of desistance and resistance has, significantly enough, vanished, too. There is not only no more time for personal in-depth disquisition, but also the space for the unfolding of social movements has become peculiarly narrow, with the obvious exception for certain, pre-arranged and pre-approved directions, which one by one nonetheless lead into the void. Both are the object of an enormous machination, re-appearing from who-knows-where without letting the subject know of its sense – which, of course, causes the nauseating uneasiness in otherwise easy leisure of comfort and conformity, which have, so to speak, become obligatory and in themselves display a kind of *blockage*.

An indication of this *blockage* is the very circumstance that “krísis” has changed its face and its sense: it no longer means, as in Parmenides, “decision” and – thereby – “determination”, but moreover indecisiveness and withdrawal, apprehension, re-tiredness, re-sourcelessness, disorientation in space and in time, which are supposed to be “ours”. This very blockage makes us ponder, whether the crisis of this time is not dictated by and from *the end*, which *as such* extends into/towards *the endlessness*, and through which the completeness of universe, the entirety of nature and the whole of history form a single *block* [blok] in the original sense of the word “(c)log [klada]” in all of its meaningful nuances, that today indicate the in-stalling of block(ade)s.

With such a contemplative view in mind we could, standing still on *the null point of nihilism*, endeavor towards formulating a presupposition for the confrontation with the crisis of this time, or – putting it pointedly – with the crisis of what on the basis of time we experience as history, in this case, of course: nihilistic history. If there is no more time for history, then there is no crisis in historical sense, and we cannot designate the crisis we are witnessing as being historical, which in itself conveys the factor of blockage that makes us think we are *historically positioned in front of a wall*. Historically we are not “standing”, but are ex-posed (ex-sistent) to a positioning in front of the wall of time, which replaces history by placing a block.

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Already at the end of the 1950s Ernst Jünger wrote about *The Wall of Time*,<sup>6</sup> and declared the victory of the era of earth over the epoch of history. The metaphor of the wall is, in general, historically, geographically, architecturally, literarily, politically, as well as sonorously extremely rich. One is reminded, for instance, of: The Great Wall of China, Hadrian's Wall, the Antonine Wall, Inca stone walls, the Berlin Wall, the Moroccan Wall of shame, the Jerusalem Wailing Wall, the new West Bank barrier wall, Wall Street and Mexico-United States Border Wall, "4-meter-high fence" on the border with non-EU members (NEW!) as well as ... well: all of the city walls. Heraclitus wrote (fragment no. 44) that the law (*nómos*) should be defended as the walls of the polis. Let us not forget also "the soundwall" or "the firewall". And then there are walls in Kafka's and Sartre's prose works, in Robert Frost's poems, etc. (Is literature as a whole not in actuality only a graffiti writing on the wall?) And also "the fourth wall" in theatre, and also Facebook (timeline) wall. And, of course, album *The Wall* by Pink Floyd.

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But what does the nihilistic wall as the positioning of everything into a block mean? What constitutes its power in its overpowering of time and space? It would be wrong to assume that this wall expresses power as, for instance, a mighty tree, a star, the sky, a river, a mountain rising upwards, or the sea opening in front of us do. The wall is not such a self-disclosing power or forcefulness. The wall positions itself for the demonstration and for the enforcement of power, which needs to be at disposal and which only wants to dispose. It is, in short, not power [moč] and force [sila], but overpowering [premoč] and violence [nasilje]. In this sense we speak here about the block, which does not only mean the load-bearing element of a building, such as a house, a bridge, a road, a playground, a school, a church, a castle, etc. We can, of course, "have" and dispose over all of these "immovable" properties; because of that they are being positioned into a block, which blocks them by defining their *representation* in advance. Through the block they are representative; they present a function and become movable, are transported into circulation, into the circle of functioning within a system, be it the system of education, sport, agriculture, tourism, judicature, entertainment,

6 Ernst Jünger, *An der Zeitmauer*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1959.

culture, religion, economy or the system of state. Yet such “institutions” also can position only, insofar as they themselves are positioned into a block. In themselves they are nothing, if they do not form a block, which is the positioning positioned for itself. It would seem that Kafka describes such a block in his stories about buildings, such as: “The Great Wall of China” and *The Castle*, but especially in one of his later and unfinished works entitled “Der Bau”, into the Slovenian language translated as “Brlog”, and into the English as “The Burrow”.<sup>7</sup>

What might in this regard the announced *philosophical discrimen* – despite or precisely in view of the mentioned discrimination of philosophy within the crisis of this time – mean? The term in Latin means “discerning”, “distinction”. Without special emphasis Heidegger uses it in *Being and Time*;<sup>8</sup> the problematic is, however, within his thought better known under the name of “the ontological difference”. And by all means has that what Gianni Vattimo had with a felicitous expression called *the adventures of difference*<sup>9</sup> defined the movement of philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in its critical confrontation with crisis, which we could otherwise also denote as historical nihilism. Within this framework the eventuation of difference could mean a kind of counter-movement, contra-movimento. Yet we should by no means think of this

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7 The story about an animal – most likely a badger [jazbec], but perhaps simply an “I [jaz]” – and its occupation with the setting of a burrow begins thus: “I HAVE COMPLETED the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful. All that can be seen from outside is a big hole; that, however, really leads nowhere; if you take a few steps you strike against natural firm rock. I can make no boast of having contrived this ruse intentionally; it is simply the remains of one of my many abortive building attempts, but finally it seemed to me advisable to leave this one hole without filling it in. True, some ruses are so subtle that they defeat themselves, I know that better than anyone, and it is certainly a risk to draw attention by this hole to the fact that there may be something in the vicinity worth inquiring into. But you do not know me if you think I am afraid, or that I built my burrow simply out of fear.” (Franz Kafka, “The Burrow”, in: Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. by N. N. Glatzer, Schocken Books Inc., New York 1983, p. 354.) Cf. also the study “Lacanov Kafka [Lacan’s Kafka]” by Mladen Dolar accompanying the Slovenian translation of “The Burrow”: Franz Kafka, “Brlog”, trans. by R. Vouk, *Problemi*, XLIII, 3-4 (2005), pp. 129 ff.

8 Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by J. Stambaugh, State University of New York Press, Albany 1996, p. 40.

9 Cf. Gianni Vattimo, *Le avventure della differenza*, Garzanti, Milano 1979.

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“counter” and of this “contra” as having the sense of contrariety, opposition and rejection, but as *contrado*, “Gegend”, “plan”, country, countryside, plain field, unfolding, wide-spreading, plane, landscape, meadow or mead ...

The contemplation upon the dif-ference, the discernment, entails only and solely maintaining and thus with-standing (with-in) the “openness for openness”, which we simply call *the world* or *dwelling in the world*. Contrastingly, the block closes up upon itself, and with it closes also the “we [mi]”, which has long ago consumed the “I [jaz]”, which had long before devoured the “I am [sem]”, so that the history of *the pre-formation of being* and of *the pre-tension* following it already has been forgotten, or it is still effective as *the forgetfulness of difference within the positioning into a block of everything without difference*. The philosophical discrimen concerns the state of *coming-to-power and overpowering of everything* through the discerning of withstanding<sup>10</sup> it with-in dwelling in the world.

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Consequently, it is less important, how present or wanted in the world philosophy within the crisis of this time still is, than, *how much world there is in philosophy*, how much of the world is still transported and comported with it. Of course, we should refrain from envisioning the world as being a block, but we should let it be supported and transported in the sense of the opening of dwelling.

The question, how much dwelling in the world is still sustained in the state of overpowering of everything, harbors the discrimen of philosophy, i. e. the respective dis-sentience of philosophy, insofar as it has found itself not only at the crossways or crossroads, but also in front of a dead end. Yet also in the configuration of the enormous blockade *the slight dif-ference* takes figure, to which philosophy bears witness. This slightness bears contemplation. It bears what in the slightness also forms *the sense of thinking*, which had in the earliest philosophy received the character of critique, and which has on the basis of its

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10 The usage of the term “withstanding [prestajanje]” is in this context based upon the appropriation of Heidegger’s term “Verwinden” (“surmounting/recovering/recuperating”) by the Italian school of “weak thought” (*pensiero debole*). Cf. Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Inattualità del pensiero debole*, Forum, Udine 2011.



historical critical development in the later stages revealed the signs of crisis,<sup>11</sup> masking more and more its state and transforming into hypocrisy; insofar as, of course, this perversion is not the hallmark of its origin, in face of which philosophy deals “only”, according to Hegel, with *the inverted world*, or in the best case, according to Nietzsche, with *the world that became a fable*.

From within this respective dis-sentience of philosophy the (f)actual problems of this time re-appear in the dimension of worldness, which needs no interpretation or change, but *the slightness of letting-be*. Insofar as – and because – we are used to defend the ruthless critique of everything existing, the critique taking source in letting-be seems to be a paradox and negligible attitude.

And yet, does Parmenides against the predominant doxy not paradoxically say that there *is* “*is*”, *esti gar einai*? Is this earliest enunciation of *krísis* not precisely an indication for *the letting attitude of being*, together with the dis-sentience, coming with it or from within it?

Are we today not also essentially concerned with calling the world *world*? Precisely because the world overrides (across) everything, we cannot allow ourselves to override everything. Our main concern is probably that at all there is “*allowing*”, in which we can sense the dimension of letting-be, not only of a dictate or of an interdiction. Letting-be as being concerned with what is humanly weak, yet uniquely singular, cannot be replaced by any multiplications of power, but it can be, by them, blocked and annihilated. *The block* can write it off without wavering, yet dealing with the indescribable is not always so easily waved away. Perhaps it is quite enough to write this into a block notebook, to note it in an annotation.

*Translated by Andrej Božič*

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<sup>11</sup> Here we have in mind, of course, foremost Husserl’s discussion of “crisis” in the work *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1970) and his other writings from the 1930s.