

NEOLIBERALISM AND JAN PATOČKA ON SUPERCIVILISATION AND EDUCATION

For all the vast production of the wherewithal of living, human life remains homeless. Home is understood ever more as a shelter, a place to sleep over so we can return to work the next day, the place where we store the fruits of our labour and lead our ‘family life’ of which there is ever less. That humans, unlike all other animals, build dwellings, because they are not at home in the world, because they lean out of the world and for that reason are charged with a calling within and towards it, anchored in deep layers of the past which have not passed as long as they live on in them – all that vanishes in the face of modern voluntary and enforced mobility, the gigantic migrations which by now affect nearly all continents. The greatest homelessness, however, is in our relation to nature and to ourselves.¹

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In this paper, I will offer a consideration of the present conception of knowledge, information, and the power of the market as the all-knowing deity that rules the lives of us all. I will suggest that this vision of society is an outcome of the transformation of the mediaeval world to the world defined by modern

¹ Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1996b), 115.

sciences, whereby our human experience was not only devalued but lost in the new mathematized universe of modern Newtonian astrophysics. In this new version of the world, the idea of a God was outsourced to its margins, leaving science as the only framework to explain the physical world. However, the new science cannot, and has never claimed to, account for human existence. Its self-proclaimed domain is the sphere of nature that can be understood through mathematics. The new, formalised knowledge was defined by the substitutability of elements within the system by reducing all phenomena to a common measure.² Yet, this demarcation of the domain of scientific knowledge has left human experience homeless in our mathematized, formalised age.³

Hence, I will also consider the present vision of a person conceived as a risk-taking self, based on the economic notion of ‘human capital’ that has become ‘reality’ for many under neoliberalism, without understanding its ideological implications. The neoliberal notion of personal risk-taking skills of the market-actor is predicated on responsabilisation of the neoliberal subject, who is by definition always ignorant and always “embedded in a competitive environment”, which is ruled by “the laws of economics”,⁴ while social relations are ‘liquidified’. Philip Mirowski wryly recounts this ‘neoliberal wisdom’, when he writes, “salvation through the market comes not from solidarity with any delusional social class or occupational category, but instead bold assertion of individuality through capitulation to a life of risk”.⁵ For William Davies,

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2 See Patočka, “Zamyšlení nad Evropou”, eds Chvatík and Kouba, *Péče o duši: Soubor statí a přednášek o postavení člověka ve světě a v dějinách. Třetí díl: Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin. Varianty a přípravné práce z let 1973–1977. Dodatky k Péči o duši I a II* (Prague: Oikoymenh, 2002 [1976]), 257–262 259; Patočka, “Morálka Obecná a Morálka Vědce”, *O Smysl Dneška: Devět Kapitol o Problémech Světových i Českých* (Purley, Surrey, England: Rozmluvy, 1987 [1969]), 31–50 31.

3 For a change to the new scientific metaphysics, see Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science: A Historical and Critical Essay* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. [Bibliolife], 1925).

4 Shamir, “The Age of Responsibilization: On Market-Embedded Morality”, *Economy and Society* 37.1, (February 2008), 1.

5 Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Crisis* (London, New York: Verso, 2013), 120.

“economics is a technology with which to convert uncertainty into risk”,⁶ the process invented to individualise and responsabilise individual actors, so they accept that risks is their own only. In other words, neoliberal economics has constructed the new vision of the self and society, whereby the social is dissolved as a security backdrop that formerly gave us a certain security in our lives. There is no society, as Margaret Thatcher famously announced; there are only individuals and their families,⁷ while she also stressed that “economics [is] the method; the object is to change the heart and soul”.⁸ Her neoliberal sentimental ambition is now a part of our ‘obviousness’, the neoliberal common sense. We already *see* ourselves in terms of the individual, fighting for oneself, which presupposes the total atomising of society, where each of us supposedly freely build our own persona as human capital to offer on the market, ruled by anonymous market forces that rule our lives.

I suggest that the entrepreneurial framing of the self is a fiction that has become accepted as everyday reality. The result is that real human beings vanish into the calculable ‘amalgam’ of interchangeable ‘market actors’, becoming nodes in a system, stripped of any agency. They are reduced to the logic of all-knowing market that has become ‘a new God’ that knows all, as Mirowski suggests. This framing of the self leads to formalised versions of interchangeable ‘market actors’. The problems of formalisation and mathematisation, the issue of knowledge and its replacement with information are becoming more acute with the rise of neoliberalism and its version of the market that has replaced a God as its founding all-knowing ground.⁹

6 Davies, “Knowing the Unknowable: The Epistemological Authority of Innovation Policy Experts”, *Social Epistemology* 25.4(2011), 402.

7 Thatcher, “Interview for *Woman’s Own* (‘no such thing as society’)”, (23 Sep 1987, Web).

8 Thatcher, “Economics are the Method: The object is to Change the Soul: Interview for Sunday Times: Mrs Thatcher – The First Two Years”, (1 May 1981, Web).

9 Mirowski and Nik-Khan, *The Knowledge We Have Lost in Information: The History of Information in Modern Economics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

In order to frame my argument, I will revisit Jan Patočka's paper "Supercivilisation and its Inner Conflict,"¹⁰ which offers a possible understanding of this new configuration of society. The changeover from an idea of God as the ground of knowledge and morality to one of absolute rationality, as Patočka calls it, is still not resolved. This is the problem that he addresses in his paper. Patočka's consideration of the changes to modern society is an extension of his concern with finite human responsibility.

Supercivilisation

For Patočka, the characteristic of supercivilisation is the anonymous acting out of forces that do not rely on charismatic leaders or special events but that seem to work automatically. Patočka extends the analysis of Arnold Toynbee's 'categorisation' of the different forms of civilisation¹¹ to claim that ours is historically unprecedented. It is based on an instrumental rationality that has forgotten its ground. For him, this leads to knowledge becoming dehumanised and dehistoricised, reduced to a motley amalgam of 'information' and ahistorical formalisation, based on mathematical, formal, and, now we can add, algorithmic formulas. Patočka argues that there are two versions of supercivilisation: moderate and radical. In the moderate version, technology rules over nature, over things: "machines, tools, appliances". In radical supercivilisation, however, the aim of technology is to rule "people, individuals and social groups. It is social and political engineering".¹² It is a dream of human mastery over nature that started with Francis Bacon's vision of instrumental knowledge that will guide us and promote human power over nature. Descartes' vision of humans becoming possessors and masters of nature is the continuation of this dream. Finally, the Enlightenment's dream that science will now help us to

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10 Patočka, "Nadcivilizace a její vnitřní konflikt [Supercivilisation and its Inner Conflict]", eds Chvatík and Kouba, *Péče o duši: Soubor statí a přednášek o postavení člověka ve světě a v dějinách. Statí z let 1929–1952. První díl: Nevydané texty z padesátých let* (Prague: Oikoyemenh, 1996c), 243–302.

11 Toynbee, *A Study of History: The One-Volume Edition* (London: Oxford University Press and Thames and Hudson, 1972).

12 Patočka, "Nadcivilizace a její vnitřní konflikt [Supercivilisation and its Inner Conflict]", 261.

understand society and resolve the problem of wars led to the nineteenth century's application of scientific methodology to society. This was an extension of the original dream to master society itself.

A Scientific Vision of the Physical World

Once we have accepted that scientific methodology is 'applicable' to the study of society, the nature of the inquiry changes. Society, just like nature, is imagined to be ruled by 'laws' that humans can describe, understand and, then use to predict futural social 'development'. Once this methodology is transplanted into the sphere of human affairs, human society is conceived as manipulable 'amalgam' of interchangeable entities that can be moulded according to the designs of those in power. Patočka warns against this vision of Shigalov society (as Dostoevsky names it),¹³ calling it radical supercivilisation. Once we accept that we can know fully how society works, the possibility of 'radical supercivilisation', as Patočka describes it, *might* become our reality.

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As a means of countering this predicament, Patočka takes the reduction of human unique experience subsumed into the model of 'society' as his central problem to show that human existence in its cultural embeddedness in the life-world cannot be reduced to formalised models that we have transposed and transformed from the natural and social sciences. He investigates the split between humans living in the world and their scientific description.¹⁴ Scientific reasoning relegates 'imprecise' human experience to the sphere of 'subjective beliefs', while 'scientific' description is conventionally understood as 'objective reasoning'. Here, reason and objectivity are taken as interchangeable. However, as Husserl points out, scientific reasoning is not the only expression of reason.¹⁵ Reason has a broader connotation and a richer history than its present, reductive use might suggest: science cannot and does not aspire to

13 Dostoevsky, *Demons: A Novel in Three Parts* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

14 For his further discussion of this 'split', see Patočka, *The Natural World as a Philosophical Problem*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

15 The same claim was already made by Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996 [1781]).

account for humans living in the life-world, because “the sciences recognize as true only what is objectively established”.¹⁶ Yet, if this ‘objective’, scientific description is ‘applied’ to our human lives, then the scientific approach to human experience leads to humans’ “unbearable lack of clarity about [their] own existence”.¹⁷ Husserl further claims that science dresses the life-world in a garb of ideas, which are “the so-called objectively scientific truths”, exemplified by Uwe Pörksen’s idea of “plastic words”.¹⁸ However, such ‘plastic words’ and the discourses they inform become the accepted obviousness of current ‘common sense’ views on human existence. Instead of opening the space to question this ‘obviousness’, they close it. Thinking anew the impossibility to address the complexity of the human experiential understanding, as well as to resolve the ethical ambivalence that demarcates our lives, becomes impossible.

At the present, human existence is already informed by the neoliberal agenda of economising all aspects of living based and derived from the scientifically informed formalisation of all and sundry. As Henry Giroux recently puts it, “the atomization and loneliness many people felt in a neoliberal social order” is co-dependent on a public derision of “dependency, solidarity, community, and any viable notion of the commons”.¹⁹

Michel Foucault’s lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* are credited with prescient insights into the neoliberal turn.²⁰ I will sketch here the way Foucault is also a hostage to the ‘scientific’ explanation represented in his lectures by his description of the shift from who governs to ‘governmental process’, from

16 Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1970), 6–7.

17 Husserl, “Appendix I: The Vienna Lecture: Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity”, trans. Carr, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwest University Press, 1970 [1935]), 269–299, 297.

18 Poerksen, *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1995).

19 Giroux, »Militant Hope in the Age of the Politics of the Disconnect«, *CounterPunch*, (23 December 2016, Web).

20 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978–79* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

why someone governs to *how* the process works. Peter Woelert notes that Foucault explains “the ‘how’ of governing over the question of ‘who’ governs/is governed”.²¹ It could also be said that the shift from who governs whom to a description of how governmentality works is based on the scientific drive to describe the process by eliminating agents of this process, a shift which Foucault does not acknowledge. Or, to cite Foucault, the “economic question is always to be posed within the field of governmental practice, in terms of its effects” and not in terms of “What original rights can found this governmentality?”²² In other words, using Patočka’s analyses, this turn, outlined by Foucault, to judge governmental practice by the ‘consequences’ of the state’s action can be traced back to the beginning of modern scientific reasoning, when examination into the ‘why’ of things was substituted by an inquiry into ‘how’ they work. The most famous (although later) expression of this mode of research is by Newton, who aptly put it: ‘*Hypotheses non fingo*’, ‘I offer no hypotheses “based on occult qualities”’.²³ I offer no speculation on why things are as they are; I only speak of ‘facts of nature’: facts that can be discovered by the use of mathematics. In other words, even though we still do not know what gravity is, we can observe the process of ‘gravitational forces’ in nature and, by using a mathematical model, we can discern what these gravitational forces might be by observing their ‘work’. To put it in Foucault’s terms, the mediaeval understanding of why someone governs, or by what right someone governs, is re-configured in terms of ‘how’ can we account for good governmental practices

21 Woelert, “Technology, Knowledge, Governance: The Political Relevance of Husserl’s Critique of the Epistemic Effects of Formalization”, *Continental Philosophy Review* 46.4, (December 2013), 488.

22 “Political economy reflects on governmental practices themselves, and it does not question ... whether or not they are legitimate in terms of right. It considers them in terms of their effects rather than their origins, ... What matters is not whether or not this is legitimate in terms of law, but what its effects are and whether they are negative. ... The economic question is always to be posed within the field of governmental practice, not in terms of what may found it by right, but in terms of its effects: What are the real effects of the exercise of governmentality? Not: What original rights can found this governmentality?” Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France 1978–79*, 15.

23 See Cohen, “The First English Version of Newton’s *Hypotheses non fingo*”, *Isis* 53.3, (Sep. 1962), 379–380.

in terms of an instrumental understanding of the ‘outcomes’ of governmental actions, which the state must be able to present as quantifiable data. According to Mackinnon, “*Biopolitics* can be characterised by the pervasive statistical quantification of all dimensions of life that become calculable coordinates integral to the system of governance. Normative values can be inferred from large amounts of data providing governance ..., whilst being rather contingent and overly generalised.”²⁴

Here, I want to pay attention precisely to the underlying contingency and generalisation that is endemic to every system identified as such. I propose that Patočka’s reaction to the development of ‘governmental action’ – or his reflection on the reduction of human societies’ structures from their multiplicity of forms to the one rationalised form of supercivilisation – is a different, and I would claim, more fruitful attempt to reflect on the present. Following Patočka, as noted above, I suggest that the mathematical and formalisable aspects of knowledge have a long historical lineage, starting with the rise of modern science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a turn that has transformed scientific inquiry’s focus from ‘why’ nature works in particular ways to ‘how natural processes’ work. To put it differently, one might say that it was the change of inquiry, enabled by the mathematising of nature, that allowed humans to make a shift: from explaining uncontrollable forces of nature in terms of ‘why’ – Zeus’ anger or God’s creation to explain the thunderstorm – to ‘how’ these forces – electrical discharge – work, in order to assume control over those forces, and thus leading to a change in our perception of nature. Nature becomes something that, while we might not know ‘why’ it is the way it is, we can nonetheless control it. We have become masters and possessors of nature, as Descartes proclaimed. Using processes of formalisation based on mathematisation, we can figure out ‘how’ those forces ‘work’, allowing us to predict future ‘occurrences’. And it is this change of focus that has influenced the study of society from the eighteenth century to the present, from the Age of Reason to the Age of Information. The nineteenth century was especially

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24 Mackinnon, "Love's Algorithm: The Perfect Parts for my Machine", eds Amooore and Piotukh, *Algorithmic Life: Calculative Devices in the Age of Big Data* (London: Routledge, 2016), 161–175, 173.

important for the rise of many disciplines that we now ‘group’ under the heading of social sciences. The formalised, mathematized approach to the study of society thus became the norm.

According to Patočka, one way of understanding this new configuration of knowledge and society is to take into account the turn from qualitative understanding to quantitative know-how that began with the rise of modern scientific reasoning.²⁵ Once this quantitative understanding was extended to the study of ‘society’ as a mechanism, living human beings were reduced to interchangeable components of the system.

Max Weber makes a claim similar to Patočka’s in relation to the victory of instrumental ends-means rationality.²⁶ For Weber, this rationality brought us “a polar night of icy darkness and hardness”.²⁷ As Patočka notes, this total rationalisation of all aspects of human living in the world is without precedent: no previous civilisation has aimed to rationalise everything, from natural processes to human associations,²⁸ as well as, at present, defining everything in economic terms, including knowledge. Although, Davies notes that the neoliberal market’s calculation of “processes of knowledge commodification” is derived from “a clumsy, excessively rationalist scientific tool, which cannot capture the dynamics of how knowledge is actually acquired, shared and implemented”,²⁹ he does not address the issue of the conceptual change. The substitution of knowledge with information that could be offered in the market-place of ideas is the change in the domain of concepts. Knowledge cannot be quantified, information can; knowledge – until very recently – cannot be owned, information can. Knowledge cannot be produced; information

25 See Patočka, "Zamyšlení nad Evropou" 259; Patočka, "Morálka Obecná a Morálka Vědce" 31.

26 For an interesting argument, considering Weber’s influence on Patočka, see Homolka, *Koncept racionální civilizace: Patočkovovo pojetí modernity ve světle civilizační analýzy* (Prague: Togga, 2016).

27 Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 128.

28 Patočka, "Nadcivilizace a její vnitřní konflikt [Supercivilisation and its Inner Conflict]", 248.

29 Davies, "Knowing the Unknowable: The Epistemological Authority of Innovation Policy Experts", 402.

can, according to George Stigler. If, today, we speak of ‘knowledge production’, we surreptitiously replace knowledge with ‘information’. An acceptance of this substitution means that if information is possible to quantify, ‘produce’ and ‘exchange’ for other information, then, so is knowledge. According to Stigler, “one of the information-producing industries” is, as he notes, “advertising”;³⁰ hence, if we can ‘produce information’, we surely can ‘produce’ knowledge. As Stigler makes clear, “information is a valuable resource: knowledge *is* power”, whereby knowledge and information are simply equivocated. According to Konrad Liessmann,³¹ we need to finally acknowledge the complete victory of capitalist economy, which has redefined what ‘knowledge’ is.³²

Education and the Logic of Corporations

Education is the formation of human sociability in such a way that the cultural work of the older generation is passed on to a new generation, which will ensure their full membership in the company of elders.³³

In 2006, the Austrian philosopher, Liessmann, published the book, *Theory of Dyseducation*,³⁴ in which he reflects on the ‘knowledge society’ and the mantra of ‘life-long learning’, propagated as a new and unavoidable turn in the present age.³⁵ Knowledge, in this new market understanding, is recognized only if it can ‘prove’ its economic usefulness – in other words, its quantita-

30 Stigler, “The Economics of Information”, *The Journal of Political Economy* 69.3, (June 1961), 213.

31 Liessmann, *Theorie der Unbildung: Die Irrtümer der Wissensgesellschaft* (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2006).

32 See also, for example, Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Collini, *What are Universities For?* (London: Penguin Books, 2012); Collini, “Sold Out”, *London Review of Books* 35.20 (2013); Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (London, New York: Verso, 2017).

33 Patočka, “Filosofie výchovy [Philosophy of Education]”, 384.

34 Liessmann, *Theorie der Unbildung: Die Irrtümer der Wissensgesellschaft* [*Theory of Dyseducation: The Errors of the Knowledge Society* (*Theorie der Unbildung: Die Irrtümer der Wissensgesellschaft*)]. I will use the Czech translation of this book, Liessmann, *Teorie nevzdělanosti: Omyly společnosti vědění* (Prague: Akademie, 2010).

35 See also Liessmann, *Geisterstunde: Die Praxis der Unbildung: Eine Streitschrift* (München: Piper Verlag GmbH, 2014).

tively 'predicted' trend to make money – instead of requiring 'investment' for its 'production'.³⁶

Yet, if we maintain that knowledge cannot be produced, how can we think about it. Perhaps, as in many other cases, Plato is a good starting point, when he writes, “knowledge is not something that can be put into words [ῥητον γαρ ουδαμως εστιν] **like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is rekindled, it is born in the soul and straightway (sic) nourishes itself**”.³⁷ In other words, knowledge and education are co-dependent. Only by learning, can one become knowledgeable. It is a life journey and not an exchange of 'goods'. In this understanding knowledge cannot be commodified, cannot be owned, sold, or exchanged. However, mathematisation and formalisation of knowledge in the sciences can lead also to the reconfiguration of what knowledge is. As Husserl notes, a scientist today is “the ingenious technician, the constructor, as it were, who, looking merely to formal interconnections, builds up his theory like a technical work of art”.³⁸ This type of formalisation of knowledge makes knowledge amenable to its marketization as information.

By contrast, previous ages considered knowledge important, aiming to publicly support education in order to cultivate the “many-sided development of human virtues and capabilities”³⁹ by teaching students to be critical in order to understand the world and how to find a place in it. To develop the students' potential meant to teach them their historical situatedness; to prepare them to become “responsible and enlightened citizen[s]”.⁴⁰ In Wilhelm von Humboldt's

36 See, for example, Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*; Collini, *What are Universities For?*.

37 Plato, "Letter VII", ed. Cooper, trans. Morrow, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997b), 1646–1667, 341c–d.

38 Husserl, *Logical Investigations (Vol 1)*, International Library of Philosophy (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), §71, 159.

39 Bohlin, “*Bildung* and Moral Self-Cultivation in Higher Education: What Does it Mean and How Can it be Achieved?”, (Summer 2008, Web).

40 Liessmann in Kahteran, "Against the Simplification of Thought and Educational Ideas: Interview with Konrad Paul Liessmann", *Philosophy Study* 3.8, (August 2013), 799.

vision, “in learning[,] memory [is] exercised, understanding sharpened, judgment rectified, and moral feeling (*sittliche Gefühl*) refined”⁴¹

According to Patočka, it is not enough to give students tools to use in seeking solutions to a problem; rather, it is necessary to teach them to realise that they need to search for why there is a problem in the first place and what the reasons are for it. Students, instead of learning the means toward predefined ends, must be made aware of the larger context of their historical situation. Education should call into question the everydayness of our understanding, to disrupt purported facts and information, to make us all aware that knowing only particulars does not give us knowledge. When we do not understand specific historical contexts, the ‘market-place of ideas’ becomes the only arbiter of what counts as knowledge, while the instability of information is simply accounted for by our ignorance. When the historical background of any knowledge claim is lost in an ahistorical onslaught of information, we become blind to information’s ideological background. Our understanding of the world around us has vanished. In such a situation, we all become powerless: only by understanding history and the conceptual foundations of particulars can we all become critical users of information. In other words, we can only be free in relation to what counts as knowledge today if we can understand where this present re-conceptualisation of it comes from; and if we can stand apart from the claims offered to us as ‘obvious’. Only then we would be able to reflect on those claims as well as on our historical present.⁴² Only when we can question what is being offered to us as ‘natural’, ‘normative’ or ‘common-sense’ truth can we freely understand the structural enframing of those claims. We must be able to disrupt their seemingly unquestionable ‘everydayness’⁴³

But this notion is now declared old-fashioned and inadequate for our technologically advanced twenty-first century. According to Liessmann, in its new

41 Wilhelm von Humboldt cited in Bohlin, “*Bildung* and Moral Self-Cultivation in Higher Education: What Does it Mean and How Can it be Achieved?”

42 Patočka, “*Filosofie výchovy* [Philosophy of Education]”, 367.

43 See Mirowski’s account of ‘Everyday Neoliberalism’ in Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Crisis*, as well as Dardot and Laval, “The New Way of the World, Part II: The Performance/Pleasure Apparatus”, *e-flux journal* 52 (2014b); Dardot and Laval, “The New Way of the World, Part I: Manufacturing the Neoliberal Subject”, *e-flux journal* 51 (2014a).

form, knowledge becomes information that is now 'tested' in the class-rooms in the form of quizzes. Education has parted company with knowledge, as we understood it previously.⁴⁴

To understand these post-war changes to the conception of what counts as knowledge in the West, it is important to revisit the writings of economists Friedrich Hayek, Gary Becker and Theodore W. Schultz.⁴⁵ According to Hayek, we need to recognise "the inevitable ignorance of all of us concerning a great many of the factors on which the achievement of our ends and welfare depends".⁴⁶ None of us have adequate knowledge, since "we normally do not know who knows best".⁴⁷ In other words, as Mirowski points out, Hayek's claim is that only the market can know and we should heed its guidance, since "the Market [is] a superior information processor".⁴⁸ For Hayek, it is through the process of competition that the market let us to discover "facts which, if the procedure did not exist, would remain unknown or at least would not be used".⁴⁹ For Hayek, then, knowledge becomes a collection of facts and information that enable otherwise ignorant actors to act in the market. As Schultz succinctly summarises, "I prefer the concept of information because it is subject to fewer ambiguities; the term 'knowledge' has all too many different meanings. I also prefer 'information' because of the advances in the treatment of the economics of information".⁵⁰ In short, to return to Hayek, "the individual in the pursuit of his ends" profits "from knowledge that the market provides", since

44 Liessmann, *Teorie nevzdělanosti: Omyly společnosti vědění*, 36.

45 Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Special Reference to Education* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Schultz, "Investment in Human Capital", *The American Economic Review* 51.1, (Mar. 1961); Schultz, *Investment in Human Capital: The Role of Education and of Research* (New York: The Free Press, 1971); Schultz, "Investment in Entrepreneurial Ability", *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 82.4(1980).

46 Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 29.
47 *Ibid.*, 110.

48 Mirowski, *Science-Mart: Privatizing American Science* (Cambridge, Mass., London, England: Harvard University Press, 2011), 323.

49 Hayek, "Competition as a Discovery Procedure", *The Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics* 5.3, (Fall 2002 [1968]), 9.

50 Schultz, *Investment in Human Capital: The Role of Education and of Research*, note 2, 203.

“he does not himself possess” it.⁵¹ In this move, knowledge becomes economic information and nothing more. Therefore, when we now speak of the “knowledge society”, it has nothing in common with knowledge as we traditionally understood it.⁵² The notion of *Bildung*,⁵³ the formation of the whole person, has vanished in the new neoliberal world.

In this framework, it is not knowledge of the larger context but simply our search for information, which we can sift through in this market-place of ideas, whereby we promote some ideas while others are eliminated from the purview. Jeremy Bentham already approvingly notes that the market discriminates in terms of ‘pleasure’ and not ‘knowledge’. He claims that “the value which [ideas] possess, is exactly in proportion to the pleasure they yield”. In this market evaluation, “the game of push-pin is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry. ... If poetry and music deserve to be preferred before a game of push-pin, it must be because they are calculated to gratify those individuals who are most difficult to be pleased”.⁵⁴ Given that poetry and music might be ‘valuable’ to only a few, then, inevitably, poetry and music will cease to be considered in terms of ‘investment’ for future profits, hence, eliminated from the space of ‘market-place of ideas’. Only those activities that can be monetised and used for future investment are recognised by the market’s entrepreneurial actors. The space of questioning and critique beyond the terms of the market itself is foreclosed. The aim of education based on the information that the market provides is, as Liessmann argues, the re-education of “responsible, free, judicious humans” into “conformist qualified human capital”.⁵⁵ In other words, not knowledge of oneself, of history, or society, but only economic information that is useful to each ‘rational actor’ turned into a node of the system is left over in the market-place of ‘ideas’. This is what Patočka calls radical supercivilisation ruled by absolute rationality.

51 Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, 22.

52 Liessmann, *Teorie nevzdělanosti: Omyly společnosti vědění*, 36.

53 Humanistic education includes aesthetic, historical and philosophical study, beyond skills and professional training.

54 Bentham, *The Rationale of Reward* (London: John and H. L. Hunt, 1825), 206–207.

55 Liessmann in Kahteran, “Against the Simplification of Thought and Educational Ideas: Interview with Konrad Paul Liessmann”, 799.

A dream of absolute rationality is to turn everything and everyone into the calculable data, without any remnants left unaccounted for, so the entire system can be controlled. The problem with the absolute rationality that pretends to replace the divine centre of previous civilisations, as Patočka points out, is its inability to provide moral guidance to people's lives. The benevolence and omniscience of God cannot be simply supplanted by the supposed omnipotence of reason, or the market, as the present neoliberal ideology professes. In short, to accept the idea of the omniscience of reason means that reason is totalitarian, as the thinkers of the Frankfurt School proposed.⁵⁶

In our present world, where knowledge is reduced to a plethora of information and data offered by the market, the critical thinking and questioning of ideas is perceived as unhelpful or as a hindrance to change. In the neoliberal market-place of ideas, the “weight of history is more often than not considered a burden of little consequence for the entrepreneurial agent, something that can be repudiated and reversed”.⁵⁷ If a person is conceived in terms of the human capital and its acquisition, then one can imagine that personal history of this acquisition could be reversed to some ‘other point’ of its ‘history’. This ‘personal history’ would be then tied to the construction of human person as a capital that can be changed, adapted, presented as malleable, always prepared to heed the demands of the market. In other words, one can reverse ‘history’ – to go back to the previous ‘version’ of the self and start again.

56 Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1997 [1951]); Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason. Lectures and Essays since the End of World War II* (New York: Continuum, 1994); Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1994 [1944]); Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London: Sphere Books, 1972).

57 Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Crisis*, 110.

Knowledge and Modern Science

Patočka speaks of the rise of “supercivilisation (nadcivilizace)” based on the new scientific reasoning,⁵⁸ whereby, “only effectual knowledge is real knowledge, what used to apply only to practice and production now holds for knowledge as such; knowledge is to lead us back to paradise, the paradise of inventions and possibilities of transforming and mastering the world to suit our needs while those needs remain undefined and unlimited.”⁵⁹ First, by transforming knowledge into effective ‘know-how,’⁶⁰ then into information, knowledge no longer can help us to critique, ask questions, or assess changes that neoliberalism unleashed upon society.

Our own society now claims to follow ‘rational market laws,’ which anonymously rule everything and everyone. Humans are incorporated into this market project as things among other things, as powers among other powers to be used when necessary,⁶¹ while trained to see themselves as self-created entrepreneurs.

A modern scientific approach to substitute the God’s omniscience with mathematical certitude eliminates from this concocted absolute rationality the humans who had erected this rational design.

Conclusion

To conclude with Patočka, we must admit, as Socrates did a long time ago, that we can only have human knowledge.⁶² Yet we need to take up again, as Socrates did at the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition, a

58 Patočka, “Nadcivilizace a její vnitřní konflikt [Supercivilisation and its Inner Conflict]” 247. At the time of his writing, Patočka speaks of two super-civilisations: The USA, which he terms moderate super-civilization, and The USSR that he calls the radical super-civilization. It would be interesting to revisit his argument in the light of the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it is beyond the scope of this paper.

59 Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* 84.

60 Patočka, “Nadcivilizace a její vnitřní konflikt [Supercivilisation and its Inner Conflict]” 247.

61 See, for example, Patočka, “Ideologie a Život v Ideji” *Kritický Měsíčník* 7.1/21946); Patočka, “Ideology and Life in the Idea”, edited and translated by Manton. *Living in Problematicity* (Prague: Oikoymenh, 2007 [1946]), 43–50.

62 Plato, “Apology”.

fight against this assumed over-rationalised and formalised omnipotence. We must accept the uncertainty of human knowledge as well as the problematicity of human existence, while searching for new ways to think about existential non-quantifiable, yet, communicable aspects of our lives, which we cannot explain using mathematical models. We should not let ourselves be seduced by mathematical models. Although “math [*sic*] provide[s] a neat refuge from the messiness of the real world”,⁶³ it is incapable of offering any existential understanding of it. According to Kathy O’Neil, the reliance on mathematical formalisations reduces human “lives to the dictates of a mathematical model”.⁶⁴ A similar claim is offered by Lee Mackinnon, writing that the “traversal of the algorithm across qualitatively disparate domains imposes a quantitative, homogenising rationale, setting all experience upon a plane of equivalence”.⁶⁵ In other words, in our new algorithmic world, ‘a quantitative, homogenising rationale’ eliminates differences in the name of sameness. Once we accept that the system *is* the expression of our lives, we lose the ability to see its limitations.⁶⁶ The ‘alienation’ created between the world of our lives and its ‘objective treatment’ by modern sciences – using mathematics, statistics and the computerised algorithms – becomes hidden in its obviousness, while, at the same time, diminishing the importance of our unique human experience by levelling it to equations that supposedly explain everything in the new bright neoliberal world, demarcated by economic terms.

The problem of knowledge and its substitution with information leads to the real ignorance of us all. The outcome might lead to the society described in Mike Judge’s film *Idiocracy* (2006),⁶⁷ where humans have lost the ability to

63 O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 12016.

64 *Ibid.*, 128.

65 Mackinnon, “Love’s Algorithm: The Perfect Parts for my Machine”, 169.

66 Patočka, “Nebezpečí technizace ve vědě u E. Husserla a bytostné jádro techniky jako nebezpečí u M. Heideggera (2. version)”, eds Chvatík and Kouba, trans. Chvatík, *Péče o duši: Soubor statí a přednášek o postavení člověka ve světě a v dějinách. Třetí díl: Kacířské eseje o filosofii dějin. Varianty a přípravné práce z let 1973–1977. Dodatky k Péči o duši I a II* (Prague: Oikoymenh, 2002 [1974]), 193–226, p. 206.

67 *Idiocracy*. Dir. Judge. (20th Century Fox, 2006).

know anything outside of the advertising providing them with 'knowledge' through "the information-producing industries".⁶⁸

Patočka's radical supercivilisation constitutes the contemporary context in which the production of knowledge is understood as interpreting and responding to the market, while the market alone possesses knowledge.⁶⁹ It is a dream of absolute human rationality, which has managed to eliminate humans from its edifice. The only way to counter this formalized and automated rationality is to return to Socrates' questioning and accept that our knowledge can only be human. It means to think anew human responsibility by rejecting absolute rationality that cannot account for individual human experience. It means also to reject the other side of this binary: ignorance and irrationality. Absolute rationality is not the opposite of absolute ignorance; it depends on it. We are only human, but we must affirm a rational approach to our human questions, while acknowledging also our human situatedness and responsibility for our knowledge claims. We need to reclaim human sociability and cultural tradition to start questioning the claims that, by reducing us all to ignorant entrepreneurs taking care of ourselves, are presented as obvious. We must reclaim the history of ideas, of enquiry and of knowledge to make a human future possible.

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