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**Kristina Stoeckl**

## **Community after the Subject. The Orthodox Intellectual Tradition and the Philosophical Discourse of Political Modernity**

The political background raising conceptual challenges for our investigation into the problematic of human subjectivity and community, is the post-Cold War and post-totalitarian constellation of Europe. Especially in Europe, the problematic of the human subject and community gains salience at the present point in time both as a philosophical and as a political issue. Philosophical, because the overcoming of totalitarianism has not brought about the scenario foreseen by Francis Fukuyama (we do not observe a universalization of Western liberal democracy and a global triumph of the individualist-liberalist paradigm). Political, because the Huntingtonean scenario of a clash of civilizations along the borderline of Eastern and Western Christianity requires us to scrutinize the differences and commonalities between a variety of approaches to the issue of the human subject and life in common in different European intellectual traditions. What this paper attempts to do is to bring the two issues which emerge from the post-totalitarian and post-Cold War constellation of Europe together, to intertwine the contemporary debate on subjectivity and community with the question of Europe as a space delimited from the East along the borderline of Eastern and Western Christianity. The aim is to look at notions of subjectivity and community in Western philosophy and in a philosophy of Eastern Christian background, and to draw from this encounter some elements of a political philosophy of community and of a European philosophical space that can accommodate, beyond alleged borderlines, those different intellectual traditions which make up the richness and ambivalence of Europe's political, cultural and religious heritage.

### **THE QUESTION OF THE HUMAN SUBJECT AND COMMUNITY IN POST-TOTALITARIAN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY**

The historical experience of the totalitarian regimes of Nazism and Stalinism signifies a watershed for European political philosophy. That the dissolution of the individual human being into the body of a postulated Volk or kollektiv, and that the conflation of state and society into a total representation of power were not only possible, but could also, at their onset, exert a considerable persuasiveness, raises questions that require us to scrutinize the very concepts of our political reasoning.<sup>1</sup> What is the human subject? What is community? And, first and foremost, what is the relationship between the two? These are questions of an eminently political nature because they are concerned with the workings of society, with life in common, with the

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, ed. Samantha Power (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), Claude Lefort, "The Logic of Totalitarianism," in *The political forms of modern society. Bureaucracy, democracy, totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1986).

principles that shape society and human co-existence.<sup>2</sup> From Claude Lefort, the philosopher who has put on trial the concept of democracy in the light of the totalitarian experience, we know that the particularity of modern democracy lies in the fact that it designates the place of power as empty.<sup>3</sup> In democracy, Lefort writes, "the legitimacy of power is based on the people: but the image of popular sovereignty is linked to the image of an empty place, impossible to occupy, such that those who exercise public authority can never claim to appropriate it."<sup>4</sup> Democracy combines two apparently contradictory principles: on the one hand, power emanates from the people; on the other, it is the power of nobody. Democracy thrives on this contradiction, and I read Lefort as saying that the very task of political philosophy is to uphold and to comprehend this contradiction, and to safeguard the emptiness and creative ambivalence of the place of power in modern democracy.

Post-totalitarian thinking of the political (*le politique*) operates in the light of the totalitarian occupation of the empty place of power, it proceeds from the historical experience of totalitarianism as one of modernity's political possibilities.<sup>5</sup> In totalitarian systems, the place of power becomes identified with one meaning, one individual, or one destiny. The effect is twofold. On the one hand a radical communitization of individual life – no life outside of the common cause becomes imaginable. And on the other hand, an extreme atomization of society – the only permissible bond between human beings is the one dictated by the common cause. What is at stake in post-totalitarian political philosophy, is to comprehend this double challenge, to preclude both the danger of all-engulfing communitization, in other words the loss of individual freedom, and to preclude the danger of atomization, in other words the fragmentation of society and any form of being in common. The task of modern political philosophy, which emerges in all its clarity maybe only with the totalitarian experience, is to account for the tension between the autonomy of individuals and their inter-relatedness in a common world, between the singular human being and community.

### ***The liberal approach: theorizing the polity***

The conclusions which political thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century draw from this insight differ. From a liberal perspective, the definition of the political which I have just given, is faulty. Liberal political theory rests on the separation of the political from the social. It is concerned with the workings of the polity, not of society in general. We find this most clearly formulated in John Rawls, who seeks to establish the liberal doctrine in a less utilitarian and more legal fashion, retrieving its origins in social contract theory.<sup>6</sup> Post-totalitarian liberal political theory is characterized by a limited conceptual elaboration of the human subject. It is not in need of any particular theory of the nature of the person, since people do only matter, politically, as parties to the social contract, neutralized behind the veil of ignorance. From this definition (or lack of definition) of the human subject follows the precariousness of the concept of community in liberalism. Rawls does not have a concept of community, but one of the polity as a system of cooperation. From the liberal perspective, a well-ordered polity is not a community but the product of an overlapping consensus on political issues related to comprehensive doctrines. In short, the liberal approach advocates the

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<sup>2</sup> Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?," in *Democracy and political theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press in association with Basil Blackwell, Oxford, UK, 1988), 216-9.

<sup>3</sup> In terms of Cornelius Castoriadis, we could say that modern society acknowledges the contingency of its self-institution. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Gesellschaft als imaginare Institution. Entwurf einer politischen Philosophie* (Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Lefort, "The Logic of Totalitarianism," 279.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Wagner, *Theorizing Modernity: Inescapability and Attainability in Social Theory* (London et. al: Sage, 2001), 54-5.

<sup>6</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, Expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

abandonment of substantial formulations of what people are and what people have in common and its substitution with legal ties.

Liberalism has been criticized for this abandonment. The critical voices can be divided into two basic categories, the communitarian and the postmodern response. Communitarian critics of liberalism hold that some substantive grounding of politics is necessary and that it is possible to formulate such a grounding without amounting to a renewed risk of totalitarianism. Postmodern political thinkers, on the other hand, take issue with the ontology underlying both liberal and communitarian political theory, which they accuse of upholding essentialist notions of subjectivity and community.

### ***The communitarian approach: theorizing community***

Communitarian political theory, developed predominantly in Anglo-American philosophy in response to the success of Rawlsian liberalism in the 1970s, is best understood in the light of the experience of totalitarianism. In the face of the two totalitarian systems which had marked the twentieth century, the non-liberal political theories of the nineteenth century were frequently interpreted as the culprits of the deterioration of the political into fascism and communism. Hegel's philosophy was considered to have given rise both to the criticism of rational humanism and liberalism from the right, culminating in the theory of the state by Carl Schmitt, and from the left, engendering Marxism and Leninism. Romanticism, marked by Herder's discovery of the culturally and linguistically defined Volk, was identified as the root of nationalism.<sup>7</sup> In the light of this apparent breakdown of non-liberal political philosophy, Charles Taylor's reading of Hegel or Alasdair MacIntyre's departure from Marxism was perceived as an affront by many liberal thinkers.<sup>8</sup> The communitarians repudiate the liberal criticism by insisting that a substantial grounding of life in common is desirable and possible without inevitably leading to totalitarian mutilation.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the substantial grounding which the communitarians undertake is rooted in moral philosophy and in sociology. In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor makes the claim that the liberal anthropological paradigm is not politically viable, that a society built on utilitarian, instrumental and individualist-atomist paradigms alone will not function. What is therefore needed, the communitarians argue, is the recognition that human beings are "encumbered selves", embedded in contexts, institutions, personal histories, and that they draw from these context moral orientation and a sense of the common.<sup>10</sup> This communitarian argument certainly does not lack plausibility, but at the same time the "sociological shortcut" to community, as one is tempted to call this strategy, bears a considerable weakness. This becomes particularly clear in a text by Etzioni, where he argues the cause that the individual is always embedded in a social context. The alleged fault-line between liberalism and communitarianism runs along the concept of freedom, Etzioni writes. Those who prioritize individual freedom leave out the sociological need for affective, non-rational bonds, those who prioritize community leave insufficient basis for individual freedom and individual rights. Etzioni wants to overcome this distinction by proposing a new vision of the human subject that is modeled after the dialogical concept proposed by Martin Buber. Etzioni uses Buber rather freely here, replacing his notion of the 'I&Though' with 'I&We' without much further ado: "The 'I' stands for the individual member of the community. The 'We' signifies social, cultural, political, and hence historical and institutional forces that shape the collective factor – the community."<sup>11</sup> What Etzioni does is to basically split

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<sup>7</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwölf Vorlesungen*, 1 ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Amy Gutman, "Communitarian Critics of Liberalism," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985): 319.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 521.

<sup>10</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the limits of justice*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Amitai Etzioni, "A moderate communitarian proposal," *Political Theory* 24, no. 2 (1996): 157.

the human subject into two halves which stand in a – in his view healthy – tension with each other: an uncommunitized and a communitized half. According to Etzioni, an equilibrium can and has to be found within every specific historical situation. What Etzioni does not do, and with him none of the communitarian writers, is to argue ontologically for this dual make-up of the human subject. When Etzioni writes "there is a strong accumulation of evidence that people have a deep-seated need for social bonds (or attachments) and that they have a compelling need for normative (or moral) guidance," he draws from this the conclusion that "the communitarian self [...] is a rather empirically well-grounded concept," but he falls short of having disproved liberal theory on philosophical grounds. He has not confronted the ontologies of the subject which Taylor in *Sources of the Self* criticized as insufficient – Descartes' disembodied soul, the self-making subject of Locke, or the Kantian purely rational being.<sup>12</sup> He has opposed them empirically. The consequence of the communitarian restriction to a sociological argument for the embeddedness of the human subject can be seen clearly in the later works of Taylor and in the writings of Michael Walzer.<sup>13</sup> There the constitution of the human subject and the issue of community are considered as two separate issues. Communitarian thinkers suggest that we can theorize community without a prior theorizing of the subject. Their approach is holist.

### *The postmodern approach: theorizing the human subject*

This holistic approach to community is criticized by the second response to individualist liberalism, namely postmodern political thought. Postmodern political philosophers single out that crucial element of the political which the other two theories with their focus on the polity and on community respectively neglect, namely the human subject. I will argue that postmodern political philosophy does not necessarily stop at the much acclaimed "death of the subject" but that it represents an innovative take on the problematic of human freedom and life in common which challenges the conceptual limits of Western thought and that it can, beyond negativity, offer an integrative elaboration of individuality and community.

Postmodern political philosophy has been described as 'un-political' (*impolitico*) by the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito.<sup>14</sup> What he means by that is that postmodern political thinking is un-political in the sense that it undoes the separation between politics and the political, it is political-philosophical by way of Lefort's definition, concerned with the principles that shape life in common. Esposito identifies the roots of this way of thinking in Nietzsche and Heidegger, and he finds a concrete elaboration of it in the works of Hannah Arendt, George Bataille, Marcel Blanchot and Jan Patocka. The list could be prolonged to include Esposito himself, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Derrida, Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and many others. These thinkers inaugurate a way of thinking about the political that is characterized by a radical questioning of the modern political vocabulary and by a scrutiny of the origins of our modern understanding of the political. What they share is the intuition that the event of totalitarianism was not a negation of the foundational principles of political modernity, but a possible outcome of these.

The postmodern political philosophers understand their task as bringing to the light the tensions between the singularity and particularity of the individual and its boundedness in a common world, inherent in the modern political project, and to maintain this tension in an ongoing critical reflection.<sup>15</sup> From this self-understanding follows that postmodern political thinkers are first and foremost concerned with ontology. This 'return of ontology into political

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, 515.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge (MA), London: Harvard University Press, 1995), Michael Walzer, "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," *Political Theory* 18, no. 1 (1990).

<sup>14</sup> Roberto Esposito, "Impolitico," in *Enciclopedia del pensiero politico. Autori, concetti, dottrine*, ed. Roberto Esposito and Carlo Galli (Roma, Bari: Editori Laterza, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

theory', as it has been called, is frequently explained by the growing consciousness that we are living in late modernity, and that this implies a greater awareness of the conventionality of much of what has been taken for certain in the modern West.<sup>16</sup> The postmodern ontological reflection stands in the tradition of Nietzsche's nihilism and Heidegger's *Fundamentalontologie*. The main lesson drawn from Nietzsche is the genealogical method, with which he achieved a thorough criticism of modern subjectivity, rationalism and morality. For Nietzsche, nihilism was not a mere position taken within philosophy, nor a temporary crisis of the spirit, but it was the necessary departure of the entire Western philosophical tradition from its Platonic and Christian origins. Nihilism as the absence of foundations and of stable truths therefore opens up a space for creation.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Nietzsche himself, who interpreted this moment of creativity in terms of power (*Übermensch*), postmodern philosophy has tended to view it as an opening, as freedom, or, in a term coined by Gianni Vattimo, as the 'weakness' of our thinking (*il pensiero debole*).<sup>18</sup> The second important source for the ontological turn in contemporary postmodern political thought is Heidegger, who understood his fundamental ontology as a way to question the unquestioned assumptions of classical metaphysics.<sup>19</sup>

One of the entities most thrown into question by the return of ontology is the human subject. The impolitical thinkers identify, with Heidegger, the classical metaphysical subject as the culprit of the dead-lock in modern philosophical thought. The human being understood as subject has become the ultimate foundation for Western thought. At the same time, however, this subject is conceived within that closure of metaphysics which Heidegger has characterized as the forgottenness or oblivion of Being (*Seinsvergessenheit*). How to liberate the human subject from its closure in metaphysics? And how to understand the Being of the human subject? For Heidegger, the counter-notion to subject is *Dasein* – Being-in-the-world, distinct from metaphysical subjectivity.<sup>20</sup>

This contraposition of *Sein* and *Dasein* has given rise to various modes of conceptualizing the human subject and its being-in-the-world in postmodern philosophy. The fact that the task of thinking the human subject anew requires first and foremost an overcoming of classical metaphysics, has frequently led to the accusation against postmodern thought that it has stopped at a deconstruction of the subject. This, however, is in my view too hasty a judgment. Rather than contenting itself with deconstruction, postmodern political thinkers have attempted to make the lack, the empty space of the deconstructed subject, sovereign, or society, meaningful itself. The clearest testimony of this determination to think the subject after its displacement is a collection of essays with the title *Who comes after the Subject?*<sup>21</sup> When Jean-Luc Nancy poses this question to his fellow French philosophers, he is more than simply asking a question. He is making a statement. The subject, as it was understood in modern thought from Descartes to Hegel, has been put on trial by philosophy in the twentieth century. The break with metaphysics, and the philosophical gesture of deconstruction that characterizes postmodern thought have not only changed our way of thinking about certain categories in philosophy, they have put on trial Western philosophy as such. This is what the after stands for in Nancy's question – it is the being after certainties, the being in a state of nihilism, if we want to put it like

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen K. White, "Weak Ontology and Liberal Political Reflection," *Political Theory* 25, no. 4 (1997): 503.

<sup>17</sup> Roberto Esposito, "Nihilismo," in *Enciclopedia del pensiero politico*. Autori, concetti, dottrine, ed. Roberto Esposito and Carlo Galli (Roma, Bari: Editori Laterza, 2000), Friedrich Nietzsche, "Hinfall der kosmologischen Werte," in *Werke IV*. Aus dem Nachlass der Achtzigerjahre. Briefe (1861-1889), ed. Karl Schlechta (Frankfurt, Berlin, Wien: Ullstein, 1969).

<sup>18</sup> Gianni Vattimo, "Dialettica, differenza, pensiero debole," in *Il pensiero debole*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and P.A. Rovatti (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1983).

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Was ist Metaphysik? (1929)," in *Gesamtausgabe*. Wegmarken (Frankfurt/M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), Gianni Vattimo, *Introduzione a Heidegger* (Roma: Editori Laterza, 2000), 55-6.

<sup>20</sup> Simon Critchley, "Post-Deconstructive Subjectivity?," in *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London, New York: Verso, 1999), 55.

<sup>21</sup> Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy, eds., *Who comes after the subject?* (New York, London: Routledge, 1991).

that. But Nancy does not stop with the after: With his question, he is also making a claim. The deconstruction of subjectivity has not obliterated its object! Someone, who, is coming after it. "Everything seems," Nancy writes, "to point to the necessity, not of a 'return to the subject' [...] but on the contrary, a move forward toward someone – some one – else in its place."<sup>22</sup> In other words, the 'death of the subject' does not release us from the task to think that very subject in new ways. It is this thinking of the human subject at a point where the ontological critique of modernism has opened up a clearance for new approaches, which is the task of much of postmodern political philosophy.

What makes postmodern political philosophy political rather than an ontology of the self, is the fact that postmodern authors discuss the question of the human subject as an issue of community, and vice versa. The two poles – the human subject and community, the 'one' and the 'many' – cannot, in the postmodern view, be divorced from each other. Talking about the subject and community after the critique of classical metaphysics implies that none of the two is allowed to acquire the status of an unquestionable starting point, of a substance or essence in itself. Their approach is therefore different from the atomism of the liberals, who start with the neutralized individual to arrive at an idea of the polity, and it is also different from the holism of the communitarians, who start from the community in order to say something about the make-up of the person. Postmodern philosophers discuss the human subject in community and community in the human subject, making recourse to figures of thought and speech that go beyond conventional political philosophy and beyond the language of classical metaphysics.

Esposito, for example, talks about 'con-division' (condivisione)<sup>23</sup>, and in his major work, *Communitas*, he writes that community cannot be thought like a body in which the individual human being is diffused into a larger individuality, nor is community merely the product of mutual recognition. Community for Esposito is the exposition of the human subject to that what breaks its closure.<sup>24</sup> A similar view is expressed by Nancy, who talks about the human subject as a being singular plural.<sup>25</sup> For Nancy, the classical Western mode of thinking community has been that of essences, of closure of the political. The thinking of community as a 'people' or 'nation', as 'destiny' or 'generic humanity' constitutes closure for Nancy "because it assigns to community a common being, whereas community is a matter of something quite different, namely, of existence inasmuch as it is in common, but without letting itself be absorbed into a community of substance."<sup>26</sup>

To conceptualize our existence in common without making it contradict the freedom of the human subject, this is the task of contemporary political philosophy, of all political philosophy, be it liberal, communitarian, or postmodern. I have indicated the different ways in which modern political philosophy has gone about this task, and I have also pointed out that not all approaches succeed in making a proposal that can do justice to both aspects – life in common and freedom. Especially liberalism and communitarianism fail to achieve a convincing balance. The challenge which lies ahead of us is to point out possible ways of thinking further from that point, to venture into a conceptualization of the human subject and community from within and beyond the political-philosophical discourse in the West.

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<sup>22</sup> Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy, eds., *Who comes after the subject?* (New York, London: Routledge, 1991), 5.

<sup>23</sup> Esposito, "Impolitico."

<sup>24</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: Origine e destino della communita* (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), XVII.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), XXXVIII.

## THE EASTERN ORTHODOX INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

The beyond which I suggest to introduce into the debate is the Eastern Orthodox intellectual tradition. I coin this term in order to describe a particular expression of Eastern Orthodoxy, a thinking which has its roots in the Russian religious philosophy of the late nineteenth century but developed further in the twentieth century under the impact of the confrontation with totalitarianism. We find it situated on the threshold of theology and philosophy, non-clerical but steeped in the spiritual tradition of the East. The reason for bringing in this perspective is that Eastern Orthodoxy partakes in an important way in the post-totalitarian and post-Cold War constellation of Europe. It has gone through and reacted to the experience of totalitarianism, and it has, after the end of the Cold War, taken stage again as a religious, cultural and partially even political element in Europe. The post-communist situation of Orthodoxy has attracted the attention of many scholars, most of whom have approached the subject from a sociological or from a historical perspective, and frequently we find also a focus on the institutional and theological situation of the Orthodox Churches and their relation with other confessions. Comparatively less scholarly attention has until now been paid to the philosophical and intellectual dimension of Orthodoxy, a dimension which must not be neglected given that, in the 1990s, the former communist countries of Europe found themselves in a situation where a dominant ideology (Marxism-Leninism) was being replaced by new schools of thought. What role did and does Orthodoxy play in these processes? What is the place of Orthodox intellectual tradition in contemporary discourses in philosophy? What can it offer to the debate in political philosophy which I have just outlined, to the question of the human subject and community?

It is indispensable to emphasize that any valid attempt to give an answer to these questions must go beyond simplistic assertions of the kind 'collectivist Russia vs. individualist West'. Notions of that kind have for a long time dominated the self-understanding of Orthodoxy and its reception in the West, but they cannot do justice to the considerably more complex situation of today. In the face of totalitarianism, not only the West has, as I have shown above, taken issue with its own philosophical trajectory, also Orthodox thought has, under the impact of communism and emigration, re-examined its origins and its development.

The disputed salience of the term *sobornost'*, which expresses the spiritual community among people and was frequently used as a catchword in the Slavophile polemics against the West, is a case in point. A key-term in Russian religious philosophy since the nineteenth century, this term came to stand for a certain religious mystification and personalization of Russia, of the Russian people and the "Russian soul".<sup>27</sup> The reason why it largely fell out of use among Orthodox thinkers in the twentieth century, is, I would like to argue, not much different from the post-totalitarian challenge that Western philosophers were facing. In the wake of the Bolshevik revolution, the religious philosophers of Russia's Silver Age found themselves caught up in a confrontation between religious-socialist ideas and communism, between their ideal of community and the Soviet *kollektiv*, between the vision of a truly Christian state and an atheist state that claimed salvation. As pointed out by Nikolaj Berdaev in *The Origins of Russian Communism*, Orthodox thinkers found themselves confronted with the political occupation of an ideal of community that was reminiscent of their own concepts.<sup>28</sup> It should therefore not come as a surprise that many of these thinkers consequently reformulated their ideas in an attempt to safeguard them from totalitarian abuse. It is this moment of renewal within Orthodox thought, manifest in the debates in Paris in the 1930s and in the critical engagement with the religious philosophy of the Silver Age in Russia in the 1990s, which shall interest me in this paper. Not only does it offer a new approach to the subject of the Orthodox intellectual tradition, dominated

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<sup>27</sup> Semen Frank, for example, writes in an essay entitled "The Russian worldview" that the Russian mode of thinking is anti-rationalistic, spiritually collectivist, and religious. Simon Frank, "Die Russische Weltanschauung," in *Philosophische Vorträge*, ed. Paul Menzer and Arthur Liebert (Charlottenburg: Pan-Verlag Rolf Meise, 1926).

<sup>28</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (Michigan: Ann Arbor Paperback, University of Michigan Press, 1960).

by the study of the canonical authors Solov'ev, Florenskij and Bulgakov, it also points the way to a conceptualization of the relation between the West and the Orthodox East that goes beyond the abovementioned simplistic assertion of individualism vs. collectivism.

The debate about the nature of Orthodox theology which took place among emigre-theologians in the 1930s in Paris and which has entered Orthodox history as the 'Sophia-Controversy', exemplifies the attempt to renew Orthodox thinking in the light of the catastrophic collapse of Russian intellectual life in the face of communism. At stake was whether the path taken by Russian religious intellectuals prior to the revolution, namely the creative engagement with Orthodoxy in the philosophical and theological language of the day, should be continued, or whether Orthodox thought ought not to confine itself to its very core, namely the theological writings of the Church Fathers.<sup>29</sup> Representative of the first point of view was Fr. Sergej Bulgakov, whose theology and understanding of the role of religion in modern society had been shaped profoundly by the experience of the lively debates between leftist intellectuals and clerics in the period proceeding the Bolshevik revolution and by the optimism and drive for a 'new religious consciousness' that informed much of these encounters. The figures behind the second approach were Fr. Georgij Florovskij and Vladimir Losskij. In his two-volume study *Ways of Russian Theology*, Florovskij criticized Russian religious philosophy for containing too many elements of Western philosophy and speculative thought, and he was especially critical of the work of Bulgakov on the grounds of his teaching on Sofia, an unconventional rendering of Orthodox theology and its relation to the world.<sup>30</sup> Also Losskij, considerably younger than Bulgakov and indebted to him as his student, spoke out against philosophical and speculative additions to Orthodox theology, whose integrity should be preserved at all costs. He was particularly critical of anything that reminded of Russian romanticism, to the extent that his interpreter Rowan Williams even speaks about "Lossky's intellectual allergy to the language of sobornost."<sup>31</sup> The concept of Sofia, with its clear symbolistic legacy, was just one such speculative element for Losskij. He held that, theologically, there was no need for the unifying metaphor of Sofia, all could be expressed in Orthodox theology purely and simply.<sup>32</sup>

The conflict between the two schools of thought, frequently referred to as Russian School theology and Neo-Patristic theology, has been described as a debate between modernists and traditionalists<sup>33</sup>, liberals and conservatives<sup>34</sup> or as an opposition between wanting to lead Orthodox theology "back to the fathers" or "beyond the fathers".<sup>35</sup> A closer look at the positions shows, however, that none of these designations quite exhausts what was at stake. The theological dispute between the two schools did not arise around the question whether Orthodoxy needed to reposition itself after centuries-long stagnation, attempts at Westernization and communist defeat – on this there was consensus – and not even on the issue whether the Church should be engaged in the world – also this was a shared view – but on the question on

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<sup>29</sup> The conflict is described in all studies dealing with this period, see for example: Sergii Bulgakov, *Towards a Russian Political Theology*, ed. Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 172-81, Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology. Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov. Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 279-89, Сергей С. Хоружий, "Шаг вперед, сделанный в рассеянии (Sergej Horuzij, A step ahead, taken in dispersal)," in *Опыты из русской духовной традиции* (transl. Experiences from the Russian Spiritual Tradition), ed. Сергей С. Хоружий (Москва: Изд. Парад, 2005), 410-3.

<sup>30</sup> See especially chapters eight "On the Eve" and nine "Breaks and Links" in Georgij Florovsky, *The Ways of Russian Theology. The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, Vols. 5-6 (Belmont, MA; Vaduz: Nordland Publishing Company; Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> Bulgakov, *Towards a Russian Political Theology*, 176.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-8.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Bird, "The Tragedy of Russian Religious Philosophy: Sergei Bulgakov and the Future of Orthodox Theology," in *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe*, ed. Jonathan Sutton and Wil van den Bercken (Leuven, Paris, Dudley: Peeters, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, "Russian Theology: 1920-1972. An Introductory Survey," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 16 (1972): 178.

<sup>35</sup> Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 376.

which basis such a renewal and engagement with the world could take place. For Bulgakov, the two issues were quite clearly linked. The renewal of the Church would take place on the basis of an active social engagement in the world. Florovskij, on the other hand, thought that the Church needed to re-appropriate its dogmatic foundations, to achieve a spiritual renewal, and from this a true engagement with the world would follow.

What Florovskij had in mind was first and foremost an emancipation from Western ways of thinking about religion and the world. "It is not enough to merely repeat answers previously formulated in the West – the western questions must be discerned and relived," he writes in a passage which is worth quoting at full length:

"Russian theology must confidently penetrate the entire complex problematics of western religious thought and spiritually trace and examine the difficult and bewildering path of the West from the time of the Great Schism. Access to the inner creative life comes only through its problematics, and one must therefore sympathize with that life and experience it precisely in its full problematality, searching and anxiety. Orthodox theology can recover its independence from western influence only through a spiritual return to its patristic sources and foundations. Returning to the fathers, however, does not mean abandoning the present age, escaping from history, or quitting the field of battle. Patristic experience must not only be preserved, but it must be discovered and brought into life. Independence from the non-Orthodox West need not become estrangement from it. A break with the West would provide no real liberation. Orthodox thought must perceive and suffer the western trials and temptations, and, for its own sake, it cannot afford to avoid and keep silent over them."<sup>36</sup>

Several things are noteworthy about this passage. Firstly, Florovskij talks about an emancipation from the ways of thinking about problematics in the West, but not from the problematics themselves. Talking about "compassionate co-experience", Florovskij departs radically from any simple anti-Westernism in the Orthodox Church, which has usually held the view that the West is doomed by its own fault and the Orthodox East does not share its problems, concluding that if only the Orthodox East stays away from the West, it will be fine. Anti-Western and conservative attitudes were and are of course a reality in Orthodoxy, the point here is, however, that the Neo-Patristics were not conservatives of that kind. Their attitude towards the preservation of tradition was different from a merely conservative stance.

This leads to the second noteworthy point about the passage above, Florovskij's definition of tradition as "creative". A recovery of the Patristic style would signify a theological Renaissance, not in the sense of a restoration of something past, but of a moving forward in the faithfulness to the spirit of the past. One can follow the path of the Fathers only through creativity, not through imitation, Florovskij writes with a metaphor typical of his polemical style: "One must be steeped in the inspiration of the patristic flame and not simply be a gardener pottering around amongst the ancient texts."<sup>37</sup>

Thirdly, Florovskij's passage breaths an anxiety with the world and with one's own condition which he shares with many contemporaries in the West. "We are summoned to theology precisely because we are already in this apocalyptic struggle,"<sup>38</sup> he writes. He is certainly more pessimistic than Bulgakov, of whose view that the Church should go into the world he is critical because both the Church and the world have become precarious: "The social question itself is above all a spiritual question, a question of conscience and wisdom,"<sup>39</sup> Florovskij writes, and he adds: "Pastoral routine and teaching cannot resolve the newly arisen task of constructing the human soul and conscience."<sup>40</sup> If we see Bulgakov's task, as described

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<sup>36</sup> Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology*, 301.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

by Robert Bird,<sup>41</sup> to teach modernity speak a religious language rather than making Orthodoxy speak in terms of modernity, Florovskij would probably still have held against it that Orthodoxy needed to find its own language first.

The theological debate of the 1930s shows in an exemplary way how Orthodox thinkers tried to make sense of the spiritual and intellectual collapse that came along with totalitarianism. While Bulgakov, and with him philosophers like Berdaev and Frank basically adhered to their pre-revolutionary ideas, refining them in order to safeguard them from totalitarian abuse, the Neo-Patristic theologians took issue with the entire mode of reasoning that determined the pre-revolutionary religious thought. To a certain extent, these two strategies are comparable to the Western reactions to the totalitarian challenge. In the West, liberals and communitarians are refining their instruments of conceptualizing individual life, society and politics, a strategy comparable to the character of Bulgakov's and Berdaev's post-revolutionary work; whereas postmoderns question the modern social and political paradigm as such, a gesture we find also in the Neo-Patristic criticism of the religious philosophers. Let me emphasize that I am making this bold comparison on structural grounds only, looking at the mode of the argument, and not on grounds of content. What needs to follow at this point is a more profound analysis of the possible linkages between the Western and Eastern reaction to the totalitarian challenge, an analysis, however, for which we need to move ahead in time – namely to contemporary Orthodox thought.

In Russia, the religious philosophy of Russia's Silver Age and the works of the emigre-theologians and philosophers experienced a boom in the late Perestroika-period and in the early 1990s. Furthered by prominent scholars such as Aleksej Losev and Sergej Averincev, the religious philosophy of the past acquired an important place in late- and post-Soviet intellectual life. However, not all of this retrieval was perceived as entirely positive by some observers. Sergej Horuzij, for example, writes in a reflection on the situation of religious philosophy in Russia in the 1990s, that in public consciousness the forbidden religious philosophy of the Silver Age and emigration acquired the status of a place where all answers to current problems – Russia's future, its place in Europe, its destiny – were to be found if only one could get there. Once the literature was made accessible, however, it became apparent that there were neither ready-made answers, nor could these texts serve as an immediate inspiration for new creative solutions. They turned out to be too utopian, too optimistic and too far-fetched, according to Horuzij's judgement. Only what was sufficiently "easy" and graspable found an immediate echo in the political and social sphere: nationalism, fundamentalism, Eurasian ideologies.<sup>42</sup> This view is shared by Vladimir Bibihin, who, under the provocative title *The Revolution has taught little* writes that the re-appropriation of the forbidden literature since the 1980s is repeating old mistakes. In particular he criticizes a maze of empty phrases – kosmism, sofologia, sobornost' – which serve only as general indicators of a rejection of Western rationalism and Catholicism.<sup>43</sup> Both Horuzij and Bibihin thereby point out that, just like in the beginning of the twentieth century, also at its end, Orthodox thought is prone to political and ideological instrumentalization.

The judgement of Horuzij and Bibihin makes clear that the post-Soviet revival of Orthodox thought partly risks falling back into the old modes of framing the Orthodox self-understanding exclusively in opposition to the West and of interpreting the relationship between East and West in primarily antagonistic terms. Their point is, that many interpreters of Russian religious thought – and most casual Western observers of Russian Orthodoxy – overlook not only the lesson taught by the revolution (to pick up Bibihin's title), but also the one taught by emigre-theology. The lesson is the formulation of clear standpoints on the totalitarian challenge

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<sup>41</sup> Bird, "The Tragedy of Russian Religious Philosophy," 214.

<sup>42</sup> Сергей С. Хоружий, "Путем зерна: русская религиозная философия сегодня (Sergej Horuzij, *The pathway of the seed. Russian religious philosophy today*)," *Вопросы Философии* 9 (1999).

<sup>43</sup> Владимир В. Биbihин, "Революция мало чему научила (Vladimir Bibihin, *The revolution has taught little*)," in *Другое начало* (transl. *A new beginning*) (Санкт Петербург: Наука, 2003).

from within the Orthodox theological tradition, and the recognition of shared problematics between West and East. This lesson can be made productive both theologically and philosophically. Since I am in this essay interested in the place of the Orthodox intellectual tradition in the philosophical discourse of political modernity, I shall focus on the latter, the philosophical aspect, and I will leave aside the no less important topic of the Russian Orthodox Church and contemporary Orthodox theology as such.

## **READING ACROSS WESTERN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE ORTHODOX INTELLECTUAL TRADITION**

What does the Orthodox intellectual tradition which emerges from the critical self-reflection of Orthodox thinkers in reaction to the totalitarian challenge have to offer to the contemporary political philosophical debate on human subjectivity and community? Let us remember that the task of this debate is to preclude both the danger of all-engulfing communitization, in other words the loss of individual freedom, and to preclude the danger of atomization, in other words the fragmentation of society and any form of being in common. The task which contemporary Orthodox thought shares with Western political philosophy, a task which becomes especially salient with the downfall of Soviet communism and with the rapid and sometimes precarious liberalization of societies all over Eastern Europe, is to account for the tension between the autonomy of individuals and their inter-relatedness in a common world, between the singular human being and community. Let me suggest right away that the Orthodox intellectual tradition, as it emerges from the development I have outlined above, has two important considerations to offer to this debate: It can, firstly, contribute to a better understanding of what is at stake when we try to conceptualize the human subject as an autonomous and at one and the same time as a communal being. Orthodox thought criticizes the ontology which underlies classical Western metaphysics as essentialist, a criticism comparable to the position taken by post-structuralist philosophy in the West. The Orthodox intellectual tradition can, secondly, sharpen the debate on community with regard to religion through a re-evaluation of tradition and of pre-/counter-enlightenment thought, comparable to the efforts made by communitarian philosophers in the West.

Exemplary work in this respect has been done by Sergej Horuzij and by the Greek theologian and philosopher Christos Yannaras. What we find there is the philosophical expansion of Neo-Patristic theology, more adequately referred to as 'Neo-Palamism'. As I have pointed out above, this is a branch in Orthodox theology which is concerned with the study of the Byzantine Church Fathers and which draws strongly on the theology of Saint Gregory Palamas, a fifteenth-century theologian who supported theologically a movement of monastic asceticism that goes back to the very beginning of Orthodoxy, namely to the "Fathers of the desert", ascetics who followed a strict practice of prayer and contemplation. In his *Triads in Defence of the Holy Hesychasts*, Palamas defended the practice of the Jesus-prayer by making a distinction between the essence and the energies of the divine, stating that the divine was inaccessible in essence but could be experienced by way of divine energies. Palamas thereby sought to reconcile two seemingly irreconcilable assertions, namely that revelation means that man has a vision of God "face to face" and that God is by nature unknowable. In a framework of an essentialist philosophy, these two truths could not be reconciled, but in Palamas' theology of distinction between essence and energy, this became possible.<sup>44</sup> Both Horuzij and Yannaras have demonstrated in several works that Neo-Palamism offers a profound ontological critique and possibly a challenging alternative to classical Western metaphysics, especially with regard to notions of subjectivity and autonomy. They have drawn on Neo-Palamism on the one side, and phenomenology, existentialism, and post-structuralism on the other side, in an engagement with

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<sup>44</sup> John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 119-23.

modernity that is situated both within the Western problematics and coming from a perspective outside of the Western intellectual tradition – Yannaras by rendering Palamitian theology in the language of Heidegger;<sup>45</sup> Horuzij by linking his own "synergetic anthropology" to the works of postmodern philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault.<sup>46</sup>

A more indirect link can, in my opinion, be found between the Orthodox emphasis on tradition<sup>47</sup> and the works of communitarians like Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre. Both of these two North American authors adhere to a concept of tradition and community which is recognizably Christian – the former more explicitly<sup>48</sup> than the latter.<sup>49</sup> However, as I have shown above they tend to argue their case on sociological grounds, not on cultural or religious grounds. I would like to suggest that a cross-reading between approaches informed, implicitly or explicitly, by Western Christian paradigms and by Orthodox Christian paradigms respectively can bring to the fore the specificities and possible shortcomings of the way in which the problematic of subjectivity and community has been framed in the West. One point which comes to mind here immediately is the relationship between theory and practice, hardly resolved in the West. The Orthodox intellectual tradition operates with a dual emphasis on ontology and on living tradition, and therefore does not suffer from the same strict separation between the philosophical and sociological discourses as does the Western debate, divided into a postmodern and communitarian branch.

The main argument of this paper has been that contemporary Western political philosophy and Orthodox thought are situated in one and the same struggle with the modern condition from within the modern condition itself, a condition they have in common due to the shared European experience of totalitarianism. More work needs to be done in order to substantiate such a cross-reading between Western political philosophy and the Orthodox intellectual tradition, but the main lines which I have outlined in a preliminary fashion clearly demonstrate that such a cross-reading is not only highly desirable but also promises original perspectives and challenging takes on issues which are at the centre of political modernity.

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<sup>45</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Person und Eros: Eine Gegenüberstellung der Ontologie der griechischen Kirchenväter und der Existenzphilosophie des Westens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht, 1982), Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God. Heidegger and the Areopagite* (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> Сергей С. Хоружий, *К феноменологии аскезы* (Sergej Horuzij, *On the phenomenology of asceticism*) (Москва: Издательство Гуманитарной Литературы, 1998), Сергей С. Хоружий, "Подвиг как органон. Организация и герменевтика опыта в исихастской традиции (Sergej Horuzij, *The organisation and hermeneutics of experience in the hesychast tradition*)," *Вопросы Философии* 3 (1998), Сергей С. Хоружий, "Человек и его три дальних удела. Новая антропология на базе древнего опыта (Sergej Horuzij, *Man and his three destinies. A new anthropology on the basis of an ancient experience*)," *Вопросы Философии* 1 (2003), Сергей С. Хоружий, "Человек Картезия (Sergej Horuzij, *The Cartesian Subject*)," *Точки-Puncta* 1-2, no. 4 (2004), Сергей С. Хоружий, "Неотменимый антропоконтур. 1. Контуры До-Кантова Человека (Sergej Horuzij, *A non-annulable anthropological outline. 1. The contours of the pre-Cartesian subject*)," *Вопросы Философии* 1 (2005), Сергей С. Хоружий, "Неотменимый антропоконтур. 2. Кантовы антропотопики (Sergej Horuzij, *A non-annulable anthropological outline. 2. Topography of the Kantian subject*)," *Вопросы Философии* 2 (2005), Хоружий, "Шаг вперед, сделанный в рассеянии (Sergej Horuzij, *A step ahead, taken in dispersal*)."

<sup>47</sup> Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984). See also: John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

<sup>48</sup> Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981). See also: Giovanni Giorgini, "MacIntyre, Alasdair," in *Enciclopedia del pensiero politico. Autori, concetti, dottrine*, ed. Roberto Esposito and Carlo Galli (Roma, Bari: Editori Laterza, 2000), Chris Huebner, "MacIntyre, Alasdair," in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pypers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).