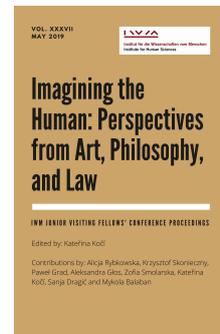


In Memory of Her Sacrifice and the Self of Milada Horáková

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Introduction

Whenever one aims to address broader academic audience, choosing a strong and inspiring title is always helpful. We can follow the title as the red thread throughout the article. “In Memory of Her” is the title borrowed from the feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza who wrote her book “in memory of” Elisabeth Cady Staton – the very first feminist interpreter of the Bible. I decided to write this article on female sacrifice “in memory of” Milada Horáková, the victim of the Stalinist showtrial in 1950s communist Czechoslovakia and, in my view, also one of the paradigmatic examples of the female sacrifice in the European context of the 20th century.

In this paper, I will follow two basic lines. First, I will present briefly the context of Horáková’s trial. Second, I will put forward influential sacrificial theories which considerably form the current discourse on sacrifice. These two lines when put together will reveal if and how is it possible to interpret the death of Milada Horáková in the sacrificial way. Marci Shore in her article “The Sacred and the Myth: Havel’s Greengrocer, Twenty Years Later”[1] stresses the Girardian interpretation of sacrifice emphasising Horáková’s function as the antidote to the frustration and accumulated violence in the 1950s communist Czechoslovakia. The aim of this study is to present Horáková’s sacrifice as a ‘breach’ of the *Gestell* – the enframing of the technocratic apparatus of the communist machinery.

Writing an academic article ‘in memory of’ someone is not very common and yet a well known feminist theologian Schüssler Fiorenza underwent such an enterprise and thus influenced me to follow her example. This paper, however, does not aim to be a mere commemoration of the unjust fate of one brave woman who became a victim of a judicial murder. It aims to unveil on her example the specificity of her sacrifice. Horáková’s last words in her letter to her sister Marta are particularly influential:

Do not cry! Do not pine for me too much! [...] Live! Live! Go to the pine woods, look at what is beautiful and everywhere we will be together. Look at the people around you. In some way I will be reflected in each one of them.[2]

Horáková did not want to be bewailed only. She, despite her desperate situation, wanted to send a message. Which message? We shall try to decipher it on the following pages.

Stalinist Showtrials, Milada Horáková, the Trial with Her ‘et al.’[3]

The showtrial with Milada Horáková was designed after the Stalinist showtrials in the 1930s Soviet Union. The designers of her process were imported from the Soviet Union based on the direct invitation of the president Klement Gottwald and the General Secretary of the Communist Party Rudolf Slánský. The designers were experienced not only from the trials in the Soviet Union but also from Hungary, where they plotted the showtrial with László Rajk, the Hungarian minister of foreign affairs, member of the Hungarian Communist party. The original idea of the showtrials was, as in Hungary, to reveal the ‘traitor(s)’ within the communist party and convict him/her from high treason, plotting against the people’s democracy’s regime, and conspiring with the western imperialists. However, the ‘Czechoslovak Rajk’ was not revealed until 1955 when it was Rudolf Slánský himself who was convicted and executed. The showtrial was, nevertheless, scheduled for 1950 already. Thus, there must have been some alternative found to ‘meet the order’ from the Soviet Union. Since there was currently no traitor from within the Communist party, the attention was redirected to the representatives of democratic parties who sat in the parliament before the 1948s ‘coup d’état’. One of them was Milada Horáková.[4]

The ‘order’, or we may say ‘commission’, is not an accidentally chosen word. It is a key word of all the showtrials around Central and Eastern Europe – a concept that joins and characterises them. Stalin or the Kremlin commissioned the showtrial in some of its satellites, the exponents of the local regime commissioned the interrogators to meet the politically desired suspects and the prosecutors commissioned these suspects to meet the script according to which they should testify before the court. The show took part in two respects – one, it was all prepared and everything should follow a strict scenario (thus, it was a fake trial because everything was decided before the trial even started); two, it was a show for the masses (thus, it was a well staged theatre).

In the case of Horáková’s trial, the show for the masses worked perfectly – exactly according to the desire of the establishment. It fanaticised the masses and the public opinion stood behind the regime. The propaganda against Horáková and the other suspects was enormous. The newspapers, radio, and television were daily fed with the ‘news from the court’. Thus, ordinary people, representatives of the working class, were addressing letters to the president and the court asking the severest penalties for Horáková and the other suspects. What did she and the others do knew almost no one and no one also cared about it. Horáková was simply seen as an ‘intruder’, someone who plotted against the Czechoslovak state with ‘western imperialist countries’, who wanted to

trigger war. The propaganda was successful, the show 'went on' and the rage of the masses was enormous. Thus, Horáková, this middle age woman and mother of the 16 year old daughter was believed to be the cause and the cure of all the frustration of everyone.

However, the show from the perspective of the designers did not go as successfully as they were hoping for, as it went in Hungary of the Soviet Union. Why? The answer is, I firmly believe, in the fact that almost none of the accused was, contrary to the previously staged showtrials, part of the community – the communist establishment. The show 'did not go on so well' because it was, despite all the propaganda, disrupted by unexpected evidences from the side of the accused. Many of them broke the prescribed script in many respects. Even if they confessed the listed accuses, they refused their criminal character. Some of the accused, e.g. Milada Horáková, Josef Nestával, Františka Zemínová, or Závěš Kalandra broke the script, to send a warning message to their allies not to continue or involve in similar matters. Horáková expresses:

I just wanted to say the following: no one in this state must die or be charged for his/her convictions. It is possible to live and work with these convictions without interrupting, spoiling and threatening what the majority of people's democratic and people's democratically convinced population decided to do. [...] do not do what I have done. Do not do it, unless you were fools, running after a false martyrdom, or you really wanted to die. [5]

The other suspects also openly and publicly confessed their disagreement with the charges. For example, Františka Zemínová claimed: "It is unbearable for me – one of those who set the idea of the independent republic – that I should be charged for such a terrible and despicable crime [espionage]. [...] Nothing would be worse than charging me from such a low acting in which money are often involved..."[6] With these words which did not correspond to the script threw Františka Zemínová the general prosecutor Karel Trudák completely off the balance. He interrupted Zemínová's last words and said: "Come on, you should have only [...] Your motivations somehow... or, I do not know what you are talking about. [...] Please [...]. You spoke about this already... [...] You said this before..."[7] Some of the accused even pointed out that their acting was not against any law of the Czechoslovak republic of those times. Zdeněk Peška expressed in his last words: "I would like to point out that we found paragraphs in the constitution of those days that allowed us to think that renewal or establishment of some political parties would not be considered illegal..."[8] By saying that, Peška denies the criminal character of his political activities.

Thus, Milada Horáková and others, despite all the interrogations, torture, and other torments dared to break the script and tried to make themselves clean before the public. They did not submit to the commission, to the general order. They functioned as the antidote to the violent society, but in a different sense, as the 'breach' of the technicization, instrumentalization of their lives, represented by the communist regime.

Sacrifice as an 'Antidote' to the Violent Society

René Girard, one of the most influential scholars in the current debate on sacrifice, specifically in the Christian discourse, formulates the so-called ‘scapegoating mechanism’ in which the community, naturally inclining to violence, generates a ‘scapegoat’, whom it ritually ‘kills’. This violence is inherent to humanity and it has its roots in the mimetic desire – a natural desire to imitate the other, or, even better, to imitate the desire of the other. However, this natural phenomenon twists into jealousy and finally to violence. The accumulated violence is channeled away by appointing and ritual killing of the scapegoat. Thus, the scapegoat represents the sum of all the accumulated frustration and becomes its only origin and only cure. The scapegoat is killed and peace in the community is restored. Girard sees the scapegoat as the antidote.[9]“There is only one person responsible for everything, one who is absolutely responsible, and he will be responsible for the cure because he is already responsible for the sickness.”[10] However, the antidote which should bring peace functions only for a limited time. Since there is no progress or improvement in Girard’s mimetic concept – the community is doomed to repeat the ritual killing of the scapegoat forever.[11]

The scapegoat, according to Girard, is a substitute, someone, whose loss does not matter. It is a passive figure who acquires some charisma because of its appointment. Apparently, the charisma does not arise from the personality of the scapegoat. It is, in fact, a mere instrument which functions as an antidote for the community. It is one from among the community whose role is chosen more or less randomly.[12]

When we apply the scapegoating mechanism on the trial against Milada Horáková, we see that from the point of view of the community – the people of the communist Czechoslovakia of 1950s – it worked perfectly. The level of the accumulated violence during the years after World War II., the decrees of president Beneš,[13] the 1948s communist coup d’état,[14] and the violent collectivisation of the private property, was enormous. Thus, seeing Horáková as the sacrificial scapegoat functioning within the realm of the scapegoating mechanism is feasible. However, there are some aspects that cannot be simply translated in terms of the scapegoating mechanism. Horáková was part of the Czechoslovak society. However, she was not part of the communist establishment and that is what distinguishes her from those accused in other Stalinist showtrials, e.g. Rudolf Slánský. She did not belong to the realm of the communist party. She did not believe that her ‘sacrifice’ would serve the party, and thus she broke the ‘general order’. The moment of acceptance of the charges and fruitfulness of the ‘sacrifice’ for the community is a key moment in Girard’s scapegoating mechanism which was not accomplished.

Sacrifice as a ‘Breach’ to the General Order

Having presented the girardian interpretation of Horáková’s trial, which is indeed valid and should not be undermined, it is useful now to move to the concept of the authentic sacrifice formulated by the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka. For Patočka ‘fills in the gaps’ where the girardian scapegoating mechanism remains silent or where his mechanism does not fit.

Sacrifice in the post-modern world is an ambiguous term and can mean almost anything. However, what links various current sacrificial debates is that one should sacrifice ‘for something’. Patočka explains that: “The paradoxical conception here is that man gains by a voluntary loss.”[15] When speaking about sacrifice, Patočka presents a rather unique approach. Sacrifice is the eminent way how to break ‘Gestell’, the ‘technicization’ or ‘instrumentalisation’ of human life which is, in fact, emptied of any possible meaning, *Being* is lost, and everything is led by the ‘general order’.[16] The logics of purchase may only be broken by the logics of free gift. Thus, the logics of general order or the technicization/instrumentalisation of human life may be only broken by sacrifice for nothing. Only this sacrifice is, in Patočka’s terms, truly authentic because it does not fit in the economy of exchange, in Patočka’s terminology, it does not respond to the general order. It does not obviously mean that Patočka would suggest that the authentic sacrifice has no reason, as it might seem. On the contrary, elsewhere Patočka claims that: “It is not a sacrifice for something or someone, even though in a certain sense it is a sacrifice for everything and for all.”[17] There must not be ‘some-thing’ but obviously there must be a cause for sacrificial acting, specifically to bear witness to the truth and it must be a result of the free decision.

Patočka’s understanding of sacrifice is in direct opposition to the scapegoating mechanism of René Girard. The antidote in the girardian system is an instrument, a randomly appointed scapegoat who channels away the accumulated violence, someone or something whose death does not matter, who is a part of the community and who is for the good of the community willing to accept his/her supposed ‘guilt’. The authentic sacrifice is, on the contrary, a result of free choice, the free gift which can only break the logics of the economic exchange, the free gift that can interrupt the general order.

The only thing, as was already mentioned, that can resist the general order is the authentic sacrifice. Calling the communist establishment ‘Gestell’ is indeed a metaphor. However, Janáč and Kaplan in their account on the showtrials present a description of the communist regime as Gestell. They claim: “the accused were regularly and consistently reassured that they stand alone against *devastating machinery* against which any opposition or resistance is hopeless and from which there is no escape.”[18]

As was already mentioned, Milada Horáková, contrary to those accused in other Stalinist showtrials, was not a member of the communist party. Thus, she did not feel responsibility for the party and its development.[19] Horáková did not feel called to confess the crimes in order to reassure the party, in other words, to pay ransom to appease the angry deity. Her motivation to confess (at certain points) the crimes, which she never committed, was purely to relieve a little bit from torments and torture that she was daily and nightly experiencing. The concept of appeasing the angry deity and restoration of balance and peace works perfectly within the girardian sacrificial discourse but not in the Patočka’s concept of the authentic sacrifice. On the contrary, no balance, no peace is restored when the authentic sacrifice is executed. The sacrificial subject bears witness to the truth and reveals being – certainly something that is not desired by the communist party and that caused a lot of restlessness among the prosecutors.

The fact that Horáková did not belong to the communist party and thus did not feel obliged to confess her guilt because of her loyalty to the party does by no means undermine her courage, endurance and faithfulness to the truth. The authentic sacrifice, as Patočka conceives it, must be a result of the free decision. Once the machinery of the showtrial was set off, one could hardly speak about free decision. However, Horáková's free decision came earlier, before she set about her political activity after the communist coup d'état. Of course, she did not expect that her activities could bring her even worse fate than those against the Nazis. However, she suspected that they might not go unnoticed. She wrote to her daughter Jana:

Providence planned my life in such a way that I could not give you nearly all that my mind and my heart had prepared for you. The reason was not that I loved you little; I love you just as purely and fervently as other mothers love their children. But I understood that my task here in the world was to do you good by seeing to it that life becomes better, and that all children can live well.[20]

As a believing Christian, Horáková in her letter speaks first about 'Providence' but later on she confesses that it was actually her decision that let her to engage in matters that brought her to conflict with the communist totalitarian regime. Her political engagement could not by any means be understood in terms of the general order. She wanted "all children to live well".

Conclusion

Patočka warns against Gestell which transform *being* into the subject of the general order and the only means to break Gestell and rescue human life from technicization and instrumentalisation is the authentic sacrifice. Patočka claims that the sacrificial subject on the threshold of life and death reveals being. Horáková in her letter describes something that could be understood as revelation of *being*:

Live! Live! Go to the pine woods, look at what is beautiful and everywhere we will be together. Look at the people around you. In some way I will be reflected in each one of them. I am not helpless and full of despair. This is not an act. I am at peace, because there is peace in my conscience.[21]

Milada Horáková knew that she was going to die, she knew it before she wrote this letter. She did not believe that her death could be beneficial for the people of the communist Czechoslovakia, not immediately and not directly as it is assumed in the girardian scapegoating mechanism. However, she did not resign, she fought for the truth and "act[ed] from the principle: 'until the very end—which can come at any time,'" as Jan Patočka claimed about Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov when he gave example of the authentic sacrifice to his students.[22] Thus, her sacrifice was not for some-thing, it was rather for no-thing (in terms of things subjected to general order). It was "for everything and for all,"[23] as Patočka believes authentic sacrifice is.

What then was the message that Horáková sent to people around her, her closest, her family and why is it worthy to write a paper “In Memory of Her”? The answer could be the following: “it is indeed worthy to bear witness to truth and do not subject oneself to the general order. And when the general order is all embracing and omnipresent, it is worthy of breaking and rescuing *being*, even for the cost of ones own life.”

[1] Marci Shore, “The Sacred and the Myth: Havel’s Greengorcer, Twenty Years Later”, *East European Politics and Societies and Culture* 32:2 (2018): 285-293.

[2] Milada Horáková, *Dopisy Milady Horákové z pankrácké cely smrti, 24 -27. 6. 1950* (Praha: Eva – Milan Nevole 2018), p. 41, 42. Translation Marci Shore.

[3] The official name of the case. Milada Horáková was accused together with 12 other people who were charged and sentenced. Four of them (Milada Horáková, Jan Buchal, Závaš Kalandra, Oldřich Pecl) were sentenced to death, others were sentenced to life imprisonment, some to decades of imprisonment.

[4] Marek Janáč, Karel Kaplan, “Poslední slova obžalovaných v procesu s Miladou Horákovou ‘a spol.’”, *Soudobé dějiny* 1-2 (2006):197-200.

[5] Milada Horáková, “Praha, 1950, 8. června – Závěrečné řeči obžalovaných v procesu s Miladou Horákovou”, in Janáč, Kaplan, *Poslední slova obžalovaných v procesu s Miladou Horákovou ‘a spol.’*, *Soudobé dějiny* 1-2: 195-238, p. 215. cf. also “There is no middle path between the work for and against the nation.” Josef Nestával, “Závěrečné řeči obžalovaných”, p. 220.

[6] Františka Zemínová, “Závěrečné řeči obžalovaných”, p. 223.

[7] Karel Trudák, “Závěrečné řeči obžalovaných”, p. 223.

[8] Zdeněk Peška, “Závěrečné řeči obžalovaných”, p. 229.

[9] René Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1993).

[10] René Girard, “What is a Myth?”, in *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University, 1989), p. 43.

[11] “Le sacrifice cherche à maîtriser et canaliser dans bonne direction les déplacements et substitutions spontanés qui s’opèrent alors.” Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, p. 24.

[12] “La violence inassouvie cherche et finit toujours par trouver une victime de recharge. A la créature qui excitait sa furer, elle en substitue soudain une autre qui n’a aucun titre particulier a s’attirer les foudres du violent, sinon qu’elle est vulnérable et qu’elle passe à sa portée.” Girard, p. 15.

[13] Beneš Decrees

<https://web.archive.org/web/20060114081002/http://www.mkcr.cz/article.php?id=1008>, accessed on 5th April 2019.

[14] Hubert Ripka, *Czechoslovakia Enslaved. The Story of the Communist Coup d'Etat*, London: Golancz, 1950.

[15] Patočka, “Čtyři semináře k problému Evropy,” in: *Sebrané spisy Jana Patočky*, sv. III., ed. Ivan Chvatík and Pavel Kouba (Praha: Oikoymenh 2002), pp. 388-402.

[16] Jan Patočka, “The Danger of Technicization in Science”, in *Religion, War and the Crisis of Modernity: A Special Issue Dedicated to the Philosophy of Jan Patočka*, ed. Ludger Hagedorn a James Dodd, *The New Yearbook of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, XIV (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 20.

[17] Patočka, “The Danger of Technicization in Science”, p. 22.

[18] Janáč, Kaplan, “Poslední slova”, p. 204.

[19] Cf. “[...] they knew the ‘production’ [one could say the ‘general order’] of the showtrials in their regimes and did not have any illusions about the hopeless position of the ‘accused’ and due to their loyalty to the party they felt obliged to serve to the party even if they should confess crimes which they have never committed.” Janáč, Kaplan, “Poslední slova”, p. 204.

[20] Cf. Milada Horáková, Letter to Daughter Jana, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/p/230.html>, accessed on 5th April 2019

[21] Milada Horáková, *Poslední slova Milady Horákové z pankrácké cely smrti*, p. 41, 42. (previously cited in the introduction).

[22] Jan Patočka, “Čtyřisemináře k problému Evropy”, p. 416. Translation Marci Shore.

[23] Patočka, “The Danger of Technicization in Science”, p. 22.
