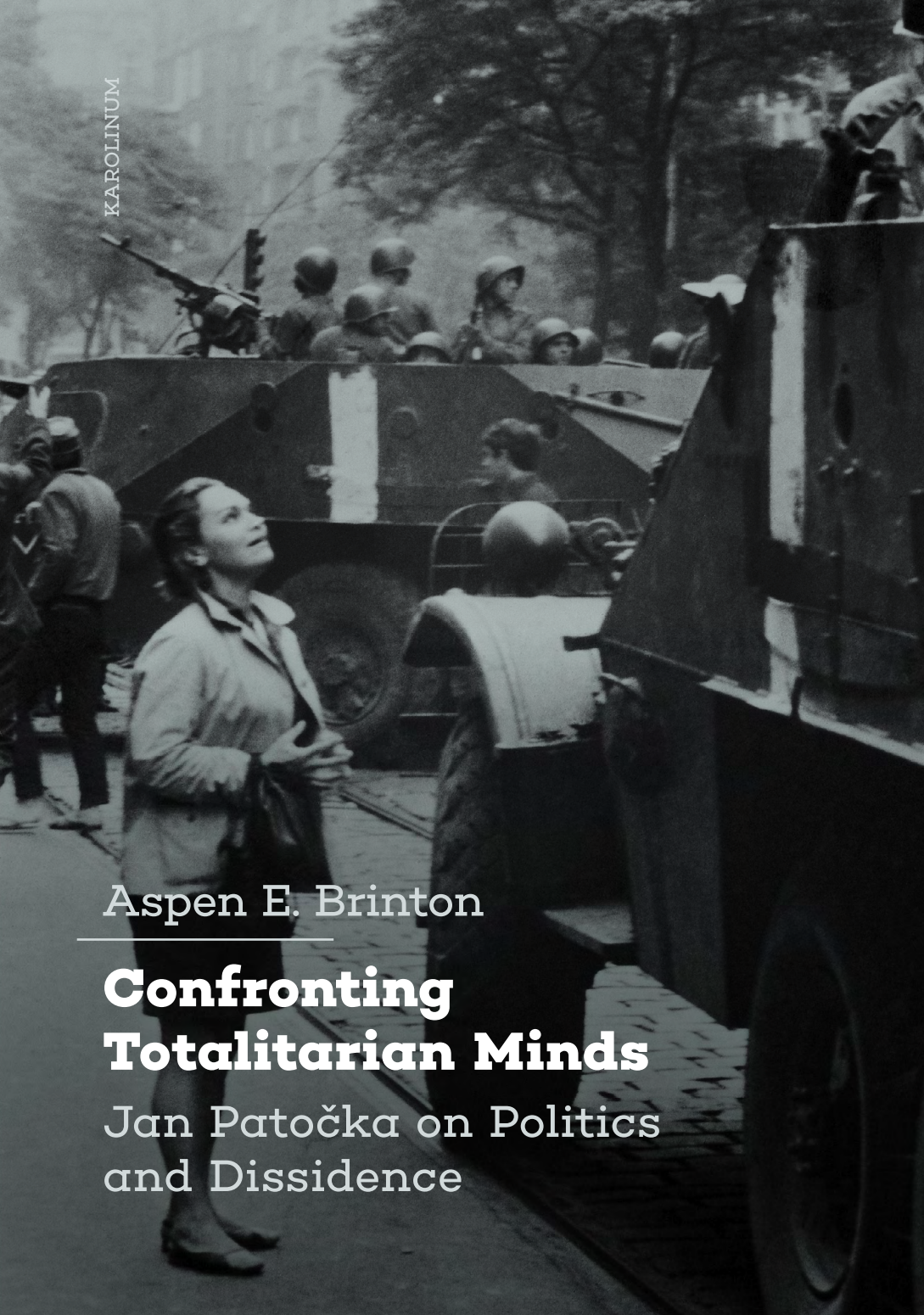


Aspen E. Brinton

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# Confronting Totalitarian Minds

Jan Patočka on Politics  
and Dissidence



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Jan Patočka on Politics and Dissidence**

**Aspen E. Brinton**

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*In memory of my father*



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# Acknowledgments

This book is a conversation as much as it is also about conversations. It was written with the hope that conversations about philosophical ideas can create moments of beauty, friendship, and transcendence within the everyday banality of an alienating world. Those who had conversations with me about this book, however short or tangential, made this book possible by creating such moments. I wish I could remember every conversation, though I cannot, and I realize that many may not even remember these conversations, even though I do. However limited and imperfect, I give thanks here to what I remember, to those who made this larger written conversation possible through a thousand smaller exchanges of words, ideas, exaltations, and questions: thanks to all the participants of the 2017 Patočka conference in Leuven and Brussels, and especially those who remember that late debate over yet another good Belgian beer about the last lines of *Heretical Essays*, including Anita Williams, James Dodd, Ian Angus, Emre San, Francesco Tava, Martin Koci, and Daniel Leufer; thanks to our 2017 ASEEES panel of Delia Popescu and Francesco and Martin again, where we had the opportunity to discuss Patočka's ideas and converse with an American audience about *The Socrates of Prague*; to Marci Shore and Ludger Hagedorn, for organizing a conference about totalitarianism and Central European philosophy, where conversations with Michael Gubser, Vladimir Tismaneanu, Omri Boehm, Krzysztof Czyzewski, Irena Grudzinska-Gross, and Elzbieta Matynia, among many other distinguished guests, let us create a moment of solidarity in the midst of our political distress; to Jonathan Bolton, for several conversations, but most especially for that moment in Brussels that gave momentary light to impending darkness;

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me remember that all of us may someday become the practicum for our own ethical theories.

I owe ongoing thanks to my colleagues at VCU who took a chance on me and this Czech philosopher, and to Mark Wood and Motse Fuentes who made the future possible; I hope our conversations continue into the years ahead.

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More formally, the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna, Austria, supported this project with a residential fellowship to use their archive and complete the manuscript. My sincere and heartfelt thanks to Ludger, Mary, and Ana for everything they did to make the fellows feel welcome at the Institute. The Dean's Office at Boston College also provided financial support and research leave for this project.

This book was written through tumult—personal, professional, and political—and each conversation really did matter, and each moment of support, however small and despite the cliché, really did make a difference in bringing this book into existence. The final conversation that brought this book into print, with Michael Baugh, editor at Karolinum Press, included more living-in-truth than most normal conversations in academic publishing, and I will always be thankful for the unexpected yet conscientious response to the multifaceted tumult of this book's life-world. I would also like to thank Sydney Murray, Courtney Latourrette and Alexander Tyree for their assistance in the final preparation of the manuscript.

The prospectus for this book was the next thing I wrote after I composed and delivered the eulogy for my father's funeral, and so this is dedicated to his memory, but also in memory of all those who, like him, survived the destructiveness of war, experienced 'the front' in all its forms, and lived and died with war in their souls.

# Preface

An umbrella opens. A tear gas canister explodes. Bodies march. A mural is painted. Someone addresses the crowd from atop a car. A mind goes blank at the sound of gunfire. Time stops. A body goes limp as the handcuffs are put on. Cameras livestream. Banners unfold. Riot police line up. Flags fly and are trampled. Images appear on a billion tiny screens. Crowds swirl. Articles are written. A Molotov cocktail is thrown. Appeals for help go viral. Commentators speculate. The bodies come and go, talking of history, hoping for freedom, trying to speak the truth about power and existential solidarity. They will return, and the questions persist: Why do they go? What if it all goes wrong? What will history say?

This book tries to illuminate dissident politics as something that *might* make human life seem more meaningful in the midst of the nihilism, despair, and existential crises wrought by modernity's political conundrums and calamities. By using Jan Patočka's ideas as lenses to examine the words of activists and dissidents across time and place, it seeks a glimpse at alternate forms of political thinking that might become antidotes to the totalitarianisms within our minds and political bodies. What is owed to Patočka in formulating these new (but also very old) questions should become clear in the chapters that follow, but what is owed to our contemporaries still working against the totalitarianisms of today should be the beginning, if only because it all must come back to these human confrontations with totalitarianism in the end. A few words to begin, then, from dissidents of the last decade, those who made headlines in recent memory, but who somehow also came to embody the ideas of this book.

Denise Ho is a spokesperson for the non-violent protest movement still ongoing in Hong Kong in 2020. She gave a speech at the Oslo Freedom Forum in 2019, describing the background to her life and activism:

The Umbrella Movement in 2014 proved to be a defiant move in a city where the majority of the population has always been so politically indifferent. Why were these young students courageously standing up to this giant machine, one that so many people were fearful of? Walking down the occupied streets of Harcourt Road, I remember seeing all these magnificent expressions of thought and creativity, something that I had never seen in my city. Graffiti, sculpture, art installations, small patches of farming, and our own posted mosaic version of the Lennon Wall, and even a temporary study hall... As a Hong Kong-born singer-song writer and a daughter of an immigrant mother who had spent her teenage years in Montreal, and also, the first female singer to have come out openly in Hong Kong, I had always felt out of place in this city... It was only until this moment, among the aspiring crowds of the Umbrella Movement, that I finally felt a real sense of belonging to this place where I have always called 'home'...

After my involvement in the Umbrella movement, I was banned from China... so I launched a campaign to crowd-sponsor my concert... I built my own system... and also improvised local tours in different districts of Hong Kong. We sang on trams and underground live houses and on sidewalks and even in local shops... By creating socially innovative art, music, and events, [and] by breaking rules and reinventing the game, I want to pass on this message to the younger generations. Create your own possibilities, even when all odds are against you... Fear grows in spaces where we feel alone, judged, and cut off. The key is to not get discouraged and intimidated by the bigger picture. But rather to look within and around ourselves, to find people with similar values and identify the possibilities that exist in our own spaces. By focusing on our everyday lives, on our skills and passion, we can and will reignite our courage... Do your best in what you do best... Live the life that you envision for generations to come. When the system does not provide for us, we take things into our own hands. Our fate is what we make of it. By reconnecting with ourselves we will reconnect with others. And finally, we will reconnect with our flexibility in finding answers as a humanity collective.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Denise Ho, "Under the Umbrella: Creative Dissent in Hong Kong." Oslo Freedom Forum, May 27, 2019. Transcribed from video. <https://oslofreedomforum.com/talks/under-the-umbrella-creative-dissent-in-hong-kong>.

Extinction Rebellion, an organization that uses non-violent civil disobedience to highlight environmental problems related to climate change, describes its mission on its website:

Our world is in crisis. Life itself is under threat... We hear history calling to us from the future... It's a future that's inside us all—located in the fierce love we carry for our children, in our urge to help a stranger in distress... And so we rebel for this, calling in joy, creativity and beauty. We rise in the name of truth and withdraw our consent for ecocide, oppression and patriarchy. We rise up for a world where power is shared for regeneration, repair and reconciliation. We rise for love in its ultimate wisdom. Our vision stretches beyond our own lifespan, to a horizon dedicated to future generations and the restoration of our planet's integrity. Together, our rebellion is the gift this world needs. We are XR [Extinction Rebellion] and you are us.

This is the time. Wherever we are standing is the place... We have just this one flickering instant to hold the winds of worlds in our hands, to vouchsafe the future. This is what destiny feels like. We have to be greater than we have ever been, dedicated, selfless, self-sacrificial...

Time is broken and buckled, and seasons are out of step so even the plants are confused. Ancient wisdoms are being betrayed: to everything there was a season, a time to be born and a time to be a child, protected and cared for, but the young are facing a world of chaos and harrowing cruelty. In the delicate web of life, everything depends on everything else: we are nature and it is us, and the extinction of the living world is our suicide...

Each generation is given two things: one is the gift of the world, and the other is the duty of keeping it safe for those to come. The generations of yesterday trust those of today not to take more than their share, and those of tomorrow trust their elders to care for it... The contract is broken, and it is happening on our watch. A pathological obsession with money and profit is engineering this breakdown...

Tell the Truth is the first demand of Extinction Rebellion, using fearless speech, Gandhi's 'truth-force' which creates a change of heart...

Humans are by nature cooperative, and times of crisis can be times when life is lived transcendentally, for a purpose beyond the self. No individual alone is fully human, as the African concept Ubuntu shows: our humanity results from being in connection with each other. Believing that there is no Them and Us, only all of us together, Extinction Rebellion

seeks alliances wherever they can be found. We are fighting for our lives and if we do not link arms, we will fail because the forces we are up against are simply too powerful. We need you...

For our deepest longings are magnificent: to live a meaningful life, to be in unity with each other and with the life-source, call it the spirit, call it the divine, call it the still small voice, it doesn't matter what it is called or how it is spelled if it guides us in service to life...

This vision has a map. It is the map of the human heart. Believing in unflinching truth, reckless beauty and audacious love, knowing that life is worth more than money and that there is nothing greater, nothing more important, nothing more sacred than protecting the spirit deep within all life.

This is life in rebellion for life.<sup>2</sup>

“March for Our Lives,” an organization in the United States started by secondary school students, works against gun violence. As written on their website:

Everywhere we look, gun violence is decimating our families and communities. Whether it's the mass shootings in shopping malls, concerts, schools, and places of worship, the retaliatory gun violence in urban neighborhoods haunted by the legacy of economic disinvestment, racism, and poverty, or the solitary suicides committed nationwide with increasing frequency, gun violence adds up: over 100 Americans die from it every day. 100 lives lost every single day. We started March For Our Lives to say, “Not One More.” No more school shooting drills. No more burying loved ones. No more American exceptionalism in all the wrong ways. But we cannot do this alone.<sup>3</sup>

The Sudanese Professionals Association issued the “Declaration of Freedom and Change” in Khartoum on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019:

We, the people of Sudan across cities and villages, in the north, the south, the east, and the west; join our political and social movements, trade unions and community groups in affirming through this declaration that we

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2 “Why We Rebel,” Extinction Rebellion, curated by Jay Griffiths with XR UK Vision team, accessed January 4, 2020, <https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/about-us/>.

3 “Peace Plan: Conclusion,” March for Our Lives, accessed January 30, 2020, <https://marchforour-lives.com/peace-plan/>.

will continue the course of peaceful struggle until the totalitarian regime is removed and the following goals are achieved: First: The immediate and unconditional end of General Omar Al Bashir's presidency and the conclusion of his administration. Second: The formation of a National Transitional Government. This transitional government will be formed of qualified people based on merits of competency and good reputation, representing various Sudanese groups and receiving the consensus of the majority... Third: Putting an immediate end to all violations against peaceful protesters, repealing of all laws restricting freedoms of speech and expression; and bringing the perpetrators of crimes against the Sudanese people to fair trials in accordance with accepted national and international laws.

By signing this draft declaration... we affirm that we will continue taking to the streets and leading the nonviolent struggle, until our demands are met. We call upon our brethren in the armed forces to take the side of the Sudanese people and to refrain from supporting Al Bashir by participating in the brutalizing and killing of unarmed civilians.<sup>4</sup>

In 2013, a group of protesters assembled in Istanbul to try to prevent the authorities from cutting down the trees in Gezi park. After protesters were abused by the police, a coalition formed to support the protesters by calling for democratic accountability. Together these groups issued a statement, "We are Taksim Solidarity. We are Here." These are excerpts from the statement:

Taksim Solidarity is comprised of 124 trade unions, political parties, community groups, sports club fan groups, and initiatives embracing diversity and expressing demands in a peaceful, democratic way. It is supported by environmentalists, artists, journalists, and members of the intelligentsia.

Taksim Solidarity's demand for a healthy urbanization and liveable city, merged with the cries of millions for more freedom and democracy, reflects a social sensitivity symbolized by Gezi Park. The creative genius of the young, the warm embrace of mothers, the power of the working

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4 "Declaration of Freedom and Change," Sudanese Professionals Association, January 1, 2019, <https://www.sudaneseprofessionals.org/en/declaration-of-freedom-and-change/>.



classes and the loud and clear voices of women, the “we are here too” cries of the LGBT community and the revitalized oldies have come together to turn an irreversible page in the democratic history of this country... These spontaneous countrywide civil society initiatives have unfortunately been confronted with tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets. Four youths have lost their lives as result of violence by the police and their accomplices. How inhuman and incomprehensible is it that the government has still not shown any empathy with the families who have lost their beloved children?

Democratic demands can undoubtedly be met by democratic means. Our society needs an approach by the public administration perceiving the issues, demands, and expectations and taking steps for their solution. We are worried about the criminalization of democratic reactions and the treatment of everyone as guilty, as terrorists, and the use of police force pushing issues to intractability.<sup>5</sup>

Historian Marci Shore interviewed those who protested against the Ukrainian government of Victor Yanukovich in the winter of 2013–2014. These are a few moments from *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of a Revolution*:

There were moments when Markiyian was certain the revolution had been lost. Yet he kept going back. Once someone asked why he was standing there freezing on the Maidan if he believed all was about to be lost? His only answer was that it was his choice.<sup>6</sup>

‘I had not understood the moment when a person is ready to die. And there I understood it... it’s a departure, a movement beyond the confines of the self, when you experience being with people who are ready to die for you, to make themselves vulnerable for you, to carry you if you’re wounded... a willingness appears—it’s a kind of rapture, a wonder at the possibilities given to man, and enormous gratitude towards others, simply

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5 “We are Taksim Solidarity, We are Here!” July 19, 2013, <https://www.taksimdayanisma.org/taksim-dayanismasi-biziz-biz-buradayiz?lang=en>. With thanks to Ezgi Yildiz for a conversation about how ‘solidarity’ and ‘civil society’ translate into Turkish.

6 Marci Shore, *The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) 58.

a *Begeisterung* with generosity and devotion. And an experiencing of an enormous solidarity.<sup>7</sup>

His shoulder had been battered, but he was not scared away, he stayed on the Maidan. ‘Your mother must have been very upset,’ I said. ‘But she let you go back?’ ‘My mother was making Molotov cocktails on Hrushevskiy Street.’<sup>8</sup>

Tatiana Aleshka was on the streets in Minsk as ongoing protests emerged against the fraudulent reelection of Belorussian President Aleksandr Lukashenko in August 2020:

The city has woken up, and people have gone out into the streets to form a human chain of solidarity and to peacefully protest... It is impossible to fall asleep in a city where thousands of people remain behind bars for no reason, where they are humiliated, beaten, and mutilated with full impunity. It is impossible to fall asleep in a city overflowing with security forces, where you can be beaten or have your arm or leg broken, simply because you are waiting for information about your husband, brother, or daughter near the walls of a prison... Yet entirely peaceful protests and demonstrations continue in this city for the third day... The atmosphere is indescribable; words cannot do it justice... When you see it for yourself, when you stand holding flowers on the streets of the city, when you talk to strangers as if they are old friends, it can seem like there is hope... You feel happy to belong to such a people, to form a part of it! But you understand deep within you that they don’t touch you only because the order hasn’t been given... I myself, my friends and acquaintances, along with millions of people in the country don’t need directions to come out to protests. We have had it up to here with life in Lukashenka’s totalitarian state. We don’t need a director to show us where and when to go and what to do.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Shore, *Ukrainian Night*, 125. “Begeisterung” is not translated in Shore’s text. The closest translation in this context might be something like exaltation or communion, but the German word also implies being overcome with a spiritual force or presence.

8 Shore, *Ukrainian Night*, 42.

9 Tatiana Aleshka, “For All Those Who Are Interested in Events in Belarus, and for All Those Who Are Asking What Is Happening Here,” trans. Markian Dobczansky, IWM Chronicle from Belarus, August 18, 2020, <https://www.iwm.at/chronicle-from-belarus/tatiana-aleshka-for-all-those-who-are-interested-in-events-in-belarus-and-for-all-those-who-are-asking-what-is-happening-here/>. Originally posted in Russian on Facebook, August 15, 2020.

The Black Lives Matter movement in the United States responded to the videoed killing of George Floyd by a police officer, as well as the killing of many other African Americans by the police, with widespread and ongoing protests about racial injustice. Solidarity protests occurred around the world throughout the summer of 2020. These were the two main rallying cries shared by protestors globally:

“No justice, no peace.”

“I can’t breathe.”

# Introduction

*“Because no one can write about Plato  
who has not had the Platonic worldview  
opened up from inside oneself.”<sup>1</sup>*

– Jan Patočka

In various Prague basements and living rooms in the 1970s, Czech philosopher Jan Patočka led seminars on the question of how philosophy might “help us in the distress... [of] the situation in which we are placed.”<sup>2</sup> Patočka’s own distress included being forbidden to teach publicly and living under conditions of censorship in Communist Czechoslovakia. Having retreated to private spaces to do his work, he confronted his situation by leading conversations with students and other intellectuals that

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- 1 “So kann niemand über Plato schreiben, wem nicht die platonische Weltansicht sich vom innen aufgetan hat.” Jan Patočka in Eugen Fink und Jan Patočka, *Briefe und Dokumente 1933–1977*, ed. Michael Heitz, and Bernhard (München: Karl Alber, 1999), 95. (my translation)
  - 2 Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, trans. Petr Lom (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002)
    1. The word “distress” here is a translation of the Czech *nouze*, which Patočka uses again at the end of these lectures to describe the general situation and condition of life at his historical moment. It can also be translated as “basic need,” implying that a state of *nouze* is one where basic needs of food, water, and shelter are not fulfilled. Yet it is used in both a psychological and physical way relating to needs, and in some older usages refers to a situation where one’s free will is taken away by the conditions of the situation, that is, a form of distress imposed from the outside and irremediable through individual action. Patočka is probably playing with all of these meanings together in choosing to describe philosophical reflection as something that can be done in a state of *nouze*, while acknowledging that the distress is produced from the constraints of the external situation. With thanks to Hana Fořtová for a clarifying discussion on this word.