

Offering a variety of views [1986]

Every Monday evening in Prague an unemployable academic — Dr Hejdánek — teaches students who have been denied entry to the University. Here he describes his seminars

Ladislav Hejdánek is a 58-year-old Czech philosopher who, since completing his studies in 1952, has been prohibited from working in the Czechoslovak university system, except for the period between 1968 and 1970 when he was admitted to the Philosophy Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. Since then, Dr Hejdánek has worked as a night receptionist, coal stoker and stockroom clerk. For more than five years he has also held an independent philosophy seminar every Monday night in his apartment for ten to fifteen students. This seminar was the topic of an interview granted by Dr Hejdánek in November 1985 at his home in Prague. The interviewer is Eric Pétursson.

How did the seminar come about?

The original seminar was begun in 1978 by Professor Julius Tomin as an attempt to keep independent philosophical thought in this country from withering away completely. But after a year of intensive police harassment, it was not possible to go on. Professor Tomin was forced to discontinue the seminar and emigrate. In April 1980, I began a seminar along similar lines to carry on what Professor Tomin started. Since then, with rare exceptions, we've met every Monday night except for a two-month break in the summer.

Have you had any problems with the police?

In the beginning they wanted to stop the seminar. I told them if they wanted another Tomin scandal they would have it. During the first year-and-a-half they interrupted the seminar four or five times but, on the whole, they tolerated us. Then, in December 1981 — when Poland was on the brink of martial law — they raided our meeting and held several of us for up to 48 hours in police custody. Two weeks later, one of our guest lecturers, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, was arrested on a trumped-up charge of drug trafifilosoficking. He was finally released after intervention by the French government, but the whole incident was very unfortunate and should never have happened in the first place. Afterwards, we spent a very difilosoficult half-year; we had something like five raids in six months. Since then, police interventions have been sporadic but not serious.

What topics do you deal with in the seminar?

In our first year we did the philosophy of science. In our second year, the philosophy of history. Our third year was broken up by police harassment, so we studied various philosophical themes. In our fourth year we did cosmology, and this year we're doing faith as a cosmic factor. We also have guest philosophers from Western Europe and

America about once every three weeks. They lecture on topics entirely of their own choice. Since September we've had two Dutch philosophers, a Belgian, a Frenchman, and an Englishman.

Do your American guest lecturers ever include Latin Americans?

Not yet, unfortunately, but I would certainly welcome them.

Is there a political content in the lectures?

No. This is nothing more nor less than an independent philosophy seminar. Even when the topic of discussion turns to a political theme, politics as such are treated only in the abstract.

Does the current seminar topic, 'Faith as a Cosmic Factor', have a theological leaning?

There's no theological context. If we sometimes mention, for example, faith among the ancient Hebrews, it's done only tangentially. At the moment, we're interested in faith as an element of Empedocles' notion of love.

What kind of students do you have?

Two or three have finished their studies; some have been expelled from the university for expressing heretical views, but most were denied entry in the first place for political reasons: either they or their parents had said or done something in the past that put them in disfavour with the authorities. Then there are some students who are completely unknown to me. We don't ask names and if somebody wishes to remain anonymous, we don't press the matter. Of course I realise that the police could send us some of their people, but that would only be to their benefit.

Another thing, almost all those who have attended our universities are weary of the third and fourth-degree Marxism they teach there. You can't even find a good Marxist philosopher in Czech universities.

Isn't that a little too categorical? In other academic or artistic disciplines, Czechoslovak dissidents themselves are careful to note that here and there among ofilosoficially-tolerated scientists and artists, one finds genuine talent, even in a discipline so thoroughly statecontrolled as history.

Genuine historians perhaps; genuine philosophers no. The acceptable field of activity in philosophy is so limited that real philosophy cannot be carried out. The best Czech philosopher of the twentieth-century, Jan Patočka, was prohibited from teaching from 1948 till his death in 1977 [when he died of a heart attack immediately following a police interrogation] with the exception of the three years between 1968 and 1971. Since 1935 there has existed no four-year period in which philosophy has been taught without some forced slant being put on it.

What is the purpose of the seminar?

First, for young people who have an interest in philosophy this is virtually their only chance to meet philosophers and acquire knowledge in this area without having to subscribe to a particular point of view.

Second, the seminar is a way of keeping the bridge open to European thought. I think it's essential that we remain a part of Europe. That's why we're so willing to welcome guest philosophers. Often they arrive unannounced and we give them the floor for the evening, putting off our own work until the following week.

Third, we offer a variety of philosophical viewpoints to our students, most of whom are beginners. Here they're taught many different philosophical theories that never see the light of day in official institutions. They're free to choose whichever they think best.

Lastly, ours is not the only philosophical seminar though it is the most well known. I know of three or four similar philosophy circles and then perhaps twenty or so seminars on other themes and subjects. This one serves as a lightning rod for the others. We're usually the first to get hit during a crackdown; they then take the hint and go further underground

Dr Hejdánek, as a man not unfamiliar with abstract ideas and spiritual matters — you are not only a philosopher but also a socialist and devout Christian — what do you make of the contention that while the West is an economic and technological success, it is a spiritual poor cousin to the East? After all, while the average American has the privilege of watching television for something like six or seven hours a day in the name of pure personal pleasure, the average Soviet citizen endures a grim life of daily hardships in the name of a 'great historical enterprise', world Communism. In Czechoslovakia, too, the system, despite itself, seems to have spawned a spiritual renaissance among the country's Catholics. Thus whether in support of the Communist system or in opposition to it, people's spiritual aspirations do seem to be aroused, unlike under capitalism.

First, I think there's more nationalism and, in the case of Czechoslovakia, religious nationalism at work than any true spirituality or faith. Therefore, I don't think the notion of the East being more 'spiritual' than the West holds together.

Another thing, there are some great thinkers in the West, but they have no influence. There are some here too. The only difference is that your freedom is so great that nobody bothers to take any interest in spiritual matters. Here people are interested, but only because it's forbidden.

There is a spiritual crisis today, but it's worldwide. As Heidegger said, 'The gods are mute'. This being the case, it's necessary to go on while waiting for something else to come along. Today the thinking we do is scientific-technological. Objects and things are

all-important to us. We are not trained to think in terms of Wirklich, or what is effectively true, but in terms of reality, rooted linguistically in the Latin, realitas, for 'things'.

Life is not a thing and it's futile to try to reduce it to such a mere concrete object.

[popiska pod přiloženou fotografií z bytového semináře:]

One of the seminars about to take place in an artists's studio. Harassment by the authorities in 1980 was enough to persuade most participants to conceal their identity.