On the Difficulty of Saying No

In the language of Roman trial law, “protest” had a strategic meaning: publicly breaking a silence that otherwise could have been misinterpreted as assent to a presented interpretation. The language of protest battles the suffocation in wordless conformity. The peculiar, deep conformism that has spread, crippingly, in the Federal Republic has generated protest and, occasionally, a protestational form of thinking. It is directed against a form of indifference whose cause – whether an identification with everything and everyone, or a simple flight from identification altogether – is no longer discernible. Klaus Heinrich offers a commentary on the singular experience of this indifference in his Essays on the Difficulty of Saying No.¹

These reflections on the complications of protest speech (which arise in cases of wrongly directed protest, as well as absent protest) do not rest on analyses of contemporary examples; they eschew the transparent biographical excuse, namely the difficulty of living as an intellectual in this Federal Republic. If this book still fell under a scientific or scholarly rubric, one could regard it as a critique of the false consciousness of ontology and of positivism. Heinrich philosophizes according to the rules of art, but the result of his artfulness is not in fact a philosophical undertaking.

Heinrich conceives of protest as opposition [Widerspruch] to processes of self-destruction. He has in mind those sublime forms of destruction that psychoanalysis has revealed in the intertwinement of individual life histories as well as in the fluctuations of collective states of consciousness – in other words, ruinings and self-destructions that do not relate directly to physical life. Heinrich does
not focus on the risks of preserving material life, threatened economi-
cally in the impoverished regions of the world and politically
and militarily even in the most highly developed ones. His concern
is neither with nutritional capacities, nor with population explosion;
neither with radiation damage and genetics, nor with the conditions
for technological progress and economic growth; neither with the
relation between strategies for national defense and global annihila-
tion, nor with an internationalized civil war and the nuclear compul-
sion toward peaceful coexistence. The dimension of self-destruction
that Heinrich puts up for discussion refers instead to a fact
that that our positivist times would far prefer to deny: that the repro-
duction of the human species is assured only in the demanding form
of historical survival. Socialized individuals can obviously only secure
their existence via organized adaptive processes to the natural envi-
rionment, and through readaptation to the social system of labor itself,
to the extent that they mediate this metabolic interaction with nature
through a highly precarious equilibrium of individuals with one
another.

Material conditions for survival are therefore tightly intercon-
nected with the most abstract conditions; the organic equilibrium is
linked with another fragile balance between separation and unifica-
tion, which engages the identity of each individual I through com-
munication with others. The failed identity of the self-asserting I,
like the failure of communication with the other speaker, are self-
destructions that, in the end, have physical ramifications as well. These
are perceptible as psychosomatic disturbances within the sphere of
the individual. But shattered biographies also reflect the shattered
reality of institutions. We know the painstaking process of continu-
ally renewing self-identification from Hegel's phenomenology of
Spirit, as well as from Freud's psychoanalysis: the problem is one
of an identity that can be constructed only through identifications,
and this means precisely through renunciations [Entäussprungen] of
identity. At the same time, this is the problem of a form of com-
munication that allows a saving balance between speechless oneness
and speechless alienation, between the sacrifice of individuality and
the isolation of the abstractly individuated I. This balance must be
achieved anew at each stage of development, and can fail at each stage
as well. Experiences of the threatened loss of identity and the col-
lapse of verbal communication are repeated over the course of every
life history. But these are no less real than the collective experiences
of species history, which the collective social subject undergoes in the course of the conflict with nature, as well as with itself.

Protest speech, whose difficulties Heinrich investigates, is directed against subterranean processes of self-destruction within society – a society which, in its present state of development, and with the dangers of reification on the one side and amorphousness on the other, must allow its members to form their fragile identities, and to sustain them within the nonidentity of successful communication. Claims about the maturity of the individual are simultaneously claims about the autonomy of society as well:

The I-Self is never either itself or not-itself; neither identity nor non-identity, rather only the construction of an identity of both. Saying no, speaking out against the diremption [Zerreissung] between these two, is the first word of language. Yet it directs itself not only against diremption but also against a dirempted reality. And it searches within that reality for models of balance. It needs an opposed other [Gegenüber], on which it can support itself – and against which it can set itself.

The two central chapters of the book describe the difficulty of protesting against the self-destruction of a society as it sinks into indifference; the problem of identity under the threat of a loss of identity; and the problem of communication in a state of habitualized speechlessness.

Since time immemorial humans have interpreted crises of inner equilibrium through myths, religions, and philosophies, which testify to the experiences of the painstaking formation of the subject of a species history. A theologian by training, Heinrich is thus able to interpret the most contemporary affects by freely referring to the oldest of traditions. In the world religions, he uncovers a variety of models for a “durable identification,” and in this way arrives at a surprising interpretation of the constitution of identity, on whose basis Fichte had already set the dialectical philosophy of identity into motion. This time, of course, dialectics is conceived as verbal communication, which the Socratic reciprocity of unforced dialogue between autonomous human beings must wrest from a repressive natural history. In situations of the domination of not yet realized mature autonomy [Mündigkeit], dialectics is the counter-offensive against the suppression of dialogue. Protest – saying no – is, in the end, the demand to think dialectically.
Heinrich develops this claim of the dialectic – and here we find the real philosophical intention of the work – in opposition to the claims of ontological thought, which, rather than revealing and overcoming the powers of origin that threaten humanity with destruction, merely repress them. Ontology appears as a failed attempt to transmute the positivity of threatened non-being into the simple negation of a purified Being, of authenticity separated from all that is inauthentic; of the true, right, and certain scrupulously separated out from the false, the evil, and the perilous. Of course, in this manner ontology only cloaks a contradictory reality. Against Parmenides, Heinrich raises the claim of dialectical thinking from the Old Testament topoi of communal fellowship. Unlike the Greek philosophers, the prophets of Israel did not conceive of the life-giving, life-preserving context as a sphere of blessed unity of all forms of life, elevated above all that is nihilating, transient, and illusory within one originary, complete Being – not as cosmos, that is – but instead as a universal bond whose power can only prove itself in the communication of traitors throughout the history of socialized humanity. Even in betrayal, a collectivity holds the fragmented world together, namely as the context of guilt. As long as this is not suppressed as a context of guilt, and remains a moving force, it clings to justice, to the idea of blessed unity, even if only as its mirror image. In this tradition – which seeks in all that has died out the traces of the still living, in all that is shattered the traces of unity – the place that ontology allots to the “forgetfulness of Being” is replaced by a different category: self-destructive betrayal. This betrayal, deceiving even the traitor himself that it is he who ultimately betrays and sells himself, is presented in two figures: as the loss of identity, which dissolves the I that had formed in and through the world, and as the breakdown of communication, which does not so much permit the speaker to lapse into silence as strike him dumb.

Unlike ontology, the critique of these representations of the untrue life (which are no longer conscious of their own untruth) does not orient itself in terms of a Being purified of non-being, or an authenticity that demands participation and obedience. Critique now does not return to the origins of the powers threatening humanity with the loss of I and of speech; it seeks rather to break that power, to “escape from the origin,” and with the attainment of an I born out of conflict, to avert the danger which annihilates the continuity of history and pulls historical life into chaos, in individual neuroses no
less than in collective catastrophes. Wherever individual consciousness is able to find and maintain its balance between fusion and isolation, the communication between speakers is the only power in which the powers of the origin can be mastered. It is this power to which subjects owe their “mature autonomy” [Mündigkeit].

Heinrich himself formulates his thesis in this way:

We know of two responses to the threat of an uncertain fate. One, in its renunciation of the world, seeks to overcome the world’s ambiguous embodiments and, faced with the vision of an eternal fate, seeks to make itself one with that fate. The other, faced with a world of ambiguous embodiments, recognizes and assumes the struggle against the ambiguity of the world as its own fate. The first response is given by the philosophers of Greece; the second by the prophets of Israel. While the first response rebels against the ambiguous embodiments of the world, nevertheless remaining unable to save its own “arrogance” (the philosophical counterpart to the hubris of the tragic heroes) from “repentance,” the other breaks the power of domination of expanded space and accelerated time. In its struggle against Baal, it protests against the unbroken powers of origin. And against those powers, it opposes the one power which, in distorted form, is also within it.

Against the ontological illusion of pure theory, the dialectician opposes a knowledge that, beyond its very interests, finally fulfills its intention.

Protest as advocacy for an achieved identity and successful communication is dialectics; indeed dialectics consists precisely in saying no (whose difficulties Heinrich analyzes) because in the redeemed context of life the demonic powers themselves would have to pass away, and could not be negated in favor of some distinctive region of pure unity: the power of the redeeming word must be wrested from the demonic powers themselves, to which they then are forfeit. The traitors can and must be shown that it is they themselves whom they betray. Protest wins its strength only to the degree that it first identifies with those against whom it protests. In this sense, the trickster is interpreted as a conformist who, through pointed collaboration, sheds light on a reality beyond conformism. The techniques of this cunning form of resistance are also depicted in the story of Odysseus, and in the work of the supremely cunning Brecht, above all in the inversions of the animal fables and the Threepenny Opera.
Heinrich’s perspective, in the end, reveals the affinity of ontological and positivist consciousnesses. Both collapse into the suggestive illusion of pure theory; both share the intention of using abstract distinctions to rid the world of the demons it fears. Whether reason elevates itself into a static contemplation of the eternal, or reduces itself to an instrument for the processing of the ready-to-hand, both ontology and positivism remain equally helpless against the return of repressed powers. The ascent to the indifferent power of origin of the one, unutterable Being renders resistance and the language of protest just as incapable of reflection as the exorcism of all empirically meaningless statements under the compulsion of restricted forms of experience. The last version of Heidegger’s ontology is the reverse side of the same coin that positivism had stamped with the seal of speechlessness. This ontology fetishizes words, bows down in worship before their roots, believing words to be pure only in their venerated origins; positivism, at the same time, nominalistically transmutes words into signs which it then processes arbitrarily, emptying language and revoking language’s unifying power.

Of course, we cannot remain satisfied with this revelation of the true relationship between Heidegger’s word-fetishism and the symbolic nominalism of the strict empirical sciences. In any event, organized scientific research has developed into a productive force in industrial society. The technical exploitation of its non-linguistic data sustains our lives – even if, at the level that Heinrich has in view, it also threatens the destruction of life insofar as the dialectical task of “translation” fails. Surely it is a question of restoring a pragmatically rich form of knowledge, not just in terms of the instrumental capacities of technically adept humanity, but also in terms of the linguistic possession of a communicative society – it is a matter of the re-translation of the products of the sciences back into the horizon of the lifeworld. But could we successfully undo the positivistically driven process of scientific research once the traces of the last of the ontologies have been swept away?

Translation, the wakening pronouncement, counts as the key to redemption. For Heinrich, life itself becomes synonymous with participation in language, reality synonymous with linguistic reality. This seems to me to be comprehensible from the perspective of Tillich’s theology of personification, but as a consequence of the current of anti-ontological arguments inspired by Walter Benjamin, not entirely consistent. Had Heinrich seriously pursued the positivistic form of
speechlessness (the operational use of signs in formalized languages) or the peculiar drive of formal logic toward explicitness (against which he offers the ambiguity of dialectical refusal), he would have discovered the system of social labor precisely in the "betrayal" that sustains the modern sciences. His theological approach, it seems, restricts his view to the origin of the process in whose course the human race wrests maturity from the "powers." Thus, mythical beginnings are not in the end referred to the categories of developed society, whose speechlessness is in fact the author's concern: he does not conceive language in its mediation through labor.

This may have something to do with the fact that, in the end, Heinrich believes that he can summarize his insights under the title of a new existentialism: instead of the anxiety of fundamental ontology, he proposes the "whirlpool" [Sog] – an odd regression into the very ontology that had fallen prey to his criticism.

Translated by Max Pensky

Note

1 Klaus Heinrich, *Versuch über die Schwierigkeit, Nein zu sagen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964).