
SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS OF DOMINIK TATARKA'S COMMUNE OF GOD

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Abstract

The study aims to reflect on Dominik Tatarka, the Slovak writer, dissident, journalist, essayist and cultural critic, and his opinions on religion, social establishment and culture. The text works with the basic assumption that despite being a devoted communist, Tatarka was also a sharp critic of the Czechoslovak socialist regime in the 1960s. As the authors believe, even though Tatarka appeared to be an atheist, at least during his adult life, some of his philosophical notions and critical remarks can be seen as religion-related and Theology-based. His concept of 'Commune of God' is thus placed in the centre of the authors' attention. The study claims that Tatarka's views and opinions should not be regarded as late modern; the authors conclude that many of his writings remain relevant and up-to-date even in the 21st century, especially in terms of our present-day opinions on religion, community building and spirituality.

Keywords: community, building, religion, Slovak, culture

1. Introduction

Slovak Philosophy and Social Sciences (or rather their theoretical outlines and methodological foundations) in the second half of the 20th century were diametrically different from Euro-Atlantic ways of thinking and opinion flows. It is quite understandable, however, given the fact that the then political situation in Czechoslovakia had pointed Slovak philosophical thinking strictly towards 'the East' for more than forty years. Any contacts with European spiritual and intellectual musings were therefore rather problematic. Communication and information dissemination in terms of specific scientific disciplines were limited to the development of Marxist and socialist ideas and their enforcement and application in social and cultural practice. Similarly, projections of 'a new man', situated in the background of radical social transformations, carried various traits of anti-culture [1], negating the social and cultural structure previously accepted and practiced by society.

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Understandably, the most renowned personas of Czechoslovak artistic life and literature had to cope with these cultural and political disparities. Many of them were (symbolically or literally) ‘silenced’ or politically repressed due to their different views on the further development of the cultural and societal situation in Czechoslovakia. Being one of these politically repressed artists, the Slovak writer, essayist and journalist Dominik Tatarka (1913-1989) witnessed the era’s contradictory social and cultural framework. His two-decades-long, politically enforced detachment from the cultural and literary life (not to forget repressions experienced in personal life) from 1969 to 1989 was ended by the democracy-establishing processes of the Velvet Revolution in November 1989 and the rather optimistic years following this essential change in social and political structures. The organizational and production mechanisms of literary life welcomed again hundreds of involuntarily ‘silenced’ and otherwise oppressed writers. It is thus unfortunate that Dominik Tatarka was not able to see this radical transformation of the cultural and political situation in Czechoslovakia as he had passed away a few months prior to the Velvet Revolution, more specifically in May 1989. Tatarka’s return to Slovak literature (marked by public availability of his samizdat works or books originally published in foreign or rather exile publishing houses) was accompanied by various paradoxes. As influentially discussed by Jozef Bžoch in his article with a very suitable title *Čakanie na Dominika Tatarku (Waiting for Dominik Tatarka*, published in 2001) [2], Tatarka’s artistic and journalistic activities finally took their rightful place within the wider communication context.

In the 1950s, Slovak arts and literature were influenced by various unstable and quickly transforming ideological, cultural and political frameworks. The decade began with the highly repressive and schematic principles of so-called Socialist Realism. This cultural establishment was quickly followed by the Khrushchev’s Thaw, i.e. by the short-term period in the late 1950s when repression and censorship in all satellite countries of the Soviet Union (which means in Czechoslovakia as well) were relaxed. However, the last years of the decade brought a certain ‘restoration of order’ – these processes were associated with constant ‘clearances’ aimed at testing devotion to the Party and citizen ‘reliability’. This era was full of intensive censorship interventions which were related to the on-going internal political struggles for power.

Even though the given isolation of Slovak thinking, science and culture from any ‘Western’ influences had caused a significant violation of their internal development, we would like to mention certain connections between then current philosophical notions of Dominik Tatarka and Western European philosophical tradition. It is necessary to mention Tatarka’s own opinion, according to which many substantial ideas – regardless of the period in humankind’s history we are talking about at the moment, past, present or future – tend to come into existence in different places, but at the same time. However, they do not ‘copy’ or ‘rip off’ one another; they are parallel and mutually independent [3]. As we believe, these very ‘European’ ideas proposed by

Dominik Tatarka are closely related to the communication structures prevailing in Slovak cultural, political and religious life in the 20th century.

2. Dominik Tatarka's life and work in today's academic reflection

The reflection on Tatarka's key thoughts on religion, culture and politics would be impossible without acknowledging the importance of his work and the troubled cultural and political circumstances of his life. As Peter Mráz points out, the writer's personal story includes moments that cannot be fully comprehended without looking closely at all the turning points of the times when he created art, published journalistic content, wrote philosophical remarks, defied pathetically or kept silence stubbornly [P. Mráz, <http://www.litcentrum.sk/62076>]. Marcela Antošová also states that Dominik Tatarka is “*a writer with un-substitutable place in the history of Slovak literature*” [4]. His works certainly deserve attention because of their poetic originality and semantic comprehension. The meditative and philosophical potential he possessed helped him both create engaging fictitious stories and express scholarly opinions which are in remarkable communication harmony with the philosophical works by Gabriel Honoré Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre and other world-renowned existential thinkers. Despite the fact that reading Tatarka's texts is not always sophisticated and ‘shiny’, his originality and semantic richness deserve our attention nevertheless [4]. Dominik Tatarka's work represents a thorough collection of ideas and critiques that are important not only to the much-needed analyses of Czechoslovak cultural history and classical historical studies in the field of Communication Studies, but to the contemporary late modern artistic creation and philosophical thinking as well. Despite the fact that most his journalistic, essayistic and literary works are rather modern than late modern.

Slovak textbooks focused on domestic Language Studies and Literature Studies tend to define Dominik Tatarka only as a writer and artist, yet his interest in Philosophy has been reflected on by several contemporary authors. As a general rule, Slovak philosophers and cultural critics see Tatarka as an existentialist, even though Tatarka never called himself so. Marcel Forgáč's publication *Existencializmus a slovenská literatúra (Existentialism and Slovak Literature)*, published in 2014) correctly points out that Tatarka's essential views on the world are, in fact, older than official acceptations of Existentialism as a tradition of philosophical inquiry in France. Analyses of Tatarka's first prosaic works often mention the absolute seclusion of the stories' fictitious heroes from the society. The writer used this approach to portray the absurd nature of an individual (and his decisions). According to Marcel Forgáč, Tatarka's intentions and thoughts are born out of loneliness, of the ontological solitude of man and distrust resulting from threats *to* humans posed *by* humans. This fact connects Tatarka's works with wider discussions on the existential aspects of human existence [5]. Moreover, Mária Bátorová focuses on various parallels between Dominik Tatarka's thinking and the work of Albert Camus by showing the Slovak writer as an existentialist whose thinking was, in many ways, quite ahead

of his time, at least in terms of Slovak cultural environment. Tatarka's Existentialism left its traits in his ambiguous relationship to religion and the civic principles of human behaviour. Mária Bátorová clearly shows that Dominik Tatarka was neither an atheist nor was he a citizen in the traditional sense of the word, answering the question 'Who was Dominik Tatarka' in a complex way that resembles his complicated life worthy of transdisciplinary scholarly reflections [6].

As we have stated above, any scientific interpretation of Dominik Tatarka's work is complicated because his essential ideas oscillated between the cultural styles of modern and late modern. However, as Mária Bátorová observes, he did not favour the late modern negation of traditional values (i.e. family relations, friendships, freedom, faith in people, intimacy, etc.). On the contrary, Tatarka's creative approach was strongly socially engaged, value-based. Many of his works balanced between autobiography and fiction, which is one of the basic contrasts separating modern and late modern art. He wrote novels, short stories and essays merging fictitious ideas and authentic experience such as *Prútené kreslá* (*Wicker Chairs*, originally published in 1963), *Panna zázračnica* (*The Miraculous Maiden*, 1944), *Farská republika* (*Parochial Republic*, 1948) or *Démon súhlasu* (*The Demon of Approval*, 1956). On the other hand, some of Tatarka's works are indeed autobiographic, but at the same time substantially stylized and still different from his intentional literary craftsmanship – these include *Sám proti noci* (*Alone against the Night*, 1984), *Pisačky pre milovanú Lutáciu* (*Scribbles for Beloved Lutecia*, 1988) or *Listy do večnosti* (*Letters into Eternity*, 1988) [7].

Despite articulating numerous objections related to social organization and the superior political status of the Communist Party, Tatarka remained to be "a devoted communist, believing that once we will be able to truly establish socialist democracy" [8]. He cared about two things – about constituting a free, self-responsible, truthfully expressive individual and a free commune of communes, a republic, i.e. a *Commune of God*. According to him, the union of citizens is much more than just an organization holding power. It is a kind of culture that is characterized by its own way of experiencing reality and communication between citizens who create this culture [T. Pichler, <http://www.tyzden.sk/casopis/10867/od-stura-k-tatarkovi/>]. 'The Commune of God' thus represents an idealized communication structure that allows citizens to actively participate in the dissemination of new information and the management of public affairs.

A similar analysis of Tatarka's key thoughts on *the Commune of God* is offered by Jozef Majchrák. As the author believes, Dominik Tatarka's critique of the hierarchized 'pyramid' of social and cultural life takes bold steps towards seeking and proposing a solution that would allow ordinary citizens to live within a free *commune*. Such a union of *communes* is formed by active, intrinsically free citizens who are ready to take a stand against the state authorities [J. Majchrák, <https://www.tyzden.sk/casopis/10324/dominik-tatarka/>]. Tatarka's republican views and his idealized vision of the development of

individually exercised civil rights are also discussed in Tibor Pichler's publication *Etnos a polis* [9].

3. Social and religious contexts of Tatarka's Commune of God

Dominik Tatarka's critical reflection on the ways the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia ruled is closely associated with his thoughts about 'the Commune of God' as a humanistic pendant of the social organization and "*a cultural, philosophical and intellectual activity as well*" [8, p. 190]. He concludes that individualism in terms of culture is "*a principally essential tendency*" that should be applied to both politics and economy, because emphasizing the possibility of returning to mass society is "*unreal, impossible and, above all, dangerous*" [8, p. 190]. That is why Tatarka, in the context of culture, i.e. a communication space filled with "*intellectual emotional force*" and "*all religious feelings and local traditions*", suggests that the authoritarian, hierarchical communication system should be replaced by "*horizontal connections between self-governed communities and towns, workplaces, workgroups, etc.*" [8, p. 190]. However, he also realizes that such a system of political and social communication can be achieved only by participating in public affairs and defending, as well as enforcing democracy through increased civic awareness. It is worth noting that Dominik Tatarka calls rebellions and revolutions "*the most spectacular cultural doings of the humanity*" which are related to the socio-cultural environment and the community-building culture; he also warns that "*culture seen as art (...) lacks one basic thing: revolution. Social expressions have fallen out of the cultural awareness.*" [8, p. 61]

Tatarka's concept of 'the Commune of God' as a model of social structure may be seen as a suitable example of a stratified discourse which has only little in common with authoritative discourses: "*Today, the Commune of God would be an organism made of social cells, of free citizens; it would be an expression of their historical awareness, their humanism, their humanistic, national and panhuman ambitions.*" [8, p. 145] According to him, this kind of "*a just, free republic*" is neither established in accordance with the church and military organization of state power nor does it consist of "*a rigidly led, strictly controlled mass*" of unambitious citizens whose social organisms have been "*mortified, scattered and reduced to power mechanisms*" [8, p. 148]. It is based on the rights of all individuals, mostly on the right to peacefully assemble and freely associate, to express one's own opinions by attending celebrations or ceremonies, by creating 'cells', i.e. fellowships, societies and clubs as social organisms that "*meet, collide, and fall apart on basis of the principle of recognition, on basis of recent needs and various acts of worshipping*" [8, p. 148]. Culture functions as the starting point and at the same time as the final achievement of the process of revival, as the integrant, binding element of *the Commune of God*. As Tatarka claims, culture is a form of life, the human existence itself, as well as its defence, purpose and fulfilment [8, p. 150].

Even in this case we may state that a human-citizen is the focal point of Dominik Tatarka's *Commune of God*. Citizens join other citizens to create social formations, here called 'cells'. Such a social organism consists of living cells and thus it tends to grow, change its shape and regroup, creating a system "of free citizens who form communes, worship their long-existing residencies and their culture and fellowships, citizens who will feel a stronger sense of responsibility towards themselves, responsibility towards their history and its fate..." [8, p. 190]. By saying this, Dominik Tatarka reacted to the need for the free engagement of citizens in various associations which had been replaced by forced memberships in professional unions and organizations after the 1948 Czechoslovak *coup d'état* (in Marxist Historiography also known as 'the Victorious February').

According to Tatarka, the most significant difference between the communist reality and *the Commune of God* lies in the processes of societal management: "Namely, this pyramid-shaped system of secretaries built from the top to the bottom does not feel right to me, it is a true hierarchy, a half-ecclesiastical hierarchy that may not be typical for wearing purple robes, but it still comes in various colours" [8, p. 187]. Moreover, this strong centralization of making crucial decisions, governing the state and building one's own career position from the lowest positions to the higher ones applies massive limitations to one of the basic civil rights: the right to receive information. Respecting this right is a basic precondition of restoring faith in the Party as a bearer of political power. During Tatarka's life, however, the Czechoslovak citizens did not possess the right to know anything relevant about the state's economic condition or foreign policy. All these aspects remained hidden under the institute of 'state secret'. The essence of *the Commune of God* (and living in it) is, however, not to foster careerism and chase after promotions, but rather to "feel like an equal, like an equally important member of a certain commune. Every commune that is alive – and worth being alive – has to accept its members, and these members will see the acceptance as an achievement, as fulfilling their own life purpose." [8, p. 190] We may conclude that Dominik Tatarka saw this equality between the citizens and the state – as well as the equality amongst the people themselves – as a social and cultural phenomenon that is much more important than the ubiquitous personality cult and the desire for power and career. We may even say that for Tatarka, the endless desire for power seems to be one of the most dishonouring societal roles existing within the socialist regime.

Any reflections on Tatarka's *Commune of God* naturally lead to the question of the concept's religious fundamentals. Dominik Tatarka's works clearly express an utter absence of normativity and include many attempts to disrupt the secretiveness of the political system that is based on proving the real character and legitimacy of truths about the world, man and God through rational procedures and logic (as proposed by Saint Thomas Aquinas, 1225-1274). Tatarka thus turns away from the Scholastic *forma dat esse rei*, deriving his own sense for form and composition of artworks from the monistic conception proposed by the Patristic Christian philosopher Saint Augustine of

Hippo (354-430): “*God Himself is the highest good and beauty, He is the purest form that cannot be understood by human senses, human notions do not represent Him appropriately*” [10]. Tatarka applies these creative foundations to his theoretical and practical explanations, as well as to analyses of Slovak literature, especially prose.

As of the concept of *the Commune of God*, careful readers aware of Tatarka's philosophical profile see the term itself in association with a certain return to *creatio perpetua* and *creatio perfectio*, i.e. to the notions by Saint Augustine. Dominik Tatarka was inspired by Saint Augustine even in the 1940s, during the Second World War. This presumed Christian framework and religiously determined interpretation of Tatarka's *Commune of God* is, however, substantially weakened by the writer himself: “*It was not God or gods who created man to their image; it was people who created God to their own image*” [8, p. 145]. Dominik Tatarka's ‘transfer’ of Saint Augustine's *creation perpetua* from God to man unambiguously places a human being at the centre of our attention, very much like the spiritual concept of culture. Man constantly engages in inner spiritual creation that forces current affairs to acquire a certain meaning.

The supreme civic principle that respects human rights without distinguishing between races, religious beliefs or political affiliations, the one that recognizes the liberating transparency of political processes, the right to assemble and the human need to freely make decisions related to the everyday existence is, in many ways, similar to Christian universalism. As mentioned by Mária Bátorová, the main difference lies in the Christian tendency to priori agree with the higher instance, which is so strange to the civic principle [11]. On the other hand, many similarities can be seen throughout the whole history of Christianity. The same traits occur in the history of Christian dissent in Slovakia which had made bloody, as well as symbolic sacrifices in the name of the fight for civil liberties throughout the whole existence of Communism, playing its role in establishing today's democracy. In the 1960s, an important Papal Encyclical was published to summarize various substantial changes in the Roman Catholic Church and its teachings. The most important change was the premise which saw Jesus Christ as a person existing among other common people, referring to the original Christian ideas: going towards Christ and following Him through being a man. The myth of the divine presence amongst the common people was therefore strengthened significantly. We may say that Dominik Tatarka's *Commune of God* offers a seemingly opposite view on this matter – if people want to, if they are able to open up to one another in good faith, God will always be with them [11]. We have mentioned Dominik Tatarka's inspiration drawn from the thoughts and notions of Saint Augustine. However, Mária Bátorová points out that “*Tatarka sees the Commune of God as a fellowship that meets freely. He does not divide it into City of Man and City of God like Saint Augustine. Tatarka regards violating and prosecuting the right to assemble, meet, ‘commune’ a crime against humanity.*” [11, p. 22]

Even though Dominik Tatarka's ideas and thoughts analysed above are not primarily religious and *the Commune of God* is not directly related to Christianity, the author had thought about his relationship to God throughout his whole life. Born and raised a Catholic, Tatarka eventually decided to favour his fascination with communist ideals over religion. Some of his writings from 1968 define the state politics' flaws in a manner similar to deficiencies that, as Tatarka believed, were also typical for institutionalised religion: "*Unlucky nations living in the last decades of this century have created an almighty, ever-present deity of the state with one and exclusive cult of power. Facing this deity, the citizen is becoming more and more helpless. His only defence against this all-ruling, vengeful, capricious Jehovah is the mimicry of consent, consent achieved at any cost, even at the cost of extreme cruelty or mass murders. Citizens, all nations used to make unthinkable sacrifices (...) Republic as a Commune of God, as a bond merging many communes of God, should be governed by elected authorities; political power should be divided as much as possible so the state pressures as little as possible, all people without any differences.*" [J. Majchrák, <https://www.tyzden.sk/casopis/10324/dominik-tatarka/>]

However, two decades later, Tatarka, then nearing the end of his life and well aware of it, wrote a letter to his good friend, a doctor and Catholic dissident Silvester Krčméry, and his words suggest otherwise: "*Breathing deeply, I pray for you, God bless you. You know, Silvo, I do not have much time left, but I still feel like a Carpathian shepherd, like a man who has lived through a lot, a man who knows and experiences what God's blessing is. God blessed this nation and humankind with these men (whom I worship deep in my heart and I am infinitely grateful they are here, close to my soul). Tell at least one of them that I love them, absolutely, as an eagle-bird. Silvo, I confess to you that I cannot be penitent enough. I am still a Carpathian shepherd who... does not deserve God's blessings, but THE DAWN WILL COME AND JESUS CHRIST, THE SUNSHINE OF HUMAN SOUL WILL COME ALONG WITH THE BREAK OF DAY.*" [J. Majchrák, <https://www.tyzden.sk/casopis/10324/dominik-tatarka/>].

4. Conclusions

The current scholarly reflection on the life and work of Dominik Tatarka involves a lot of different theoretical frameworks. Although most authors focusing on Tatarka's ideas and writings work in the fields of Literary Science, History, Cultural Studies or Philosophy, Tatarka's contradictory persona, long-term artistic career and notable involvement with public life are increasingly interesting to the sphere of Media Studies as well [12]. Since his work is quite versatile, it needs to be reflected on through various interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary approaches. Our observations related to Dominik Tatarka's views on society, culture and religion bring attention to the political consequences of media and communication processes. Of course, the political frameworks of media communication and the problems of the chaotic or often

insufficient participation of ordinary citizens in the political and societal life (i.e. the weak citizen involvements in public communication activities) were, are and always will be up-to-date. As stated by Alena Macková, Hana Macháčková, Jakub Macek and Jan Šerek, any use of media always comes with political consequences, at least in relation to the ways people engage in political processes. The research into the relations between political and media practices is therefore obviously not a new topic and it often builds upon classical studies from the mid-20th century [13]. According to Martin Solík and Juliána Mináriková, the cultural context may be deeply rooted in the genes of all people living in national states, but any changes in communication and technological advancements associated with mass communication necessarily influence the whole social organization, including politics [14].

Even though it is beyond any doubts that Dominik Tatarka's thoughts were inspired by Christian philosophy, practical realization of *the Commune of God* is not based on a Church-governed state administration, at least not necessarily. Refusing the higher principle, God, or rather replacing it by equality and justice as basic attributes of public life arrangement, refers to Tatarka's idea of the social state and classless society. As he claims, we will defend ourselves and reassure one another: "*Each small or bigger social cell possesses the right to feel like a Commune of God, to overcome numbing conventions, vitalize the social organism, provide it with tension.*" [8, p. 149] Dominik Tatarka respected these principles despite the fact that the process of 'normalization' excluded him from the cultural life approved by the official authorities, to the social and cultural periphery.

Based on our analysis of the work of Dominik Tatarka (as well as on the references to related opinions and studies published by other interested scholars), we conclude that Tatarka's spiritual and intellectual activities dating back to the 1960s were formed by the then dominant and intensively experienced social and historical realities. His influential works certainly re-connected Slovak philosophical thinking to European cultural tradition and Philosophy. After all, he wrote his philosophical texts under the influence of European spiritual 'flow'. This statement is best proved by the fact that besides following the Christian and existential lines of thinking, Tatarka's Philosophy also includes the reception of Dialogical Philosophy by Emmanuel Lévinas without any mutual conflicts.

Given the fact that Dominik Tatarka's was a citizen, writer, publicist and philosopher as well, his confessions merge various philosophical lines of thought and his immediate reactions to the social and political reality. His attempts to find an interconnection between Slovak socialist culture and the cultural and philosophical realities of Western Europe came into existence despite the strict boundaries of totalitarian ideology. As Peter Cabadaj comments, "*He was an 'Europer', with everything that was relevant to the term in the twentieth century. His own mistakes and missteps being no exception*" [P. Cabadaj, http://www.czsk.net/dotyky/7_2005/tatarka.html].

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