

cultural periods, the archival cards are, no doubt, “open texts”. The creation of an online archive, as the objective of the project *Placing the ethno-folkloric document into a new perspective. The configuration of cultural identity in its dynamics*, coordinated by the editor of the present volume, Eleonora Sava, completed by a corpus of texts which offer *one* form of organization and *one* reading of these texts is a step, while not easy to achieve, indeed necessary for a timely research.

Translated by Emese G. Czintos

**The Time and Age of Paradoxes:
Lajos András Kiss: *Paradoxes of Progress – Introduction
in the Philosophy of Extreme Ages*¹**

Krisztina SZŐCS
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj

Keywords: absurd, extreme ages, authenticity, *homo sacer*, irrationality and history, exceptional situation, uncommonness, historical paradoxical, testimony, totalitarianism

E-mail: krisztinaszocs@yahoo.com

*

Looking into Lajos András Kiss’ book, one encounters a peculiar world. The irony of the caricature-like graphics which figure at the head of each of the fourteen chapters already point out the direction on the path of the questions of self-criticism and uncommonness.

This book represents a serious challenge for anyone not only because of its comprehensiveness and various subjects, but also on account of the novel way it raises problems. The word *extreme* figuring in the subtitle suggests that one is going to experience something exceptional, something out of the ordinary here; this, by all means, is thought-provoking for present day readership interested in extreme things.

Kiss’ way of writing is characterized by both complexity and simplicity. According to his philosophy, our world is basically characterized by ambivalence; therefore one can think about it only in paradoxes. Kiss considers that the things most important to man often reach beyond the horizon of human reason. For thinking has a dimension where the absolute power of science fails; this is the world of paradoxes and irrational events. To go beyond the boundaries of reason is the condition for the man fallen into the precipice of necessities to find his way in the labyrinth of possibilities. Kiss, together with Hegel, believes that “if the world becomes irrational, one must devise ‘irrational instruments’ for understanding it.”²

¹ Kiss Lajos András, *Haladásparadoxonok – bevezetés az extrém korok filozófiájába* (Budapest: Liget Műhely Alapítvány, 2009), 288 p. (ISBN 963 9363 694)

² *Ibid.*, 5.



Octavian Cosman, *Twilight*, 47,5 x 69 cm, acrylic and oil on board, 2006

In his book he analyzes the paradoxes, lies, and eccentricities of totalitarian systems and modern democracies. Relying on the works of contemporary thinkers, Kiss presents the world of totalitarianisms and post-totalitarian democracies charged with paradoxes, the different forms of exclusion and oppression in the loosely connected chapters in a particular manner, insisting on issues which cannot be grasped with the logic of the European tradition based on rationalism.

After the paradoxes of the first chapter condensed in fragments and aphorisms, the author confesses that, beginning with the second chapter, he has tried to conform to the standards of “normal science”, and fragmentariness refers only to the confusingly great variety of themes and sets of issues.

In chapter two, in order to understand the “paradoxical world”, Kiss resorts to the outstanding personalities of current European philosophy, namely Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida’s concentration camp philosophy. From Agamben’s conception he emphasizes first of all the relationship between power and biology. But while, in the case of Agamben, Kiss relies on the epic texts of concentration camp survivors, in Derrida’s case, he tries to unravel the paradox of the annihilation camps through poetical creations.

After the absurd world of the concentration camps’ existential situation which cannot be grasped by rational means, the author tries to shift the perspective, analyzing the history full of paradoxes and excesses of the previous century in Walter Benjamin’s and Pavel Florensky’s political theological works, according special attention to Florensky’s letters from the labour camp. The most coherent theme of the volume is the interpretation of Florensky’s Gulag-letters.

The second part of the book, after the paradoxes of modern democracies, deals with the extremities and contradictions of the new capitalism. Kiss analyzes the paradoxical, false world of post-totalitarian democracies through the works of Slavoj Žižek, Peter Sloterdijk, Niklas Luhmann, Emmanuel Lévinas, Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Pierre Le Goff, as if dialogising with their creations.

Because of the thematic variety of Kiss’ book, it would be impossible for the present review to present the questions and problems approached by him in detail; therefore, I shall emphasize two topics from the volume. One such idea is the *state of exception, of the extraordinary* in concentration camps and the concept of the *homo sacer*, the other issue is the possibility or impossibility of *bearing witness* to what happened there.

Agamben approached the idea of biopolitics known from the discourse of social sciences, and applied it to the world of western political culture in a manner very different from Foucault’s views. The Italian philosopher analyzed the relations of biopower starting from the ideas of the *homo sacer* and the state of exception.

In an interview given to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2004, Agamben answered Ulrich Raulff’s question, what the state of exception meant to him, in the following way: “the state of exception or state of emergency has become a paradigm of government today. Which was originally understood as something extraordinary, an exception, which should have validity only for a limited period of time, has become the normal form of governance in the course of historical transformation [...] The state of exception establishes a hidden but fundamental relationship

between law and the absence of law. It is a void, a blank and this empty space is constitutive of the legal system.”¹

The Nazi concentration camps, the Soviet Gulags established by legal-political instruments create the paradox of the *extraordinary, exceptional state*. The camp consolidates the state of exception by creating “the paradox of normality”, in the lack of moral laws a new system of norm is born in which the norm becomes undistinguishable from the exception. The *exception* becomes the meeting place between bare life and the sovereign power which creates it. Kiss believes that the strength of the sovereign power does not consist of its control over its subjects, but much rather of the “mystical ability to decide about bare life”.²

Kiss considers that one of the greatest paradoxes of the 20th century was that “it made the exceptional figure of the *homo sacer* the norm and by this the possibility to differentiate between the normal and abnormal was effaced as well”.³ In the course of history in almost every age the paradox structure of the *state of exception*, to be outside the system of laws and nevertheless within it, has been recreated and has recurred. Kiss characterizes the existence of the sovereign power present in the *state of exception* as the oxymoron of the *inclusion in/exclusion from* the law. The sovereign power on the one hand is present in the everyday life of the state of exception, of the camp; on the other hand this power excludes one from the legal system and from the world of moral laws. The duality of *inclusion-exclusion* thrusts the *homo sacer* in an absurd situation which points beyond the horizon of human reason.

Kiss, similarly to Agamben, presents the concept of the *homo sacer*'s exceptional situation through the functioning of the totalitarian systems' logic. But while Agamben remained within the limits of the philosophy of law, history of law as well as of pure philosophy, Kiss, resorting to sociological and political philosophical points of view, focuses on the analysis of the post-totalitarian regimes' exclusion techniques.

Reading Kiss' interpretation written about the possibility, respectively impossibility to bear witness, I remembered the words of Russian philosopher Lev Shestov. The philosopher of irrationalism and paradoxes drew our attention half a century ago to the fact that “Hitherto, our science has only been able to turn away from all that is horrible in life, as if it were completely nonexistent, and to oppose it with ideals, as if ideals were the true reality. [...] Then life appeared before us with its demands. It does not even think of ideals. With enigmatic severity, it tells us with

¹ Ulrich Raulff, “An Interview with Giorgio Agamben”, originally published by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on April 6, 2004; English translation by Morag Goodwin, EUI, Florence, *German Law Journal* 5 (2004): 609, accessed on March 16, 2011, http://www.germanlawjournal.com/pdfs/Vol05No05/PDF_Vol_05_No_05_609-614_special_issue_Raulff_Interview.pdf

² Kiss, *Haladásparadoxonok*, 27.

³ *Ibid.*, 6.

its mute tongue things the like of which we never heard before, which we never even suspected.”¹

Extremities, the world of the unutterable and of paradoxes perplex and confuse the mind of the European man conditioned to rational thinking. Kiss sees in this confusion the average man’s defensive mechanism against the unbearable. The rational interpretation of things makes us immune, as Kiss formulates: “that which we get to know, of what we form a clear concept is no longer so fearful. But we have to pay a high price for the achievements of cognitive imperialism: important things always evade our field of view.”²

The secret omitted from our horizon can never be revealed either by idealism or positivism, and, because of this, it troubles man forever. The wise do not devise “eternal” truths for those in need of comforting, but much rather for the comforters, for themselves. The insolvability, the mystery of the causes unfathomable by reason generates anxiety in the man accustomed to rational thinking.

It seems that time has come to reconsider and to analyze the event of the previous century from a different point of view and, as Shestov’s philosophy advises, “not to deny suffering as a kind of fictitious reality from which a person can deliver himself by the magic words ‘it must not be’, as he delivers himself from the devil by the sign of the cross, but by accepting it, by acknowledging it, and perhaps, finally, by understanding it.”³ One must not turn away from the horrors of life, but, considering it real, must look the Gorgon head in the eye. Only few people have this kind of audacity, for whoever attempts this, assumes the risk of failure as well. According to Kiss, Agamben is one of these few.⁴

Agamben solved the problem with relative ease; for in his opinion unexplainable means must be applied to explain the unexplainable. But which should be these means? How is it possible to operate with irrational instruments? To employ irrational means in a world believed to be rational is equal to the invocation of paradoxes and of the absurd.

To use rational means in the dimension of irrationality and to account for something unaccountable: this is the paradox of bearing witness as well. Who has the right to bear witness to the horrors suffered in concentration camps? In this situation who can appear as a reliable witness?

Kiss, analyzing Agamben’s paradoxical philosophy of Auschwitz testimonies, starts from the concept of the witness as a trustworthy testifier. Relying on different interpretations of the witness, Agamben on the one hand designated the testifier as the impartial third party in a lawsuit, on the other hand, bearing witness or testimony signifies the witness’ authentic report, evidence given on the basis of his/her own experience about an event. The witnesses of concentration camps

¹ Lev Shestov, “Dostoevsky and Nietzsche”, transl. Spencer Roberts, in *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Nietzsche*, ed. Bernard Martin (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1969), accessed on March 17, 2011, http://shestov.by.ru/dtn/dn_29.html.

² Kiss, *Haladásparadoxonok*, 49.

³ Shestov, “Dostoevsky and Nietzsche”, http://shestov.by.ru/dtn/dn_29.html

⁴ Cf. Kiss, *Haladásparadoxonok*, 49.

obviously do not represent the point of view of an impartial third party, the experienced horrors make it impossible to apply the criterion of objectivity demanded by the second meaning of testimony, according to which the reports on personally experienced events should apply objective points of view.

If testimonies do not contain objective points of view, then what makes them authentic? Are the survivors of the Auschwitz death camps real experiencers? Kiss' question – according to which: “is not the fact that they have survived the proof that what they experienced was not the most terrible thing, for if they had experienced that, they would not be survivors?”¹ – points out the testifiers' absurd situation clearly, for the really trustworthy witnesses would be among the *non-survivors*. And the real witnesses are unable to testify, thus the place of the authentic Auschwitz witnesses remains usually empty.

The empty place, the lack of witnesses reminds us of Shakespeare's *time out of joint*; Shestov's idea draws our attention precisely by reference to this empty time, out of joint, for “What can one do, how can one act, when the time is out of joint, when being reveals its horrors?”² The witnesses of Auschwitz camps are dislocated from time. There is a dimension in which reason is effective and this is experience, where we want to clarify everything. But if we do not succeed in explaining the events, we are faced with the absurd, because our effective but limited mind bumps into the always renewed absurdity.

The encounter with the absurd could hardly be described more fittingly than Shestov did with a Nietzsche reference: “You can see him [the underground man] – always provided that you have eyes for such deep work – making his way slowly, cautiously, gently but surely, without showing signs of the weariness that usually accompanies a long privation of light and air. It might even be said that he is content with his work in the dark. It even begins to seem as if some faith is leading him on, as if he finds solace in his work. Perhaps he needs a long period of darkness, he needs an unintelligible, hidden, enigmatic something...”³ In the place of the unexplainable, instead of reassuring answers, new and new questions occur.

Kiss in order to interpret the absurdity of bearing witness, after Agamben, recurs to Derrida's analysis of Holocaust survivor Paul Celan's poem. Derrida tried to solve the paradox of the Auschwitz death camps through Celan's poem entitled *Ashglory*, but in the course of the analysis he reached the conclusion that testimony, because of its resemblance to religious convictions, is rather far from the deductive forms of scientific reasoning. At Derrida the act of faith means the lack of evidence.

In court procedures the truthfulness of the witness is supported by the act of oath taking. Swearing an oath by the Bible in a court room contains both legal and religious elements, therefore law and religious faith are equally present in the testifier's oath. According to Derrida, since scientific reasoning is much too short sighted and faith has no place in thinking, the role of the trustworthy witness is

¹ Ibid., 40.

² Lev Shestov, “In Memory of a Great Philosopher”, trans. George L. Kline, in *Speculation and Revelation*, ed. by Bernard Martin (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), accessed on March 17, 2011, <http://shestov.by.ru/sar/husserl1.html>

³ Shestov, “Dostoevsky and Nietzsche”, http://shestov.by.ru/dtm/dn_23.html.

questioned again and again. As the chasm between knowledge and faith is unbridgeable, the situation of the testifier is continuously reinterpreted.

Kiss studied the meaning of testimony starting from the analysis of the sentence “Niemand Zeugt für den Zeugen”¹ taken from Celan’s poem. According to the first interpretation the word “für” refers to bearing witness to something or someone. In this sense the witness testifies *in someone’s interest, in someone’s benefit*.

According to the second meaning, in the cases when one is unable to defend oneself, the witness testifies *instead of someone*. In Kiss’ opinion the witness undertakes an almost impossible endeavour on these occasions. This status results in an absurd situation because in the testimony “I bear witness to my own non-substitutability”.²

Therefore, if I cannot give truthful testimony for someone, that is, if my testimony given for the witnesses who died in death camps is not authentic, then how can Celan’s poem possibly bear witness to the several million Jews who perished there?

According to Kiss, Derrida characterized Celan as the accomplice of death, “as if he were in conspiratorial understanding with death, as if he knew that which remains an eternal secret as well, for with death the holder of the secret has also departed”.³

But then who can authentically replace the absent witnesses? Kiss, referring to Derrida, gives the following answer to this question: “only one the seriousness of whose testimony we believe in. The power of faith is necessary, for no one can live another’s life, as no one can die with another’s death”.⁴ But as I have suggested before, the act of faith means the lack of argumentation, therefore, if someone can act as a trustworthy witness on the basis of the faith put in him/her, but faith is not enough proof for authenticity, then we have fallen into the trap of another paradoxical situation.

But Kiss’ interpretation of Derrida has a third sense as well: when we do not testify for or instead of someone but against someone. The different testimonies formulated against one another are authentic testimonies by themselves, for, as Kiss formulates, “every testimony is singular, individual, and unrepeatable”.⁵ And “none of them can be preferred to or played off against another”.⁶ This means that no witness can give a decisive testimony against another. In this case the responsibility to make a decision falls on the judge. During the production of evidence, however, the judge, by appraising and pondering the testimonies, is included into the procedure of witnessing, becoming unwillingly involved in it. The judge becomes involved in the testifying, as Kiss formulates “the judge takes something upon himself of the witness’s part, even when he rejects the survivors’ testimony saying:

¹ In the English translation by Joachim Neugroschel: “No one bears witness for the witness.”

² Kiss, *Haladásparadoxonok*, 64.

³ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

the survivors cannot be reliable witnesses for those who perished in the gas chambers and in the crematories. The judge, the historian, the arbiter cannot avoid being part of the procedure of bearing witness. Thus not only the witnesses are put in a paradoxical situation, but the outsider, the judge appearing in the role of the ‘impartial third party’ too. After all, if we wish to form a judgement on the excesses of the 20th century, we must accept that in a certain sense we, all of us are beaten: we cannot escape paradoxes.”¹ What is to be done if the procedure of bearing witness suppresses the role of the ‘impartial third’ and the world becomes incomprehensible and contradictory?

Since we cannot escape the world of paradoxes there remains nothing else to be done than to experience, live through this paradox consciously. I believe our claims on the world are problematic, we should like everything to be explainable, interpretable, knowable, we wish to receive answers to the injuries we committed in the past, we hope that we can bear witness in the interest of our dead fellow men. But how does the world answer to these claims by man? As Camus would say: with silence. If the witness is dumb and the world is silent what chances could the man of the 21st century have? Have the horrors of the past century taught us to believe in the world of paradoxes and of the absurd? Or, still searching desperately for the answers, are we engulfed by the labyrinth of reason being unable to find the way out?

Instead of rationality and creating seemingly logical systems, Kiss considers that the possibility of getting to know and understand the world lies in the openly assumed paradoxicality. This paradoxicality is expressed by Agamben’s *homo sacer*, the witness’ absurd situation, and the contradictory opinions. This paradoxicality characterizes Derrida’s concentration camp philosophy, Walter Benjamin’s theory of violence; this is manifest in Luhman’s, Derrida’s, and Lévinas’s interpretations on modern capitalism.

This way of thinking naturally results in the open acceptance of incompleteness, of fragmentariness. The segments of the world too do not form a united whole by smoothly fitting together, but in their fragmentariness, incompleteness, closeness, and contradictoriness. Closeness, completeness characterize the forming of systems, they are the beginning of dogmatism, the precondition of lifelessness. Thus Kiss’ philosophy becomes the strange amalgam of paradoxes, irrationality, and the absurd.

The main characteristic of Kiss’ structuring is that he ends the chapters in open questions, which incite the reader. Exactly this overwhelming impetus enables one to think through problems personally.

Due to the carefully selected bibliography, the rich apparatus of notes, the references to the different theories of international literature, and the author’s exceptional responsiveness to problems, I believe, the book meets the most serious philosophical demands; moreover, it may help further investigations.

Translated by Ágnes Korondi

¹ Ibid., 66.