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Revolution, Transformation and the Role of the Subject

Critical Reflections on François Jullien’s Book *The Silent Transformations*

**Abstract:** In order to understand today’s social and political situation in East-Central Europe, one should particularly examine the consequences of post-socialist transformation. The negative and often very painful effects of the social changes that affected Central and Eastern Europe over the past three decades have not been overcome until today. This makes it all the more important to be better prepared philosophically for future social changes. François Jullien offers a number of solutions. In the first part of my paper, taking Jullien’s book *The Silent Transformations* as a point of departure, I show that many of the problems that still exist in East-Central Europe largely result from placing too much emphasis on the event of the revolution and too little on the transformation experienced by the region’s populations. In the second and third parts, I indicate, *pace* Jullien, a way towards a moderate, “sober”, but nevertheless creative and productive understanding of the active agent by appealing to the works of Hans-Herbert Kögler and Fabian Heubel.

**Introduction**

There is no doubt that, alongside the descriptive analysis of political, social, and cultural processes that have shaped the history of mankind, it is the normative questions that are especially relevant to political philosophy. However, this perspective must be in constant dialogue with the respective diagnoses of time and analyses of society (Axel Honneth) as well as of civilization(s) (Johann P. Arnason)¹, as the

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reality often turns out to be much more complex than theoretical approaches expect. This was also the case after the 1989 revolutions in East Central Europe, the region that here serves as a case study, much like France in François Jullien’s book *The Silent Transformations.*

In order to understand today’s social and political situation in East Central Europe, one should particularly examine the consequences of the post-socialist transformation. It is no longer a secret that many of those living in the former European Eastern Bloc countries, despite the general optimism in 1989, see no reason at all to celebrate the current political order, i.e. liberal democracy, as the negative and often very painful repercussions of the social changes that have afflicted Central and Eastern Europe over the past three decades have not yet been eliminated. What is more, there are only few forces that could, or would want to, heal the open wounds of the past. This makes it even more important to be philosophically better prepared for future social changes. François Jullien offers several suggestions.

In the first part of my paper, with reference to Jullien’s book *The Silent Transformations,* I will attempt to show that many of the problems still existing in East Central Europe largely result from placing too much emphasis on the very event of the revolution and too little on the transformations both witnessed and experienced by its populations. This reductionist perspective, more or less consciously related to the teleological idea of the finality of history, neglected not only a more comprehensive understanding of social processes but also an examination of the question of which ‘subjects’, or rather ‘agents’, are needed to secure the new order, and which forms of agency would also have a potential for paving the way to innovative solutions. In the second and third parts of my paper, I will suggest – not so much in line with Jullien, as rather critiquing him – a way to a more moderate, ‘sober’, but still creative and productive (cf. Hans-Herbert Kögler and Fabian Heubel) understanding of the active agent. This approach allows us to avoid mistakes such as the aforementioned ignorance or neglect of the negative consequences of social change, which has given rise to the elitist parlance birthed by

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2 The post-socialist transformation took diverse paths in the individual countries of the region (mainly Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) with different outcomes. Being limited by the extent of the paper, which does not allow me to discuss all East Central European countries, I will confine myself to the analysis of developments in Slovakia, which I am most familiar with.

3 In his book *The Silent Transformations* François Jullien, the French philosopher and sinologist, has opened up a specific perspective on the old problem of selfhood. At the same time, he has managed to win a broad audience for his views and also for Chinese philosophy, thus giving greater importance to the study of the latter. I believe that despite the wide reception of Jullien’s ideas and considerable debate, the problem of silent transformations has not yet been fully exhausted, and the debate still offers great potential.
these transformation processes that speaks of the ‘losers’, with little to no sensitivity or empathy.

Hence, this paper aims to outline a specific transcultural understanding of an agent in the revolutionary social transformations as treated within the intercultural dialogue between China and Europe, with a major contribution from François Jullien, who takes account of silent social changes that often accompany major political and historical events.

1. The Event

The concept of event as one of the crucial concepts of Jullien’s interpretation has been inspired by the oldest of the classical Chinese texts, *I Ching* or *The Book of Changes*. Jullien criticizes the European philosophical tradition for its focus on “the event”, which has received considerably more attention than the small and often invisible changes that can nonetheless be more influential in the long term. Jullien illustrates this with diverse examples ranging from personal relationships such as love or the aging process, to major historical events, such as the French Revolution.

When trying to understand and analyze the results of the transformation processes in East Central Europe, the distinction between the event itself (revolution) and the persistence of numerous pre-1989 mechanisms, practices, ways of thinking and mentalities is of vital importance as it may account for many existing problems, providing a likely answer to the questions of how and why the former social elites are still able to maintain and even stabilize their influence after the revolution without much difficulty.5

To illustrate this, I would like to refer to the example used by Jullien, namely, the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Using this example, Jullien highlights two concepts: the negative and the tacit maturation. I will then make a reference to what happened in Czechoslovakia in and after 1989. Jullien asks himself:

Was that [“9/11” – L.D.] not the brutal event *par excellence*, which overturned the history of the world and of which no one, not even those who planned it, could anticipate all that it would give rise to, or how much it would introduce new possibilities? But here again I believe it will be possible to reverse the perspective, because was not this [...] rather visible, sonorous and even spectacular ‘emergence’ of the transformation that remains silent, precisely because it is global, and [...] is rightly called by the name of ‘globalization’? Could one seriously imagine, in

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4 *I Ching* is a traditional transcription; today, it is gradually abandoned to be replaced with ‘Yijing’ (Chinese 易經/易经, Pinyin: Yijing).
5 I do not wish to generalize here: some former socialist countries have broken with the past much more radically than Slovakia.
a sort of optimism born from the Enlightenment, the last ‘Wall’ having fallen and all nations from now on conferring together, that the negative would definitely withdraw on tiptoe from History, a History that would be over because it had been forever pacified? I would believe instead that this negative, at work throughout history, and which never vanishes, and which is no longer [...] allowed to be aimed outside (globalization suppressing this Outside) because it belonged to another camp or another class (as between the USA and the USSR at the time of the Cold War), naturally came to be internalized, and that, ceasing to have a head-on, demarcated and open outlet, it could therefore only take an occult form, which would no longer be confinable but become disseminated (and be returned without warning) [through] ‘terrorism’.

Global transformations, indeed, and those which have consequently ceased to be prominent: economic interests henceforth too narrowly entangled in the same ‘world’ by the laws of the market, ruptures, progressively leading to re-form on another level, which has become that of belief and values, [...] where the ideological can be once again asserted in full autonomous right – hence the recrudescence of dogma, sacrifice and triumphant Faith – these are all the more strongly inclined to parade their intransigence by violence, because they can brazenly oppose the desperately feeble (where it is not openly hypocritical) discourse of international cooperation, i.e., that of unanimously broadcast and ‘completely positive’ feelings. I do not [...] deny that 9/11 has been magnified, in its consequences, from a brutal mutation of relations of force and political conduct, but I also believe that it is observable as the fruit of reconfiguration and silent maturation of the negative, which also possesses, in parallel with this sudden irruption, its endemic manifestations (like the war in Afghanistan) [while remaining] in this particular case hidden under the sensationalism of the Event and its effect of dramatic condensation.6

Now, let us draw a parallel between the above event and the beginning of the Velvet revolution in Slovakia and the Czech Republic on November 17, 1989. This, too, was an event that gave history a new turn. However, in stark contrast to the 9/11 and its negative connotations, this date is mostly charged with positive associations of ‘freedom and democracy’ in both parts of former Czechoslovakia.

While there are a number of sociological and historical studies that appreciate the favorable aspects of the above social change, there are also many that draw attention to its negative consequences.7 However, what is more important than taking sides on the matter is to analyze and discuss a sentiment still shared by a large part of the Slovak population, namely, a sense of a ‘lack of freedom’. This seems as a paradox as the most important criticism of the old socialist regime was aimed at this very lack of freedom, a problem that was believed to be eliminated by the victory of democracy on November 17, the day of liberation.

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6 Jullien (2011), pp. 120–121.
Even though ‘emotions’ and ‘impressions’ are hard to fathom or calculate, František Novosád, who has long played a major role in the Slovak philosophical and intellectual discourse, describes the post-1989 developments as follows:

Since 1989, almost everything has changed: institutions have changed, technological conditions of life have changed, and our life strategies have changed. The changes, however, have manifested themselves differently in the lives of the elites and in those of ‘ordinary’ people. The life of an ‘ordinary’ man has remained essentially the same, and even has become more difficult, because today, his or her fate hinges on several increasingly vague factors. The social environment, especially the working environment, is less defined, requiring more will to adapt than before. It is ambiguous even when it comes to the liberty to express oneself freely. Formally, there are no obstacles to freedom of speech. However, the line separating the acceptable from the ‘indecent’, while not publicly drawn, is ruthlessly adhered to. As a result, we are paradoxically almost as careful with words as we used to be [under socialism]. The life of the ‘elites’ has changed radically. A new world has opened up for them, with new possibilities – so many new possibilities that they cannot even absorb them. We can even talk about the increasing cleavage between ‘the elites’ and ‘the commoners’, which is clearly reflected in political behavior patterns and attitudes. The ‘elites’ bemoan the fact that the ‘masses’ prefer populists, while ‘the commoners’ in their turn lament the unwillingness and inability of the elites to understand the elementary concerns of an individual who lives from paycheck to paycheck.

There is even a technical term to describe this condition: working poverty, which is also being encountered at an ever-increasing rate in the U.S. and in Western Europe, too – at least in some of its parts. František Novosád criticizes the elites for approaching this problem like Marie-Antoinette (as the story goes with regard to the quote, which is often ascribed to her): “If they have no bread, let them eat cake”. It is obvious that such arrogance of the elites has increasingly fed the ‘negative forces’ in the previous decade, including those who no longer want a democratic regime and are looking for other social orders, often those with extremist traits. What started off as a process of tacit maturation now seems to have unleashed an explosion of social outrage, which reduces or even completely blocks the possibilities for intelligent problem-solving (J. Dewey).

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8 At this point, it is worth making a brief digression, so as not to come across as a one of the members of the populist Slovak Left. When looking back on socialism – a reference made by František Novosád – what the Slovaks usually have in mind is the late, relatively relaxed period of socialism in former Czechoslovakia, when only part of the population took the ideology and the party apparatus really seriously (at least this was true of its Slovak section, for which party adherence was not so strict).

9 Novosád František, Útržky o Slovensku [The Fragments on Slovakia], Bratislava: Kalligram 2010, p. 29 (translated from the Slovak original by L.D.).

10 Ibid.
One lesson learned from the post-1989 transition processes in Slovakia is that a social transformation, if it is to be successful in terms of extensive social changes, requires processes that are much more complex than just a political revolution *per se*, which merely represents an initial event for triggering extensive reorganization. It was only after the revolution that the real struggle for democracy began, as the defeated forces, while weakened and contained, did not disappear entirely. In my opinion, the biggest mistake made by the Slovaks was that many of them saw democracy in a very formal sense merely as a political system or ‘legal framework’, without understanding how complicated it is to keep a democratic form of the state alive. In fact, citizens acted as if they were at the end of history, where not only the negative no longer exists, but also where democracy evolves of its own accord.11

At this point, I will refrain from a more detailed historical reconstruction12 and move on to the concept of ‘maturation’. The central question is whether an approach focused on the ‘event’ as a breakthrough moment sufficient enough for the desired changes to take place (i.e., a view that 1989 brought the ultimate victory of freedom and democracy) does not blind us to the real dangers to democracy from anti-democratic forces. In Slovakia, these anti-democratic forces include two extremes: conservatism, which a significant part draws its ideas and principles not only from the fascist and Nazi ‘doctrine’ but also from the historical ‘heritage’ of Hitler’s satellite, the first Slovak ‘Clerical fascist’ Republic (1939–1945), and the radical left, with more neo-Stalinist and state-socialist traits, which are contrasted with the radical democratic parties or groups in the West. It is not possible to explain or show here why these two currents at the opposite ends of the spectrum are so close today in many respects and to what extent the negative consequences of globalization may act as a catalyst in their emergence and later consolidation.13

11 Although proving such a strong claim may be hard, one relevant indicator is the low voter turnout, which is among the lowest in the EU at some elections (to the European Parliament or to regional parliaments).
13 In this context, I am reminded of Luboš Blaha, a political scientist and active politician and also an important voice that seems to express the views of either of the currents, offering a number of arguments in favor of their critique of globalization. See his eclectic and in many ways problematic book *The Antiglobalist: A Central European Leftist Perspective* (Blaha Luboš, translated by Richard Cedzo and others Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019).
What unites these actors is great hatred for liberal democracy and the West in general. A large section of the population regards the terms ‘liberal’ and ‘democracy’ as pejorative, and this attitude has matured for years.

In trying to understand the prevailing negative attitude towards democracy today, it is worth looking back at the 1989 opinion polls. These showed that, in 1989, the Czechoslovak population at large did not want neoliberal capitalism, or even capitalism per se, but advocated democratic reform of socialism combined with more freedoms in the classical liberal sense. And, naturally, people did demand more consumption, even though a rather popular opinion that this was the main reason behind the revolution is not tenable, as demonstrated by James Krapfl and others.

On the other hand, such interpretation could plausibly explain why so many people in former Czechoslovakia ask today if gradual transition, with state socialism first opening up to the market economy and only then embarking on a path of political transformation (as was the case with China), would not have been more beneficial than the abrupt change experienced by the country in 1989 and thereafter, bringing about collapse of the political and economic system, a situation that could otherwise have been prevented.

Such views could be reinforced by Jullien’s example of the ‘Little Helmsman’ or the “quiet changer,” as Jullien calls the Chinese party leader and Mao’s successor Deng Xiaoping. This political figure is contrasted with Mao Zedong, the ‘Great Helmsman’ and the initiator of the Cultural Revolution, which was marked by violent class struggle and was often labeled with attributes like ‘permanent’ or even ‘final’. (Let us note, however, that the figure of Deng Xiaoping is not unambiguous as Deng’s politics is also associated with the tragic events at the Tiananmen Square.)

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Paradoxically, today, quite a few people not only in Slovakia are striving for a new ‘event’, a new ‘revolution’, which should ‘redeem’ them forever. In doing so, the actors mostly fail to see that the solution to today’s burning problems is rather in details and ‘trifles’; this is also because the concept of silent transformation is unheard-of in the European tradition, as Jullien points out with reference to the French or pan-European experience. Silent transformation refers to the shifts in society where the change occurs gradually, inconspicuously and quietly, or at least without much noise, rather than abruptly or completely, that is, without major events, and especially without much pain.

2. The Subject

In the sixth chapter, “Figures of Reversal,” Jullien, inspired by the Chinese philosophical tradition he calls taoique, writes:

Let us compare them both [the revolution and the transformation – L.D.] from the perspective of their effectiveness [sic]—or what Germans call Wirklichkeit. Because it forces the situation to its extreme point, intending to break forcefully with the established order, the Revolution as action, and even action carried to the extreme, necessarily gives rise to a reaction, which fights, or rather struggles, in a space of forces that have been declared and have become rivals. This gives form and strength to its adversary; and even though victimized, subdued and crushed, the repressed forces nonetheless continue to work in the shadows until they are able to flourish again. All revolutions are followed by a restoration, which takes more or less time to arrive, but which afterwards refuses to die because the revolution has not found a point of acceptance, allowing it to be integrated into its historical context. [By contrast, the silent transformation] does not use force or thwart anything; it does not fight; but [...] makes its way, infiltrates, branches out and becomes pervasive – ‘spreads like a stain’. It integrates as it disintegrates; it allows itself to be assimilated as it takes things apart even to the measure of that which assimilates it. This is also why it is silent: because it does not give rise to any resistance to it; no one protests against it or thinks of rejecting it, no one notices its progress.

21 One of such actors is currently the largest ruling party, the conservative protest party OĽANO (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti – The Ordinary People and Independent Personalities), which won the election with the promise to defeat corruption for good. In this “struggle,” however, decisions were made in 2020, and mechanisms were often used, so it is highly questionable whether the constitutional state is actually strengthened or rather weakened as a result.


23 Naturally, one should not forget that this is an ideal. Its feasibility in practical reality remains open.

24 Jullien (2011), p. 34.

25 Jullien (2011), pp. 66n. At first sight, Jullien’s remarks on reforms and his tendency to contemplate societal and political change in terms of transformation rather than revolution may resemble a
Although Jullien indeed provides some food for thought, his perspective does not lack limitations or flaws. First off, we could speculate whether all revolutions are followed by restorations, yet making this claim would require a thorough analysis of most such breakthrough events. Furthermore, a question might arise whether restoration did indeed take place in Slovakia, in East Central or Eastern Europe following the 1980s revolutions. And, after all, one could theorize whether it is even possible to approach history in such an ‘ontological’ or Taoist way.

While it seems obvious that a new form of restoration has emerged during the reign of Vladimir Putin in Russia, which in certain respects goes not only in the pre-1989/1991 period, but in the pre 1917, the East Central European countries should be looked into on a case-by-case basis; nevertheless, it is correct to say that, without EU membership, the authoritarian forces would have become much stronger. By contrast, EU membership does not seem to be enough in Poland or Hungary, while in other parts of East Central and Eastern Europe, anti-democratic, and anti-liberal currents are also enjoying great popularity thanks to their anti-EU rhetoric.

Now, let us turn to Jullien’s commentary on the French Revolution, where my critical objections are implied. Jullien emphasizes:

On the one side, we see that the French Revolution led, for close to a century, to a sequence of restorations and revolutions, before becoming stabilized, rather gradually, this time without any particularly memorable action, for the parliamentary regime came into being in an undefined and ‘undeclared’ way, and rather through extinction and a lack of other possibilities, corresponding to the social equilibrium and thus becoming tolerable, and even henceforth the only viable manifestation of the Third Republic. On the other side and in contrast to these spectacular bombshells, shocks and political after-effects, we notice that transformations were being propagated without alerting attention, not only in the economic and social sphere, but also in the realms of belief and allegiance. They impose themselves without any opposition. They predispose, orient, impregnate and allow themselves to be assimilated. Anonymous and faceless—one cannot target them, still less respond to them. They inflect the situation without saying a word, even to the extent of causing it to topple over, without consequently having
dispute between ‘radicals’ and ‘reformists’ or – to use a relatively recent parallel – between the communists and the social democrats. Yet, Jullien’s reading of the Book of Changes cannot be reduced to a single historical phenomenon. Indeed, the idea of silent transformation has a much broader applicability (not only for politics and economy but also for a wide variety of real-life situations. (As an aside, in the European tradition, especially in the German-speaking area, the relationship between revolution and reform has been discussed for more than 100 years – with different conclusions). In this regard, one should also mention Jan Patočka’s concept of moderateness (see my rather cautious attempt to bring critical theory, ancient philosophy, Patočka and Chinese philosophy into the conversation (Dunaj Lubomír, “The Inner Conflict of Modernity, the Moderateness of Confucianism and Critical Theory”, in: Human Affairs, vol. 27, no. 4, 2017, pp. 466–484).
As far as Jullien’s assertion and my previously stated views are concerned, a more thorough discussion would be needed to determine whether such processes actually proceeded ‘silently’, ‘anonymously’, ‘without struggle’, and ‘without face’, and whether they were able to impose specific sociopolitical ideals without having to ‘struggle for recognition’. In this context, historical and sociological research, such as exploring the experience of women’s movements, would certainly deserve more notice. What, however, is obviously missing in Jullien’s analysis is *homo agens*, i.e., a deliberately acting subject that participates in social debates and processes, initiates them, drives them forward, and ultimately enforces changes. True, François Jullien does not deny the fact that active individual entities receive less attention or are expected to play a lesser role but he bases his entire theory on the rival concepts of contemporary philosophy, taking a different perspective than that of the subject-action, with transformation being given priority. At the very beginning of his book referred to here, he explains that when he looks at a 20-year-old photograph, he sees himself as a subject until a certain moment, when he inevitably realizes that he is not a subject but merely part of a process. He first explains this realization as “a subject of initiative, one who conceives and desires, is active or passive, but one which always retains the sense of its being and self-possession. Admittedly it is a self that is aware of being caught in a totality of external as well as internal interactions which hem it in, while still considering itself to be ‘generated from within’, in line with the concept dear to metaphysics, *causa sui*. And then, right in front of me, this perspective is suddenly violently shaken, capsized into this otherness: that of a cause or a *continuum*, whose sole consistency stems from a mutual correlation of factors – mutually maintained and without regard to ‘me’ – and from which this evolution of the whole proceeds without interruption in an obvious but imperceptible way.

This passage of his book is significant insofar as Jullien wants to convince us for a brief moment that a different concept of the subject is conceivable than the one “that [...] necessarily abandons its option of autonomy and Liberty, when its pertinence is suddenly found to be limited”. This position, which at first glance suggests possible openness to the hermeneutics of the self or the awareness of the

29 (Ibid.), p. 7.
‘social in us’, and which could, for example, initiate distancing from dominant practices and habits within the individual or in society and thus also change behavior that is no longer sustainable,30 is completely lost sight of in the course of Jullien’s book. Thus, he ends with the following conclusion: “The myth of humans as being able to choose-act is necessary to democracy, and is thus salutary to preserve, but it cannot hide what it detaches itself from: it cannot conceal the importance of what is neither the weight of structures nor anonymous forces, which have traditionally been opposed to it – the *general orientations* and *discreet propensities* (*da shi*, the Chinese say) inflecting their epoch.”31

This thesis is only partially tenable. Jullien creates an impression that these ‘overall orientations’ and ‘inconspicuous inclinations’ are something inherent, independent of the conscious decisions and activities of specific real actors. In my opinion, this is wrong and can be proven not only by the actual social reality in Slovakia, which is much more complex than some totalizing critics accept, but can also be supported by the current findings from cultural studies.32 These reveal a reflexive and creative variety of subjective interpretations and applications that pervade our daily practice and thereby unfold their effects precisely against the background of well-rehearsed and socially acquired habitus structures.33 The problem with Jullien’s view is that he throws the baby out with the bathwater, so that, as Heiner Roetz points out, for example, he seems more indebted to Nietzsche and Foucault34 in the project of deconstructing ‘European reason’ than to Chinese thought itself. In doing so, Jullien dissolves the subject, presenting Chinese thinking as immanent and subjectless. In his view, dissent is impossible because everything is ‘deeply conformist’.35 Since discussing Roetz’ entire argumentation against Jullien would require much more space, I will confine myself here to Roetz’ main problem

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35 Ibid., p. 293.
with Jullien’s interpretation. Roetz’ criticism starts with Jullien’s method, which consists in the ‘logic of juxtaposition’ and reproduction of West-East clichés.36

In order to present my general line of reasoning in a clear and consistent fashion, in the last part of my paper, I will focus on two authors whose approaches were very much influenced by Michel Foucault (similar to Jullien) and also by Critical Theory (similar to Roetz): Hans-Herbert Kögler and Fabian Heubel. Both philosophers develop their theoretical approaches very creatively – the former by addressing hermeneutics and pragmatism and the latter by touching on Taoism and other currents of Chinese philosophy – and both also offer theoretical solutions (which are absent in Roetz’ critique).37

3. A Hermeneutic-Transformative Agency?

So far, I have argued that Jullien has failed to portray the tension between the social “environment” and a subject’s ability to act autonomously and distance itself from the social default. In this context, a link to critical-hermeneutic investigations seems to be productive and useful. One of the most important representatives in this field is Hans-Herbert Kögler. Kögler, like his fellow researchers Alice Pechriggl and Rainer Winter, with whom he coauthored the introduction to the book Enigma Agency. Macht, Widerstand, Reflexivität, is well acquainted with the various schools and research studies in the Western philosophical tradition that proclaim the ‘death of the subject’. Nevertheless, he does not concur with such a view, claiming that: “[t]he traditional Cartesian-Kantian concept of consciousness and subject is untenable and is to be subjected to a resolute critique. However, this does not imply the total

36 Ibid., p. 297. For more detail on this problem, see other criticisms of François Jullien, such as Contre François Jullien by Jean François Billeter, (Paris: Allia 2006), and Was ist chinesische Philosophie? Kritische Perspektiven by Fabian Heubel (2021). The underestimation of the active role of the subject, or flat denial of its existence in China is a very old philosophical problem that sinologists specializing in philosophy have been dealing with for many years. See, for example, Roetz Heiner, Mensch und Natur im alten China. Zum Subjekt-Objekt-Gegensatz in der klassischen chinesischen Philosophie. Zugleich eine Kritik des Klischees vom chinesischen Universismus. Frankfurt/M. – Bern – New York: Peter Lang 1984; Slingerland: Mind and Body in Early China. Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism. New York: Oxford University Press 2019.

37 His position seems to go to the other extreme and is narrowed by a rationalist, philosophy-of-consciousness perspective, as several critiques attempt to show or at least indirectly indicate. See Hall, David, L. – Ames, Roger T., Anticipating China. Thinking though the narratives of Chinese and Western Culture, Albany: SUNY 1995; Heubel (2021); Jullien François: Detour and Access. Strategies of Meaning in China and Greece New York: Zone Books 2004; Jullien François, On the Universal, the Uniform, the Common and Dialogue between cultures, Polity, Cambridge, 2014.
abandonment of self-determined action, nor the conceptual annihilation of reflexivity and intentionality located in the concretely situated subject. Rather, what seems to be the central challenge of the current discourse in critical social science and social theory is to create a possibility of resistance and reflexivity conceivable again precisely in the face of drive, power, and domination; and thus, to ground it beyond the untenable premises of traditional subject philosophy."

With reference to this goal, Kögler develops a theory of hermeneutic agency which, although similar to Jullien, sees the constraints of a totally autonomous subject, nevertheless – in contrast to him – grants autonomy to the agent or opens up the possibility of it acquiring and subsequently cultivating its autonomy from the inherent potential of social practices. Kögler’s theory assumes that the origin of autonomy lies in an interpretative ability, that is, in a competence acquired through socialization to “relate to oneself, others and the world in a certain cognitive way.”

In doing so, Kögler by no means reduces the existence of hermeneutic agency to the linguistic alone, but holds out for it the whole range of intra- and interactions that take place against the background of emotions, desires, as well as social and cultural practices. At this point, it must be emphasized that while it is always the real subject of action that is at play, like Jullien, Kögler, too, puts processuality into the foreground. Yet, he does not dissolve the subject, nor does he want to do so. On the contrary, he focuses on the real social conditions of the possibility of situated autonomy.

One question, or rather task, still remains: This theory needs to be examined outside of the Western perspective, for Kögler rarely discusses in his comprehensive work what hermeneutic agency might look like under specific circumstances within other, for example non-Western, political-social relations. Today, however, we can by no means assume that all countries of the world could become social liberal democracies in the foreseeable future – the framework on which Kögler’s theory is largely based. Without a doubt, even in those countries that we can call ‘decent’ with reference to John Rawls, citizens strive for ‘autonomy’ and “transgression.” In concrete terms, what is missing is a case study of what hermeneutic agency could actually achieve if it were located outside the Western normative framework.

associated with the idea of intersubjective recognition. In addition to East Central Europe, India and, say, South America, where, while fragile and brittle, political regimes still exist that we could call (liberal) democracies, China in particular, with its own social, political and economic model, poses a challenge to the West in many respects.

Due to the complexity and difficulties of trying to bring different traditions into conversation with each other, Fabian Heubel’s approach of a “new paradigm of subjectivity” will be cited here for initial orientation as I believe his approach and reading of Chinese philosophy are more productive than that of Jullien. Fabian Heubel is a harsh critic of the latter, yet convinced of the philosophical quality of Jullien’s work and the relevance of Chinese philosophy. In his book *Chinesische Gegenwartsphilosophie*, Heubel initially follows Jean François Billeter, but later departs from his interpretation in favor of transformative Taoist metaphysics, which is, however, interpreted differently than by Jullien.

In order to provoke an intercultural debate between critical hermeneutics and Chinese philosophy, I will highlight just one possible perspective by citing the passage where Heubel agrees with Billeter to show possible proximity of these two approaches.

Billeter’s studies [primarily of the Book of Zhuangzi] go beyond the often overly rigid framework of comparative work, fixated on the difference between and identity of national cultures or cultural groups. Essentialist claims, such as that Chinese thought has not developed any subjectivity, are foreign to him. Accordingly, he does not shy away from speaking of a new paradigm of subjectivity with reference to the Book of Zhuangzi. This serves him as a cultural resource to think further about subjectivity, in such a way that subjectivity is neither narrowed down in terms of philosophical-rationalistic consciousness, nor discarded in an anti-enlightenment way. In this way, he first of all opposes the politically disastrous consequences of the tendency towards subjectlessness, an attribute that Daoist philosophy (with Zhuangzi and Laozi being the most significant representatives) is

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41 The question to be answered is how the variously fanned-out roots of linguistically enabled reflexivity (e.g. a post-conventional norm orientation, an empathetic-cultural perspective-taking and an analysis of power and dominance) can unfold in light of other cultural framework conditions and are therefore ‘conceivable’. In other words: whether and how the aforementioned social-cognitive abilities can develop independent of a framework of social orders controlled by democratic-liberal regimes and in this respect providing a more affine breeding ground’ for their actualization than China, for example.

associated with: against a connection between Daoism and subject critique, for
which subjectlessness functions as the core of supposed overcoming of modernity.\textsuperscript{43}

Here it becomes evident that both perspectives, the critical-hermeneutic and
Heubel's interpretation of Chinese philosophy, actually seek a 'middle ground' or a
third way between the two extreme positions that oscillate between the Cartesian-
Kantian understanding of the subject and the total rejection of the subject's ability
to act autonomously. With regard to the analysis of the post-socialist transforma-
tion, the problem with the first position lies within the too positive or too optimistic
opinion about the abilities of human reason, particularly in relation to the realm of
politics. The result of this optimism is a large gap between 'theory' and 'realities',
which causes various practical political problems, such as large communicative
barriers and alienation between different social classes, as partially addressed by
František Novosád above. The problem with the other perspective is that it is too
'skeptical' and often leads to defeatism.

The prerequisites for the development of hermeneutic, dialogical, moderate
thinking include permanent self-cultivation\textsuperscript{44} of an individual in order to acquire
and develop the basic skills necessary for reflexive thinking.\textsuperscript{45} In this regard, there
is often not only a lack of relevant insights in today's East Central Europe, but also
no will acquire them. As a result, a tendency is observed to "write off" democracy,
to critically question the existing state and not be willing to improve it step by step.
In today's global age, tools and resources for such intentions can be found not only
in the various "arts" (philosophy, literature, painting, aesthetics, etc.), but also in
other cultures and civilizations. A connection to the Chinese classical as well as
contemporary philosophy seems promising in this respect.

\section*{4. Conclusion}

The present paper explores the extent to which François Jullien's examination of
Chinese philosophy may serve as a frame of reference for gaining a more compre-
hensive understanding of social transformation processes. A brief glance at post-
1989 social shifts in the East Central European region, specifically in Slovakia, is

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, pp. 111–112.
used for illustration – the paper argues that, rather than developing purely abstract normative principles, as the mainstream contemporary political philosophy tends to do, there is a need for individuals to engage more with the social reality in specific societal spaces.\textsuperscript{46} As implied by this context-sensitive approach, a much broader understanding of democracy is required, both in terms of its nature and of its form.\textsuperscript{47} In this sense, people’s ability to think reflectively should not be underestimated. Although social reality sometimes does not go according to ‘plan’, often because individuals or agents cannot fully grasp the witnessed and/or experienced events as they unfold, this in no way means that autonomous action is not possible. On the other hand, autonomy must not be thought of in categorical terms: the constitution of a self is a complex (hermeneutic) process that involves many paradoxes, detours, failures or downright unwillingness. For this reason, Jullien’s approach, while inspiring, remains insufficient, not only in view of the Slovak experience during the post-1989 transition, but also with regard to possible readings of Chinese philosophy (Heubel) and in terms of the current discussions on agency (Kögler). Jullien’s approach, as I have attempted to show, could be criticized on multiple levels – philosophical, sinological, but also historical. I have used all three perspectives; even though they did not receive equal attention in my paper, they each would deserve further clarification.

The above critical debate on Jullien has yielded two insights: the idea of a transformative subject, and also the means of how such a subject might be conceived of as well as shaped through hermeneutic agency. Naturally, there is more to say about both terms than could be provided here in the context of one article. However, it can be assumed that “the enigmatic dimension of agency, understood as the conceptually irreducible source of intentional action, enables a reconstruction of situated and hermeneutically conceived autonomy”.\textsuperscript{48} Another task arising from this debate would now be to bring these assumptions into a polylogue with non-Western philosophies, which could not only open up further levels and perspectives, but could also check their actual validity.

\textsuperscript{46} Honneth (2014), pp. 1n.
\textsuperscript{48} Kögler (2019), p. 81.