

F. NOVOSÁD'S BOOK *IDEAS IN THE MARKETPLACE*

František Novosád: *Idey na trhovisku*. Bratislava: IRIS 2016, 176 s.

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This review essay aims at the interpretation of the Slovakian tradition of intellectual history as represented by František Novosád. The text emphasizes his idiosyncratic twist of cultural historicist-contextualist approach, refined by Bakhtinian insights and enhanced by an interpretive concept of his own coinage, termed *ideas arrangement*. The text gives considerable attention to the conceptual metaphor of the "marketplace of ideas" in view of its centrality to the book's pivotal thesis: theory-practice relationship and the future of philosophy.

Keywords: Western philosophy – Slovakian philosophy – František Novosád – Ideas – Intellectual history – Contextualism – Bakhtin – Ideas arrangement – Ideology – Marketplace metaphor – Philosophical profession

"Civilization did not start with a social contract determining modes of behaviour. Its earliest effort was the slow introduction of ideas explanatory of modes of behaviour and of inrushes of emotion which already dominated human lives."

Alfred North Whitehead

Project of philosophy. The idea of the epigraph that heads this review essay can be uncontroversially supplemented by the book's claim that behaviour which is guided by instinct alone tends to be "inelastic and is commonly provoked by the anticipated configuration of operative forces. Perception is much more elastic, yet more so is imagination; the highest palette of possibilities, however, is possessed by thought "(Novosád, 2016b, 55). Thinking has ever been concerned with nothing but sense. Human thought products, such as hypotheses, concepts, categories, theories or models perform, besides their explanatory function, that of liberating the *symbolic animal* from the prison of immediacy and circumstance. Thus emancipated thought will know no edge, ideating gods, conjuring social utopias, and creating whole worlds that never were. European philosophy, as an

effort to make sense of what is beyond the senses, has evolved in looking for ever new, more satisfying ideas and methodologies. The project has been competitive – with myth, religion, polymathy, and experiential reality itself as suppliers of alternative accounts of the world. This is how the book opens, without subjecting the reader to a kind of catechism cluttering much learned literature yet at once without compromising fine conceptual distinctions. Nor, at the same time, the philosophical narrative of *Ideas in the Marketplace* (hereinafter *Ideas*) indulges in the recitation of “facts”. Such methodological stance is consonant with that of Max Weber, of whom the author of *Ideas* has written elsewhere in his oeuvre that the co-founder of sociology is “by no means a hysteric, and the diagnosis of the day he offers does not rest on the period embarrassments and calamities” (Novosád 2016c, 124). Nevertheless, *Ideas*, surreptitiously, is a reflective tribute to the facticity of grandeur, aggrandizement, and perceived degradation of the European philosophical project: from “first philosophy” birthed in the sun of Hellenic contemplative wonderment all the way to the point of chilly schematism and, not infrequently, to civic lethargy precipitated by some worthies of analytic Modernity. Along the way, there have always been some whom Bertrand Russell, a notable wit, refers to as “serpents” and who, though not unaware of the world’s “higgledy-piggledy” character, have been trying “to dress it up in Sunday clothes” (Russell 1995, 41).

Growth in understanding. With any idea, it is impossible to start from scratch and with ideas taken gregariously, it is no little difficulty to think in a clear and tidy way. Defying getting shoe-horned into a pattern, they never keep the line. Even if you arrive at a temporary system for thought, it is just to see it eroded, corroded – or all too often pluralized in the wake. It seems reasonable, therefore, to join Whitehead as assuming that human life is driven forward by its “dim apprehension of notions too general for its existing language. Such ideas cannot be grasped singly, one by one in isolation. They require that mankind advances in its apprehension of the general nature of things, so as to conceive systems of ideas elucidating each other” (Whitehead 1964, 32). Nevertheless, the growth in generality of understanding, he further surmises, is the slowest of all evolutionary changes, and it is the *task of philosophy* to promote such “growth in mentality”. Now, this is exactly what František Novosád, a distinguished university Professor of Philosophy and a prolific academic writer has single-mindedly demonstrated in his *Ideas* – and has been uncompromisingly committed to over the course of his nearly half a century’s engagement with the history of Western philosophy.

Hermeneutical commitments. The author of *Ideas* boasts a fine philosophical head, a great store of historical learning, and a talent for reason which conjointly add up to secure a way more than a reasonable degree of reader satisfaction. This minor volume brims with philosophical insights and optimism, yet bristles not with difficulties for non-professionals. It is basically concerned with the worldly *fortunes* and *futures of ideas* and their culture-sensitive historical-philosophical interpretation. The author avows his hermeneutical commitments and intentions right in the perfunctory note, suggesting that “the

kernel of each historical interpretation of any idea, any theoretical conception is the *reconstruction of a problem* posed by the latter's originators". This implies, he unfolds the thesis, "taking a path towards a more specifically oriented understanding of relationships between theoretical conceptions and the time-space wherein the former made their appearance and were initially received" (Novosád 2016a). Vital though the intertwinement of ideas and their *chronotop* (Mikhail Bakhtin) may be, the nature of Novosád's hermeneutical engagement with ideas begs, on top of that, taking into account the linkages between/among ideas themselves. The author holds that all time periods and cultures are characterizable – at any rate as far as philosophical production is concerned – by diversity. It behooves us to ask, he goes on making his point, whether the said diversity of spiritual production is kept together by contemporality alone or there exists something that does weld the diverging ideas more firmly" (Novosád 2016a).

Concept of ideas arrangement. Novosád's response to the bewilderingly rich plurivocity of the realm of ideas and their ambivalent relationships with the Rabelaisian carnival of the sensuous world is to find a sort of "logic" and render the chaos intelligible. So then, he is putting forth a sort of an organizing structure which bestows orderliness on the hive of ideas. This construct is meant to "mediate between the configuration of social forces, ideational motifs, and a particular artefact, the latter being the consequence and outcome of the intricate fabric of economic, social, political, ideological, and cultural interactions" (Novosád 2016a, 79). Therefore, in groping his way towards the "good order" or *Kosmos* (Greek for "arrangement"), Novosád relies on a concept he has termed *ideas arrangement*. Elaborated in the eponymously titled chapter, the concept is designed to serve as a methodological tool enabling of "seeing history of philosophy in its full complexity and polyphony" (Novosád 2016a, 76). Dismissing the conception of philosophy's immanent development (in polemic with Neo-Kantians), the author sets forth a strategy of full-blown cultural-historical, Bakhtinian commitment to the entirety of the *text*, its multiple *voices* and *contexts*. The stance is underwritten by the conviction that "the unity of forms within spiritual production is not posited *a priori* – it is not anything ready-made yet something ever in-becoming..." (Novosád 2016a, 77). Each historical epoch is plagued with a sort of the "fundamental problem of the day" to whose solution the decisive amount of intellectual energy is being applied (Novosád 2016a, 80). Thus, the notion of *ideas arrangement*, finely itemized for legibility's sake, allows the most comprehensive and commendably comprehensible mapping of philosophy's unnumbered bonds and intersections with non-philosophical forms of consciousness, with the fabric of material circumstance and contingency as leaving their mark on spiritual production. This is where Novosád ushers in *historicism* (Chapter Two). Once adopted, a historical stance will compel a researcher to reply to the vital question: To which extent is the meaning of a spiritual product contingent on its era and in which measure does this meaning transcend the confines and limitations of the time and circumstance of the artefact's origin? The answer, Novosád concedes, is imperative for anyone who believes history of philosophical thought to be valued not for its pastness, but for its utility as a compass for the pre-

sence (Novosád 1916a, 19). So, in interpreting the products of the *Geist*, the author proves clearly a practitioner and champion of the *cultural-historicist-contextualist* approach (associated with the loose historiographical movement, the Cambridge School of Intellectual History) of his own twist and articles of faith.

Ideas marketplace. In the light of the above, the choice of the metaphorically-laden title for the book merits consideration. The incorporation of the marketplace metaphor permits the author to kill much more than two hares with one shot. Under the lavish polysemy of the marketplace metaphor employed, the reader is invited to engage with all the aspects of the “marketplace” – “a place where chance rages “(Adam Smith) and, may we dare to complement, *choice* and *competition* reign; where high ideas are exchanged and intermingled with the gossip, the buzz and bustle of daily care and concern, and, too, with the peals of raucous laughter. Novosád clearly entertains second thoughts – political, economic, and ideological – about the fairness of competition implied in the free market model, hence, about the allegedly free circulation of intellectual goods. The snag is the competition tends to be marred by vested interests, by the proclivity of the powerful for preserving the *status quo*, or just for favouring ideas which promise to sort out immediate societal bottlenecks and deficits. The “marketplace of ideas” metaphor, thus, relates the text of *Ideas* to multifarious cultural memes.

Bakhtin’s polyglossia. The chapter with the title *Ideas in the Marketplace of History* opens with the elucidation of the relationship between reflexive and spontaneous knowledge, as well as the role of different symbolic forms in societal self-knowledge. The author assumes that theoretical conceptions as found in philosophy and science proceed from spontaneous understanding of reality gained via living wisdom, myths, art, religion, and, later on, ideologies. Novosád borrows the insight, and deftly unfolds it, from Giambattista Vico who proposed that Socrates’s and Plato’s philosophical speculations were of the same, “low” provenience as the conversations of market vendors about Athenian society (Novosád 2016a, 55). The influence between the two discourses is, Novosád enlarges on the insight, two-directional: intellectually refined ideas will trickle down to the mob, undergo popularization/vulgarization to become part of everyday talk; quite frequently, too, social sciences will eavesdrop on popular wisdom and subsequently refine it in consonance with the norms of scientificity.

Under the net. Finally, by means of this umbrella metaphor the author ushers in the issue of the bittersweet bondage between philosophy and language. In a way, language terminates philosophizing: Plotinus believes that philosophy is about what is *unsaid*, about primordial epiphanic recognitions. It is prudent of the author to not open the Pandora’s box. Nonetheless, he discreetly knocks on it in claiming that “we are ever and already thrown, at the very least, into natural language, never thus knowing in which measure our thinking has been determined by historical structures embedded in the language. What is more, we cannot even be certain about whether, by means of our proposi-

tions, we mimic nature or just proceed in compliance with the form through which we contemplate nature” (Novosád 2016a, 85). To know, therefore, seems, in the final event, to decode the secret of analogies and see through metaphors.

So then, the metaphorically couched title of *Ideas* neatly captures the chief thrust of the book – the persistence of the irreducible particular “under the net” of abstractions and generalities (Murdock 2002); the defiance of the cauldron of real life, complete with philosophical ideas of orators mingled with geese honking; where, too, passions of heated disputes are aflame. Jean-Luc Nancy aptly catches the same sense by recourse to the metaphor of “melee” as fierce competition, *brouhaha* or *clash*: “Melee of Ares and melee of Aphrodite, melee of these melees: blows and embraces, assaults and truces, rivalry and desire... dialogue and dispute, fear and pity and laughter as well. And melee of Hermes, melee of messages and conduits... *competition* (italics mine, E.N.) between codes, configurations of spaces, borders made to cross, so that crossing becomes sharing, because there’s identity only when shared, divided, mixed, distinguished, cut off, common, substitutable, unsubstitutable, withdrawn, exposed” (Nancy 2003, 287). An insightful elaboration on the permutations of (Kierkegaardian) ideas throughout history, their renaissance, and on the interplay of *receptive production* and *productive reception* has been recently carried out by Peter Šajda, Slovakia’s internationally recognized Kierkegaard scholar (Šajda 2016, 215). In analyzing an individual philosophical conception, therefore, one cannot concentrate his/her attention exclusively on the process in this area. Such exploration necessitates a parallel scrutiny of the vertical movement in ideas – both their *ascent* onto the higher level of generality and abstraction, as well as their *descent* down to earthier levels (Novosád 2016a, 77).

Slovakian school of intellectual history? Reflections on the tussle of ideas gets Novosád into a lengthy conversation with the American sociologist Randall Collins known as a champion of cross-fertilization of such binaries as consensualism and conflictualism, methodological individualism and holism, or micro- and macro-analysis. With an eye to him, the author of the *Ideas* argues that “intellectual life is primarily a struggle for the attention of the competent public” (Novosád 2016a, 90). Extrapolating from this contention to philosophy, Novosád views its ambition as achieving dominance within “attention span” of the community of the like-minded. As in politics, the author throws in provocatively, one can stand out by sheer disagreement, dissent. Those unable to present an alternative will end up, he concludes, among mediocrity and lightweight (Novosád 2016a, 89). While dwelling on “schools,” the author suggests that the first premise for the name to get justified is that the members be guided by a common research programme, hold certain basic coterminous views, and be sufficiently aware of so doing. This said, one might be curious to know if there exists enough such commonality among the community of historicizing philosophers in Slovakian academia which would admit of the blanket term “Slovakian school of intellectual history”? Academic pieces by Milan Zigo, Teodor Münz, František Mihina, as well as the earlier works of the contributors to the impressive *History of Social and Political Thought*, prefaced by Novosád, edited by Novosád and Smreková (2013), gets one inclined to respond in the affirmative.

From ideas to ideologies. To begin with, the author takes considerable pains to explicate the ambivalent status of social sciences. Counter-illusive yet not counter-intuitive, “social sciences will forever remain in the ambivalent position, condemned to be looking for the adequate ratio between teleological explanations and causal ones, while the latter relying on objective contexts” (Novosád 2016a, 109). Novosád views them as belonging in one compartment, since their evolution is “part and parcel of the trend typical of the development of modern societies, viz., the one towards the growth in the measure of explicitness and intellectualization across all spheres of social life” (Novosád 2016a, 96). The author makes no exception for the modern state, whose operation is only possible on the basis of massive intellectual support derived from social sciences. One illuminating example from *praxis* is incisively examined in *Slovakia as a Good idea* (Steiger 2017). Ideas, just arbitrary abstractions – how come, then, that entire nations have been built on such *ephemera*? How do ideas morph into tools and masks of power? What constitutes Slavoj Žižek’s “sublime object of ideology” and whence does the authority of this elusive ideological chimera stem? What is it that makes the grip of its ghostly power so firm? These questions, commonly answered in ideological-tautological mode by more partisan authors, are here given lucid, learned, and liberating answers. Bakhtin, again, with his conception of *life-ideology* proves customarily helpful for Novosád’s particular brand of *theory of ideology*. Novosád proceeds from the received proposition that the “kernel” of ideology is viewed as consisting of “assorted ideas which have been instrumentalized by the powerful and that such a process is commonly driven by situations when power experiences a need in legitimation”, in presenting itself as an intellectual project” (Novosád 2016a, 113). The author expands on the thesis by showing many multiple guises of ideology – including sheer fantasies and will-o’-the-wisps – as heralds of the new, yet as well pledges of the *status quo*. The analysis of ideologies as it is being carried out in *Ideas* is nothing but intellectually engrossing. Novosád proves an experienced conductor of the vast body of (at first blush) purportedly disparate motifs and ideas, so the reader may look forward to three beautifully orchestrated narratives on ideology, enlisting the thought of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud.

Future for philosophy. What is, lastly, in store for philosophy in the derailed post-modern world? Novosád concerns himself with the query in the chapter *Policing Divisions and Borders*. In the haze of the future, the author discerns a number of “job opportunities” for the philosophical profession. For a start, a philosopher is “advantaged by their reliance on a tradition behind”– the tradition of explicitness, of asking questions; moreover, philosopher is one who “seeks clarity in furnishing responses to unclear questions” (Novosád 2016a, 173). And what about philosophy’s odds in the competition amongst scholarly disciplines? Novosád exhibits a good measure of optimism, arguing that the world of values is arranged around the idea of *telos*. And it is within this framework that philosophy competes for its niche against existential teleology of myth and religion. In the world of flux and uncertainty, of the dissolution of boundaries between the possible and the passable (Novosád 2016b, 100), philosophy clearly offers a leg to stand

on. Indeed, the book leaves you with the immunity against going wax about urinated beds (supposed to be new art) in the Tate Gallery; with the wherewithal to go through life fully inhabiting your experience – without crying for the moon.

Caveat (from Kierkegaard-land). One downside, however, springs to mind: modern and postmodern philosophy have profusely contributed to the surplus of consciousness, to the deluge of ideality which threatens human sanity. Cognition, theorizing, it seems, give us more than we can bear. In this context, Novosád's *Ideas* – as well as his brand-new piece (Novosád 2017) on Neo-Kantian streams and rivulets of ideas – has, by virtue of its very subject-matter, foregrounded the mind-boggling expansion of the “concept-net” and virtual worlds that disjoint humans from the closer experience of life. Joining in Murdock's jeremiad, one is justified to think that all theorizing is flight, that we, rather, must be ruled by the situation itself, which is ever unutterably particular; it is, though, “something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try to *crawl under the net*” (italics mine, E. N.), (Murdock 2002). A truly grim prophet, following Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, turns out Peter Zapffe. In his classic essay *The Last Messiah* (Zapffe 1933), he re-casts Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, professing that humans have become too reflexive for comfort. Everything man wants to grasp dissolves before the testing consciousness, the smile of the beloved being no exception. The strain of living is getting ever unbearable. To get his message across, Zapffe employs a zoological parable. He recounts a tale of a long extinct deer, *Cervis Giganticus*, which became unfitted for life owing to the hypertrophy of its antlers. In depressive states, Zapffe concludes, the mind may be seen in the image of such antlers – in all their dazzling splendour, yet rendering their bearer unfitted for (Darwinian) survival. The difficulty is that humans, contrary to the said extinct species, are set to persist, which they do by quenching their increasingly acute existential Angst. *Homo sapience sapience*, thus, will get doomed to inventing every form of escapist/ defensive, transcending/transcendental ruses, the latter just taking humans further away from the lived outside world. When *circulus vicious* closes, Zapffe drives his point home, we perceive “how the minds are dangling in threads of their own spinning...” The picture looks a far cry from Schiller's optimistic *In des Ideals Reich!* (Into the Ideals' Kingdom!). In a way, none the less, Novosád's text reads as an attempt to head off the spooky prophesy.

Coda. Only profound can be truly intriguing, which is the case of *Ideas*. It leaves you with many good answers. The author's intellectual discernment, as well as the concision of expression, will appeal to the reader. His pedagogical career, spanning many decades, has honed him into a lucid expositor committed to the consistency and cogency of argument. Being no name-dropper, he, nevertheless, allows for the reader to get engaged in an incessant polylogue with the heroes of the European *Geist*, the likes of Hobbes, Kant, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Tocqueville, Marx, Cassirer, Heidegger, or Bachtin. Novosád's take on *ideas in history* should be required reading in the milieu of the worldwide crisis of higher education and the receding purpose of learning. No better way to appreciate his

timely undertaking than by recourse to his own appraisal of Max Weber's commendable "simultaneity of empirical exploration of the real and interest in methodological reflection; of exposition and understanding; of parallel inquiry into both micro- and macro-structures, as well as into geneses and functions encountered across social phenomena" (Novosád 2016c, 12).

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