




4-2018

Michael Gubser, *The Far Reaches: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Social Renewal in Central Europe*. Stanford University Press, 2014

Stephen T. Satkiewicz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Satkiewicz, Stephen T. (2018) "Michael Gubser, *The Far Reaches: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Social Renewal in Central Europe*. Stanford University Press, 2014," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 78 : No. 78 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol78/iss78/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Comparative Civilizations Review* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

**Michael Gubser, *The Far Reaches: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Social Renewal in Central Europe*.
Stanford University Press, 2014**

Reviewed by Stephen T. Satkiewicz

With the on-going civilizational crisis that began with the 2008 financial collapse, it has become a matter of vital necessity to formulate new sets of paradigms that may shed critical light on the catastrophe we are facing. Civilizational crises have been the seedbeds for some of the greatest philosophical insights into the human condition. The great crisis of the twentieth century that culminated with the two world wars as well as the great depression (1914-1945) was no exception. The great cataclysmic shock of the world wars shook the world to its very core, and out of the ashes of old certainties

Michael Gubser, Associate Professor of History at James Madison University, has provided scholars with a little known but still important chapter in the philosophical history of the twentieth century with his work *The Far Reaches: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Social Renewal in Central Europe*. Phenomenology is too often considered primarily a philosophy of consciousness, yet its deep civilizational implications and dimensions have long been neglected in Western and especially Anglophone scholarship. Gubser's account insists that phenomenology is without question "one of the preeminent social and ethical philosophies of its age" (1).

Gubser provides some explanation as to why this might be the case. The predominance of Martin Heidegger and later Maurice Merleau-Ponty in Western phenomenology is one critical reason mentioned by Gubser. Neither thinker made social ethical concerns a major priority of philosophical concern. Heidegger's involvement with the Nazi movement is of course still a matter of debate among philosophers, yet even this debate rests more upon the presumption that such political involvement is either separate from his strictly philosophical concerns or are not explicitly propounded upon if they are connected. The main architect for phenomenology's use as a philosophy of civilizational renewal came from the work of Max Scheler. Although neglected once again by mainstream scholarship on phenomenology, Scheler's impact on this school of thought cannot be over-emphasized. Even Heidegger praised Scheler's work as "the strongest philosophical power" (80).

After the destruction of World War II, the main stronghold for the continuation of the social ethical legacy of phenomenology remained in Eastern Europe behind the Iron Curtain. In such a context, the struggle against totalitarianism remained a top priority for dissident intellectuals such as Jan Patočka, Karol Wojtyła (later Pope John Paul II), Václav Havel, as well as many others. There the threat of Soviet Communism raised critical issues concerning the proper nature of human personhood and community.

As a result of being cut off from the rest of Europe, dissident intellectuals had to address the nature and meaning of Europe as a civilization as well as its proper place in the postwar world. This meant a critical reengagement with Europe's Classical and Christian heritage, which would serve as the foundation for any potential civilizational rebirth.

To Karol Wojtyła, Europe's Christian heritage became the most important foundation for asserting the indestructible value of the human person. This provided the groundwork for his life-long struggle with first the Nazi and then later the Communist form of totalitarianism, which wrought havoc upon his native Poland throughout the 20th century. Wojtyła realized the horrors of totalitarianism could be matched by a vision of Europe and society governed by its 2000 years of Christian history. This religious-based insight became the essence of his work related to phenomenology. Although he was not the only phenomenologist to do so, he was perhaps the most famous example of one who attempted to synthesis phenomenological social ethics with Neo-Thomism. Karol Wojtyła was determined to avoid the pitfall of phenomenology turning into subjectivism, and saw Neo-Thomism as a more reliable foundation for a building a realist ontology to govern phenomenological inquiry. While acknowledging his debt to Scheler's work related to philosophical anthropology, Wojtyła sought a different path on how to proceed with such work. Upon being elected as Pope John Paul II in 1979, his work on Personalist social ethics built upon an overtly religious foundation would serve as an intellectual inspiration for the Solidarity movement of the 1980s which later helped bring about the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe.

The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka also addressed the spiritual catastrophe that had befallen the modern world. He openly lamented the permanent death of Europe as a result of the crisis of late modernity represented by the Second World War that would in time usher in a new "post-European" world. Yet in contemplating the possibilities for such a world, Patočka was at the same time determined to retrace the historical trajectory that had led Europe to its civilizational greatness and then later abyss. Its foundations lay with the adventurous spirit of the Ancient Greeks to boldly explore their world to its fullest extent. This adventurous spirit was sharp contrast to the bourgeois complacency of the modern West, which hypocritically asserted freedom as the highest ideal while slavishly obeying the dictates of impersonal technocratic bureaucracies.

Patočka proclaimed that modern Europe had successfully created the first "metacivilization" that encompassed the whole world. Yet this "metacivilization" was built on superficial technocratic foundations which not only undermine mankind's traditional cultural and religious identities. It was these same superficial foundations which lead not only Europe but the whole world to the abyss, unleashing the ideological forces of the French Revolution and later on the rise of totalitarian Fascism and Communism. This served to undermine the only fragile nature of this modern metacivilization.

With the fall of Communism in 1989 in Eastern Europe, the social phenomenological tradition fell into obscurity in the face of the more popular “End of History” style of triumphalism that was all the rage throughout the 1990s. Yet the legacy of the social ethical tradition of phenomenology continues into the present moment as the Western world continues to grapple with issues related to its very self-identity and the growing globalization of the world. The phenomenological insights into the civilizational crisis of the 20th century that began with the First World War are as relevant as ever to the on-going crisis a century later.

Patočka’s insights in particular on the world’s metacivilization demonstrate that any globalized order built purely on mere technocratic foundations cannot last since it fails to satisfy basic human needs for identity and roots. The recent resurgence of populist nationalisms across the world in reaction to globalization is a stern reminder of that reality. Europe is once again at the very heart of this contemporary struggle, with the European Union’s foundations being called into question by the resurgence of such nationalisms, as well as initiatives such as Brexit. The legacy of social phenomenology with its explicit aim of European renewal could be a valuable intellectual resource, calling upon European civilizational unity whilst also acknowledging the very historical foundations for such a unity. Any superficial and ahistorical foundations for European unity are bound to fail. Civilizations and cultures are historically-based realities that cannot be overridden and erased overnight. A civilization without a history is a civilization without a future.

Yet this acknowledgement for historical roots need not be interpreted as an endorsement for the emerging populist nationalism either. The specter of the Nazi brand of extreme nationalism came under severe rebuke from social phenomenologists as well, especially in the case of Dietrich von Hildebrand and Edith Stein (who died in a concentration camp). To them, nationalism was but another manifestation of the impersonal collectivism behind modern totalitarianism, the same force that gave birth to Soviet Communism. In a similar vein, the current dichotomy between globalization and populist neo-nationalism represents the latest manifestation of the clash between different extremes of late modernity that had inspired phenomenology’s social analysis in the first place. In this contemporary context, perhaps this tradition may provide a foundation for a thorough social analysis that goes beyond the narrow confines of the now discredited “End of History” school of thought. Possible insights could grapple with the issue of how to properly integrate historically rooted identities within a global metacivilization that is not built on mere technocratic foundations. The global metacivilization maybe no longer be Euro-centric, but that need not mean Europe has no proper place within it either.