

## THE MEANING OF RUSSIAN NIHILISM

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**ABSTRACT. The Meaning of Russian Nihilism.** The origins of nihilistic doctrine can be traced to Greek antiquity; but the spread of this term and shaping of its meaning belongs to eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a historical period nihilism came close to the uprising movements, to the negation of the old principles and the refusal of a world built on a conservative tradition. This meaning of nihilism transpires in Dostoyevsky's writings, in which his characters deny the divine principle. Then why does nihilism stand out by negation, what is the relationship between nihilism and atheism? Which are the values nihilism puts forward instead? Can we talk about any values regarding this new phenomenon? These are some questions we seek to answer in the following lines, using Dostoevsky's writings, who revealed nihilism in all its breadth.

**Keywords:** *nihilism, atheism, values, doctrine, freedom*

### The Etymology of Nihilism

Nihilism, an adaptation of international Latin term *nihilismus* (from lat. = nothing), means reduction to nothing, to nothingness. As a philosophical term it represents that theory or attitude which denies any real (non-relational or imperishable) substance of the existing ones, and therefore the real nature of knowledge (the existence of truth) or ethical values. Western scholars regard the sophist Gorgias as standing at the origin of nihilism.<sup>1</sup>

The term appears for first time in 1733 in a philosophical context, but also in a theological one, in a study by Friedrich Lebrecht Goetzius, *De nonismo et nichilismo in theologia*. Fr. H. Jacobi enforced the actual use of the concept since 1799 (*Sendschreiben an Fichte*), when he praised Kant's transcendental philosophy as nihilistic and particularly J. G. Fichte's "doctrine's renewal". In 1819 in *The World as Will and Representation*,

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<sup>1</sup> Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, 2nd edition, trans. by Haralambos Ventis, New York, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2004, p. 21.

Schopenhauer approached “in a nihilistic key to the issue of knowledge and the essence of reality, [...]”. Since 1836, the term was also used by W. Hamilton in *Lectures on metaphysics* to define the doctrine by which D. Hume negated substantial reality (*Lectures on metaphysics and logic*, 1856-1860).<sup>2</sup> The term nihilism spread due to the emergence in 1862 in Russia of the Turgenev’s novel *Fathers and Sons*, in which the author describes the nihilistic spirit of the main character Bazarov, who positions himself against the principles and morals of Russian traditional conservatism. Bazarov’s attitude designated a radical denial of an authority that doesn’t have its outset in rationality and utility. The real-life prototype for this character was the literary critic Dmitry I. Pisarev, who claimed that the spreading of science, philosophy and materialist ethics fostered human liberation from the “irrational” ties of family, religion and society. Based initially on a “rationalistic egoism”, Russian nihilists’ attitude was afterwards oriented towards the idea of social happiness that had a utilitarian substrate. Starting herein, the term acquires thereby a political meaning, since it regards “the extremist attitude of the young socialists, opponents of the tsarist aristocracy”.<sup>3</sup>

Nihilism is a doctrine that, in a general sense, negates the “reality of being” both theoretically and practically. More specifically, we can distinguish among the *metaphysical* nihilism that denies the “substantial” reality, the *logical-epistemological* nihilism that can be assimilated into the scepticism that denies the objective value of truth and the *moral and political* nihilism resulting from namely that loss of metaphysical truth. This third meaning is actually the negation or the rejection of any principle, rule or other social duties. Beyond these meanings, nihilism is also “the doctrine of an intellectual and political movement” inside the Russian world as asserted itself in the second half of the nineteenth century and which aimed the transformation of “social structure on the basis of an individualism of pessimistic and naturalist character”.<sup>4</sup> To this “revolutionary movement” took part students and young generation of 1860s.

In philosophy dictionaries, the names of Dostoevsky and Nietzsche appear together, but only in order to mark the two different views on this movement. Nihilism, according to Nietzsche, is a natural conclusion of the decadent Western history, which includes the classical philosophy, Christian religion and traditional morality. This is the crisis point of civilization and the German philosopher suggests an overtaking of nihilism. Thus, Nietzsche distinguishes between an active nihilism, which aims to reassess the traditional order of values that perpetuate only a semblance of the life; and a *passive* nihilism, which designates the weakness and the submission of the ones who lack the

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<sup>2</sup> *Enciclopedia de filosofie și științe umane [Encyclopedia of Philosophy and Human Sciences]*, trans. by Luminița Cosma, Anca Dumitru, Florin Frunză, Radu Gâdei, Cornel Mihai Ionescu, Mihaela Pop, Hanibal Stănculescu, Sabin Totu, Bucharest, ALL Educational, 2004, p. 752.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 752.

<sup>4</sup> *Enciclopedia Filosofica, III, LI-REI [Encyclopedia of Philosophy, III, L-R]*, Center of Philosophical Studies of Gallarate, Institute of Cultural Exchange, Venice–Rome, 1957, pp. 890–891.

force of a revolt against general conformism. We owe to Dostoevsky a deeper meaning of the term, by his literary illustration of a society where “everything is permitted”, as according to Ivan’s formula from *The Karamazov Brothers* novel, as a result of the loss of traditional Christian values in modern world.

This current is characterized by the negation, rejection and denial of any principle outside human space, i.e. by not acknowledging the divine principle.<sup>5</sup> This is its first and defining aspect, by which it actually attempts a self-definition and assertion.<sup>6</sup> And from here on it continues with the negation of the per se accepted values – of the traditional values recognized as superior ideas having normative character, of the notion of good, of truth and its founding principle and function, of the limit. Starting with nothingness theorization, that with the awareness of absence of a meaning to be referred against a supreme and exterior principle, the individual becomes free. Man can no longer relate only to himself.<sup>7</sup> Thus, paradoxically and since it is a doctrine, nihilism, by denying tradition’s coercion gives the freedom to man. Why then are the axiological and lofty ideas negated? Is nihilism just a negation for the sake of negation, or does it have a certain claiming character? Restoration of justice, of a strictly human equity, in order to release the man, seems to be the only guiding criterion for nihilism.

And while the West is characterized by an individualistic nihilism conform to the model of Max Stirner,<sup>8</sup> in Russian world this movement refers to a community that has a collectivistic specific. And on this basis, Russian nihilism is also messianic, because essentially it acts as an atheism and it claims the function of humanity salvation. Its apocalyptic mood<sup>9</sup> aims namely the transformation of a deified universe into a human one. In this key its radical dominant trait becomes evincible. These expressions of nihilism transpire from Dostoevsky’s writings and from the way he imagined Russian nihilistic phenomenon.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Filosofia de la A-Z. Dicționar enciclopedic de filosofie [Philosophy from A to Z, Encyclopedic Dictionary]*, Élisabeth Clément, Chantal Demonque, Laurence Hansen-Love, Pierre Kahn; trans. by Magdalena Cojoccea-Mărculescu, Aurelian Cojoccea, Bucharest, ALL Educational, 1999, p. 366.

<sup>6</sup> Berdyaev says that the denial by nihilism of the accepted lofty ideas must be seen as a religious phenomenon, because like Orthodox asceticism, nihilism was an individualist movement, but it was also directed against the fulness and richness of life. Nihilism considers as sinful luxury not only art, metaphysics and spiritual values, but religion also. All its strength must be devoted to the emancipation of earthly man, the emancipation of the labouring people from their excessive suffering, to establishing conditions of happy life, to the destruction of superstition and prejudice, conventional standards and lofty ideas, which enslave man and hinder his happiness. That is the one thing needful, all else is of the Devil. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Origins of the Russian Communism*, Glasgow, Robert MacLehose and Company Ltd, The Glasgow University Press, 1948, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Franco Volpi, *Nihilismul [The Nihilism]*, trans. by Teodora Pavel, foreword by Ion Tănăsescu, Iași, European Institute Press, 2014, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Enciclopedia Filosofica, III, LI-REI [Encyclopedia of Philosophy, III, L-R]*, Center of Philosophical Studies of Gallarate, Institute of Cultural Exchange, Venice–Rome, 1957, pp. 890–891.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Origins of the Russian Communism*, Glasgow, Robert MacLehose and Company Ltd, The Glasgow University Press, 1948, pp. 44–45.

Dostoevsky's intelligentsia are usually the antithetical product of liberation movements in Russia, a (subjectively or objectively) undemocratic effect of democracy, an elite result of the plebeians. However, the intellectual has no longer anything to do with the old patriarchal society or with the noble world principles, longings or desires; but he is stuck into the tragic antinomies of the modern world.<sup>10</sup>

In this transforming world Dostoevsky will have placed his nihilistic characters, the anti-heroes: Raskolnikov, Ippolit, Stavroghin and Ivan Karamazov.

### **The Anti-heroes or Dostoyevskyan Nihilistic Characters**

For Dostoevsky all the actors, in almost all of his writings are at the limit of reasoning and through extreme mental exercise they fall within the irrational, becoming unpredictable even for themselves. Man, as a spiritual being, has this space of irrational on his side. This unusual characteristic provides unpredictability, hope and supposes the existence of the absurdity or the tragedy. That is why Dostoevsky did not accept other forms of social organization and declared himself against nihilism and socialism that in the end could limit one's freedom by fencing him exceedingly, as both are based only on a rational reasoning. Man is not a piano "key", as he says in *Notes from Underground*, which is why he resisted humanistic ideas of "progress", "general welfare", "happiness", etc.

Eventually his heroes are representatives of nihilism, of refusal, of opposing to certain norms, values and precepts. There are attempts of these ones to introduce their new attitudes, morals, ideas. His heroes also stand out by negation, which makes them "antiheroes" – the most eloquent example remaining the antihero "from the underground".

The first clearly defined characters, bearers of new nihilistic ideas appear in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), a work that opens the four major writings of the author.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that his position towards nihilism is present in various remarks of his characters, in his "figures" of the nihilism, in the interference with the likewise new ideas of an emergent socialism. Nihilism and socialism, as doctrines, are close, and when the author refers critically about nihilism, then usually an acid critique of socialism follows or vice versa. This is not accidental: the writer has demonstrated the unifying binder of these ones, their common anti-Christian germ.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ion Ianoși, *Dostoevski: Tragedia subteranei; Dostoevski și Tolstoi: Poveste cu doi necunoscuți [Dostoyevsky: Underworld's Tragedy; Dostoyevsky and Tolstoi: A Tale with Two Strangers]*, Bucharest, Europress Group, 2013, p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1869), *The Possessed* (1872), *The Karamazov Brothers* (1880).

<sup>12</sup> "However, it was by choosing to make reason, in its most limited aspect, into an act of faith that the nihilists provided their successors with a model. They believed in nothing but reason and self-interest. But instead of skepticism, they chose to propagate a doctrine and became socialists. Therein lies their basic contradiction." Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. by Anthony Bower, New York, Vintage Books, 1991, p. 154.

The investigator Nikodim Fomitch, shortly before Raskolnikov's self-denunciation will have said:

Your career is an intellectual one and you won't be deterred by failure. For you, one may say, all the attractions of life *nihil est* – you are an ascetic, a monk, a hermit! There are a great many Nihilists about nowadays, you know, and indeed it is not to be wondered at. What sort of days are they? I ask you. But we thought... you are not a Nihilist, of course? Answer me openly, openly! – N-no ...<sup>13</sup>

### Criteria Adjudged by Nihilism

Is Raskolnikov a Nihilist? Dostoevsky gave us all the details, all the clues, but he didn't rule on it. Illustrated through his characters, murder and suicide become manifestations at Dostoevsky, artistic expressions of the radical ultimate nihilism. The nihilistic group from *The Idiot* is pictured by characters like Ippolit Terentiev, Keller, Doktorenko, and Antip Burdovski. These four represent the younger generation in the novel (although Keller was 30 years old), that is under the influence of ideas with which Dostoevsky debated. But they aren't actually Nihilists, explains Lebedev, because "they surpassed" even them (among which are also "educated people, scholars" – agreed both Lebedev and the author), "they go much further in that they pursue something peculiar, they are primarily action people. So, prudently, the writer attacks thus nihilism in its extreme and degraded forms."<sup>14</sup>

Kirillov from *Demons* is a twenty-eight years young man studying the suicide phenomenon and its motivations, thinking that people do not commit suicide because of prejudices as "pain" and "the other world". Kirillov *believes*, though not in the common sense of the term, and introduces himself as an atheist. Narrator's questioning implies the following: "Are there no atheists, such as don't believe in the other world at all?"<sup>15</sup> In the absence of any prejudice, says the actant, *all* would commit suicide. And the attractiveness and calling of life are explained through a deceit. A nihilist would say: "Life is pain, life is terror, and man is unhappy."<sup>16</sup> The concepts of *now* and *then* arise: "Now man is not yet what he will be. There will be a new man, happy and proud. For whom it will be the same to live or not to live, he will be the new man. He who will conquer pain and terror will himself be a god. And this God will not be."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, Reprint edition trans. by Constance Garnett, New York, Dover Publications, 2001, pp. 415–416.

<sup>14</sup> Valeriu Cristea, *Dicționarul personajelor lui Dostoevski [Dictionary of Dostoevsky Characters]*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Iași, Polirom, 2007, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Possessed*, trans. by Constance Garnett with introduction by Elizabeth Dalton, New York, Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004, p. 67.

<sup>16</sup> *Idem*, p. 67.

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, p. 67.

In *The Karamazov Brothers*, the author puts nihilism in relation with atheism, and the new paradigm arises not in terms of existence or death of God, but in terms of belief, a belief of the messianic logos fulfilment, or in its rejection. With this new approach, the topic remained open and actual between the faith in logos and *his* promises of his word and the belief in the absence of logos, the silence of the Divine tantamount to *him* not getting involved, also lack of faith in *him*; but that does not concern the question of the Divine existence or death. Ivan refused logos' promises, but didn't negate his existence. Christ does not empower through logos, through word, the establishment of an *order* of continuing denial. This *order* would be established against *him* and without *his* consent; in his absence, but not by *his* non-existence.

Dostoevsky takes a leap, as observed by Camus, from "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted" (from *The Karamazov Brothers* and *Crime and Punishment*) to "If there's no God, then I'm God" (from *Demons*, as Kirillov reasons). Nihilism, understood through the new paradigm of absence, emptiness and desolation of the role occupied by divine doesn't benefit of a fair assessment. Therefore according to Dostoevsky the role of the Divinity by no means may be left vacant. The man wanted to replace the divine. In *Demons*, through Kirillov, on the one hand, and through Piotr Verhovenski (and Stavroghin), on the other hand, we see how the author debates about revolution: the outer revolution – a paltry, power thirsty as well, chaotic, profane one germinates a transformation of the human, namely the inner revolution of the rational spirit driven to the extreme. A new and ominous mutation occurs, one shattering the values and reference points.

Referring to Ivan's postulate Camus defines it as the launching point for nihilism's undertaking in the world and its becoming a doctrine.<sup>18</sup> Thus the absolute, utter rebellion of Dostoevsky's characters proclaiming full permissiveness (Raskolnikov, Ivan), which denies a higher order established by the faith in the existence of an out of human scope governing principle, announces in fact a new ordinance, directed by the man's own rules and laws; thus operating in a confined, interior and strictly human space. Raskolnikov permitted himself the crime, while at the same time Ivan permitted his father's murder. The new human ordinance is established through crime, which sanctifies and enshrines it.

After contesting the legitimacy of the ruler of this world, he must be overthrown. Man must take his place. "As there's no God or immortality, the new man is allowed to become god." But what it means to be god? It's to avow that everything is permitted; to deny any law other than one's own law. Without the need to develop interim judgments, we deduce thus that becoming a god is to accept the crime (an equally favourite idea of Dostoevsky's intelligentsia).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. by Anthony Bower, New York, Vintage Books, 1991, p. 56.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 57.

Two order criteria are adjudged by nihilism: justice and freedom, and it acts being engaged in fighting the divine and human injustice. The divine values are denied, but in virtue of the divine “silence” and injustice extension it vindicates the principle of equity as its driving force and trigger of action and at the same time as its ultimate goal. About the second principle, the new doctrine’s principle of freedom, Dostoevsky refers on a hesitant tone: you cannot underlain justice through injustice after Shigaliov’s system. So therefore freedom is marred as it is self-repealing. Nihilism’s aim can be defined as an empire of justice, nevertheless an empire of a barren unsubstantial freedom, as its justice has an arbitrary basis.

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