

*Lino Veljak*

## PHILOSOPHY IN TIMES OF REGRESSION

### ABSTRACT

In this paper the author tries to explore (or at least to indicate) the problem of the social function of philosophy in the contemporary world. This world is characterized by universal modernization and in the last decades by globalization and unification, but at the same time also by controversies and contradictions which reveal tendencies of human regression and degeneration. Philosophy must remain a study of general and fundamental nature of a human-produced world. As such philosophy produces potentialities of critical thinking, provides social investigations, and—at least in principle—gives people the power of an adequate understanding of our world, its fundamental characteristics and main tendencies. Thus philosophy is a ground for a reasonable social practice and adequate policies.

**Keywords:** social function of philosophy, contemporary era, modernization, regression, high education, social practice

### INTRODUCTORY CLARIFICATIONS

The problem on the function and purpose of philosophy in the human world is an over-elaborated topic of contemporary philosophy. However, it seems that the question about the social function and social responsibility of philosophy forms a necessary ground for the self-reflection of philosophy and for settling the sense of philosophy, undoubtedly of social philosophy, if not of the philosophy as a whole.

At the beginning of the reflection it is necessary to clarify some central notions relevant for our exposition. These are: philosophy, regression, our time.

The main problem of this reflection may be formulated as follows: What is or what can philosophy do? Why we are speaking about our times as the times of regression? And, perhaps most important: what philosophy may do in our times?

## PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy? We know that philosophy can be defined as a study of ideas about knowledge, truth, the nature and meaning of life, as a particular set of such ideas,<sup>1</sup> etc. I prefer to say: philosophy is a study about the the nature and meaning of being, including especially the human being, or a study about the nature and the world understood primarily as the human world or human-made world. Moreover, philosophy could be defined as a set of ideas about how to do something and how to live. Philosophy could also be defined as a pursuit of wisdom, or as a love of wisdom—as it was understood in most of ancient philosophical traditions. Somebody is a philosopher (better: somebody can be understood and recognized as a philosopher) if he/ she is a friend of wisdom, a lover of truth, etc.

But those ancient definitions of philosophy and the essence or nature of philosophers are not adequate in modern times; they cannot explain what actually philosophy represents, what is its significance or what it could become. If we want to understand the sense, relevance and possible impact of philosophy in the contemporary world, we necessarily must examine the essential characteristics and tendencies of the world in the period of globalization. Philosophy could be a simple private activity of isolated and alienated individuals, but such philosophy cannot pretend to possess any significant and relevant influence on the world. Because of that, it would be plausible to concentrate our analysis only on the nature and tendencies in the contemporary world.

## OUR TIMES

Here we arrive at the notion of our times as times of regression. Namely, the concentration of the analysis of the nature and tendencies in the contemporary world could be formulated by use of the question concerning the definition of our times as the times of regression. A direct consequence of the valuation of our times as times of regression is the evaluation of our contemporary world as a world in the process of regression. But, can anybody really approve such an evaluation of our world? Through several past centuries the humankind was living in the period of the universal (scientific, technological, social, and maybe political) progress.

People say and a great number of the mainstream scholars agree: we are living in the times in which the world became increasingly better due to science,

---

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Merriam-Webster *Dictionary* (<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/philosophy.htm>). Naturally, philosophy is a product of philosopher's efforts. We can find a very attractive definition of the philosopher's nature in popular Durant's overview of philosophy: "A philosopher [...] has [...] a structure of thought unified by a purpose for his own life and for mankind" (Durant, 1953, 141).

technology, modernization, liberty, freedom, democracy and the quality of life. So, we are living in the age of an universal progress. That means: the scientific and technological progress determines all other dimensions of the universal human progress, and leads humankind to better human conditions, i. e. to freedom, good life and happiness.

According to Karl R. Popper, the wrong view of science betrays itself in the craving to be right: for it is not the possession of knowledge of irrefutable truth that makes men scientists, but their persistent and critical search for truth. Through scientific advances and their application in the field of technology and social organization, humankind produces an improvement of the human condition (Popper, 2002). Technology offers conditions for the economic development and increase of global wealth. Because of that humankind is living in the period of modernization (i.e. industrialization, urbanization and rationalization). Thanks to modernization we are becoming wealthier and more powerful, as citizens we are freer to enjoy higher standards of living. Developing new technologies and the need to update traditional methods of transportation, communications and production make modernization necessary or at least preferable to the status quo. Modernization is linked to an overreaching process of rationalization. It is a process of the replacement of traditions, values, and emotions as motivators of behavior in society with rational, calculated ones. Rationalization refers to the process of replacing societies' current values, traditions and emotions that motivate the current behaviors of their members, with thoughts and activities which appear to be more rational.

### CONTRADICTIONS AND CONTROVERSIES

Instead of uncritically adopting such an unlimited optimistic view there would be needed to ask: can really (and necessary) the described type of rationalization produce better human conditions in the new, rationalized and modernized world? Some most important contemporary thinkers can give us relevant indications concerning possible answers to that question. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno formulated in their famous book on the Enlightenment (Horkheimer, Adorno, 1972) main internal contradictions of modernity and progress. According to them, the process of progress (the modernization based on the tradition of the Enlightenment) has its dark side: while trying to abolish old superstitions and myths, the Enlightenment ignored its own foundation. Its strivings towards totality and certainty led to an increasing instrumentalization of reason: the real basis of rationalization is the instrumental reason. But, more than that: in the period of the globalization of such rationalization, the rationalization must be connected with commodity fetishism<sup>2</sup> and with modern forms of consumption.

---

<sup>2</sup> The classical definition of this notion gave Karl Marx (Marx 1962, 107).

As a good example we can take into account the typical process of rationalization in the globalized food consumption. Fast-food restaurants designed to maximize profit have strived toward total efficiency since their inception. A high level of efficiency has been accomplished in several ways, including a stronger control of workers, the replacement of more complicated systems with simpler, less time-consuming ones, simple numbered systems of the value of meals and the addition of drive-through windows. Should the globalized rationalization in the terms of increase of efficiency, calculability, predictability (or standardization) and control be valued as an evidence of human progression or global regression? The question is open; the possible answers depend on the solution of the fundamental issue: what may be valued as good and what is the basic criterion of such valuation?

Hannah Arendt in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1951) argues that the barbarian phenomena and barbarian episodes (like the Holocaust) in the modern world are deeply connected to modernity and its order-making efforts. In a similar sense Zygmunt Bauman argues that rationalization as a attribute of modernity is closely associated with the events of the Holocaust (Bauman, 1989). He investigates the different approaches which modern society adopts toward the stranger. The stranger cannot be controlled and ordered and as such he/she is always the object of fear; a potential mugger, a person beyond society's borders, constantly threatening. Bauman claims that the Holocaust should not simply be considered an event in the Jewish history, nor a regression to pre-modern barbarism. On the contrary, the Holocaust should be seen as deeply connected to the essence of the modern world. Procedural rationality, the division of labour into small tasks, the taxonomic categorization of different species, and the tendency to view the following of the rules as morally good, all played their role in the Holocaust. For this reason, according to Bauman, modern societies have not fully learned the lessons of the Holocaust. Could this argumentation be used as a proof of the thesis claiming that we are now living in the times of human regression?

Marek Siemek, an important Polish philosopher, in his books *Democracy and Philosophy* and *Reason and Intersubjectivity* (Siemek, 1999; 2000) as well as in other publications (Siemek, 1985; 1994; 1996) presents—basing on his original transcendental social philosophy, inspired by Hegel's thought—other evidences and arguments on the over-evaluation of our times.

It can be argued that instead of critical evaluations of the progression of modernization and globalization it would be reasonable to emphasize positive sides of this processes. The progress in education may be seen as its positive feature. In modern times the illiteracy was practically vanished, at least in the developed western countries, and the high education has become much more common than earlier. The research concerning Great Britain presented by Richard F. Gombrich, a distinguished fellow of Balliol College at the University of Oxford, may be used as a clear example: In 1961, 5% of young people in

Britain received higher education; in 1997 the percentage was 34%, and the government's declared policy is to raise it to 50%. Over the last twenty years the number of students has more than doubled" (Gombrich, 2013, 10), more exactly: the number of the full-time students in British higher education was in 1960 just under 200,000, in 1970—just over 400,000, 1980—almost the same, 1990—about 650,000, 1997—about 1,160,000 (Gombrich, 2013, 24), but "while the unit of funding per student (known as 'unit of resource') has fallen by 40% and is still falling: the government has announced plans to cut it by 0,8% in the current year and 0,9% in each of the next two years" (Gombrich, 2013, 10).

The progress in high education reveals also its own black side. Namely, according to Gombrich, the British high education (like education in all the world):

"There is a fashionable argument which says that since knowledge these days is changing faster than ever before, our educational institutions, which are there to impart that knowledge, must be ready to change just as fast. As it stands, this is silly. The ability to change the content of a course has few if any further implications. Yes, there are subjects which are moving so fast that at university level what is thought may constantly to be revised. I suspect that all these subjects are scientific. Their existence does not, however, mean that the idea of mastering a body of knowledge is obsolete. Mastering of a body of knowledge is akin to mastering a skill, and is an equally valuable and satisfying experience. Anyone who is not given that experience while growing up, preferably several times over, has in my view been deprived of a proper education and a chance to make full use of their mind. Nor does this deprive only the individuals most concerned. In our society common knowledge is being reduced to knowledge about sport, pop music, film stars and TV personalities. There is nothing wrong with knowing about those things, but a society in which members share knowledge about nothing else is desperately impoverished and lacks an important force for cohesion; it is on the way to not having the common language." (Gombrich, 2013a, 34)

How we could evaluate the evident progress (like the progress in the field of education, one of the better sides of humankind's general progress) which results in the infantilization of the common language and common sense? Could we find another argument for the thesis claiming that humankind is now in the process of radical regression? If the answer is affirmative, it is necessary to put the question about grounds of such degenerative processes. The troubles with high education are not in the first place—as it seems at first sight and as Gombrich argues—produced by relevant government's policies. The regression and the degenerative processes (not only in the field of education) are consequences of the dominating logic determined by the primacy of instrumental reason serv-

ing the profit. Because of that, instead of a better world the modernization and globalization based on the instrumental reason generates the world which includes radical and unsupportable contradictions (i.e. for example the contradictions between riches and poverty)<sup>3</sup> and in which a false common sense by the use of mainstream media and mainstream (especially privatized) education produces the reduction of human faculties and powers in different fields of human individual and social life.

Our times since the 19th century are determined by the industrial revolution, modernization and (evidently since the last years of the 20th century) the economical and cultural globalization and unification of the world. These times are characterized by growing contradictions and contradictory processes of progress and degeneration.

### WHAT WITH PHILOSOPHY?

What philosophy may and can do in these circumstances? A good candidate for an adequate answer is given by different contemporary thinkers. According to them, philosophy in our world must be concentrated on the issue of responsibility,<sup>4</sup> more precisely, of the specific philosophical responsibility. How philosophers can be responsible? The answer is: it is possible through philosophers' devotion to the essence of their real task, consisting in producing philosophical thinking. Philosophy must remain a study of the general and fundamental nature of the world, more precisely, a study of our human-produced world, never a study of an abstract world. That is possible only if philosophy produce critical thinking: the thinking based on the differentiation between truth and falsehood, between good and unacceptable, between right and wrong, between human and inhuman. Due to possibilities of critical thinking such philosophy can provide the social investigations and—at least in principle, as an open chance—can give the common people the power of adequate understanding of our world, its fundamental characteristics and main tendencies which can produce grounds for reasonable social practice and for adequate policies. That is the way in which the true philosophers can remain responsible and dignified human beings.

### REFERENCES

- Arendt, H. 1951. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken Books.  
 Babb, S. 2009. *Behind the Development Banks: Washington Politics, World Poverty, and the Wealth of Nations*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.  
 Bauman, Z. 1989. *Modernity and Holocaust*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.  
 Durant, W. 1953. *The Story of Philosophy*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. for example (Babb, 2009) or (Holzinger, Schlechter, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Such indications gives inter alia Hans Jonas. Cf. (Jonas, 1984).

- Gombrich, R. F. 2013. "British Higher Education Policy in the Last Twenty Years." *Synthesis Philosophica*, 28, 1–2, 7–29.
- Gombrich, R. F. 2013a. "Why Has British Education Gone So Wrong, and Why Can't We Stop the Rot?." *Synthesis Philosophica*, 28, 1–2, 31–37.
- Holzinger, L., H. Schlechter. 2010. *Das Gespenst der Armut. Reportagen und Analysen zur Kritik der sozialen Vernunft*. Wien: Steinbauer.
- Horkheimer, M., Th. W. Adorno. 1972. *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer.
- Jonas, H. 1984. *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Marx, K. 1962. *Das Kapital*, vol. 1. In: *MEW* 23, Berlin: Dietz.
- Philosophy, in Merriam-Webster *Dictionary*. Accessed January 3, 2016. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/philosophy.htm>.
- Popper, K. R. 2002. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London-New York: Routledge.
- Siemek, M. 1999. *Demokratie und Philosophie. Die Antike und das politische Ethos des europäischen Denkens*. Bonn: ZEI.
- Siemek, M. 2000. *Vernunft und Intersubjektivität. Zur philosophisch-politischen Identität der europäischen Moderne*. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.
- Siemek, M. 1985. "Erkenntnis als Praxis. Prolegomena zu einer künftigen Epistemologie", *Kasseler Philosophische Schriften*, 13, 1985, 63–74.
- Siemek, M. 1994. "Drei Standpunkte der Philosophie zur modernen Wissenschaft." In: *Das geistige Erbe Europas*. Buhr, M. (ed.). Napoli: Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici Vivarium, 624–634.
- Siemek, M. 1996. "Transzendentalphilosophie und der 'Primat des Praktischen'." In: Reinalter, H. (ed.), *Beobachter und Lebenswelt. Studien zur Natur-, Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaft*. Wien-München: Thaur, 171–181.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — PhD, full professor, Department of Philosophy at the University of Zagreb; former head of this department (2006–2010); a former president of Croatian Philosophical Society (2009–2011), director of doctoral studies in philosophy at the same university (since 2005). Promotion in philosophy and sociology (1973) and habilitation in philosophy (1983) at Zagreb University, postdoc in Frankfurt a. M. Author of seven and editor of nine books, among others: 1979. *Marxism and Theory of Reflection*; 1983. *Philosophy of Practice of Antonio Gramsci*; 1988. *Horizon of Metaphysics*; 1990. *The Crossroads of Epoch*; 2004. *Between Ontology and Philosophy of History*; 2010. *Contributions to the Criticism of False Alternatives*; 2014. *Identity and Culture*, as well as two hundred papers concerning different fields of philosophy (criticism of metaphysics and dogmatism, philosophy of history, methodology of interdisciplinary researches) and social theory (elaborating and developing among others the notions *antithetical solidarity* and *false alternatives*).

Email: lveljak@ffzg.hr