

REVIEW

of the dissertation of Jordan Jordanovich

U. BECK AND Z. BAUMAN ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY (COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS)

The dissertation is of about 190 pages and consists of Introduction, nine chapters and Conclusion. In the list of references about 60 titles are included, in English all of them. After that list another one is situated, including titles of publications which are not cited in the dissertation, but are in some way relevant to its theme. As there is no such practice in our academic life, in my opinion it would have been better if this certainly useful bibliography would have been placed as an appendix to the dissertation. Such as is now, it is somewhat bewildering for the reader.

The author has worked mostly with two monographs: “Globalization” by Z. Bauman and “The Risk Society – Towards a New Modernity” by U. Beck. In a nutshell: the author considers two attempts, by Bauman and Beck, to find an alternative to the two well-known forms of making sense of what is happening in society nowadays – the classically modern, and the relativistically postmodern ones. Both Bauman and Beck subscribe neither to the “subject-centered” (in the words of another great contemporary philosopher, J. Habermas) modernist approach, nor to the fragmenting one of postmodernist authors. They propose, instead, to understand our times as – and this is not merely a terminological matter – as “late modernity” (Beck), or as “new”, or “liquid” (Bauman), etc. modernity. In regard of this the usage of the more neutral term “contemporary society” in the dissertation’s theme seems to be quite adequate, although it might sound trivializing. The point is that the author questions precisely the qualification of our contemporary society as “postmodern”, or “new modern”, or “late modern”, or “liquid modern”, etc., and that is why the theme of the dissertation should not be tied to one or another more informative qualification.

Generally, the structure of the dissertation looks like that. Chapters one and two deal with globalization as the most important, according to both Bauman and Beck, feature of our contemporary society. Chapter three refers to the role of technological development in the times of globalization. Chapter four is about the radical changes in the understanding and in the objective role of space and time. The author means the technical capacities to carry out swift, as if in no time, interactions between locations which may be at whatever distance from one

another – a phenomenon in regard of which Bauman introduced the expression “light modernity” (unlike the, in his words, “heavy”, classical one) which he qualified as “an epoch of disengagement, elusiveness, escapism and hopeless chase” (p. 77). Beck, in his turn, associates the risks of contemporary society with the transborder, global nature of the danger of technological catastrophes like the Chernobyl one. The fifth chapter deals with the ethical problems ensuing from globalization. In chapter six the author presents Bauman’s and Beck’s conceptions about the relation between freedom and security in the conditions of globalization. Chapter seven is about the ideologization of the theme concerning happiness, and the eighth one – about identity issues in the times of globalization. Chapter nine presents an attempt of a comparative analysis proper of Bauman’s and Beck’s understandings about the main problems of contemporary society. I use the qualification “proper” because, as I will comment in detail further, although the dissertation is declared in its very title to be a comparative one as a whole, in my opinion this element is not sufficiently present in most of the text.

The Introduction ends with a paragraph titled “Purpose of This Dissertation”. That is to be expected – to announce in the introduction the purpose of the study. Strangely enough, however, no explicitly formulated “purpose” can be found in this paragraph. At about its end the author concludes that “... the process of Globalization still needs to be completed, even though it looks like it has, in the last few years, been losing momentum.” (p. 14) So, instead of a “purpose” we have here a “conclusion”, which might be understood also as something like the dissertation’s thesis – because no explicitly formulated thesis can be found in the text either. Actually, at the very end of the dissertation there is another statement of the author, which is also designated as “conclusion”, and it says that “The comparison shows that the constitution of planetary social security without a radical change of the philosophical paradigm could not be realised. (p. 187) J. Jordanovich refers here to certain claims of Bauman and Beck concerning a possible positive resolution of fundamental social and cultural conflicts of contemporary society: “Beck and Bauman are not only critical towards these changes, which nullify the achievement of Enlightenment, but they show a way out of modern society's conflicting situation to a highly individualised self.” (Ibid.) Anyway, we can conclude from all these formulations that the dissertation has neither a clearly stated purpose, nor a well articulated thesis. The two conclusions just cited are too scarce in content in order to be able to claim the status of a final product of such a large in volume and comprehensive study as this dissertation is.

I'll consider further certain moments in the text, which are, in my opinion especially telling. Provided that the subject of this research are Z. Bauman's and U. Beck's views about our contemporary society, it is to be expected that the theme of globalization will be the central one in the dissertation. Actually, in the account of J. Jordanovich three themes stand out – about contemporary social reality, about globalization, and about postmodernity. The two latter ones overlap – among the issues of postmodernity there are certainly ones which are not related, at least directly, to globalization, and vice versa. The area of overlapping is basically the one of human problems. Both authors refer to a new vulnerability of the human beings, which they understand as effect of the transfer of the sources of economic and political influence from state authorities to transnational factors, but also as result of a loss of orientation in a, in Bauman's words, postmodern social environment, guided both locally and globally by market dependencies, where no one is in control.

What is common between the two authors, according to Jordanovich, is their critical attitude towards these phenomena. The difference is in their views about the ways in which the vulnerability in question is manifested. In Bauman's account the accent is upon the inner world of the human being, characterized by insecurity, ambivalence of experiences, isolation, problematic identity, whilst Beck is dealing predominantly with the objective risks, following from the development of technologies in dangerous directions and the misuses of the natural environment in the globalized, late modern society.

Another characteristic theme is about the role of technologies in "late modernity" (p. 48). J. Jordanovich introduces this theme by a comment on M. Heidegger's views about the development of technologies, which date from mid-twentieth century. He presents them on the basis of Heidegger's book "The Question Concerning Technology", published in 1954. Jordanovich does not explain why, provided that he compares Bauman's and Beck's views about our contemporary society, he has chosen to present also the position on this matter precisely of Heidegger. Without questioning its importance, I would like to remark that the author has missed a valuable, in my opinion, opportunity, i.e. to juxtapose Heidegger's position with the ones of Bauman and Beck on the same matter. Heidegger's considerations concerning the technological development belong to times which by far precede globalization and the social and cultural changes called by many "postmodern". Singling out similarities and differences between Heidegger's position, on the one hand, and Bauman's and Beck's, on the other,

could have shown the post-, or late, or liquid-modern, whatever, specifics of the views on technological development of the two authors.

Coming back to these views, in Bauman's case the influence of Levinas is evident. Bauman's concerns related to the ever accelerating development of technologies address mostly the dehumanizing effect of all that. "In a world where unification, standardisation, mechanisation, securitisation, and fragmentations are the leading policies, we can hardly square them with the humanism of the other. Other is excluded, and otherness is not welcomed, as it brings chaos to the world of numerals." (p. 56) Among Beck's views on technology the leitmotif of risk is present again. In this regard he coins a new term – "manufactured risk", unlike the natural ones. In "advanced modernity" the social production of wealth is accompanied by social production of risk.

When working on the other themes in the dissertation – about social space and time, about the ethical problems related to globalization, about the matters of freedom and security in these conditions, about the ideologization of the theme of happiness, about identity issues – the author continues to present Bauman's and Beck's views in a correct, competent manner, demonstrating very good skills in summarizing philosophical conceptions without loss of meaning. The resulting text is something like a compendium and, in my opinion, it can even be used for teaching purposes. This is, no doubt, a merit of the dissertation. It has, however, a substantial shortcoming. It is declared to be comparativist – in its theme, in the Introduction and in other parts of the text. In spite of that the author rarely performs comparative analysis of the views of Bauman and Beck. He presents separately Bauman's and Beck's positions on the respective theme and then goes on to the next one with minimum juxtapositions and comments. It seems to me that he has himself no clear idea what a comparative analysis is about.

And another critical comment. This text is not a proper dissertation in our academic tradition – with a well defined problem that the research addresses, with an explicit and consistent methodology, with a clearly stated aim of the research, with a well presented, and most importantly of all, defended thesis. Besides, the manner in which the contributions of the research have been formulated in the dissertation's summary has a defect which is quite typical for this genre – under the label "contributions" we find actually a short description of what has been done in the dissertation in this or that regard.

Of course, it is the author's right to choose how to design his dissertation, not having to follow necessarily the "canon" of this kind of research. So, my last comment should not be understood as necessarily negative. And I'll repeat – in my opinion the work that has been done by J. Jordanovich is of good enough quality. He has demonstrated a good understanding of a complex subject matter. He has shown adequately what "diagnoses" of our contemporary society have been made by two really important authors, and also – what solutions they propose. All this provides, in my opinion, sufficient ground that the degree "Doctor in Philosophy" be granted to him.

29.03.2023 г.

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