

Democratic values related to the dystopian view of Western culture

ANNA M. KŁONKOWSKA

University of Gdańsk, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Journalism, Department of Philosophy of Culture, ul. Bielańska 5, 80-851 Gdańsk, Poland
E-mail: wnsak@univ.gda.pl

The paper concerns an ambivalent attitude towards democratic values expressed by some of the critics of Western culture: Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor Lessing, José Ortega y Gasset, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz. It is demonstrated that the values indicated as the basic ideals of Western culture and democracy may be perceived also as a menace, either when being improperly understood and accomplished or because of their delusive nature. The paper analyses and confronts the democratic values with the arguments of those critics of Western culture who accused democratic ideals of hypocrisy or wanted to warn against the dystopian future that their improper accomplishment may lead to.

Key words: Western culture, values, democracy, dystopia

INTRODUCTION

Although opinions about “what the exact democratic values are” may differ in details, those most commonly mentioned are: *freedom, equality, justice, pluralism, responsibility, openness, truth, tolerance*, etc. Although these values are indicated as the basic ideals of Western culture and democracy and are worshiped and desired, this article is to play the role of *advocatus diaboli* and present a contrary point of view. It is to be demonstrated that those values may be perceived also as a menace, either when being improperly understood and accomplished or because of their delusive nature. Using the arguments inspired by some of the critics of Western culture (Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodor Lessing, José Ortega y Gasset and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz), this article aims to demonstrate that the democratic ideals may be either accused of hypocrisy or that their improper accomplishment may lead to a dystopian future.

The hypocrisy of the values worshipped among European societies (including many of the values commonly indicated as “democratic”) was pointed out by Friedrich Nietzsche and Theodor Lessing¹. Both of them indicated the roots of those values as a Judeo-Christian heritage and wanted to warn of their message’s misleading nature. None of them believed in *freedom, equality, justice, responsibility, openness* or *truth*, which the Western civilization seems to be

¹ Lessing was familiar with Nietzsche’s writings and much inspired by his theory. Nietzsche’s “life-centric” philosophy, his attitude towards history, towards Western culture and its values has strongly influenced Lessing’s thought. In his book *Nietzsche* (first published in 1925 in Berlin), Lessing deliberately tried to emphasize the similarities between him and Nietzsche. Even Lessing’s writing style (poetical, full of metaphors and similes) reminds of Nietzsche’s way of expressing his thoughts. A wide comparison between Lessing and Nietzsche may be found in an article by Rita Bischof (Bischof 1985).

so proud of. But, although both of them give a critical judgment of Western culture's aims, its sense-seeking nature, its values, morality, ideals and ideas, they come to different conclusions. Nietzsche, commonly known as the one who wanted to reevaluate the existing values, rejects them because of their hidden resentment, having mediocrity in favour and conducting towards personal weakness and social frailty. Lessing emphasizes and criticizes mostly their exaggerated anthropocentrism, the need of domination, the incessant desire of human revalorization and the conviction of a human right to "subdue [the earth] and have domination over <...> every living thing <...>" (Gen 1, 28).

Being an enemy of the democratic movement, Nietzsche perceives democracy as a system that puts values inspired by the Judeo-Christian morality into effect. Thus, Nietzsche is convinced that in parallel with reevaluating the values derived from Christianity, he criticizes the democratic values. In Nietzsche's opinion (Nietzsche 1996; Nietzsche 1973; Nietzsche 1968) *freedom, justice, equality and responsibility* – the way they are understood in Western democratic societies – are just misunderstood and thus improperly accomplished and – as a result – lead to wrong consequences. *Freedom*, according to Nietzsche, is not "common-wealth". Nobody but those who are strong enough to provide themselves with *freedom* are entitled to be free. Freedom is a rare good one has to deserve; it is not to be given "for nothing", without any effort, to those who are not even able to appreciate it and use it properly. General freedom is just wishful thinking so popular among those who are not strong enough to attain it themselves and thus – in Nietzsche's opinion – who do not deserve it. Hence, we cannot speak at this point of *justice*, as *justice* does not mean providing everybody with the same rights and goods as it is believed. Just the opposite: it is unjust to provide somebody with something he or she is not entitled to, equally to those who truly deserve it. That is why *equality* is another wrong assumption leading to the misunderstandings mentioned above: according to Nietzsche, people are not equal, there are better and worse among them, depending on their strength, vitality and will. And those who are strong and eminent have no *responsibility* in relation to those who are weak and mediocre. The only thing they are responsible for is their aims and achievements. What is more, Nietzsche is convinced that there is no *openness* in those – in his opinion misinterpreted – ideals and their purpose. They are based on fictional assumptions. People who declare those values are not frank with themselves and with the others, because those values are not as pure and unselfish as they may seem. There are hidden aims underneath their laudable ideals: they are to act in the interest of their propagators. Of course, Nietzsche admits that it is natural and justified when those whom he calls weak and mediocre have values that protect themselves: everyone chooses the values that act in his or her interests. What he opposes to is the intention to impose them on everybody else – to manipulate the strong and eminent ones so that they feel doubts about their own values and their own interests and believe that this system of values they were convinced to is the only one, the objective one and the true one. For Nietzsche, there is no such thing as objective *truth*: what is called *the truth* is always subjective and dependent on our position and our point of view. That is why he accuses the democratic values of hypocrisy. According to Nietzsche, the consequences of putting them into effect are as follows: mediocrity is being reinforced; weakness and average are in favour.

Lessing not only points out (Lessing 1983; Lessing 1930) the hypocrisy of the Western democratic values and their average-oriented nature, but also warns of the dystopian future which their improper accomplishment may lead to. Our *freedom* – as Lessing claims – is just illusory. Western people, living in so-called democratic societies, are slaves of the ideals inculcated in

them by their culture and its heritage. Thus, they are to obey its commandments exhorting to the sense-and-purpose orientation, the desire of achievements, the need of domination, constant insatiability, action-orientation, rivalry and struggle with themselves, with others, with time and the surrounding world. What is more, they take no *responsibility* for their acts and their results, which leads to the destruction of anything that stands in their way: it is of no importance whether it is the natural environment, other people or even other cultures. Thus, speaking of *justice* in this context sounds like a mockery. However, Western “democratic” people, equipped with a highly developed mechanism of rationalization, easily justify those results by what they call historical necessity, natural order, etc. That is why what is unjust keeps up appearances of *justice*. This indicates a lack of *openness*: the real motives are hidden behind the proclaimed ideals. What is more, Lessing – like Nietzsche – perceives *truth* as subjective. But despite the fact that *truth* is always arbitrary and dependent on our point of view, people tend to fabricate (even unconsciously) the so-called “historical truth”. They pick up random occurrences (for some purpose considered to be important), plait them together and construct a reality commonly believed to be truth. This “history” resembles a patchwork created from random elements: it is always artificial, it remakes the reality and from a wide spectrum of events chooses those that suit a vision of reality assumed in advance. That is why Lessing describes the “historical truth” as *Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*: sense-giving to the senseless.

Unlike Nietzsche, when criticizing and debunking the hypocrisy of the laudable values worshipped among Western democratic societies Lessing does not pay much attention to Nietzsche’s anxiety for mediocrity and weakness being reinforced. What bothers Lessing is the vision of the dystopia that social manipulation of those commonly declared, deceptive values may lead to. He warns his readers of a “Brave New World” (which he calls *Moloch*) which will come in a not very distant future. Misunderstanding and improper accomplishment of the Western (democratic) values, caused by their delusive nature and hypocrisy of their adherents (whose aims are derived from the desire of achievements, the need of domination and constant insatiability) will lead us to a total, universal, unified and mechanized reality. Every spontaneous form of existence will be conquered and subdued. *Equality* will be identical with unification. People will be excused from *responsibility*. Anything people want to believe in will become *truth*. *Freedom* will mean *freedom* from the burden of thinking and self-awareness. Life will become unbearably light and easy.

The world of “unbearable lightness of being”, with material goods and conveniences available like never before, with existential problems being no obstacle, with the common contentment and satisfaction of needs – was a worry also to Ortega y Gasset (Ortega y Gasset 1993) and Witkiewicz (Witkiewicz 2002). Both of them perceived the democratic values as ambivalent. On the one hand, they appreciated the meaning and social role of values such as *freedom*, *equality*, *pluralism* and *tolerance*; on the other hand, they were afraid of the consequences of their improper, but unavoidable, accomplishment. In their analysis of cultural phenomena they come to surprisingly convergent conclusions.

Ortega y Gasset and Witkiewicz agree that in the social development based on democratic values, two parallel, concomitant tendencies occur. One of them manifests itself in an increasing standard of living, general satisfaction, an upgrade of possibilities, available conveniences, safety and material prosperity. The other tendency is the price being paid for all the benefits brought by the first one. Witkiewicz describes it as an exaggerated socialization leading to social unification and the lack of individuality. This should cause a phenomenon which he calls “vanishing of metaphysical feelings” and – as a consequence – “suicide of philosophy”

and “decline of art”. Ortega y Gasset remarks that this second, pejorative tendency brings a deluge of banality and featurelessness to social life, art, intellectual output and other domains of culture. What is more, it is banality and featurelessness that demand co-existence with all the great works of cultural and social output. It is vulgar, self-contented “mass” people who do not demand anything special of themselves and who never impose on themselves an effort to become more than what they already are, who strive to take places of noble, “select minorities”, intellectual people, who put high demands on themselves, aiming towards perfection. Unfortunately, those “mass” people, pampered by the levelling requirements of democratic ideals, with their mentality of a spoiled child, who are convinced that they deserve everything they desire, who feel no gratitude for anything and who evade their obligations to and *responsibility* for the social system and the culture to which they are indebted for their comfortable, pleasant life-styles – become the dominant group of society.

Both Ortega y Gasset and Witkiewicz perceive the unavoidable threat of the domination of the masses as a result of the levelling and pampering democratic ideals which have been transformed from aspirations and ideals into assumptions and legitimate expectations. The democratic values, such as *equality*, *freedom*, *justice*, *pluralism* and *tolerance*, when being transformed from ideals into reality may lead to an accomplishment that differs from the initial assumptions. They may lead to the domination of masses, where *equality* turns into a tendency to a general levelling (resulting in a lowering of the highest level); *freedom* turns into the freedom of being nothing more but “mere buoys” just floating with the stream of life; intellectual *pluralism* and *tolerance* – into a lack of differentiation between the mediocre and a valuable cultural and social output. What is more, *responsibility* – one of the fundamental democratic values – is lost and forgotten. In consequence, democracy may lead to hyper-democracy and the misunderstanding of democratic values to the domination of the “masses” and a reality of dystopia.

CONCLUSIONS

After analysing the arguments given by the opponents and critics of the democratic values – even when holding on to their perspective, their vision of social reality and not going beyond their conceptions – some questions and doubts arise. Do those values really have a hypocritical nature and is their laudable ideals’ purpose just to protect featurelessness and put mediocrity in favour; or is it a misunderstanding and an improper accomplishment of those values that lead to such consequences? Do they have to result in dystopian reality with people living unbearably light, thoughtless lives, in a world where mediocrity is the “natural”, expected way of being? Or are these doubts simply mere fears, and democratic values are just to protect the rights of every human being, without the hidden risk of a featureless, dystopian society?

On the other hand – even if those values do promote mediocrity and levelling that will lead to a world with existential problems being no obstacle, to a Brave New World of social unification and lack of individuality, banality and featurelessness in social life, art, intellectual output and other domains of culture – it will also be a world of an increasing general standard of living, general satisfaction, an upgrade of possibilities and available conveniences, safety and material prosperity, a world with the common contentment and satisfaction of needs. So the question is whether the losses are worth the benefits, i. e. whether we should grieve over what we lose or look forward to what we may gain. If in this new, thoughtless but comfortable social reality more people are to experience contentment, safety and material prosperity, and if they are not to be aware of what they lose – why should we regret the losses?

I do not intend and I do not feel entitled to adjudicate on the answers to these questions. But at this point, again, another question appears: what is the alternative? Except for Nietzsche – whose concept does not seem appealing to those of us who do not feel the “superior” blood in their veins – the mentioned critics of democracy and its values do not propose an alternative “what instead?”. So perhaps one good old phrase should be recalled: “Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time” (Churchill 1947).

Received 16 May 2008

Accepted 20 June 2008

References

1. Bischof, R. 1985. “Ein Doppel-Porträt (an afterword)”, in *Nietzsche, T. Lessing*. München: Matthews & Seitz Verlag.
2. Churchill, W. 1947. “From a House of Commons speech on November 11, 1947”, as referenced, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*. Third edition. 1986. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 150.
3. Lessing, T. 1983. *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen*. München: Matthes & Seitz Verlag.
4. Lessing, T. 1930. *Europa und Asien. Untergang der Erde am Geist*. Leipzig: Meiner Verlag.
5. Nietzsche, F. 1996. *On the Genealogy of Morals: a Polemic*, transl. D. Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
6. Nietzsche, F. 1973. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, transl. R. J. Hollingdale. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
7. Nietzsche, F. 1968. *The Will to Power*, transl. W. Kaufmann. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
8. Ortega y Gasset, J. 1993. *The Revolt of the Masses*, authorized transl. New York: Norton.
9. Witkiewicz, S. I. 2002. *Nowe formy w malarstwie i wynikające stąd nieporozumienie*. Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.

ANNA M. KLONKOWSKA

Demokratinės vertybės Vakarų kultūros distopinėje perspektyvoje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami tokių Vakarų kultūros kritikų kaip F. Nietzsche, Th. Lessingas, J. Ortega y Gassetas, S. I. Witkiewicziaus ambivalentiški požiūriai demokratinų vertybių atžvilgiu. Parodoma, kad vertybės, paprastai traktuojamos kaip Vakarų kultūros ir demokratijos pamatiniai idealai, gali būti suvokiamos ir kaip grėsmė: tiek netinkamai suprasistos arba įgyvendintos, tiek dėl jų iliuzinės prigimties. Analizuojamos demokratinės vertybės, kurios priešinamos su argumentais minėtų Vakarų kultūros kritikų, kaltinusių demokratinius idealus dėl krizių arba norėjusių įspėti dėl distopinės ateities.

Raktažodžiai: Vakarų kultūra, vertybės, demokratija, distopija