

Contemporary Society in the Context of Kant's Practical Philosophy

ĽUBOMÍR BELÁS, ĽUDMILA BELÁSOVÁ

University of Prešov, 17. Novembra 1, 080 01 Prešov, Slovakia

E-mail lubomir.belas@unipo.sk, ludmila.belasova@unipo.sk

The submitted paper offers a philosophical analysis of contemporary society based on the ideas of Immanuel Kant's practical philosophy. Kant focused on the issue of society in terms of the a priori principles of freedom, equality, and independence and his ideas on social issues are analysed in the first part of the paper. The analysis then serves as a prerequisite for philosophical-critical assessment of contemporary society, especially in the region of Central Europe, presented by philosophers and authors of various fields of study. In the second part of the paper the authors aim to analyse basic social problems of contemporary society and its situation from the point of view of philosophical criticism and referring to the topicality of Kant's ideas in today's philosophical thought.

Keywords: criticism, Kant, practical philosophy, social reality, society

Philosophy serves to be able for people to realize their human and social situation. At the same time it enables us to be able to resist every form of an authoritative bond with personalities or systems. Its fundamental disposition is the spirit of criticism (H. Schnädelbach).

I.

In 1984, Walter Eucken Institut published a statement saying: “No one has contributed to the analysis and understanding of society of free and responsible people more than Kant has. Despite this fact there is only a small number of social scientists who are familiar with the basic understanding of his ideas and opinions” (Koslowski 1985: 3). The founder of the German transcendental philosophy, Immanuel Kant, was a philosopher who paid a lot of attention to the issue of society and he presented it in his *practical philosophy*.

Kant evaluated society with philosophical arguments and often returned to ancient philosophy, especially to Plato, using *Plato's Republic* as an example of dream perfection. Kant claims that “[a] constitution providing for the *greatest human freedom* according to laws that permit the freedom of each to exist together with that of *others* <...> is at least a necessary idea, which one must make the ground not merely of the primary plan of a state's constitution but of all the laws too” (Kant 1998: 397). In *The Contest of Faculties* he adds: “All forms of state are based on the idea of a constitution which is compatible with the natural rights of man, so that those who obey the law should also act as a unified body of legislators. And if we accordingly think of the commonwealth in terms of concepts of pure reason, it may be called

a Platonic *ideal* (*respublica noumenon*), which is not an empty figment of the imagination, but the eternal norm for all civil constitutions whatsoever, and a means of ending all wars. A civil society organised in conformity with it and governed by laws of freedom is an example representing it in the world of experience (*respublica phaenomenon*), and it can only be achieved by a laborious process, after innumerable wars and conflicts. But its constitution, once it has been attained as a whole, is the best qualified of all to keep out war, the destroyer of everything good. Thus it is our duty to enter into a constitution of this kind; and in the meantime, since it will be a considerable time before this takes place, it is the duty of monarchs to govern in a *republican* (not a democratic) manner, even although they may rule *autocratically*. In other words, they should treat the people in accordance with principles akin in spirit to the laws of freedom which a people of mature rational powers would prescribe for itself, even if the people is not literally asked for its consent” (Kant 1991: 187).

One should also bear in mind the historical-philosophical fact that Kant continued in the tradition of social-theoretical opinions represented by the modern thinkers as T. Hobbes, J. Locke and J. J. Rousseau or Scottish thinkers of the 18th century (A. Ferguson, D. Hume) and some of his remarks – related to human actions and activity – prove his familiarity with Voltaire’s ideas. Kant’s works labelled as *short writings* deal with the ideas of his philosophical teacher, J. J. Rousseau, especially in the field of social, moral, and historically focused philosophy. We may then ask how Kant deals with Rousseau on the *philosophical-critical* level. Above all, it is the issue of man and his knowledge analysed through a metaphysical and moral *investigation*, a *search for a true core of society* because, as he claims, nature has prepared people only a little for the social and for the *civil society*.

Kant *germanises* (Briesskorn 2009: 64) the classical term *societas civilis* and uses the term *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*. His work *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* – a work of the philosophy of history – signals an integration of the *sense of the social* (Kneller 1998: 7) to the historical process and continuous *cultivation*, *civilisation*, and especially *moralisation* of man. Moral cultivation of an individual in civil society becomes an important theme for Kant. He describes the beginning of the process in *Idea* with an interesting metaphor: “But once enclosed within a precinct like that of civil union, the same inclinations have the most beneficial effect. In the same way, trees in a forest, by seeking to deprive each other of air and sunlight, compel each other to find these by upward growth, so that they grow beautiful and straight-whereas those which put out branches at will, in freedom and in isolation from others, grow stunted, bent and twisted” (Kant 1991: 46). This represents a *normative* description of society. However, Kant as a *realist*, also sees the complications. He is thinking about continual approaching to the idea of this union thanks to the three things: great experience, a correct conception and a good will.

Kant broadens his argumentation about the issue of society in the work *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in which he presents his sensibility towards real practices of a common social life while paying attention to “examples of assaults on the freedom and property of others” (Kant 1997: 38). In §40 of the work *Critique of the Power of Judgement* Kant deals with the *sensus communis* (Kant 2000: 173) and in the next part of the work he writes that people have an inclination towards society or a tendency towards society (Kant 2000: 176). He also thinks of human *sociability* as a property belonging to *humanity* and he writes about man: “For himself alone a human being abandoned on a desert island would not adorn either his hut or himself, nor seek out or still less plant flowers in order to decorate himself; rather, only in society does it occur to him to be not merely a human being but also, in his own way, a refined human being (the beginning of civilization)” (Kant 2000: 177).

Cassirer comments on Kant's social-theoretical interest in the following way: "Kant still uses the language of Rousseau here, but he has gone beyond Rousseau in the *systematic* and *methodological* foundations of his ideas. While Rousseau sees all of man's history as a *fall* from the condition of innocence and happiness in which man lived before he entered into society and before he banded into *social groups*, to Kant the idea of such an *original state* appears utopian if taken as a fact, and *ambiguous* and *unclear* if regarded as a *moral ideal*. His *ethics* orients him toward the individual and toward the basic concept of the *moral personality* and its autonomy; but his view of history and its philosophy leads to the conviction that it is only through the medium of *society* that the ideal *task of moral self-consciousness* can find its actual *empirical* fulfilment. The value of society may seem negative when measured by the *happiness of the individual*, but this only shows that this point of view of evaluation has been falsely chosen. The true criterion of this value lies not in what the social and political community accomplishes for the needs of the individual, *for the security of his empirical existence*, but in what it signifies as an instrument in his *education into freedom*" (Cassirer 1981: 223–224). Kant's opinion that *natural predispositions* aimed at the use of reason should fully develop only in species, not individuals, has far-reaching consequences for internal *moral* justification of history. In *Idea* Kant shows that "in the actual course of human affairs, a whole host of hardships awaits man" (Kant 1991: 43–44) which leads him to a conclusion that the way to real unity of human species leads only through *fight* and *opposites* and the way to self-legislation through *coercion*. Kant's explanation is that *nature* – from the point of view of man's *animal dispositions* – led him to a *state* in which he is at lower level compared to other species and he lives in need and helplessness. However, from these first crude beginnings, all human aptitudes could now gradually develop, thanks to the *steps of reason*, and he understands that he is the end of nature. Reason, going beyond the limits of the animal, leads people to a new way of life, in which there are conditions for *civil state* and *public justice*. Afterwards, human art (as the art of *sociability* and *civil security*), as well as human *inequality*, begin (Kant 1991: 230). Summarizing Kant's ideas on the development of morality in man's *action* and *non-action* accompanied by *reason*, it is possible to say that the first human social unions did not appear from natural dispositions for society but it was the *need* that established the unions and created key conditions necessary for establishing and strengthening *social structures*. According to Kant, the *social unit* cannot be explained on the basis of original internal harmony of particular wills or *moral-social* dispositions. Its existence is rooted in attraction and repulsion, i.e. antagonism of capacities. This *opposite* is the embryo and predisposition of every *social order*.

Kant was aware of the complicated nature of man's creation in history and thus, referring to Rousseau, he writes: "We are *cultivated* to a high degree by art and science. We are *civilized* to the point of excess in all kinds of social courtesies and proprieties. But we are still a long way from the point where we could consider ourselves *morally* mature. For while the idea of morality is indeed present in culture, an application of this idea which only extends to the semblances of morality, as in love of honour and outward propriety, amounts merely to civilisation. <...> But all good enterprises which are not grafted on to a morally good attitude of mind are nothing but illusion and outwardly glittering misery" (Kant 1991: 49).

Kant comments on the issue of *society* or its creation also in his other works. What leads people to *sociability*, to something so unoriginal, artificial, and created by people themselves? Kant – exploring the development of morality – mentions a *limitation* set by reason that is much more necessary than *propensity* and *love*. This is present in Kant's *practical* philosophy in the second formulation of the categorical imperative: "*act that you use humanity, whether in your*

own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (Kant 1997: 38) which eliminates the reservation about formalism and shallowness.

This tendency is also supported in Kant's work *On the Common Saying: 'This May Be True in Theory, but it Does Not Apply in Practice'* (1793) in which he states that “[t]he civil state, regarded purely as a lawful state, is based on the following *a priori* principles:

1. The *freedom* of every member of society as a *human being*.
2. The *equality* of each with all the others as a *subject*.
3. The *independence* of each member of a commonwealth as a *citizen*” (Kant 1991: 74).

There still is a vivid discussion about these three principles and their normativity in German philosophy. There are no doubts about the first two, however, for some, the third is problematic. E. Višňovský wrote that for Kant, man is a “‘norm-setting being’ who is able to be a legislator for himself. The need to create norms comes from the need to create order in the human world and reason is the most effective means for that. <...> In Kant's understanding the term norm acquires two other important connotations: 1. The norm is understood as an imperative, i.e. as a rule that leads us in acts to freedom and responsibility through fulfilling duties; 2. The norm is connected with a value, i.e. with something that should be” (Višňovský 2008: 386).

An interesting interpretation is provided by Kant's discussion on the issue of independence in close connection with the legislative process: a person who has the right to vote “is a *citizen* (*citoyen*, i.e. citizen of a state, not *bourgeois* or citizen of a town). The only qualification required by a citizen (apart, of course, from being an adult male) is that he must be his *own master* (*sui iuris*), and must have some *property* (which can include any skill, trade, fine art or science) to support himself. In cases where he must earn his living from others, he must earn it only by *selling* that which is his, and not by allowing others *to* make use of him; for he must in the true sense of the word *serve* no-one but the commonwealth” (Kant 1991: 77–78).

Dealing with Kant's works in a complex way, the question of justification of man's sociability from the point of view of creating or sustaining society becomes crucial. In the work *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History* Kant writes that all human aptitudes could now gradually develop and that the most beneficial of these are “*sociability and civil security*” (Kant 1991: 230). In the *Anthropology* he writes: “All human virtue in circulation is small change – it is a child who takes it for real gold. But it is still better to have small change in circulation than no funds at all, and eventually, they can be converted into genuine gold, though at considerable loss” (Kant 2007: 264). In the same work he states: “The human being is destined by his reason to live in a society with human beings and in it to *cultivate* himself, to *civilize* himself, and to *moralize* himself by means of the arts and sciences” (Kant 2007: 420). By this he can become a member of civil society. Kant's appeal on humanity becomes the central issue of his practical philosophy. Cultivation, civilization, and moralisation represent the key categories through which society can approach to its aim and it is the role of the future to continuously approach to these normative ideas.

II.

If we look at the changes of society from the aspect of pros and cons, it is possible to say that society has become strongly economized. From the point of view of social perception of time, we find ourselves in the present under the influence of the means and tools of *invisible* social control modelled by expected consumerism. The development after November 1989 in Czechoslovakia, then Slovakia, euphemistically called a strategy of transformation of economics and society, has

acquired non-promised parameters, especially in Eastern Slovakia. The periphery of Europe has faced poverty, known from the times of the First Slovak Republic, and social inequality.

The contemporary state of today's society could be the matter of a well-founded social criticism of a normative character. Unfortunately, there are only some minor indications of this analysis and this task should be fulfilled by philosophy. The first traces of this effort could have been seen in modern philosophy by authors like T. Hobbes, J. Locke, J. J. Rousseau, and mainly I. Kant, who formulated basic principles of a just civil state. A classic variant of the modern philosophical criticism of society is then represented by the Frankfurt School represented by M. Horkheimer and W. Adorno who had to face new problems of their times, e.g. why German working men voted for Hitler and Nazism (Hrubec 2015: 56).

J. Habermas states that “[s]ince 1989–1990 it has become impossible to break out of the universe of capitalism; the only remaining option is to civilize and tame the capitalist dynamic from within” (2012: 106). According to him, the well paid collapse of the Soviet Union led to a fatal triumphalism in the West and to a feeling that capitalism from the point of view of *world history* is right. This *euphoria* was permeating all areas of life and its outcome was the introduction of the social Darwinism, even in the area of international relations.

Based on the new reality of transformed Slovakia, M. Tížik, a sociologist, thematises the cardinal problem of practical philosophy – human dignity – in neoliberal capitalism. Referring to J. Habermas' essay *The Concept of Human Dignity and the Realistic Utopia of Human Rights*, Tížik emphasizes the importance of the connection between moral justifications and preconditions and the source of human rights, which is human dignity. According to him, “[h]uman dignity is a seismograph showing on what the democratic legal order is built. It is exactly the same rights that have to be set by citizens of a certain political commonwealth in advance to be able to respect one another” (Tížik 2014: 22). If this was applied in Slovakia, there would be no drafts of laws enabling “the respect for man as a reasonably and meaningfully thinking creature to be taken from whole groups of people” (2014: 27). In connection with everyday Slovakia, his claim that “everyday political practice, actually from the beginning of the Slovak Republic, teaches citizens about the opposite of the idea of a good citizen and asymmetrically strengthens loyalty and conformity with collective identities or nation...” (2014: 27) is really disturbing.

The issue of neoliberalism has also been discussed by R. Safranski. According to him, it is the most effective variant of normative globalism. It is so powerful that it is most likely to be denounced by the critical public. Neoliberalism, writes Safranski, “invokes globalization as an argument for ending the social obligations of capital, and counts on competition among governments for jobs to eliminate the so-called investment barriers (by which ecological and fiscal regulation, social welfare policies and legislation favourable to trade unions are meant). Neoliberal globalism is an ideological legitimation for the unrestricted movement of capital in search of the most favourable profit conditions” (Safranski 2014). It is also necessary to remember the phenomenon of the world economy crisis unveiling the absence of political rules and mechanisms that would allow social settlement (*ibid.*).

The history of modern philosophy – represented by the theoreticians of natural law and social contract – from Hobbes, Locke, Spinoza, Rousseau to Kant – shows us that the compromise in the form of a contract should be a forced reaction on the threatening danger either from outside or inside. In this case it is useful to have a look at the past. J. Draxler named it appropriately when he writes: “Economics after the war was a historical miracle. Consumption norms, labour market and macroeconomic politics all worked together. People needed housing, warmth,

clothing, cars, and home electronics. These things were produced by workers in the factories whose salaries represented economic demand. Thus, salaries were growing in accordance with domestic labour productivity by which grew also the demand that enabled production under permanently improving technological conditions. <...> For this growing model to arise, however, there had to appear a concord of historical conditions. It was not enough for the economists to learn from the previous mistakes, especially from the catastrophic currency politics in the beginnings of the big economic crisis. The combination of conscience of employees strengthened by the existence of the USSR and Cold War as a mobilization factor for governments and it significantly contributed to the creation of economically productive historical compromises” (Draxler 2013: 31). However, this is the past, what about the present?

Today people are looking for every possible means, tools, and ideological concepts that would work and be productive in renewing the compromise. It is necessary to solve the unbearable situation caused by worsening social standards of large groups of people, the situation when *res publica* is not working and when there is a *social hierarchy* with wealth at its top (Geist 2013: 34). Classical liberalism did not know such big differences. Geist writes that in classical liberalism, “inequality of possessions was compatible with the idea that rich and poor are parts of the same political commonwealth that can be administered according to the principles of equality and freedom. In the world in which the rich hide themselves in fenced and protected communities and in which the poor are “redundant”, it is an unsustainable idea” (2013: 34). The field of the *social* in which one *discovers* and *accepts* the other’s *human dignity* is slowly becoming the past and it survives as a merely *outmoded* philosophical *value*. It is possible to speak about a destruction of the social state. Although Kant’s normative ideas of practical reason are well-founded, today’s social situation is an example of their distortion.

The problems of human social life in the present day offer prerequisites for the philosophical-critical assessment of the parameters of civil coexistence of individuals. The word *criticism* does not mean here a refusal of everything. M. Horkheimer expresses it explicitly: “The real social function of philosophy lies in its criticism of what is prevalent. That does not mean superficial fault-finding with individual ideas or conditions, as though a philosopher were a crank. Nor does it mean that the philosopher complains about this or that isolated condition and suggests remedies. The chief aim of such criticism is to prevent mankind from losing itself in those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instills into its members. Man must be made to see the relationship between his activities and what is achieved thereby, between his particular existence and the general life of society, between his everyday projects and the great ideas which he acknowledges. Philosophy exposes the contradiction in which man is entangled in so far as he must attach himself to isolated ideas and concepts in everyday life.” (Horkheimer 2002: 264–265) The role of philosophy is to fight against everyday routine and fight for the belief that human dignity and happy future do not disappear from the earth. This was Kant’s aim, as it is the aim of today’s philosophy.

The question is what philosophy has at its disposal. Today there are, for example, discussions about optimal inequality, about justice or freedom. In the contemporary disputes and search for possible returns to a *good life*, there also appears a question of restoring *social contract* as a possible solution of a dramatic social situation. J. Habermas commented on the issue in the following way: “What worries me most is the scandalous social injustice that the most vulnerable social groups will have to bear the brunt of the socialized costs for the market failure. The mass of those who are in any case not among the winners of globalization will now have to pick up the tab for the impacts on the real economy of a predictable dysfunction

of the financial system. Unlike the shareholders, they will not pay in money values but in the hard currency of their daily existence. On a global scale, this avenging fate is also afflicting the economically weakest countries. That's the political scandal. Yet pointing a finger at scapegoats strikes me as hypocritical. The speculators were also acting consistently within the established legal framework in accordance with the socially recognized logic of profit maximization. Politics turns itself into a laughing stock when it resorts to moralizing instead of relying upon the enforceable law of the democratic legislator. Politics, and not *capitalism*, is responsible for promoting the common good" (Habermas 2012: 102–103). This is a precise characteristic of our present day. If we are to finish with some perspective view towards future, we agree with J. Draxler, an economist, who says that in next years, we may hope, "it will be about painful getting rid of various myths and looking for new visions and forms of economic and social organization" (Draxler 2013: 31). A more radical view is offered by a Swiss economist, Arturo Bris, who calls for a crusade against income inequality, otherwise we will have to face many social conflicts stemming from the poor becoming poorer and the other who do not know what to do with their wealth.

Kant's humanistic request "*do not be for the others a means, but be an end for them*" has not been achieved yet and there are many challenges with big responsibility in front of us. We claim that it would not be wise to say that Kant is not topical today only because society was not able to follow its humanistic path. The suggestion could be to accept his ideas on practical philosophy as a challenge for the future of humanity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The paper is the outcome of the Research Project VEGA 1/0238/15 *Kant's Ideas of Reason and Contemporary World* supported by the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic.

Received 18 April 2017

Accepted 28 June 2017

References

1. Brieskorn, N. 2009. *Sozialphilosophie: Eine Philosophie des gesellschaftlichen Lebens*. Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer.
2. Cassirer, E. 1981. *Kant's Life and Thought*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
3. Draxler, J. 2013. "Vo svete bez rastu" ["In the World without Growth?"], *Pravda*, August 16.
4. Geist, R. 2013. "Slobodní a rovní" ["Free and Equal"], *Pravda*, February 1.
5. Habermas, J. 2012. *The Crisis of European Union. A Response*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
6. Horkheimer, M. 2002. "The Social Function of Philosophy", in *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*. New York: Continuum.
7. Hrubec, M. 2015. *Odjištěná společnost. Rozhovory o potřebné společenské změně* [Released Society. Dialogues on a Necessary Social Change]. Praha: Sociologické nakladatelství SLON.
8. Kant, I. 1991. "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History", in *Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
9. Kant, I. 1991. "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose", in *Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
10. Kant, I. 1991. "On the Common Saying: 'This May Be True in Theory, but it Does Not Apply in Practice'", in *Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
11. Kant, I. 1991. "The Contest of Faculties", in *Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
12. Kant, I. 1997. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
13. Kant, I. 1998. "Über Pädagogik", in *Werke in sechs Bänden. Zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik*. Herausgegeben von Wilhelm Weischedel. Band VI. Schriften.

14. Kant, I. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
15. Kant, I. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
16. Kant, I. 2007. "Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View", in *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
17. Kneller, J. 1998. "Introducing Kantian Social Theory", in *Autonomy and Community. Readings in Contemporary Kantian Social Philosophy*, eds. J. Kneller and S. Axinn. Albany: State University of New York.
18. Koslowski, P. 1985. *Staat und Gesellschaft bei Kant*. Tübingen: Mohr.
19. Machiavelli, N. 2015. *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*. Chapter XI. Of the Religion of the Romans. Start Publishing LLC.
20. Safranski, R. 2014. *How Much Globalization Can We Bear?* Wiley Publishers.
21. Tížik, M. 2014. "Ľudská dôstojnosť v neoliberalnom kapitalizme" ["Human Dignity in Neoliberal Capitalism"], *Pravda*, December 13.
22. Višňovský, E. 2008. "K problému noriem a normativity: Základné koncepcie a otázky" ["On the Problem of Norms and Normativity: Basic Conceptions and Questions"], *Filozofia* 63(5): 386–389.

LUBOMÍR BELÁS, ĽUDMILA BELÁSOVÁ

Šiuolaikinė visuomenė I. Kanto praktinės filosofijos kontekste

Santrauka

Pristatoma filosofinė šiuolaikinės visuomenės analizė, pagrįsta Imanuelio Kanto praktinės filosofijos idėjomis. Pirmojoje dalyje, aptariant apriorinį laisvės, lygybės ir nepriklausomybės principus, svarstomas filosofo dėmesys visuomenės problemoms ir jo socialinės idėjos. Ši analizė pasitarnauja filosofiniam-kritiniam šiuolaikinės visuomenės vertinimui, ypač Vidurio Europos regione. Antrojoje dalyje, aktualizuodami I. Kanto idėjas šiandienos filosofiniame mąstyme, autoriai siekia analizuoti pagrindines šiuolaikinės visuomenės socialines problemas ir įvertinti jų būklę filosofinės kritikos požiūriu.

Raktažodžiai: kritika, Kantas, praktinė filosofija, socialinė realybė, visuomenė