

E-LOGOS

ELECTRONIC JOURNAL FOR PHILOSOPHY/95

ISSN 1211-0442

Karel Pstruzina: Czech Culture in the Context of European
Culture

Theses:

- If we want to enlighten the role of Czech culture in the context of European culture we have to focused on the question: What does mean to be European?
- European tradition has been developed as incessant encountering between civilization and culture. Civilization we can characterized as a growth of dignity and security of man by the means of technical and scientific reason; culture as a disquietness of spirit and inspiration of man for all form of creativity.
- Czech culture has not many particularities; Czech culture is immediately European culture in prevailing form.
- On the examples of K. Čapek, V. Vanžura and M. Jesensk we can illustrate some features of Czech culture and their contribution to the development of European culture.

Keywords:

civilization, culture, creativity,

Karel Pstruzina:

Czech Culture in the context of European Culture.

When I thought about my talk I could not decide how to open the problem Czech Culture in the Context of European Culture.

I suppose it will be best to begin from myself.

I born during second world war. My father was German and my mather was from Poland, but I am Czech. In the time All Souls Days I function as a travel-agency because the graves of my relatives are in Germany, in Moravia, in Poland and in Austria is Nazi camp Mathausen where died my father.

I think these features are in some way typical for the theme of my today's talk. I attempt explain what I mean.

My birth was in sign of war and life. Czech philosoph Jan Patočka in his essay "The Wars of XX. Century and XX. Century as a War", wrote that the war did not finished in Europe. There are only a pause in the war during XX. century or the war only changes its form. History of Europe is history of wars among the nations and conceptions of view on the world.

Mixture and penetration of nations and cultural values are a second very important sign of European tradition and somewhere here we can see the essence what does it mean to be European. To be European it is not geographical terms but the terms involving the values.

It is true that European tradition was developed as

encountering war and life, as encountering nations, but I suppose that a dominant feature of European tradition is encountering civilization and culture.

By Civilization I mean all form improvement of our everyday's life. Civilization is a growth of safety and dignity of man. Civilization improves a healthy, education.

Civilization means that mankind dispose by the tools for better comfort and familiarity of environment. But

civilization leads the man to avoiding a pain, a suffering and looking for saturation, for happiness and passion.

Post-modern man in the realm of civilization is roaming man.

He or she takes a new things, uses that and he or she throws away old things and forgets on them immediately. Civilization is founded by application of scientific results in our everyday's life.

From time to time I play a chess with my computer and

I resign often because I have erred. My feelings are

- disappointment, ill-humor and misunderstanding how is it possible that couple of chips and wires (or what are in) can be better to me, how it can be better to man? And

involuntary one question is emerging all the time: will we have any chances in the future making so many mistakes?

Of course, sometimes I win and I can read - You won,

congratulation - and nothing more. I cannot see any

disappointment or bit of hard thinking about the main

mistake, those human concomitant circumstances at every

such situation.

I have read that a chaos in our brains is perhaps "chief property that makes the brain different from an artificial-intelligence machine" (W.J. Freeman: The Physiology of perception. In: Scientific American 2/1991, p.85) and I have been proud of the chaos in my brain because it is something special. But in fact, does exist any reason for us to be proud? Are our brain's chaos impulses, or our sexappeal, or REM-sleep, if I may bring out at least three peculiarities, so outstanding that we have got ensuency for our being?

Who can give the answer - YES and who can tell - NO?

I have not a fear of next computer's development but I am affraid that our inner nature is insufficient germane to the dynamism of evolution.

It was not long ago when I took stock together with my 95-years old uncle. He has experienced during his life perhaps all what was possible: An electricity and bulbs, Radio, TV, his first car, buses, trains, an undergrounds, airplane's travelling, space rackets, satellites for communication, satellites for a wheather monitoring, the first man on the moon, radars, sleep's pills, headache's pills, penicillin, the third set of teeth, transplantation of hearts, transplantation of kidneys and of eye's cornea, two world's wars, hunger and garbages cramed by food,

escalators, elevators, gas fittings, plastic bags, plastic money, even children who are conceived in vitro and genetical improvement of plants and animals, digital wrist watch, traffic signs, boom in books production, CD disks, mass education, mass culture, mass consumption, mass mediation of informations, concentration camps, Hiroshima's bomb, drugs, swing and rock and roll, nationalism, fascism, socialism and democracy, Austrian's Emperor, Hitler, Stalin, Roosevelt and Havel, and computers, robots instead of workers, and electronic networking. .. I will not enumerate more.

These things have not impinged only on my uncle but on all of us. Some of them stronger, some of them weaker. Each of these things intervenes in our everyday life. As for example anti-baby pills do. It is only pill and how profoundly it changes our historical approach to sexuality and family. We take care of these problems seemingly easy, we press buttons of slot machines, we open cans, but we cannot tell that our reactions are not hysterical, that they are without fear and anxiety.

There are really many new phenomena, that are changing our natural and social environment. They are the products of our Techno-Reason that is a base for development of Civilization. But the question is: Do we have also so many means for development Culture? I think that development of Civilization and development of Culture is not in harmony.

On the contrary, culture is a sorrow for a soul. It is a fear about a level of spiritual life, it is anxiety that our minds fall asleep. Our minds are beaten by comfort in everyday life and the postmodern man is very near to lazy animals in ZOO because all things are prepared for our using. Therefore he or she must be injected, goaded by culture. Culture is disquietness, alarmation from comfortable life. Culture have to be nursed, dusted in order that we should not lost contact with history which is so needed for future development. Culture links us not only with history but also with universal values. In this direction the culture overcomes the border of states and nations and acquires universal and humanistic character. Culture hides something in symbolic form at every time and forces us to discovering of that. Culture is allusion that we must fathom out. In this way culture tunes up us for acceptance of covert report and therefore we can tell that culture is inspiration of mind to the creativity. Culture needs a tangled structure of emotion and it is culture that can help to the process of development of emotion.

Prof M.W. Allen on the end of his research with people who have specifically damage of brain wrote: "Emotion may well be the support system without which the edifice of reason cannot function properly and may collapse.

Culture harmonizes us. It is a compass on man's way through history. Culture teaches us what the human deal is.

Culture prepares us for something transcendental.

I think we need both, civilization and culture and we need both in very balance measure. It is, for my opinion, only one perspective for today's man. If civilization prevail over culture than it could lead to some form of alienation or to such form of society where the individuals are very specialized and dependent on the social order. If culture prevail over civilization than we are afraid all form of despotism or scholastical type of society, where some ideology is dominant. Perhaps all totalitarian regimes start with anxiety about a level of our cultural life.

I am afraid that contemporary culture is hedonic culture.

One day I came at home and I look at TV screen, the sound was switch off. On the TV screen were joyful people with flags, they were dancing for joy and singing. I asked myself - why? What did the reports enable such joy? I thought it could be that somebody has discovered the new cancer's medicine, or AIDS medicine, or some scientist has given announcement about new source of energy, etc. I was glad also together with people on TV screen. Then I switch on the sound and I found out that the people on TV screen were the fans of some football's team that won some (stupid) match. Did the values change or is it such pressure of civilization and a new form of club's culture on all of us that we do not differ among the values?

The hedonic culture is one-dimensional culture. Such

culture attacks our instincts by offering sexual and aggressive indulgences. The contemporary culture changes its direction. The vertical or transcendental orientation (with contrapuncts) was changed beyond horizontal or serial orientation, where the time and not values is only one sovereign power. The man in this culture is captured to the web of gratification and does not prepared for independency and self-creation as a person.

The man who lived in the time of Pericleus had had a pillar in mystical voices, he has been in copula with Gods and prophecy. Similarly middle age's man has been in copula with the God. The God has been present at every step of man. The copula of life has been stable. The man in the post-modern world is under the press of contradictions what he is longing for and what he is doing. Post-modern man has lost the pillars of his life and he must create new ones from the values of civilization and culture and therefore they must be very balance.

I think contemporary culture is under press of mass-media represents the world by the means of head-lines and in maximum 3 minutes commentaries. Mass-media forces us for swallowing all reports, they product the information's murmur and do not allow to meditate about the problems. Mass-media pre-prepares our opinion for all situations and we are pre-prepared for acceptance of opinions that are finished and do not for creation of opinions. It is a great

danger that threaten to contemporary culture.

What is the today's task of philosophers?

For my opinion the task of philosophers is to show, where the balance between civilization and culture is disturbed. The world is topsy - turvy. The world is performed by the wrong side out and philosophers must to turn the world by other way round. It is really Hamlet's task.

Hamlet says:

There are more things in heaven and erthe, Horatio

Than are dream of in your philosophy

The time is out of joint; - í cursed spite

That ever I was born to set it right!

The Denmark is a prison at this Shakespeare's play. The murderer - the king of Denmark - and Hamlet are on opposite side of bar. The murderer is free and Hamlet and people of Denmark are in prison. Hamlet's task is turn round the world in such way that murderer will be punished and the people will be free.

We must to do what Hamlet has done. I think you remember the scene when actors have played on Elsinor the drama "The murder of Gonzago" and where Hamlet had added several verses. Hamlet did not look at the stage but into auditorium. He has watched something what could confirme his conjectures, how his father was murdered, how the world is. I suppose, philosophers does not have to look at the

performance of the world but they must look for something what is hidden and must discovered all dangers that threaten to normal way of development of civilization and culture.

To be European it means to balance on the knife's edge between life and death, between civilization and culture.

I should like one more remarked that I have not anything against civilization and I am preferring culture. I only plead for balance between civilization and culture.

What is typical Czech tradition? The difficult question.

Perhaps I can quote one Czech's poet. (Svatopluk Cech)

He wrote: "Czech can be a prisoner but not a jailor". And I think, the Czech's people in some way love to be prisoners.

The Czech journalist Ferdinand Peroutka wrote: The man who had criticized has been felt haughty attitude then man who has worked. Therefore many people has felt all strange as truth of prison or police and all domestic or privat as the truth of humanism.

In Czech tradition is great difference between "their" and "our". But dominant feature of Czech tradition is humanistic vision of the world.

The Czech situation has developed between the great advancement and downfall. It was several times where the Bohemia was in center of history. The period of advancement was always very short and the period of downfall was very long. It is as though the Czech people look for the power to

show their ideals and after the short performance of that ones they are done in and they are doomed to submission.

Perhaps it is a cause why many Czechs are steady waiting for any catastrophe.

For example only during my life the situation was radically changed in Bohemia three times. There were really radical changes. These changes profoundly intervene the life of everybody in Czech Republic.

Do we have such adoptive power?

The geographical location of Bohemia, the fact that the Czech Republic is small country with about 10 millions inhabitants and European history with the wars that had began in Center European region has given born to some particularities to Czech's people.

Some typically Czech features are for my opinion:

- special sense of humor;
- the man and not the God or another abstract ideas is in focus of interest;
- skillfullnes is also typical features of Czech people;
- but also sceptic's vision of world; and some form of narrow-mindedness
- the effort for finding out the place in hostile world;
- orientation to everydayness not to great task or great historical occurences;

- the heroes are normal people in Czech tradition, who are reserved and who are mistrustful of everybody and everything.

Czech culture of course reflects that features but despite of that, the Czech culture has not many particularities. Czech culture is immediately European culture in prevailing form.

We can demonstrate that on many examples.

In Bohemia and Moravia region has born many painters, composers, philosophers, writers and so on. All of them perform both European and Czech traditions. I should like remind you.

Composers: B. Smetana, A. Dvorak (you can hear His Largo "Symphony No 9 - From the New World" at the beginning of my talk), L. Janacek, B. Martinu.

Or painters: Zrzavy, Sima, Tichy, Styrsky, Vachal.

In Moravia has born such philosophers as E. Husserl, S. Freud, T.G. Masaryk.

But I want to focus your attention to three examples from the literature.

These three are: Karel Čapek, Vladislav Vančura and Milena Jesenská. Two of them (Vladislav Vančura and Milena Jesenská) died in Nazi Camps and K. Čapek died completely exhausted before the German's annexation of Bohemia in 1939. Their engagement against all forms of evil and violence is not only one characteristic of them. It is above

all the compassion with suffering of people and willingness to undertake painful determination of destiny why I decide to choose them.

K Capek has apprehended next development in Europe. At his dramas R.U.R. or Ze zivota hmyzu (From the life of insects) he anticipate the danger of manipulation of man in modern society or a danger of robots that could shift aside the man from his place in society and subordinate his life to the requirements of machines.

When his hero from the novel Krakatit, engineer Prokop has discovered the new and very effective explosive we are at the end of II. world war because this explosive is very similar to atom bomb. At this novel Capek explain the responsibility of scientist for the future of world and also his abortive effort against the desire of powerfull maniacs as well as the possibility of changes in the world under the fact of such explosive.

The same motif, it means the dilemma of individual and fanatical mass of people we can see also in his drama the white disease (Bila nemoc). Capek anticipate insufficiency of man who is doing one's best despite of disaster that comes up.

Also his novel "The war with salamander" (Valka s mloky) engages with the problem uniformity of fanatical mass of people. The people are very liable to accept the idea that their hardships are arised from the activity of

another nations or groups of people and that only one way is best and it is the war.

Capek's novels and dramas are full of fantasy and despite of that also very concrete. Capek dispose by the clear vision of all danger of the world. Capek's view on the people is kind. The people are represent with all pasions, as a skillful people with everyday's sorrows for their needs but when we are reading his novels we have not the feeling that Capek ridicules them.

I think that his contribution to the development of European culture is indisputable.

V. Vancura and M. Jesenska are not perhaps so well know over the world, though their contribution to European culture has the same significancy. In the case of V. Vancura it is because he has used all possibility of figurativness of Czech language. I think that at this field exist great debt of translators.

In Vancura works we can distinguish two periods. First one from the year 1924 to 1930 is under influence of expresionism. The novels of this period are focused on the life of simple-minded people (Pekar Jan Marhoul - 1924) that are fraught with some guilt and suffering. Vancura point out to absurdity of wars and hardship of life for example in his novel (Pole orna a valecna - 1925). The style of his writings is not without of joy from earthy of life and his heros are deeply rooted in reality. But the occurences of

episodes are not petrified. We can see the very life fluence of stories with many motifs of behavior. The every characters are very precisely described including of secondary characters. The dominant of Vancura's novels from this period consist in tragicomical of life that is rather senseless.

The second period from 1931 to 1940 we can call as pure naration with the cult of plot. It is rabelaise style of writings. The world is perfect and worthy of admiration. The characters do not create the plot but on the contrary the situation of stories create the characters. The people are draw into the plot. The content of novels are often without the time and space location how it is in novel (Marketa Lazarova). On the other side we can see that Vancura's novels are full of fancy they are near to the world of dreams with the detail description of milie. When we read them we have feeling of picturesqueness like in tale or in myth (or legenda). At the time the coming of fascism Vancura very often inclines to ideal of old time for example in his novel (Obrazy z dejin naroda ceskeho). He long for invariability of conditions and values.

The women play special role at his novels. The women recall the plot of novels to normal proportion of everyday's life. The men are roaming, they are dreaming with imagination about the women and about the future, they are vagrant and do not deeply rooted in concrete situation of

life but women are reconcile with natural rythm of life. The love is the source of poetic and delicacy in Vancura's work. The love is also the source of power for revival. The dominant feature of Vancura's works is idiom or style of writing. Vancura has wanted to revive epics by the means of metaphor which meaning must be think to end. His language is full of archaism, near to biblical form. He loves the sayings and proverbs, he is focused on picturesque depiction of every details. Sublime language is often in cotrast with grossness of words. We can evaluate his language as imaginative.

Vancura is not only Czech but great European writer who has pointed out to solid values.

M. Jesenska is known above all as a girl friend of F. Kafka but her importance is most significant. Czech philosophers K. Kosik has characterized Jesenska as contemporary Antigona because she has undertaken the fight against three forms of evil at her time; against bolshevism, fascism and against Munich agreement.

She has bring about the conceiving of the world how F. Kafka thought about. The Heros of Kafka's novels for example the novel "The Trial" or "The Metamorphosis" were not punished for some crime but because they has lived in normal way, they did not look around them and they did not understand that the life is the gift and simultaneously the task that everybody must descry for himselfes or herselfes

and fill complete.

Perhaps one story from her life can illustrate importance of M. Jesenska.

The story is from the time after annexion of Bohemia by Germans at 1939. One day she came to the Gestapo office with the clothes for F. Peroutka. She had the Jewish star on her jacket. She of course was not Jewess. The Gestapo officer asked her if she is in contact with Jews and she answered "of course, do you have any objection?"

She did not only sympathize with Jewish people. She was very active and devoted to all people that were needed for help. Jesenska's attitude is not only full of courage but she was resolve to undergo the consequences of her deeds. She had believed that everybody would has performed his or her opinion and does not to hidden to anonymity of mass-behaviour.

The attitudes, the forms of writings and the humanistic contents; they are the dominant features of these tree great persons of Czech and European culture. I am persuaded of importancy Capek, Vancura and Jesenska and their contribution to European culture in sense of my talk._