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Academic versus Practical : (How to Balance the Theoretical and the Applied in the Postmodern Situation)

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ACADEMIC VERSUS PRACTICAL (HOW TO BALANCE THE THEORETICAL AND THE APPLIED IN THE POSTMODERN SITUATION)

Abstract. Europe and America are culturally interrelated areas. However, as they developed in their specific conditions both show differences among which European academic and American practical emerge as the most significant. Consequently, this influences the understanding and dealing with the real world and further challenges that have appeared on the both sides. Practical courageous approach stimulates the fight for a better world; however, ontological conservatism protect human values and the very foundations of Western civilization. Although we are witnesses of incredible development and progress, the return to the traditional values and sacred is required since they guarantee to preserve and protect that what has been built for centuries. Both areas have something to offer in this mission.

Key words: practical, transcendental, pragmatism, progress, hope

1. Stating a problem. 2. The historical basis of experimentation. 3. Theory versus practice. 4. Optimism, nostalgia, disillusionment. 5. Conclusion.

1. STATING A PROBLEM

The European and American cultural area is usually referred to as ‘Western civilization’. The characteristics that distinguish them from other societies include: individualism and personal responsibility, libe-

ralism, moral and judicial background based on Christianity, optimism towards future prospects humanity with a potential to achieve in connection with a belief in limitless progress, and credibility of scientific approach to reality.¹ Although many of them have proved as naïve they summarize the distinctive features which have brought the West to economic and scientific prevalence over the rest of the world. In fact, the Western World consists of, geographically and culturally, two parts: Europe and America. They are, on the one hand very closely interrelated; on the other, quite dissimilar in nature. Sometimes the Old World is referred to as cultivated, virtuous, principled but elitist while the New World seems to be uncivilized, greedy to achieve cultural and economic dominance and primitive with a need to refine. However, taking a look from the other side of the Atlantic, the Americans are described as innocent, fresh, simple and spontaneous and Europeans as cunning, keen on schematic concepts, conformists bound by rules and tradition. These opinions variably resonate in Western culture.

In this article we would like to explore different/similar phenomena, concentrating on two issues: American activism and European contemplation. We will rely on fundamental ideas of both cultural environments, especially on their potential to search for solutions to contemporary problems of ambiguous character of progress. We will concern ourselves with European Greek and Christian tradition, as represented by Plato, Aurelius and Augustine; the American transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau; and the climax of American thinking in the philosophy of pragmatism.

2. THE HISTORICAL BASIS OF EXPERIMENTATION

The paths of the continents started to diverge with the arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers to the New World in 1620. As *Bradford's Diary* states when they were not able to endure persecutions in the homeland the Pilgrim Fathers decided to leave England, firstly for Holland before resettling the colony to America. This event gave basis to two essential

¹ Cf. R. Koch et al, *Suicide of the West*, New York 2006, 11–16.

features of the future American nation: willingness to experiment and a sense of mission, which has proven crucial in forming of the original American nature. What matters is that the Pilgrim Fathers decided to change their conditions actively. Considering traditional Europe, it was a really breakthrough-position: in pre-modern times people used to live in ontologically, geographically, socially 'restricted' areas. Being born into a specific point they did not have a chance, or even motivation to change it. Naturally, this order derived from Plato's philosophy in which true life meant correspondence of real matters to eternally existing entities in the perfect world of forms. It is no wonder that this concept was forced by privileged groups in various ways: social, moral, ideological. Nevertheless, the Pilgrims' challenge to authorities made the door ajar to experiment with existing conditions and enabled them to subordinate tradition in favor of invention and social safety to future hope. The necessity to take risks increased with the arrival to a completely new country, very dissimilar to the Old World. Although colonists started their social experiment with communal service and ownership they soon realized the emptiness of the theory of Plato and turned to private property.² The concept of self-reliance became more prominent, growing out of a new tradition of responsibility, adaptability, and self-confidence, allowing their mission to create a "New Jerusalem." In fact, settlers moved several times in order to fulfill a biblical promise of a new life, multiplicity and prosperity announced by God and repeated by American leaders such as John Winthrop. In his Sermon *City upon a Hill* Winthrop preached not to forget that: "we must Consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us (...) we shall be made a story and a byword through the world."³ The Pilgrim Fathers accepted the challenge of history makers realizing they would have to abandon the old seeing the hope of the new coming.

² Cf. W. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 2003, http://mith.umd.edu/eada/html/display.php?docs=bradford_history.xml [accessed: 6 Jun 2013].

³ J. Winthrop, *City upon a Hill*, 1630, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/winthrop.htm> [accessed: 6 Jun 2013].

The call for experimentation and non-conventional approach has reappeared in the American history. Although after the War of Independence the USA emerged as a geographically and politically independent state, intellectually, they still relied on European models. There was a need for thinkers who would express original spirit of the country. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a founder of American identity, expresses his attitude towards tradition, for him, represented by books of great (European) authors. He recommends: “books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? They are for nothing but to inspire. I had better never see a book, than to be wrapped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit.”⁴ In other words: read the books but be critical, since the books reflect the period they refer to, but have nothing to say about the present or future. “They look backwards and not forward.”⁵ He encourages: Do not parrot, be a Thinking Individual.⁶ His challenge was followed by Walt Whitman, who reckons that “the genuine identity of America is neither a written law, nor self-interest or pecuniary or material objects (as generally supposed) but the fervid and tremendous IDEA, melting everything else with resistless heat (...) infinite, spiritual, emotional power.”⁷ In fact, democracy and freedom are the most visible realization of the spirit. This new kind of human fraternity was considered so crucial that it gave America authoritative guidance for human conduct.⁸ However, progress in American eyes does not show precise contours of a determinate project. As Shaplin comments on Whitman: “no past human achievements, not Plato’s or even Christ’s, can tell us about the ultimate significance of human life. No such achievements can give

⁴ R.W. Emerson, *American Scholar*, 1837, 13, <http://www.emersoncentral.com/am scholar.htm> [accessed: 6 Jun 2013].

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cf. Ibid.

⁷ W. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 1871, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/Whitman/vistas/vistas.html> [accessed 25 Nov 2014].

⁸ Cf. J. Shaplin, *American National Pride: Whitman and Dewey*, in: *The Rorty Reader*, ed. Ch. Voparil, Oxford 2010.

us a template on which to model our future. The future will widen endlessly. Experiments with new forms of individual and social life will interact and reinforce one another.”⁹ John Dewey shifted this concept to politics, suggesting that constituting and governing a state should be an experimental process: “since conditions of action and of inquiry and knowledge are always changing, the experiment must be always retried.”¹⁰ Pragmatism under the leadership of Richard Rorty wants to “give up the neurotic Cartesian quest for certainty”¹¹ embodied in European ontology of correspondence, mapping, picturing and representation¹² and getting down to multiplicity of various alternatives in life. Thus, life is more like a journey than a goal. Not a Plato’s perfect world but pursuing without ending is the American ideal.

3. THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE

‘Activism versus Contemplation’ seems to create the most significant gap between the two areas. Europe derives its contemplative character from Greek tradition. The Greek word ‘θεωρία’ corresponds with the English word ‘theory’ that etymologically means “contemplation, speculation, a looking at, things looked at,” from *therein* “to consider, speculate, look at,” from *therein* “spectator.”¹³ Intellectuals assume: “It is very likely that Plato, followed by Aristotle, invented the concept of life devoted to θεωρία and distinctive of the philosopher, so much so that later philosophers had to acknowledge this new conception of philosophy.”¹⁴ European devotion to contemplation cul-

⁹ Ibid., 375.

¹⁰ J. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, New York 1927, 34.

¹¹ R. Rorty, *Pragmatism, Relativism and Irrationalism*, in: *The Rorty Reader*, op. cit., 111–122.

¹² Cf. Ibid.

¹³ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=theory&searchmode=none [accessed: 6 Jun 2013].

¹⁴ T. Bénatouï, M. Bonnazi, *From the Presocratics to the end of Antiquity: Overview*, in: *Theoria, Praxis and Contemplative life after Plato and Aristotle*, ed. T. Bénatouï, M. Bonazzi, Leiden – Boston 2012, 3.

minated in the Middle Ages. Spirituality, monastic tradition, mystics, new imaginative forms of meditation, speculations in philosophy and theology dominated European thinking from the 12th to 15th centuries embodied in Augustine's Confession soliloquies. Searching for truth was lead via the methods of meditation, spiritual practice and introspection and self-exploration.¹⁵ In fact, European philosophy showed speculative tendencies for centuries including Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard stressing that 'God's-eye view' on reality had to precede any action.

However, this all had to be omitted on the other side of the Atlantic, where people were struggling to survive. The American colonists drew their attention almost exclusively on useful matters: diaries, personal letters, maps, contracts and sermons represented the first evidence of utilitarian approach to reality. This attitude so much adapted that Emerson stated a century later "The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul"¹⁶ and he continued: "practical man sneers at speculative man, as if speculate or see, they could do nothing."¹⁷ While in the one country scholars might be acclaimed, in another they stand for bookworms. As Thoreau expresses metaphorically: "It is too late to be studying Hebrew; it is more important to understand even the slang of today."¹⁸ It was the essayist Thoreau and later the novelist Henry James who accentuated a moral value of the active approach to reality. They concurred with the opinion that uncivilized, wild, raw, fresh material of experience overflows with life. Everything refined, civilized meant deterioration. More specifically, "all good things are wild and free."¹⁹

¹⁵ Cf. K. Baier, *Meditation and Contemplation in High to Late Medieval Europe*, Wien 2009, 328.

¹⁶ R.W. Emerson, *American scholar*, 1836, 15, [<http://www.emersoncentral.com/amscholar.htm>] [accessed: 6 Jun 2013].

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ H.D. Thoreau, *Walking*, 37, [<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/06/walking/304674/>] [accessed: 6 Jun 2013].

¹⁹ Ibid., 51.

The Pilgrim Fathers played a crucial role in American culture most significantly manifested in Pragmatism which tries "to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences."²⁰ In opposition, the theory is of an instrumental value. It is used to solve problems in experience, and a theory is neither true nor false until tested in practical life. Experiential, practice-embedded making of truth and the world²¹ is emphasized by pragmatists. As James claims: "the true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons."²² Pragmatism believes in a willful individual who, due to self-control, self-reliance, self-discipline, is able to guide the world without preliminary metaphysical conduct. What pragmatists tell us is "the vocabulary of practice rather than theory, of action rather than contemplation"²³ and in this meaning, pragmatism can be identified with "a message of hope and liberation"²⁴ from metaphysical oppression.

However, postmodern Europe seems to be cautious of the idea that "our world is rationally organized, manipulable and 'controllable'"²⁵ and development inevitably brings expansion in freedom, democracy and humanity. The pursuit of a better world resulted in legally and morally justified concept of the state racism in WWII. What is the most horrifying fact reminded by Zygmund Bauman, is that killing was not understood as destruction but as creation and progress. In 'the gardening culture' of the Nazi regime weeds must be eliminated in order not to spoil the vision of a perfect garden.²⁶ Bertrand Russell strikes a similar issue: "Pragmatism, in some of its forms, is a power-philosophy. For pragmatism, a belief is 'true' if its consequences are pleasant.

²⁰ W. James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, New York 1907, 14.

²¹ Cf. S. Pihlström, *Pragmatist Metaphysics*, Bodmin 2009, 21.

²² W. James, op. cit., 23.

²³ R. Rorty, op. cit., 111–122.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Z. Bauman, *Modernism and Holocaust*, New York 2001, 4.

²⁶ Cf. Ibid.

Now human beings can make the consequences of a belief pleasant or unpleasant. Belief in the moral superiority of a dictator has pleasanter consequences than disbelief, if you live under his government."²⁷ Critically, Pragmatism is 'the philosophy of means rather than ends' and must face unexamined consequences, just as being without ontological grounding is said to lack the means for protecting human life. In fact, this experience had already been observed by Whitman in the Reconstruction Era of materialistic boom instead of estimated expansion of humanity.²⁸ Thus, enthusiasm to change the world should lean upon eternal postulates, which necessarily exist as objective realities and make claim on human decisions and subsequent action.

4. OPTIMISM, NOSTALGIA, DISILLUSIONMENT

Civilization-progress is also an important category to consider. European thinking based on Plato's essentialism exalted the world of the ideal forms over the world of everyday action. Material things are only shadows of ideal forms. Therefore, if one wants to gain true knowledge, they must have insight into the upper world where the light dwells. This concept did not only cleave reality into two unequal dimensions, but also undermined a practical action declaring all progress "corruption or decay or degeneration."²⁹ In fact, nostalgia towards the past accompanied by distrust and worries about future development have been ascending recently in Europe. Thus, Europe no longer became a place of optimism and hope. Crisis has become a distinctive notion to describe the postmodern era. In his *Letters from Lake Como*, Romano Guardini³⁰ expresses sadness about the irretrievable past and questions human chances for happiness in a world of impersonal technology. Ga-

²⁷ B. Russell, *Power*, New York 2004, 210.

²⁸ Cf. W. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 1871, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/Whitman/vistas/vistas.html> [accessed: 25 Nov 2014].

²⁹ K.R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Princeton 1971, 19.

³⁰ Cf. R. Guardini, *Technika a člověk*, trans. K. Balleková, Trnava 2010.

briel Marcel³¹ warns against living in functions, which have become a be-side effect of the enormous technological progress followed by a devastating impact of performativity and technocracy on human lives. Naturally, yearning for yesterday characterizes the industrial West. Frank Davis links nostalgia with homesickness as separation from native environment and subsequent desire to get back to homeland.³² In fact, Europe has always been concerned with the idea of return: Plato's soul should come back to the ideal world of forms, Renaissance as "re-birth" of Ancient ideals, Rousseau and Hobbes analyzing the original state of society, Husserl calling to return to things themselves and in 20th century Guardini requiring the return to sacred values as the only values that could guarantee dignity of human life. In all its 'returns' Europe seems rather skeptical towards the uncertain value of progress and development.

However, American intellectuals at approximately the same time acclaimed modern inventions. John Dewey states that machines and technology could be condemned only "if it seen through a spirituality that belonged to another state of culture."³³ He challenges humanity to rearrange a concept of spirituality in order to include modern achievements into its essence. Factually, America has had a strong tradition in seeing advance in technology as the evidence of progress. Thoreau claims: "there is transcendentalism in mechanics as well as in ethics."³⁴ The founders of American identity, Emerson and Thoreau, never created European gap between the physical and the spiritual. In opposition to Plato, these dimensions worked in unity one mirroring the other. Therefore, Americans have been eager to acclaim civilization-progress. Thoreau takes the technological optimism into amazing extremes challenging humanity:

"We will marshal the clouds and restrain tempests; we will bottle up pestilent exhalations; we will probe for earthquakes, grub them up, and

³¹ Cf. G. Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, New York 1995, 15.

³² Cf. F. Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: Sociology of Nostalgia*, New York 1978, 9.

³³ J. Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, New York 1930, 150.

³⁴ H.D. Thoreau, *op. cit.*, 3.

give vent to the dangerous gas; we will disembowel the volcano, and extract its poison, take its seed out. We will wash water, and warm fire, and cool ice, and underprop the earth. We will teach birds to fly, and fishes to swim, and ruminants to chew the cud. It is time we had looked into these things.”³⁵ The activism, change and vision mark American culture as ‘future-oriented’. Factually, in such culture “what is yet to come is most valued stressing taking chances, change and youth.”³⁶ Emphasizing a message of hope and liberation American intellectuals identified themselves with prophets rather than thinkers³⁷ revealing, as Thoreau says, prophetic truths.³⁸ In opposition, Europe with its rich cultural and historical tradition appreciates a message of the past: legends, myths, heroes, and the legacy of previous generations constantly deriving desirable behavior from these models. Despite being oriented towards the future as well (promise of salvation and resurrection) contemporary Europe shows much more nostalgia towards ‘good old days’ than enthusiasm into the bright future. Apparently, Europe has had the right to express incredulity towards modernization. “It was the rational world of modern civilization that made the Holocaust thinkable.”³⁹

Obviously, America has not been resistant to cultural breakdowns as well. It was the Civil War that shattered American optimism. To overcome it, the American poet Walt Whitman elaborated his theory of ‘life cycles’ in which destruction, decay and death are natural parts of life proceeding not in linear way but cyclically. Whitman uses the metaphor of grass that is with each spring in potential of re-birth and rejuvenation.

Despite the enthusiasm American contemporary thinkers try to be careful: “if there is technological advance without social advance, there is, almost automatically, an increase in human misery, in impoveri-

³⁵ Idem, *Paradise Regained*, 8, <http://www.thoreau-online.org/paradise-to-be-re-gained-page3.html> [accessed: 6 Jun 2013].

³⁶ L.A. Samovar at al., *Communication between Cultures*, Boston 2010, 277.

³⁷ Cf. R. Rorty, op. cit., 111–122.

³⁸ Cf. H.D. Thoreau, *Walking*, op. cit., 50.

³⁹ Cf. Z. Bauman, op. cit., 13.

shment.”⁴⁰ And on the European side there are many opinions supporting a cyclical theory of progress. Lyotard clears that “accumulation of knowledge is not regular, continuous and unanimous but periodic, discontinuous and conflictual”⁴¹ and Gianni Vattimo claims that we are on the edge of the end of history as the objective course of events controlled by human race. History, so much connected with the concept of progress, has become impossible.⁴² Nowadays, technological advancement might be more associated with menace than with the great achievement. The West has been facing the opinion that personal engagement in world happening is irrelevant as reality is ruled by quasi – supernatural forces: functionalism, performativity, instrumentalism, etatism. In fact “nature as well as man himself is becoming even more vulnerable to the dominion – economic, technical, political, organizational – of power.”⁴³ No wonder, the Pope Francis has likened Europe to a grandmother – no longer vibrant and fertile.⁴⁴ However, his aim is to encourage that this situation can be mastered by recovering a sense of sacredness and transcendently grounded values; by coming back to roots our civilization had been nourished by. In this point the two continents can join their forces and contribute to re-building the Western World. America with its enthusiasm to develop, to change, with its confidence in mankind and its abilities, and Europe with its respect for pivotal concepts of human dignity, human life, and the human being endowed with its inalienable rights, which cannot be taken away by any political or economic imperatives. As is evident, the transcendental ideals, directly linked to theorizing and contemplation, have not their the last world. However, to prevent them from being ossified, they

⁴⁰ M. Harrington, *The Other America. Poverty in the United States*, New York 1981, 188.

⁴¹ J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester 1984, 21.

⁴² G. Vattimo, *The End of History*, Bloomington 1991, 134.

⁴³ R. Guardini, *The Anthology of The Writings*, Chicago 1997, 23.

⁴⁴ Cf. Francis, *Address of Pope Frances to European Parliament*, Strasbourg, France, 25th November 2014.

need eager, respectful and persistent reformers, who would be able to rediscover the transcendental message of Europe and spread it with the catchy enthusiasm of America.

5. CONCLUSION

The question, of whether Europe and America are culturally interrelated or different, seems to be difficult to answer. Being based on identical roots, they display common features concerning greatness of the individual, importance of cognitive and moral knowledge, and a focus on growth and progress. However, the correspondence has started to diverge under different conditions. While the Americans were subjected to an urge to adapt to new conditions almost immediately, people in Europe had to face a challenge to change established customs slowly with the effort to maintain order at runtime. In the New World, necessity to organize practical life naturally prevailed over academic theorizing, resulting in the pragmatic approach to reality. On the other hand, Europe proudly continued to build its identity on established ideas defining ‘culture’ as following, copying or imitating verified models. As late as the end of the 19th century, Europe started to be perceived as too rigid, bound by antiquated tradition and restricted by metaphysical limitation. On the other hand, America burst with optimism to lead the cultural as well as industrial development of the world. However, this zeal ended up in disillusionment from ambiguous consequences of technological advancement, exempt from moral commitment: WWII, technocracy, materialism, and moral relativism. Today, citizens of the West are more spectators than agents and they express incredulity towards the heritage of both regions. The question is: Do the ideals of the West still have the potential to inspire, gain self-confidence and pass on the message of hope and humanism? Now, that the continents are to join forces in search of solutions, America could offer its creative enthusiasm, activism and national pride, while Europe could focus on acknowledgement of the centrality of the human being in each moment of the mission.

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