

FRANTIŠEK NOVOSÁD:

**Čo? Ako? Prečo? Sociálna teória v otázkach a odpovediach
(What? How? Why? Social Theory: Questions and Answers)**

Bratislava: Hronka 2014, 242 p.¹

*„Proximity, too, will get in the way of knowledge
... The point is knowledge takes distantiation.”*

Novosád, *Doba X*

A carefully selected set of laconically phrased important questions related to the terrain and plausible uses of social theory in the rough seas of the early 21st century is brilliantly gratified in tightly and elegantly argued responses by Slovakia's major thinker, social philosophy professor František Novosád. He makes no secret of his debt (*Preface*) for having been inspired as to the choice of a Q&A format for his philosophical observations and excursions by a number of books, including those by Alexis de Tocqueville and Alan Macfarlan's *Letters to Lily – On How the World Works*. The choice seems to be nothing but fortunate in terms of rendering the necessarily scholarship-intensive discourse user-friendlier. All the more so, for throughout the book, Novosád never succumbs to the vice of posing high-calibre “Liebnizian” queries (like “Why is there something rather than nothing?”). Taking stock: as a corollary, and true to the promise of its title, the book is conceived as a multiplicity of self-contained sections-responses, and the reader is graciously led by an uncommanding and unimposing counsellor through themes ranging, besides many more, from social consciousness and knowledge of social world to the function of hierarchies in human society to continuity and discontinuity in historical processes.

Still, the author must have had weightier grounds for electing this particular format. In the section “How should one proceed in analyzing social reality?” he draws a divide between science and pre-scientific/non-scientific ways of cognition by identifying a “question” as a basic cell of scientific knowledge. On the face of this, he maintains, “learning science means learning the art of systematically posing questions ... Scientist, therefore, is a specialist in posing questions ... Cognizing is proceeding to the rhythm “question – answer” (Novosád 2014, 83). The crucial importance of asking right questions is attended to in the author's earlier treatment of Heidegger's ontology and the latter's “intensive” pursuit of the “question of Being” (Novosád 1995, 25).

Anyway, back to (also non-academic) readership, why should one even bother with

¹ This review essay is meant as an input to a broader discussion, vigorously initiated by Prof. T. Sedova's extensive and insightful reflexion (in *Filozofia* 3/2015) of the title being reviewed herein.

social theories today? In answering the question, the author, after a nimble excursus to history, proposes that while traditional societies, contained and held together by custom, routine or clear-cut patterns of behavior inherited from forebears might entertain theories as mere ornament, modern society – what with its freshly emerging decisions and innovations, needs new orientation and legitimation in the ever shifting social world: “In modern society, nearly nothing functions automatically. Modern society has to be incessantly going about self-correction, self-amendment and ‘self-resolution’” (Novosád 2014, 61). It is, therefore, exactly at this point of our troubled post-modernity that a theory as a guide comes prominently to the foreground. It is quite remarkable, the author notes, how “ideas tend to be gaining on importance – above all at times referred to as ‘crisis’” (Novosád, 2014, 61). He rounds up his case by claiming that it is typical of such tumultuous times – with a panoply of alternatives on choice – to look up to ideas and theories that seem to harbor feasible clues for the future. This also leads the author to the shrewd observation with, ultimately, far-reaching social, cultural, and civilization consequences. The point is that scientific cognition today creates stimuli for its development all by itself and within its own cycle – that is, out of touch with natural reality out there, while within the realm of social sciences genuine experience of the sensory and sentient reality still retains its cognitive potential (Novosád, 2014, 57).

A great part of the text’s scholarly excellence and its sheer literary appeal is achieved by masterly exploitation of the expository power of paradoxes. One such instance is furnished by the section of the book responding to the question as to how man’s rationality/reasonableness relates to her free will. The author writes: “As often as not, evil will be associated with free will. At first sight it looks like a paradox, yet this paradox possesses logic of its own: it is solely possible to demonstrate that free will is genuinely free only if you take a decision whose consequences will turn against you. To all appearances, the presence of free will is only possible to demonstrate by hurting oneself” (Novosád, 2014, 150). Another putative paradox on the book’s generous menu of non-commonsensical insights is invoked in the answer to the question, “How do modes of thinking change in the course of history?” Ignoring the current, exclusively negative connotation of the word “crisis” and exploiting to the full its original Greek designation as “rupture” (hence, a new beginning), the author – tying up on his earlier insight (Novosád 2004, 48) – suggests that “innovative thinking lives off crises. Crisis tends to lay bare the groundwork – structures and fundamental forces that keep society together, allowing thus to have a glimpse of its “inside” (Novosád 2014, 226) and pose new questions. He concludes: “It is widely received, however, that for philosophy, science, and art times of changes, pre- and post-revolutionary periods, in other words, times of destabilization of old orders prove more auspicious – at any rate, more stimulating than those of stability and “order” (Novosád 2014, 225).

Quite a number of the book’s opening questions touch on the themes of perception and knowledge of social reality and comparative role of science and philosophy in it: how is our consciousness of reality made possible, what is involved in the process of knowledge, how can we switch from spontaneous to theoretical knowledge. The answers Novosád

churns out are lively miniature philosophical etudes into theory of knowledge and hermeneutics of understanding, complete with elegant intellectual acrobatics between Kant's transcendental idealism of pure reason and historicity of Heidegger's existential analytic, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology with its *époché* and what not. And mind, at that the reader is spared and kept unknowable of all the burdensome terms of art, vagaries, heresies, jealousies, and controversies of the relevant past "disputations" (Gordon 2010, as allegorized, for instance, in the Davos meeting between Cassirer and Heidegger. Novosád, however, adds his voice to the dispute: "Science and technology can avail us of new means ... In discussions about goals, it is philosophy that comes to the fore along with theology, ideology, and common sense. Science then is capable of letting the genie out of the bottle, not however, of 'taming' it" (Novosád 2014, 187). Yet the cooperation in making sense of ever deranged social reality, he opines, is a must. For "...relationship between philosophy and specialist sciences is to be viewed as a distinctive case of mutually interfering and self-correcting processes" (Novosád 2004, 26). Now, the never failing coherence and consistency of Novosád's argumentative prose (topped by implicit yet high and dense intertextuality) does not easily lend itself to reductive glossing: all along, one is aware of running the risk of being guilty of "violent" (Gordon 2010) reading, "overdrawing contrasts" (Gordon 2010, 9) or clear snatching off the context.

It may be reasonable then to conclude by the author's more or less a-temporal exhortation "to expand the list of questions posed, securing thus orientation" and scaffolding for our thinking about the social world. His own catalogue of questions (pp. 48- 49), including many topical concerns of modern human condition, reflect the changes and challenges of the concrete post-1900 socio-political temporality.

Literature

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