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IS THERE A NEED FOR AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF CRITICAL THINKING?

Written for K&K and Nová Přítomnost, 1996

The aim of every issue of **KRITIKA & KONTEXT** is to introduce the context of four or five books from the social sciences and humanities that were published in the West during the past fifty years, but for various reasons were translated into Slovak or Czech only after 1989. This first issue includes translations of reviews of: Eichmann in Jerusalem by Hannah Arendt; Poverty of Historicism by Karl Popper; A Theory of Justice by John Rawls; and Federation in Central Europe by Milan Hodža. Each issue will include book reviews by contemporary Slovak and Czech thinkers and articles by Western, Slovak and Czech scholars that will briefly chart the developments in the discipline since the books publication.

The recent release of numerous scholarly books in Slovakia and the Czech Republic has made available a number of well-known names and titles that were restricted during Communism. But how to select from an array of fruit that was forbidden until just recently? Which fruit remains fresh, and which is now overripe, although it was tasty in the past? And how much can we assess the importance of a work when we do not know the context in which it originated; when we often do not know what it was reacting to or how it was assessed by the reviewers? Finally, how is a book that we only now have the opportunity to read currently viewed in the West?

How to get acquainted with the scholarly reviews that set the direction each discipline would then follow? The latest textbooks and anthologies that offer contemporary trends and a list of literature is certainly useful reading, but it is mostly a view through the prism of the present time. As we well know, the social and especially the humanistic disciplines, as opposed to natural sciences, do not progress in linear fashion. A new finding in physics usually makes many previous theories obsolete; a new view, say in political science, offers a new, fresh look at a certain problem. It does not automatically undermine an old theory. It is thus important to know the context and developments in social sciences and humanities. It is not enough to know the present views on a book published thirty years ago; we need its assessment by reviewers from the period when it was first published.

Also one has to distinguish between those parts of a book that remain relevant or controversial and those that are already outdated. Usually, only parts of even great books withstand the test of time. We have to not only identify those precious fragments but also be able to justify why the rest of a book is only a part of a certain discipline's historical unfolding. A reader must be alert while reading the classics, because next to a brilliant idea he or she may find an idea that is dated or even banal. Uncritical acceptance of both thoughts might deflate the value of the brilliant one. Late in his life, Nietzsche mainly wrote using aphorisms, instead of writing complete texts, because he felt there was no point in filling space with thoughts that would not survive their time.

The study of context shows how a book was received, how it redirected debate in its discipline, and what books subsequently developed that topic. The intellectual history of a book can be more important than its assessment by a later reviewer. It has often happened that a nearly obsolete book has sparked current debate and pushed the discipline further but the debate itself has made the book out-of-date. The articles written specifically for **KRITIKA & KONTEXT** by R.W. Newell, B. Egyed, P. Azzie, D. Kovac and P. Lukac map the intellectual history of the books reviewed.

In contrast to literary and music criticism, reviewing in the social sciences and humanities is not an independent discipline. A review of a sociological study might be written by someone who is not a sociologist, however, only a review by a respected sociologist will be of decisive importance, supporting or dismissing the thesis of the book. In this manner, each discipline will naturally select its “classics” and its “flops”; the works that represent the pinnacle in the field and those that contribute to the discussion but do not influence the direction of the discipline.

Following the developments of, say, Western philosophy or political philosophy through the prism of contemporary postmodernism is no less subjective than the perceptions of a fervent Marxist, theologian, positivist, feminist or someone who is convinced that all the answers are hidden in the oeuvre of Sigmund Freud. If you ask any one of them whose world view is least biased, if sincere, they will respond that their own is. If they are evasive, as they often are, they mock you for being superficial. They will relativise any view other than their own. In this respect postmodernism is “traditional”. The world seems different if it is interpreted by Foucault, Marcuse, Tallyard, Karnap, Naomi Wolf or Lacan. The task of a critical thinker is to maintain some distance from an ideological or anarchistic view of the world. The search for a “single view” of the world undermines critical thinking.

It is important for central European scholars not to get sidetracked and overwhelmed by the many trends that have engulfed Western academia during the past thirty years. A critical stance free from unnecessary veneration is a precondition for orientation, and is also key for participating in a dialogue with Western colleagues on equal footing. It is critical to discern what is an intellectual asset and what is only a vain mannerism, often embellished with incomprehensible gibberish. An atmosphere of critical thinking, to be sure, cannot be created overnight, through “schnell” courses or with some lofty manuals. What remains indispensable is the tedious mapping of the historical context while remaining up-to-date on the latest developments.

The motto of **KRITIKA & KONTEXT**, and the topic of the introductory discussion, is Joseph Schumpeter’s famous dictum “to realize the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian”. Only in this delicate constellation, neither fanatical nor relativist, is one able to accept and benefit from criticism, and criticise others without forcing one’s own opinion on them. This is exactly the atmosphere in which critical thinking can flourish.

KRITIKA & KONTEXT will try to create a forum for critical thinking for Slovak and Czech scholars. It strives to be a forum without pathos and reminiscence, one for two distinct communities with much to say to one another; with the added benefit that there is no need for a translator. We cannot be connected by commercial television or by nostalgia for things past. Our duty is to debate critically matters that surround us, torment us, interest us and things we do with joy. To be critical of ourselves and of each other is a healthy manifestation of self-confidence and kindred spirit. There are many topics we did not have the opportunity, nor the courage, to address. If we do not address them, they might be used and abused by others.