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Book Review

Miloslav Petrusek *Společnosti pozdní doby* [Late Era Societies].
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In the fall of 2006 Prague Sociologické nakladatelství (Sociological Publishers—Slon) issued a new long-awaited book by Miloslav Petrusek, entitled *Společnosti pozdní doby* [Late Era Societies]. The book turned out to be a bestseller, certainly not only due to the charismatic personality of its author. Petrusek's career started in 1960's. As a young scholar he participated in research of Pavel Machonin's team, that resulted in a thorough study of the Czech society. After the fall of the Prague Spring the research outcome (Machonin 1969) became politically unacceptable and proscribed, and Petrusek was ousted from the academic life. He was able to return to it only gradually in the late 1980's. In spite of that, in the following decade he became an adored teacher of the whole generation of contemporary Czech social scientists, and probably the most celebrated Czech sociologist.

The structure of the Late Era Societies is somewhat untypical. It starts with an introduction that concerns the practice of denominating social phenomena. As Petrusek suggests, the unusual interest in labeling our own epoch is the peculiar feature of contemporary social science and an essential feature of our society. In his opinion sociology played an important role in the arise of the phenomenon—the discipline started up with Comte's periodisation of theological, metaphysical and positive age, and Comte's scheme was followed by numerous similar periodisations created by whole generations of scholars. Nevertheless, the great wave of labeling came later, around 1970's, when such terms as "postindustrial" or "technotronic society" were invented. Nowadays the most popular term is certainly "postmodernity," the notion that provoked a heated debate and a lot of disapproval. Petrusek himself decided not to use any of the popular terms like "postmodern" or "late modern society," and ended up with somewhat vague "late period society" (*společnost pozdní doby*). In Czech this term sounds a little apocalyptic, and not incidentally Petrusek characterized late period society as "…a society, that is metaphorically comparable with a volcano, which we do not know if it is active or not, whether or when it may explode, and with what consequences. Maybe tomorrow, maybe never." (Petrusek 2006: 25).

For the author our age is the unprecedented one, and social scientists' attempts to denote it are not an idle talk. It is so because the names have a legitimizing function,

thus they are important not only for scholars, but also for the public, since contemporary social science is a reflexive one (in Anthony Giddens's sense of the term—it continuously influences reality it describes). As for Petrusek's book, according to the author's declarations, it is not only a collection and an explanation of some of the notions used by various scholars to describe late era society, but also an attempt to take a sociological look at it "from above." He believes that it is possible to portray it analyzing terms sociologists use to describe it. Doing so, Petrusek acknowledges some advantages of the postmodernist variant of sociology. The postmodernists reclaimed the literary genre of an intellectual essay for sociology, opened the discipline for new topics, and, last but not least, rediscovered the individual as an ultimate social agent and a research subject for the discipline.

Except the introduction, the book comprises over 100 essays on alphabetically ordered terms and concepts, from the Amitai Etzioni's "active society" (in Czech *aktivní*) to the Peter Glotz's "accelerating society" (German *beschleunigte*, Czech *zrychlující společnost*). Each essay is followed by a basic bibliography. A unique feature of Petrusek's book is the fact, that he does not limit himself to Western (i.e. Anglo-American and incidentally German or French) literature, but also extensively cites Central and East European one, mainly Czech, Polish and Russian.

The assessment of the Petrusek's book is by no means an easy task. The author's intellectual scope is so broad that is unimaginable for an average sociologist to go through all his brilliant essays in order to trace possible faults. Naturally, his special quality is familiarity not only with Western, but also with Central and East European literature, which enables him to refer to works of authors from the peripheries of the Western world, and allows him to demonstrate that they are able not only to interpret concepts of their Western colleagues, but to speak for themselves and with their own voice. This particular feature makes the Petrusek's book an important reference for any Central-East European sociologist.

Anyway, the discussion concerning the key concepts and premises of the work is nevertheless possible. One possible question is an unorthodox, only semi-structured and dictionary-like structure of the book. For any person familiar with other Petrusek's works it is clear, that it is not an outcome of the author's laziness, or of his inability to formulate a more definite concept. Therefore, it appears to be a refuge of a scholar who knows too much to be able to give his own thoughts any clearly defined form, or a trick of someone who simply does not wish to present a reader the one and definitive concept. Some indications make the second hypothesis more probable, including the book's title, which does not contain any of popular terms that provoke endless debates, such as "postmodernism" or "late modernity," but Petrusek's own, yet deliberately vague term "late period society." If this is correct, one can only appreciate such a controlled inconclusiveness.

Another possible problem with the book is its supposed ability to deal with social realities we live in. The note on the book cover states that it is: "a collection of sociological essays, that attempt to answer in a systematic form [the question] which society we live in." "Although the book requires some sociological knowledge, it may be used as a non-standard introduction to sociology because it does

not only tell about sociology itself, but also about contemporary societies, as seen by sociology." (Petrusek 2006: cover 4). Unfortunately, it is hardly possible to describe reality in this particular way because: (a) the relation between things and their names seems to be different then Petrusek suggests, and (b) it is by no means clear which way the particular, analyzed terms apply to various social realities and different phenomena one may observe (I would prefer not to use the term "society" at all). As for the (a), the core of the problem is apparent in some forms of the criticism of postmodernism and supposed late-modern "individualism." Such criticism often originates from a naïvely ideocentric concept of the social reality. According to it, human beings (and consequently their societies) are driven by refined intellectual concepts and abstract values. As a result, the critics perceive intellectuals, who attempt to describe reality in which different values and contradictory ideas coexist, not only as someone like Bob Dylan's wicked messenger, who was not able to bring good news, and who was therefore told not to bring any (Dylan 1967), but as defectors who try to subvert the established social order. In the supposed late-modern individualism they see the opposite of solidarity and a social threat, and therefore they are unable to analyze it as a social fact (e.g. Giddens 1991), and an integral element of our social life (an example of this stance in Czech literature—cf. Mucha 2000).

It is difficult to decide, whether Miloslav Petrusek shares this ideocentric perspective or not, as he has written a collection of essays, and not a theoretical treaty. Nevertheless, there are indications that he at least sometimes sees the relations between things and names this way. Even though he keeps a critical distance to both critics and proponents of postmodernism, he evidently treats seriously oppositions like individualism vs. solidarity, which oppose mere names, and reflect intellectual habits of their users rather then anything else.

As for the (b), the question is unfortunately clear. Petrusek does not care much to map out social worlds to which the notions he dealt with might be applied. Do they describe Western or postcommunist countries? Which period, and which aspect of social life do they apply to? The characteristic feature of the book is the presence of classical sociological thought, such as Georg Simmel's, Émile Durkheim's, and aborigine Czech classic, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. But are their works still valid? When Petrusek, after 80 years of continuous social change, still evokes José Ortega y Gasset's work as a relevant description of our own society (Petrusek 2006: 177–178), at least one of them must be wrong—Ortega y Gasset or Petrusek (most probably both).

It seems that Miloslav Petrusek's Late Era Societies are not, despite the author's claims, a "look from above" at our society—probably simply because it cannot be so without a serious usage of a more detailed empirical research. This does not mean that the book is useless, but only that it should serve first and foremost as an encyclopedia of the key concepts of the late modern (or postmodern) sociology. From this perspective, its quality is quite exceptional, due to its open and deliberately non-authoritative character. Its only drawback is perhaps the lack of indexes (at least the name index), which would make its usage much easier.

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