

Prospects of Civilization in 21st Century: Human Degradation or Transformation

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ABSTRACT

The article is dedicated to the relevant problem of humankind development prospects in the 21st century. The aim of the article is to identify and specify general conditions of the systemic crisis of modern civilization with the crisis recovery having multi-faceted nature – either a new round of progressive high-quality changes, or degradation of humankind up to self-destruction, or transformation based on new values and approaches. The authors analyze various precursors to value-spiritual, mental, technological and biological problems that define to a great extent the future of humanity. The article focuses on such factors of modern civilization development as the formation of modern consumer society, the entry of humanity into the postmodernism era with new values and imperatives, the process of comprehensive digitalization and the risk of depopulation and human biological degradation.

Keywords: *Systemic crisis, Civilization, Human essence, Consumer society, Postmodernism, Digitalization, Depopulation of humanity, Human construction.*

1. INTRODUCTION: TIPPING POINT IN DEVELOPMENT OF CIVILIZATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES

Since ancient times, the questions of social development have been the focus of the research interest among thinkers and are still relevant for each of us. However, the new millennium is facing a problem which is becoming particularly critical – that is the prospects of human existence. Civilization in the 21st century is at a tipping point that requires drastic changes in the existence of a human society and, therefore, new directions in the study of society and the human in it. Prospects of human development do not look so univocal and favorable as it used to be in the philosophic tradition introduced during the enlightenment and dominating in the modernity times. A lot of philosophers somehow specified a problem which has to be urgently solved: human society is in the midst of a crisis.

The aim of the article is to identify and specify not certain aspects but rather general conditions and precursors to a systemic crisis of the modern civilization with the crisis recovery having multi-faceted nature – either a new round of progressive high-quality changes, or degradation of humankind up to self-destruction, or transformation based on new values and approaches. What are the development prospects for society and the human in it? To start with, this problem has two main aspects that are inseparable: firstly, the 21st century civilization being at a tipping point; secondly, crisis of humans and their essential features. The problem of prospects and crisis of a modern human society is of integral nature although it is made up of many different manifestations and research areas. Therefore, this problem needs to be studied from different aspects. The famous philosopher, scholar and academician Ivan Timofeevich Frolov (1929-1999) pioneered such a multidisciplinary approach in the Russian philosophy. For such a large-scale comprehensive research, he initiated the establishment of the Institute of Man in the Academy of Sciences of the then Soviet Union that

was supposed to solve the existing and developing problems of humans and their existence. The Institute of Man attracted a large circle of interested scholars and philosophers [<http://www.frolov-it.ru/historyich.html>].

The main challenge during the research was that humans are constantly changing objects that, transforming the environment, on the one hand, give it human dimension and, on the other hand, change and develop their own essence. Existentialism accurately observed this essential feature of a human – to be an eternal project. By changing itself, doesn't the 21st century humankind betray itself? What kind of project will it be? How productive?

Both foreign philosophers (Johan Huizinga [1], René Jean-Marie-Joseph Guénon [2], Ervin László [3]) and Russian thinkers (L. A. Musayelyan, V. S. Stepin) are preoccupied with the solution of these problems. More and more often we hear from them “a diagnosis of the spiritual distemper of our time”, dread the destruction threatening the world, expect changes and have hopes for the future...What is actually a crisis of modern civilization? This is a social and historic situation and certain conditions when further reproduction of the whole social system becomes impossible in the previous conditions and, therefore, there is a risk of its complete destruction.

Let us try specify systematically the reasons and precursors that led humankind to a dangerous situation.

2. CONSUMER SOCIETY AND FUTURE OF HUMANKIND

With the appearance in the second half of the 20th - early 21st century of new content of “consumer society” concept that goes beyond the economic notion and serves now as an essential feature of human society where consumption doesn't just play a decisive role but defines the essence itself and the existence of society, humans, and relations between them. Many economists classify such society as an achievement of civilization demonstrating an improvement of human life quality, comfortable living that will create conditions for spiritual development of humankind, that liberated itself from the struggles for its material and physiological survival. However, behind the seeming “positive conquest” there are hidden “submerged reefs” that can easily

take down the ship of civilization. And the movement has started.

Humanistic ideology originating in the Renaissance and to a great extent defining the values of modern civilization helped, after the medieval religious period, focus on inherent value and uniqueness of every individuality, but at the same time it looked closely at the needs of an individual. It contributed back then to the development of individualism that can be considered a progressive phenomenon paving the way to the future capitalist society. Nevertheless, already the Renaissance philosophers mostly understood the limited nature and tragedy of absolutizing individualism. It is well demonstrated in Shakespeare's works where characters are full of self-esteem typical of the Renaissance (Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear), however, individualism in them reveals its own inadequacy and its tragic impending doom. The Russian philosopher A. F. Losev wrote, “Aesthetics of the Renaissance was based on human personality, however, it understood very well the limited nature of this personality. It claimed wildly and vehemently the rights of a human subject and demanded his liberation – both spiritual, and mental, and physical, and, generally, material. But the aesthetics of the Renaissance had one amazing quality that was absent in the aesthetics of bourgeois-capitalistic world that followed: it was aware of and felt the whole limitedness of an isolated human subject.” [4]. This individualism characteristic of the Renaissance gradually lost its grand sense and deteriorated to consumerism.

Pessimistic predictions of the famous philosopher E. Fromm that he made in his work *To Have or To Be* published back in 1976 become a reality [5]: the development of the consumption sphere in modern society serves not the interests of humans and their comprehensive development, but the systemic needs of the capitalist society. Thus, the humanistic, spiritual approach in this sphere is substituted with a socio-economic one, requiring an individual with certain characteristics of a consumer – selfish, seeking to make the world around them, including themselves, their own. This modern type, according to Marcuse, is a “one-dimensional” man infected with “commodity fetishism” (Karl Marx) and the virus of degeneration.

The French thinker R. Guénon agrees with his predecessors believing that modern civilization has embarked on a path of successive descent and

degradation, movement to the level of the lowest elements in humans and a focus on satisfying their most rough, material needs. In real life, this is an illusory goal, since civilization constantly generates a significantly bigger number of artificial needs than it is able to satisfy itself [6]. Such consumer parasitism towards nature steadily leads to degradation of biosphere and an environmental disaster.

3. POSTMODERNISM AGE AND HUMAN VALUES

The atmosphere of postmodernism fully reflects the transition of humankind to a new era. Modernity, which was building a hierarchical vertical and a sustainable model of social relations and values, sought to transform the world for the better following an ideal project, exhausted itself by the end of the 20th century. An era of skepticism and disbelief in the possibility of cognizing social and anthropological phenomena as a certain system established. Modern social cognition and general gnoseological aspirations are characterized by the perception of the world as uncertainty and chaos, a variety of new focuses, and the absolutization of everything relative and accidental. “Eternal values”, which have a universal human character, are neglected or reconsidered in the context of new trends and paradigms of public consciousness. We can agree with the participants of the discussion at The First Belarusian Congress of Philosophy who made conclusions that modern spiritual and cultural values of humankind lag behind civilizational ones (the aggregate knowledge, technical and technological achievements) and even their subordination to the latter [7].

Modern philosophers are trying to track, comprehend and define these trends in the development of civilization. Researcher Z. Bauman called the main feature of the postmodernity world unstable-fragmented “liquid modernity”, while A. Giddens called it constantly “runaway” reality, causing a feeling of unpredictability. They are supported by F. Emery, who compares dynamic processes in society with the movement of the ground underfoot, and P. Weill – with a boiler of boiling water, when there is a feeling of constant chaos. The creation of new multimedia technologies for the functioning of information flows with endless flickering of plots, a kaleidoscope of news, random facts, the imposition of various meanings lead to the development of a

mosaic “split” consciousness in a person, incapable of systematizing material and grasping the main.

Rationality and scientific-deterministic approaches to reality as values of the former modernist civilization become irrelevant. The boundaries between scientific and common cognition are being eliminated. This applies to various social spheres. It even affected the sphere of higher education, where the focus is on interactive postmodern “games” that correspond to the aspirations of modern consciousness for individualization, unconditional freedom of thought, constructivism and liberation from traditions. Therefore, students develop an uncritical type of thinking, incapable of a clear systematization of knowledge, not using basic concepts and precise definitions. These observations are confirmed by the results of special studies (for example, L. Vekker, G. Crabtree from Stanford University; L. Yasyukova – Head of the Laboratory of Social Psychology, St. Petersburg State University) [8]: the level of human intelligence is decreasing, less than 20% of young people today have solid conceptual thinking.

Even at the level of diplomacy and international relations that has always featured the values of rationalism and ethical norms, chaos reigns now: official statements are not subjected to critical and ethical analysis, accusations are not accompanied by logical rationale and proper evidence, “spells”, emotional style and labeling prevail. The obvious consequences include aggravation of contradictions, local conflicts, an arms race, various cataclysms. While rejecting the values of scientific rationality, what can humanity offer as a new mental support?

4. HUMAN DIGITALIZATION

The processes of comprehensive computerization and digitalization are in many ways the catalyst of the above-described phenomena. The information revolution has rushed into the life of modern society, considerably changing the appearance and functioning of various spheres of its life. Digitalization as one of the main components of the information revolution has not only firmly settled in the mechanism of social life, but also significantly transformed this mechanism, the essence and nature of human relations [9], [10]. This process acquired particular importance during the coronavirus pandemic, which simultaneously showed to the world the disadvantages of “virtual

reality”, protests against which swept across many Western countries.

It seems that digitalization, new computer technologies solve many problems and greatly facilitate human life, improve its quality, and increase the functionality of humankind. But this problem, like the previous ones, has two sides. And people on lockdown are more and more aware of this second negative side.

Firstly, the atomization of humans, their separation from the living social environment following digitalization can disrupt the natural process of their socialization, the development of their ancestral human potential and essential ancestral qualities. The surge in autism as a behavioral disorder coinciding precisely with the beginning of the information and computer revolution does not look surprising at all.

A human is an amazing creation of nature. Their essential ancestral qualities (abstract thinking, speech, creative abilities, spiritual needs, etc.) are not developed outside of live communication with others like them. This feature will separate us forever from the animal world. The tragic fate of the feral people, the so-called “Mowglis”, who grew up from early childhood far from the human community, and did not become fully valid members of society, proves this. A “virtual environment” that functions according to its own laws cannot become a proper substitute for a living community. This means that people are doomed to underdevelopment of their human abilities, incomplete fulfillment of their ancestral potential, adjustment to new algorithms of digital existence that do not allow going beyond them.

The second comment is connected to a great extent with the first one. Its content was in some ways developed by the Dutch philosopher, historian and culture researcher Johan Huizinga in his work *In the Shadow of Tomorrow* which is still relevant today [11]. He was concerned by the fact that people turned from creators to spectators and consumers of leisure activities: “In modern culture, almost everything has shifted: people are entertained by others singing, dancing, playing for them”. Today, in the information society, this trend has become unprecedentedly widespread and not only in leisure: even first graders now do not need to perform the simplest calculations in their mind, and a driver does not need to study a map if there is a navigator... In the information society, supreme mental function of humans are transformed, certain human abilities that were previously considered

fundamental (calculations, working with text, memory capacity, imagination, etc.) are lost [12].

The pathos of humanism and anthropocentrism during the Renaissance elevated a person to God’s employee, companion. After all, God and Man have something in common – a unique ability to create. This immediately elevated humans above the natural world, made them able to overcome their biological nature, and spiritualized human activity. It is no wonder that during the Renaissance, creative giants emerge in various fields – in art (Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, etc.), literature (Dante, Shakespeare, etc.), science (Copernicus, Galileo, etc.). Although it is impossible to limit each of them to just one sphere, since it was common to create and try your strength in different areas. Together with the ideology of individualism, such an atmosphere facilitated fast advancement of humankind along the path of scientific and technological progress.

But today people have got into a trap set by themselves. From a creative subject engaged in various activities, they turn into “qualified” consumers. Information and technical means not only facilitate the existence of humans, but also subdue them.

Thirdly, the information revolution led to new problems of the integrity of the human essence and existence – the problem of the split human consciousness, the death of the subject, etc. The mosaic nature of a modern person’s consciousness, the destroying effect of being present in several situations at the same time, the illusion of possessing the “virtual” knowledge, the inability to process huge flows of information, an enhanced ability to influence human consciousness through new media, increased visual suggestion, the problem of alienation of the subject – all this destroys the integrity of human existence, which is the ontological meaning of human existence.

To gain integrity for a human and humankind means to gain the full-fledged diverse existence, to reveal human potential. And a human can achieve this harmony through subject-transforming creative activity as a specific way of his being.

5. PROBLEM OF DEPOPULATION AND BIOLOGICAL DEGRADATION OF HUMAN

Philosophers, sociologists, health professionals while peering anxiously into the future, are talking more and more often about the possible biological

degeneration of humankind. In this case, we are talking about solving the problem of sustainable reproduction of humankind. The content of this problem features several important aspects.

The most obvious theme is possible depopulation of humanity. Such a threat exists and concerns, first of all, developed countries: according to the World Bank, the total fertility rate (TFR) in developed countries (the European Union and the Eurozone) in 2018 was 1.5 children per woman. This is despite the fact that in the last decade this indicator in Western countries somehow increased due to migration processes. TFR in Russia for 2018 was 1.58 [13]. To maintain a constant population size in the long term, a minimum of 2.13 children per woman must be born.

In many ways, such disappointing indicators are connected with the collapse of the classical form of a family, being the bearer of traditional values. Among these family values that are gradually being lost, children are the most important cultural and axiological universal. The family is not just a social unit, it is its foundation and support, since family is responsible for primary socialization – norms, ideals and principles of human community are reproduced.

Therefore, family as a social institution in terms of the prospects for the development of civilization has a double function: 1) solves the problem of human biological population preservation; 2) is the primary agent of socialization and largely determines its success. The collapse of nuclear family and marriage relations between a man and a woman affects the nature of the developing social relations in society in the spirit of postmodernity.

An equally dangerous problem is the biological construction of a human (bioengineering, transhumanism, transpersonalism, etc.). It should be noted that I.T. Frolov, a biologist by education, back in the second half of the 20th century (he died in 1999) had a very negative attitude towards different “human reconstruction” projects. Today, the postmodernist trend of constructivism has embraced anthropology: the “mania for re-creation of a human” (as well-defined by P.S. Gurevich) by “foremen of human re-creation” began [14] with the help of machines and biology. Such enthusiastic reconstruction of a person’s being deprives them of their own inner life project and self-development, the opportunity to sort themselves out, i.e. their very creative essence and openness. And it always carries the risks of unforeseen consequences of

such tests, since, according to the great Russian writer and philosopher F.M. Dostoevsky, “man is a mystery”, which needs to be unravelled its whole life.

Finally, the aggravating problem of the “genetic load” of humanity (introduced by H. J. Muller in 1950 in his work *Our Load of Mutations*) should also be considered. This is the accumulation of negative mutations that lead to a pronounced degradation in the viability of individuals or their death. This happens following pollution of the natural human habitat, as well as a decrease in the importance of natural selection in the human population, thanks to medical and technological advances. Mutagenic factors are accumulated making subsequent generations more prone to illnesses and degenerative.

6. CONCLUSION

Thus, humankind and humans are integrity, which is in constant formation, revealing to us different aspects of its existence, but often remaining a “thing-in-itself”. It is for a reason that human sciences appeared later than others and differed significantly from natural sciences. The interference with the object of study in them was always careful and very limited. Since, as a result of socioanthropogenesis, humans have acquired the mechanism of a universal mode of existence. Experiments and rough interference with this mechanism can lead to the loss of universality and openness of the human biosocial system.

Over the past 45 thousand years, the problem of human civilization development and the improvement of humans was solved not through biological changes, but through cultural achievements and spiritual and educational measures that opened to people their true essence and endless prospects. And it would be treacherously dangerous to deviate from this path.

AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

Irina Ponizovkina analyzed and generalized the findings of Russian and foreign scientists in the field of research and used them for generating new ideas. Irina Ponizovkina made a decisive contribution to describing the history of the problem, its topicality and wrote sections 2, and 3.

Elena Agibalova collected evidence for preliminary estimation of the problem and its

structuring. Elena Agibalova wrote sections 4, and 5 and concluding remarks.

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