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Reader's report of Jan Zeman's MA Thesis "Perspektivität und Katastrophe. Die Ambivalenz des Fortschritts"

(Charles University, Faculty of Humanities, German and French Philosophy)

The thesis attempts to interconnect three topics: human perspectivity, the ambivalence of progress, and the essence of a cultural disaster. From the methodological point of view, this interconnection has an interdisciplinary nature: the perspectivity is explained within the philosophical-phenomenological context (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Scheler, Gebser), the ambivalence of progress from a widely understood cultural-and-sociological perspective, and the notion of a disaster (catastrophe) is built on cultural anthropology and archeology (Diamond, Wright). From a more topical point of view, this interconnection is framed ecologically. Jan Zeman explores the collapse of civilization at the Easter Island (based on reading Diamond and Wright) to show that the cultural and ecological reasons of this catastrophe are interlinked.

The motivation for the interdisciplinary enterprise is justified with this claim "kulturkritischen Ansätzen ein philosophisch-phänomenologisches Fundament zu verschaffen" (p. 61). In my critical reading of the thesis I want to highlight that this aim has been fulfilled only implicitly, but not explicitly. In the introduction, Jan Zeman suggests that he plans to find the phenomenological basis of cultural collapses in an ego-centricity which defines human perspective. Though he does not follow this lead thoroughly. In phenomenology, the ego-centering of human perception describes a creative process which includes a respect to uncertainty, multi-perspectivity, accuracy improvements, etc. (this all is noted also in this thesis with respect to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty). So, ego-centricity does not simply imply an ecological egoism. Phenomenological perspectivity might as well establish a very sensitive altruistic approach which would be ego-related and self-less in the same time (e.g. Levinas). Yes, ego-centricity shapes the world as "my world" (or *die Welt* as *meine Umwelt*; p. 24); but how this entails a collapse of a civilization? Generally speaking, perspectivity could be understood as a positive concept which captures the richness of human creativity. If the thesis links it with catastrophes, it should be explained more in detail.

The transitions among the three topics – perspectivity, progress, and disaster – are very vaguely justified in the thesis. As a reader, I have been constantly asking – why this; why now; how this relates to the previous chapter; etc. I am entirely missing a point of including the final chapter entitled “Lösungsansätze” – the problem that should be initially solved is not named at all.

I am formulating the main points of my critical reading in the forms of question for the thesis’ defense:

Questions:

- Shouldn’t the thesis be entitled rather “Egozentrität und Katastrophe”? Is egocentricity the only possible version of phenomenological perspectivity? What about Levinasian ethical reversal of egocentricity? Or the emphasis on ex-centricity (Plessner, Heidegger)?
- Does *Weltanschauung* involve the same perspectivity as the perception? (I am asking this since the perspectivity is in the thesis deduced from perception (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty).
- How does the “ambivalence of progress” relates to the theme of a collapse of civilization?
- Why Gebser? How does his work help to understand the collapse of the Easter Island’s civilization?
- How do the phenomenological conceptions of perspectivity underpin the cultural and sociological understanding of the collapse of the Easter Island’s civilization? It is so simple that the people of Rapa Nui just maximized a natural human ego-centricity?

Assessment:

In my opinion, the thesis fails to clearly explain the interconnection of human perspectivity, the ambivalence of progress, and the essence of a cultural disaster. It offers rather separate insights into these three themes; these insights are interesting and without substantial errors.

I recommend the thesis to be accepted for a defense and propose to evaluate it as 2 in the Czech system (velmi dobře) – or as good (C), i.e. 14 in the French system.

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