Hope and Trust in Times of Global Despair and Mistrust

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LIT

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SCHOLARS' UNSOCIAL SOCIABILITY
IN THE PERIOD OF PANDEMIC

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Introduction

In the last two years of the pandemic, a whale of theoretical reflections accumulated about the social impacts of the quarantine, lockdown and the change of everyday routine, especially concerning the personal relationship and communication. However, it is a remarkable discourse, nowadays; we can be convinced by a short overview of this literature that they usually represent the old topics of the philosophy of communication of the last decades, in an actualised form. What seems to be novelty, it is an effect of a haphazard synchrony, sufficient amount of social experiences for a new level of a social and theoretical analysis assumed just in the eve of the pandemic. It means that a lot of their statements seem to be an effect of the pandemic, but they were actually formulated before and without the context of the pandemic, as well. Another speciality of this discourse that, however, the publications are formulated by academic people, they rarely focus on the peculiar problems of the everyday life, communication and mental situation of the same sphere. In the following at first I will offer an overview of the theoretical reflections about the social and psychical aspects of the pandemic, focussed on the structure of communication, comparing it with several topics of the previous period of philosophy of communication. Later I will focus on a possible classical theoretical starting point of the analysis, Kant's *unsocial sociability,* what is surprisingly rarely referred nowadays in this discourse. At the end of this paper it will be discussed a special problem of the academic sphere under circumstances of the pandemic, namely the turn of the communicational structure of the network of the national and international conferences, because of the enforced transformation from the real space and time into the remote meetings. An aim of the present paper is to offer a – may be, subjective – overview of the Hungarian experience of the pandemic in the mirror of its theoretical reflections published in the Hungarian academic sphere. Because of this reason I will use purely Hungarian examples and references, excluding several classics, and technical literature.

1. Theoretical Reflexions on the Contemporary Communication Before and After the Pandemic

In the period of the appearance of the first theoretical reflections to the social aspects of the pandemic (they emerged actually in synchrony with the first lock-downs), my first idea was that they are highly similar to several topics of the philosophy of communication about the internet and mobile phone as relatively new media in general, two decades ago. The core concept of this discourse was the *computer mediated communication (CMC)*. Nowadays, this term is used in a more technological meaning (e.g. Kelly 2019), but two decades ago it referred to the social and political aspects, as well (e.g. Thurlow–Lengel–Tomic 2004). Because of a pioneer of these researches in Hungary was our institute in the 1990s and 2000s, I can refer to my personal experiences in the question that what was in the focus of the scholar community in this time. (For some results of these Hungarian researches see Nyíri 2004; 2005.) All in all, the central question of this period can be summarised as the problem of the boundaries of the teleconnection in the maintenance of communities. We are before the period of the big networks of social media; *teleconnection* meant the world of the online chat-forums, videoconferences and creative usage of the mobile phones, in this time. Common opinion of scholars was that a sustainable communicational community cannot based *purely* on different forms of remote connections, it need periodically physical meetings.

Two decades later, teleconnections meant a really multitudinous usage of the new media and widespread networks of the newly established social media. The experiences about the social consequences of this new period accumulated in the advent of the pandemic in an amount enough to formulate new theoretical analyses. In this situation, all the newly published results of the philosophy of communication and analysis of the late modernity appears as a reflection to the pandemic situation, as well; however, they were developed mainly before the first information about Coronavirus. In the following I will exemplify this phenomenon by the recent publications of two Hungarian authors; both of them are connected to the circle of the periodical *Liget (Grove),* an organ engaged for the ecology and criticism of the late modernity, but independent from any concrete political, or social movement. However the book of Lajos András Kiss entitled *The Power of Conception* (Kiss 2021) was published in the second year of the pandemic; it was clearly formulated before 2020. Kiss's essays of political philosophy are focussed on the transformation of the *fear* as the *root* of the political power in the early modern political theorists (Machiavelli, Hobbes) to the *existential angst* of our contemporaries who afraid of *losing their identity* in a way. Gábor Kovács's es-say, entitled *The Angst of the Cyborg in the Time of Pandemic* (Kovács 2021) is a

reflection to Kiss's book from the point of view of the pandemic situation. Kovács offers a systematic experiment; how works the social-philosophical analysis of the book in the new situation of the pandemic. His ideas are connected with his previous essay entitled *Facebook and Dance of Death* (Kovács 2020) written in the first period of the first lockdown in Hungary. His central idea is the fragmentation of the society by the *filter bubbles* of the social media, what existed before, as well, but their dynamism become significantly stronger. Deprivation from the relationship of the physical contact enforced the people into their favourite filter bubbles. This defencelessness toward the technology of communication is the root of the hysteria which is palpable in the public communication. His conclusion is essentially similar to the statement of the philosophy of communication that communities cannot be substitutable *purely* by teleconnection. By his words, it is an illusion "to substitute the physical closeness by the unlimited freedom of the wandering in the endless digital space", because "our virtual self is not separable from our physical existence; however, we wish divide them" (Kovács 2020. 17). However, the theoretical content of these utterances is the same; but two decades ago it was just an interesting theoretical experiment; nowadays it touches the very roots of the *human condition*. The paradox of the combination of world-wide communication and physical lockdown can be symbolised by a well-known slogan of a multinational IT-company, combined with a world-wide motto of the lockdowns in the subsequent waves of the pandemic: 'Welcome in the new world – Stay home!'

When I am writing these lines, in the beginning of the year 2022, after the experiences of several forms of lockdowns in Hungary, I can see several symptoms of the modified human behaviour, learnt in the time of the lockdown. In a sunny Saturday afternoon I am eating my lunch in my favourite restaurant in a suburb, in Zugló district of Budapest. We are alone with the boss, who says: 'business goes better than it is seems to be, we live mainly by home delivery since the recent times. *But I did not become a publican just for organising deliveries in an empty inn.*' A novelty of the Budapest life is the appearance of *walking food-runner* (bike, motor-bike and car deliverers were standard elements of the urban landscape in the last several decades). It is a new level of the individualisation of the lifestyle. 'Radius of action' of the walking food-runners from the restaurants to the flats is the same as that of the customers, and eating in a restaurant is cheaper than order a delivery from the same place, under conditions of the Hungarian tax-system. (Government wants to save the traditional consumption in the restaurants by this way, seemingly by exiguous results). Contrary these financial circumstances, people intend to eat alone at home, from boxes, by a more expensive price than together in a restaurant, from plate, by a cheaper price.

2. A Possible Theoretical Framework: Kant's Unsocial Sociability

A rationalisation of the dichotomy of the coexistence of lockdown and intensive teleconnection appeared in the academic sphere in the idea of the *ethic of keeping social distance*. According this principle, people who isolate themselves physically, are responsible ethically and the ones who intend to maintain the traditional physical forms of the societal life are irresponsible. In this concept, the *ethical* meaning of our behaviour is connected to *sociability* in an unusual form: the conscious *isolation* is a manifestation of the *sociability*, but in the thoughtless maintenance of the physical togetherness is the manifestation of the *missing sociability* because of the endangered health of the contact persons. However, this principle is good enough for using it in the everyday life of the pandemic; it usually lacks a deeper theoretical and historical argumentation. This dichotomy is not restricted to the situation of the pandemic; it mirrors the roots of the modern idea of the societies and the political rule. From this point of view, it is a surprise that a well-known formulation of Immanuel Kant does not appear more often in the theoretical reflections to the social consequences of the pandemic. I mean the concept of *unsocial sociability (ungesellige Geselligkeit)* in the *Fourth Proposition* of his *Idea for Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*. (In the Hungarian discourse, it appeared just once, in a moderated form; see Péter Tánczos's paper entitled *The Hazardous Solitude of the* Gemüt: *The Transgressive Longing and Risk of Seclusion in the* Œuvres *of Immanuel Kant*, Tánczos 2021.) In here Kant refers to a dichotomy or, in his term, *antagonism* in a more general meaning than the free global online communication of the intellects linked with physically closed bodies. He talks about the general dichotomy of every society; by his words:

> "*The means which nature employs to bring about the development of innate capacities is that of antagonism within society, in so far as this antagonism becomes in the long run the cause of a law-governed social order.* By antagonism I mean in this context the *unsocial sociability* of men, that is, their tendency to come together in society, coupled, however, with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up. This propensity is obviously rooted in human nature. Man has an inclination to *live in society,* since he feels in this state more like a man, that is, he feels able to develop his natural capacities. But he also has a great tendency to *live as an individual,* to isolate himself, since he also encounters in himself the unsocial characteristic of wanting the direct everything in accordance with his own ideas. He

therefore expects resistance all around, just as he knows of himself that he is turn inclined to offer resistance to others." (Kant 1970, 44.)[1]

Unsocial sociability, for Kant, is an essential part of the *human condition,* the root of the ambiguity of the human nature, metaphorically, the *crooked timber of humanity.*[2] In spite of the historical distance and the different environment of the technology of the communication, we can realize that Kant's dilemma appears in a concrete, actual and extreme form, in the situation of the online communication in the time of the pandemic. It offers an opportunity for rethinking of the meaning of the modern society on a Kantian basis; what is an almost missing colour on the spectrum of the contemporary analyses of the social aspects of the pandemic world situation. As it is known, Kant often referred to the border-line situations of the solitude and sociability, exemplified by shipwrecked people, or isolated aboriginal peoples. He often links the common eating with the common thinking; *togetherness* meant for him always both the community of the meal and thought. The most explicit locus *from* this aspect is in his *Anthropology* (§88), namely:

"When I think of companions for a dinner party to be composed solely of men of taste (aesthetically united),* who are not only interested in having a meal

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1   „Das Mittel, dessen sich die Natur bedient, die Entwickelung aller ihrer Anlagen zu Stande zu bringen, ist der Antagonismus derselben in der Gesellschaft, sofern dieser doch am Ende die Ursache einer gesetzmäßigen Ordnung derselben wird. Ich verstehe hier unter dem Antagonismus die *ungesellige Geselligkeit* des Menschen, d.i. den Hang derselben in Gesellschaft zu treten, der doch mit einem durch gängigen Widerstande, welche diese Gesellschaft beständig zu trennen droht, verbunden ist. Hierzu liegt die Anlage offenbar in der menschlichen Natur. Der Mensch hat eine Neigung sich zu vergesellschaften: weil er in einem solchen Zustande sich mehr als Mensch, d. i. die Entwickelung seiner Naturanlagen, fühlt. Er hat aber auch einen großen Hang sich zu vereinzelten (isolieren): weil er in sich zugleich die ungesellige Eigenschaft antrifft, alles bloß nach seinem Sinne richten zu wollen, und daher allerwärts Widerstand erwartet, so wie er von sich selbst weiß, daß er seinerseits zum Widerstande gegen andere geneigt ist."

2   "Nothing straight can be constructed from such warped wood as that which man is made of" (Kant 1784/1970, 46). *Sixth Proposition.* ("Aus so krummem Holze, als woraus der Mensch gemacht ist, kann nicht ganz Gerades gezimmert werden.") In spite of the widespread English translation quoted above, this Kantian *locus* is more known for the English-speaking reader as a motto of Isaiah Berlin's book (Berlin 1991): "Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made." By the evidence of Henry Hardy's *Preface* for Berlin's book, Berlin quoted Kant's sentence in Collingwood's translation, based on an unpublished university lecture in Berlin's student years.

together but also in enjoying one another, then this little dinner party (since their number cannot amount to many more than the number of the Graces) must not only try to supply physical satisfaction which everyone can find for himself but also social enjoyment for which the dinner must appear only as a vehicle.

*[Kant's footnote] Plato's Symposium in which the guest said: 'Your dinners are pleasing not only when one enjoys them, but also as often as one thinks of them.'" (Kant 1798/2011, 187.)

Between Kant's remarks to the 'good life' of his own epoch and his references to the antique Greek culture contain a hidden tension. In the Greek life and thought, the opposite of the person of togetherness, or sociability is the *idiōtēs,* an unsocial individual in a total solitude. Individuals of Kant's lifetime, mainly in his academic lifeworld, could live in physical solitude and in the world of the new media of scholar periodicals, in the same time; it is the origin of the figure of 'armchair philosopher' what was not imaginable in the premodern epochs. Kant's critique of solitude, however, uses antique examples, is focussed on the later phenomenon. It is clear that in this context, Kant's general remarks on the humanity refer to the ideal typical human, the human being as a *thinker* what practically can identical with the *philosopher.* By the idea of the application of the abovementioned Kantian topics to the contemporary communicational circumstances of the academic people under conditions of the pandemic, we arrived to the topic of the last section of the present paper.

3. The Discomfort of the Academic Sphere in the Enforced Online Space

In the last two years academic people participated in superfluous online events. By my personal experiences, in the case of the purely online events, when everybody was at home, the usage of the web camera was connected with an ambiguous feeling of an *unintentional voyeur who sees others and others' home, amongst other unintentional voyeurs who see me, and my home.* This ambiguous feeling can be formulated by the hypothetical question that 'what I am doing in the kitchen of a colleague in a strange city, where I have never been'. I do not mean a formal indiscretion, or unveiled personal secrets, just a discomfort because of the enforced and unintentional confusion of the private and public realms. (For a more detailed analysis, see my essay entitled *The Russian Kitchen. Public Realm, Privacy and Scholars Life-World – Reloaded,* Mester 2021; and Mester s. a.)

This uneasy feeling is just the one side of the problem. Another one is that the core of the philosophical thinking is connected to the concept of *personal*

knowledge and *nonverbal communication* what is not transferable to the online space. To fulfil this function is, amongst others, an important task of the conferences with *personal participation;* we cannot save their costs because of rational and financial reasons. We should not forget Plato's description of the birth of the philosophical knowledge in his *Seventh Letter:*

> "For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself" (Plato's *Seventh Letter* 341c–d; Plato 1966).

It is known that Kant formulated a highly bad opinion on 'Plato the letter writer' *(Briefsteller),* based actually on the *Seventh Letter* (Kant 1796/1993; cf. *Akademische Ausgabe,* Band VIII, 388). But *in this, and only in this context,* the message of Plato's *Seventh Letter* referred by me and that of his *Symposium* referred by Kant, about the 'communion of thinking' is the same, and is in accordance with Kant's own opinion.

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Béla Mester
Scholars' Unsocial Sociability in the Period of Pandemic

In the present paper at first it will be offered an overview of the theoretical re-flections about the social and psychical aspects of the pandemic, focussed on the structure of communication, comparing it with several topics of the previous period of philosophy of communication. Later it will be focused on a possible classical theoretical starting point of the analysis, Kant's *unsocial sociability,* what is surprisingly rarely referred nowadays in the pandemic discourse. At the end of this paper it will be discussed a special problem of the academic sphere under circumstances of the pandemic, namely the turn of the communicational structure of the network of the national and international conferences, because of the enforced transformation from the real space and time into the remote meetings. In this context, the present paper will refer Plato's topics on 'the com-munion of thinking'. An aim of the present paper is to offer an overview of the Hungarian experience of the pandemic in the mirror of its theoretical reflections published in the Hungarian academic sphere. Because of this reason it will be used purely Hungarian examples and references, excluding several classics, and technical literature.

Keywords: *academic sphere, Hungarian reflections, Immanuel Kant, philoso-phy of communication, pandemic, Plato, unsocial sociability*

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