

Extract from Art, Society & Self-consciousness by Jan Swidzinski

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Introduction

The reason for writing this book is the great anxiety that I feel living in modern civilization - a civilization in which, with ever-increasing difficulty, I am able to identify reality and define its values.

Our activity in the sphere of art causes us to become more interested in the sense of what we do, rather than in the practical results. At the same time we are aware of the fact that results are nothing but a projection of the conceptions which we have been able to accomplish. However the aim is not to create a situation in which the results would confirm our conceptions, but that our activity could be considered as reasonable. That is why we need such a picture of the world — a picture we could use and a system of values on which we could lean.

What I have written comprises three sections: theory, history and practice. These are three strategies, the usefulness of which differs depending on the current demands of our existence. The theoretical point of view becomes essential when the problem of steering emerges; the historical viewpoint when the problem of justifying the sense of action arises; the practical originates when the problem of functioning in the reality which is given to us ensues. Talking nowadays of practice testifies to the fact that human existence, in conditions which have been evoked by contemporary civilization, becomes the source of our anxieties.

In theory I have thus taken up reflection on factors which create our image of the world, and successively on their reciprocal relation, which structures them into a logical whole on the basis of which we take up our vital activities. It has been proved that such logical entireties may be numerous depending on the manner in which we put together the same elements, and that this being so, there exists more than one world in which we may reasonably exist.

In the part devoted to history I focus on concrete conditions which have occurred and which, according to me, have delimited our present situation. In the second part of history I take up art, trying to explain its present behaviour. That which has happened outside of art and that which has occurred inside it, was a choice which at a given moment of our history was made out of the possibilities described in theory.

In practice I have described the present need of art by trying to explain the consequences of this need. I have written about art, trying simultaneously to demonstrate that its behaviour is a manifestation of the same reaction to present day reality as are other forms of human activity.

In the conclusion I have come out with certain proposals which were the outcome of my deliberations. I was interested, as a matter of fact, not in describing things (this being the domain of science), but in putting forward proposals for constructing images of the world and the system of values functioning within them — this being the domain of art.

Theory

Part One: The Condition in Which My/Our Actions Take Place The Principles of My Actions

1. In order to exist in the world I must undertake various actions. This is the basis of my existence. Any of my actions leads either to a change in the existing status quo or to its preservation. My choice is related to the chance of achieving the state I desire. In order to make a decision I have to know which of the possible states are advantageous to me and which of the possible actions I should undertake in order to achieve the desired result. My decisions depend on my attitude towards reality and on my knowledge of it.

My relationship to the world is not exclusively of an intellectual kind. There are also the emotional and motivational components of my attitude through which my knowledge and reception of reality is filtered, and which influence my decisions.

Whilst deciding to undertake any action, I take into consideration the actual possibilities and adapt my needs to the possible (in my opinion) results which I can achieve. My modifications of the aim or the resignation from its achievement depend on the value it represents to me. There are some aims which I cannot renounce.

The aims I try to achieve depend on the subject for which they exist, i.e. myself; the results on the other hand depend on what is actually achieved. The former are subjective, the latter objective.

What we desire must belong to our own image of the world. This world does not need to be material or rational. Berger writes that the probability of the appearance of ghosts is greater in a society which believes in them.*

2. If the conditions in which I live are constant, I can base my actions on certainty. My own experience, and that of my environment, which are based on constantly repeated states, allows me to eliminate states that I have no chance of achieving. My imagination is limited but what it proposes is real and it does not let me down. That which is subjective in my aims is the same as that which is objective in the achieved results. There is no need to separate the one from the other. There is, thus, no need to separate one's self from one's environment. My attitude towards the world around me is based on confidence. Reality does not disappoint me, it is always the same as I think it is, and my expectations are based on the facts which I recognize without any difficulty. Acting in the conditions of certainty is possible only when I can foresee the results of my action. I can foresee them only when there are no radical changes in the world in which I live.

3. However, if reality surrounding me changes radically, then the results which I can predict are much less certain. The former action under conditions of certainty changes to an action under conditions of risk. My actions can bring some kind of result. The number of possible results which I am able to predict depends on my knowledge of reality. The messages about reality which are necessary for me to make a decision should refer to the actual status quo. They should also reach me quickly enough to ensure that they will not be out of date at the moment of my decision. Their form should be as clear as possible.

The bigger the group, who whilst acting in the conditions of risk have to make decisions of great importance to their existence, the more important is the problem of information and mutual communication. Here arises the social problem of the intersubjectivity of the language by means of which we communicate.

What strategy do I choose when I have to act under conditions of risk? First of all, I think of the possible results I can achieve. Then I ascribe to them some appropriate but different values. Similarly I set the aims in order, preferring those which appear most likely to succeed. I am conscious that I cannot achieve the aims that I desire the most, and that what I can achieve represents a compromise between two values; the probability of achievement and the actual value I ascribe to various aims. My strategy, if it is going to be efficient, should be based on calculations and not on desires.

In societies in which actions take place under conditions of certainty, an individual knows his prospects and his position in relation to others. In societies in which one acts under conditions of risk there is a possibility of achieving one aim at the cost of others. The risk creates a chance for mutual competition.

4. When the hitherto existing acceleration of the changes of reality increases, acting under conditions of risk becomes acting under conditions of uncertainty. The rapidity of changes occurring in my environment forces me very often to make decisions in situations which are very new to me. I cannot refer either to my own or to others' experience, because we all stand before the state of things which are as yet unknown to us. At the same time, the changing reality alters the values which we have previously ascribed to things. The aims we valued and pursued whilst undertaking our actions appear very often, in the moment we achieve them, to be less valuable than we thought.

In a society where existence is dependent exclusively on the occurrence of constant changes of reality, the process of revaluation becomes an indispensable phenomenon, from the moment when the quantity of goods begins to surpass the possibilities for their consumption. Revaluation thus becomes a necessity because the annihilation of the accumulated values makes it possible to replace them with new values which emerge in the process of production.

Under conditions of uncertainty the results I achieve and the aims I pursue, ascribing to them particular values, depend on me as an individual to a lesser and lesser degree. I become indifferent to what I have to do. To do it with the greatest perfection becomes my number one aim. I am only informed, but not convinced, about the fact that something represents a value.

* Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, *The social Construction of Reality, A Treatise On The Sociology of Knowledge*, Penguin University Books, 1973, pp 381.