

THE YOUNG GENERATION AS A HOPE?

BEDŘICH VYMĚTALÍK

The report of Professor Mlčoch is focussed on the principal danger threatening the intergeneration solidarity. It consists in the fact that 'hunting' for money and a cult of consumption lead to an erosion of the family solidarity and that on the other hand those who are interested to create some effective solidary family often have no needed economic conditions to be able to realise their desire. As Professor Mlčoch says we owe to our children and grandchildren a clear message that the richness itself is not sufficient for being happy – in some cases it may even hinder them from their real happiness.

The following problem remains how to achieve that this message would be accepted. Is the middle age generation (i.e. the generation of potential parents) because of its own passed experiences able at all to realise such a message? If not – what could be an adequate answer?

This is just a circle of questions where I shall try to focus my comment.

The intergeneration relations in post-communist countries are necessarily influenced by the fact that each generation was living for a long time period in different political and economic conditions and that such a reaction to them is needed which would correspond to appropriate different attitudes and opinions.

Moreover in the Czech Republic it was in 1968 the occupation of its territory by the military forces of the so-called Warsaw Pact (in practice of the USSR) and the following moral marasmus of the Czech society which were influencing the attitudes and behaviour of the citizens.

In this situation the people of today's middle age generation were for twenty years forming their ideas, priorities, life habits – simply their whole living standard which was after the fall of communism in 1989 adapted to the new situation on the basis of their own experiences.

On the other hand the youngest generation of nowadays has been living in new conditions. Children born in 1989 – when the communist system felt

down – are now 17 years old and they are unable to imagine the previous ways of living known under the name of the real socialism. They are confronted with a new life style (connected with a higher living standard of economically developed countries and presented as an appropriate, convenient and desirable one) as well as with the living standard of the generation of their parents stigmatised by the social transformation after the fall of socialism. On the basis of such a confrontation many young people are forming their own views and attitudes, in many respects different from those of their parents. Moreover the young people continue to become a more important factor as consumers and therefore they are objects of interest for various marketing researches – investigating actual trends of their life style and naturally trying to influence them. Young people are becoming an important and perspective consumers group. Therefore transnational corporations are permanently searching ‘cool trends’ and everything by means of what is it possible to attract the interest of young people. The market oriented to the youth is hectically expanding. The same fever starts to manifest itself also in the whole sphere of culture. The world of the youth culture is getting into a state named by the sociologists Robert Goldman and Stephen Papsen as a regulated development (citation from the book of Naomi Klein *Without the Logo*, p. 66, issued by Picador in New York 2002, Czech translation Pavel Kaas). A well premeditated publicity is influencing the youth more significantly.

Of course, the middle age generation is also influenced. Whereas for young people advertisements are offered as an allurements for which they can make a free decision without any ballast of thinking inherited from the past, the middle age generation is accepting these advertisements rather as a way to get free from any limitation of the previous regime. This way permits and somewhat justifies to enforce the own egoistic profit.

The decisive influence on creating attitudes of today’s middle age generation was undoubtedly the occupation of the country in 1968. It has – with using the force – stopped any tendency to democratisation which appeared in connection with some political liberalisation in the USSR, in half-hearted attempts accepted also by a part of communist politicians formulating the so-called socialism with the human face. This idea became so popular that a danger arose that communist politicians of this new orientation would achieve the support of majority at the coming congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Such a development was unacceptable for Moscow. Therefore under the pretext of the starting counter-revolution and of the necessity to defend achievements of the socialism the mil-

itary units of the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia in the night on August 21, 1968.

They did not find any shooting counterrevolutionaries nor any disruption, only shocked citizens who in their absolute majority were protesting against the occupation by petitions, demonstrations etc. The Czechoslovak army which had to defend the republic against the potential threaten of imperialists and for such a case had to its disposal a secret network of transmitters used this network also to protest against the occupation. Only after several days the occupants happened to discover and destroy that network.

A new period of the so-called normalisation started – a period of disappointment and moral marasmus. A so-called healthy core of the communist party was formed, political screening started, people who were considered to support or approve the ‘counter-revolution’ were expelled from the communist party and dismissed from their work. New office-hunters appeared with an apparent effort to use the possibility to enter into ‘hot’ positions. I am presenting these facts on the basis of my personal experiences. In 1968 I was 40 years old. The worst fact was that mutual confidence among people disappeared. The hitherto friends changed their behaviour, taking different attitudes. Sometimes they even were fearing about what would do their former friends.

The newly formed political power did not yet start with penal recourses or with open restraints – as many people feared – but it was showing unambiguously that instead of the socialism with human face the so-called real socialism should be accepted with its moral marasmus and that this orientation should be irreversible. A new period of a legitimate hypocrisy begun using completely different languages in the separated private and public spheres. People according to their experiences preferred privacy taking care mainly for themselves. Activities as ‘do-it-yourself’, gardening, keeping weekend cottage etc. have become very popular.

The fight against religion achieved some moderated forms – it was no more considered as too actual. People knew that the fact to inscribe their children to the voluntary school lessons of religion would be connected with a risk that later any access to a higher education to those children would be refused. Parents did not want to bear such risks, by the way after many decades of communism these parents already did not know too much about the religion. And thus – in contrary to Poland – the religion in Czechoslovakia had no more any significant role in the social consciousness.

At the same time an intrinsic destruction of communism took place. Later its end was signalled by the fall of the Berlin wall, in Czechoslovakia

by the officially approved meeting and procession of students commemorating 50 years from the events of November 17, 1939 when nazi occupants closed Czech universities. Then a provoked conflict with police followed during which one student was reported to be killed. In fact this 'student' was a member of the State security who simulated to be killed to incite an indignation of citizens. It was evident that the communists had in their plans to transmit the power and that they were prepared for it. This can be documented also by the fact that many of them were rapidly leaving their communist party giving back their party membership cards and joining the newly formed political structures. Using their connections these people were able to be incorporated into these structures in a very organic way in a short time.

The new political power enthroned quickly and openly new concepts and new slogans with the task to show the only right way how to achieve the welfare of the developed Western countries which in the previous years of the old regime for many of them appeared as that of their dreams. They were slogans about the market economics without any attribute, about the liberty (where the Man is a Law for himself and has not to be limited by anybody), about money to be 'only' on the first place, about the non-existence of the so-called dirty money. According to these aspects the law or even ethics were only delaying the transformation of the society towards a clear future. It was the ruthless own profit and unlimited liberty which were emphasised as the main motto of the welfare. Many documents can be found in the press of that time.

The absolute majority of population was persuaded that enforcing the new complete liberty of every single citizen – in connection with a free influence of the market – would open the way to a free and prosperous society in a very short time. This ample confidence made it possible to seek an enemy of the liberty even in the Catholic church that insisted in refusing to permit any single man to do everything according to his wishes without any respect to others and without any respect to the God. Thus the man appeared as being endangered in his absolute liberty. A lapidary expression of such a meaning was a comment in the broadcasting relation of June 15, 1993: 'All religions in the world demand devotion and obedience what is very difficult to bear after 40 years of totality. Therefore the number of believers is decreasing'.

Another paradox is occurring. The same Church – under the communist system considered as one among a few flag-bearers of liberty – is now being accused for disfavouring any liberty.

These opinions were helping more or less to open a space for behaviour models which have been later applied in the privatisation process and which also have led to the moral relativism (nowadays promoted in the developed countries) more acceptable in our country than in the West where citizens have passed a period of constantly accepted values conserving a series of behaviour models from those times.

Our society of those times – really drunken by the ideas about an unlimited liberty for everybody – in the absolute majority lost any interest for spiritual and moral values. Political representatives of that time openly refused any effort to punish thieving of property as a groundless criminalisation of entrepreneurs defending transformation of the society. By this way such attitudes have been created step-by-step. Lack of repaying debts, robbing of poor people, frauds, lack of keeping given words started to be considered as a standard behaviour that can be either applied or criticised but in practice with but a small chance to be changed. Cases with dubiously acquired richness seemed to justify unfairness as a standard way of behaviour.

When some information upon criminality has been reported the most striking cases either were getting almost lost or only nowadays – after decades of years – are being treated before tribunals; the main lawbreakers are living comfortably abroad in countries from where their extradition to our republic is impossible.

Even though today our society is already seeking generally acceptable sources of authority and the period of ‘a predatory privatisation’ is over, nevertheless the so-called normalisation in the years 1968-1989 and the following ‘capitalist’ transformation (without any rule when possible) resulted in the ideas, thinking and acting of the today’s middle age generation. It has helped to create the life standard characteristic features of which can be expressed as follows:

1. *spiritual emptiness* accompanied by a programmed nihilism considering this emptiness as a natural environment of the man;

2. *seeking of enjoyments à tout prix* in a hope that the right one will be found; in other words: an effort to enjoy the life even though it is not clear how to do it;

3. *cult of consumption* which has to replace traditional religious liaisons (Professor Mlčoch makes to this an appropriate comment that ‘a price for the slavery of consumption is “vanishing youth”, eroded family solidarity, lost happiness and a “running world” of natural joy from children’);

4. *accepting of egoistic profit* without any respect to others as the basic standard of behaviour;

5. *general weakening of traditional moral norms* substantiated by the liberty of the Man; as one of the amusers very clearly declared in the TV: nowadays all taboos have fallen;

6. *decaying consciousness of law* – a result of separating the law from the justice in the ideology of the communist regime as well as in the following period in attitudes of post-November politicians;

7. *passivity towards evil* or even accepting the evil culture, gradual loss of ability to discern between the good and the evil; a dubious role is played by the *media* which in an effort to achieve high publicity are presenting more and more perversities and this vicious circle seems to be infinite. It is *de facto* a defence of evil promoting when it is explained that also such kind of relations is showing the reality of life and that children should learn to make a cognition of this reality and then to make their own decision what is right. It is true that in the old tales the evil was also present. But in those tales it was always the good to which the final victory belonged. Today the victory is on the side of the evil. And thus the criminality is growing – supported among others also by the news published in the media about the unpunished crimes or even about setting lawbreakers of extremely heavy crimes free for the reason that the tribunal was able to negotiate this case only after 10 years and that a punishment by depriving liberty today would miss any ‘educational’ sense.

The present rather extended views can be perhaps characterised by an article published in the Czech daily newspaper *Lidové noviny* on December 30, 2005. The economist Jiří Kinkor was commenting the prestigious American weekly *Time* that evaluated Bill and Melinda Gates as personalities of the year for their extreme charity activities for which they spend huge sums of money. In the opinion of Kinkor Gates merits to be appreciated for material values he created and not for charity which in fact is just a reaction to somebody’s incapability or impotency. He should have been evaluated for earning money and not for giving it up. Emphasising charity is said to be an expression for the misunderstood morality of our world. Let us add that today for many people an honest work or ethical entrepreneurial activities start to be considered as a useless effort when according to all experiences it is far better and more rapid to make money by dishonest ways.

Of course the presented views and attitudes are not characteristic for the whole society. A not small part of the population exists as well that does not consider the egoistic profit as a basic standard of behaviour and seeks also other values covering among others ‘verity and liberty, altruism and sacrifice,

solidarity, friendship and compassion' (Archbishop of Lublin Josef Lycinski: *Let us be custodians of daybreak*, published in Czech, Perspektivy Nr. 3/2005).

Question rather remains who and how should contribute to make these values accepted in a broader way by the society and eventually what can be today expected in this matter from the young generation whose majority has already spent the whole life in democracy.

Lot of research has been made in our country concerning attitudes of young people. The results confirm that nowadays young people accept as a reality the life style oriented only to their own egoistic profit and that they make their own conclusions from it. The growing economics of the last years provides an incentive to these optimistic attitudes in them. The family influence is being further diminished whereas the group of equals in age continues to have the key importance. An orientation of the young man in the future often depends on that group where this man becomes to be a member – either Mafia or democratic orientation (Matoušek, Kroftová: *Mládež a delikvence*, Portál 2003, pp. 81-84). Nowadays media are offering more and more such behaviour models which a few years ago were considered as immoral and inadmissible – even in the atheistic communist regime. The negative influence of media on the growing criminality is considered today as indubitable. The criminality of the youth is growing as well. In the last decade of the 20-th century the portion of children and juveniles on the total number of all delinquents in the Czech Republic grew from 13 % to 20 % (Matoušek, Kroftová, pp. 100-108, 145-148). A new phenomenon is a striking growing criminality of children from the middle class and also the increased number of criminal activities of young people from the best situated social strata appears as a special surprise (*ibid.* p. 41).

On the other hand the school is becoming a poorly trustworthy institution. The research of the agency Median (1997) reported only 51 % of the inquired 910 young people as feeling a confidence to the teacher in the school.

According to the inquiry of the Pedagogic faculty of the Charles University in Prague – realised in 2005 among the 15 years old pupils – nowadays young people are oriented mostly to themselves. They consider their own success and independence as the most important fact – neglecting how many friends they have. They are socially simple and impertinent. In the course of examinations they almost do not prompt their colleagues being indifferent to their bad marks. In majority they have no idea what a profession they would like to do in their future life; they only know that they will have to hardly work if they want to be successful (the article 'Co

chci dělat? Nevím, ale budu nejlepší *What want I to do? I do not know but I shall be the best one'* – Lidové noviny, August 19, 2005).

The results of inquiry among young people from Central Europe in the age between 17-27 years organised by the editing house Reader's Digest are very interesting. In comparison with young people from Hungary, Poland and Rumania the young Czechs are more self-attentive and egoistic. They are also more self-confident in report to their own future. They do not fear not to be able to enforce themselves. In their views unemployment is a problem but they think they will be able to earn their living. They accentuate more the education and therefore they believe to find a well paid work. The founding of their own family seems to be a subsidiary secondary matter.

Their priorities differing from people of the equal age in neighbouring countries are shown in the following table.

For what am I ashamed in my country?

Czech Republic	1. Politicians	2. Criminality	3. Bad human character
Hungary	1. Foreigners do not like us	2. Low standard of life	3. Small possibility to enforce one self
Poland	1. Unemployment	2. Corruption	3. Poverty
Rumania	1. Corruption	2. Criminals	3. Poverty

For what am I proud?

Czech Republic	1. Successes in the sport	2. History of the country	3. Good human character
Hungary	1. I am born as Hungarian	2. History of the country	3. The language
Poland	1. Traditions*	2. History of the country	3. Traditions*
Rumania	1. Beautiful country	2. History of the country	3. Traditions

Source: Lidové noviny, October 26, 2005.

* Evidently the printer's error.

If more than a half of young Czech people expressed in the inquiry they are mostly ashamed of their politicians, presenting criminality at the second place and a bad human character at the third one then it is possible to deduce that their evaluating orientation is not so completely indifferent in the moral way and that some possible further positive shifting in this area can be expected.

Furthermore in accordance with other researches the young people in the Czech Republic do not form any monolithic group. Jiří Zajac in the weekly *Katolický týdeník* Nr. 2/2006 refers that young people oriented to effectiveness and personal success make a strong part of the youth but that besides that in average 25 % of them are oriented to relations and grouping and 15 % to the protection of the Nature and a healthy life style. 'Many people among them are really sensible to the spiritual life, emphasising relations and knowledge, service and responsibility, love and verity'.

The ability to become enthusiastic for something great, openness, desire for verity, uncompromising – that all remains in the nature of the youth. That all can be evaluated as a positive phenomenon giving a hope that just the young generation can introduce to the society new values able to replace the present spiritual emptiness.

The president of the Czech Christian Academy – the Catholic priest Professor Tomáš Halík (working in the pastorship among the university students) in one of his published interviews mentioned very explicitly: 'I do not see any other hope than the hope in the younger generation which will perhaps bring a new spirit and new values' (*Lidové noviny*, December 31, 2005).

When the intergeneration solidarity should be considered as until now (i.e. the parents have to take care to incorporate their children into the society as well as possible with taking over the values and standards of life of the middle aged generation) then such a one-sided solidarity is harmful and even dangerous for the life of future generations.

The support for creating a life standard of the up-to-date young generation should be a very important component of the intergeneration solidarity. It should correspond to real needs of this generation, based on spiritual values and on the effort to achieve a dignified human life for everybody. The forming of such a life style needs to get at first the appropriate interest of today's young generation providing a help and co-operation of that part of the adult generation which will be able to understand such a necessity.

This is not any utopia far from any reality. If the sociological researches bring to the attention the significant influence of the so-called peer-ship groups on creating life attitudes of young people then a support to create

such groups of equal age can be the first step also for creating a new life style which would correspond to the needs and interests of young people practising mutual understanding, solidarity and other positive human properties.

They are many such informal groups of equal age. They even brought a significant support to priests in the period of the communist regime with lack of other possibilities for spiritual activities. Today they can be supported by already existing or newly established non profit organisations of young people with commonly profitable aims. They can be supported by those families that have not yet lost the interest for fulfilling their functions. Their activities can be enforced by creating networks of organisations of young people with the aim to enforce their common interests.

In 2005 altogether 32 nonprofit organisations (NGO) in the Czech Republic have made an agreement to co-operate in order to strengthen the social dialogue. As an analogy it might be possible to create an analogous network of juvenile organisations or to incorporate them into the existing network. A Christian broadcasting already exists in our country and a Christian TV is expected to be officially authorised. Not yet applied and exhausted possibilities for young people are shown by the internet. A possibility to establish a foundation supporting these ideas still exists.

The following question still remains: a needed number of young people should be registered who will be ready and willing to do such activities. In the positive case a real response can be found to the message of Professor Mlčoch that the richness itself is not sufficient for being happy.