Modernity as a project critical thinking example

Technology, Development

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According to Habermas (1983), the notion of " project of modernity" came into focus during the period of the eighteenth century. It is worth mentioning that the spirit of aesthetic modernity discussed by the philosopher was extremely striking in the works of Baudelaire, avant-garde movements, Dadaism and surrealism. At this very time, Bergson presents his philosophy of the new time, showing the elusiveness, ephemerality and discontinuity of life. That's is why the way of modernist representation of art is rather abstract and ambiguous. The representatives of modernism were rebelling against the whole normative system claiming that they have no history and no tradition that could have prevented them in expressing themselves. Furthermore, they were opposing to the standards of both morality and usefulness, staying between the secrecy and the scandal. The modern artists were trying to change the meaning of the previous times and decrease the influence of the past – their art was ahistorical and was directed against false normativity in history.

Habermas (1983) argues that the idea of modernity has close connection to the European art development, however, he believes that " the project of modernity' can be analyzed only after the shift from usual focus on art. He relies on Max Weber's characterization of cultural modernity. According to Weber (1983), it is a " separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres (science, morality and art)". They were singled out because of the breakdown between the world-view of metaphysics and religion that used to be unified. With time, each domain of culture acquired its own specialists who are more adept at its specifics. Further, the culture and art in particular become separated from

the real life because of the appearance of professionals treating and understanding art in a completely different way comparing to people not so proficient in the above-mentioned spheres. As a result of these changes, the distance between the culture of experts and the one of the wider audience became bigger and harder to be eliminated.

In the article " Modernity and modernism" (1990) devoted to the distinction of the historical notions and further developments of them, Harvey uses Baudelaire's definition of modernity to understand the conflicting notions that are connected to modernism better. Baudelaire claims that modernity " is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable". Following the idea of ephemeral and the fleeting, Harvey supports Berman's idea of confrontation the chaos and fragmentation that is visible in works of Goethe, Baudelaire, Marx and others. The same point presents the philosophy of Frisby (Harvey, 1990) who along with Simmel, Benjamin and Kracauer emphasize on the fact that the time, space and causality are transitory, arbitrary elements. Nevertheless, Harvey (1990) points out that the only secure thing in the whole notion of modernity is its insecurity and tendency for ' totalizing chaos'. It means that the modernistic current was so extremely chaotic and abstract, and it was highly complicated to find a repeated pattern. Taking into account that modernists were moving against historical continuity, their movement was unstable, and it was hardly possible to predict the next step in the development of the current. Moreover, Harvey (1990) claims that if modern life is so ephemeral and fragmentary, there should be certain consequences of it. First of all, modernity cannot respect even its own past because of it

unstable history; the ephemerality of things does not let the history preserve any sense of durability. Hence, the meanings can be discovered only in changes that took place. Modernity itself cannot have connection with the preceding events and can only be characterized from the point of fragmentation in the whole process. Second, due to the unstable character, essential character of modernism was constantly changing and could even be contradictory, that complicated the reception of its messages. It means that the present ideas could be rational counterparts of the past ones.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment period formulated the project of modernity that was aimed at the development of objective science, universal morality and law. Hence, according to their inner logic, the evolution of autonomous art should have happened. Also, the idea the project was to release the cognitive potentials of the above-mentioned spheres from their esoteric forms. It means that philosophers wanted to use the knowledge gained by those studying culture for daily life in order to achieve " rational organization of everyday social life" (Habermas, 1983). The importance of science and nature and their influence on society could help to avoid scarcity, want and natural disasters. The advancement of rational thoughts could eliminate the need in superstitions, religion and myths releasing the human nature from them. They believed that only through this project the true, universal and everlasting qualities of humanity can be discovered.

The Enlightenment philosophers followed the idea of progress, and sought the way to diminish the break between the history and tradition. According to Harvey (1990), " it was a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in

order to liberate human beings from their chains". It means that the representative of the Enlightenment thought welcomed the changes in the name of the progress since it evolved human creativity, desire for scientific discoveries and the pursuit of human excellence. Therefore, from the point of view of the philosophers of that time, the fragmentation and transiency of the history were inevitable since they lead to the progress, aimed for good and were unavoidable parts of carrying the project into life.

Habermas (1983) mentions Condorcet and the writers sharing his worldview, claiming that they believed in the condition where the art and sciences may help to control the natural forces and, what is more important, encourage better understanding of the world, the self, the notion of justice and even the meaning of happiness for a human being. However, their expectations did not embody in the 20th century, since the distance between science, art and morality became even wider. Each of the elements had its autonomy and was treated separately by the representatives of different fields of study from the everyday communication. This phenomenon lead to the negation of culture of expertise, but didn't solve the problem itself.

Habermas suggests in-depth analysis of the specific programs that promoted negation of culture since it played an important role in the modernity as a project. The movement of culture negation started from the art criticism of Baudelaire in the middle of the nineteenth century. The idea of color, lines, sound, movement served as a cause for representation when the techniques of production and the media became aesthetic objects themselves. As a result, we can see the appearance of surrealism as a separate current. By that time, the relation of opposites completely entered all aspects of human

life and the art became a mirror criticizing the society and reflecting the extreme incompatibility of the worlds of art and society. Following the modernist project, art more and more distanced itself from the life and tries to achieve complete autonomy. However, the attempt to negate art was not successful since the surrealists faced similar problems as the Enlightenment thinkers did.

The idea of modernity as a project always had its followers and critics. Among those who criticized the project was De Sade, who believed that another dimension of human liberation can be found apart from the thought of the Enlightenment philosophers. Further, Malthus rebutted Condorcet's point of view claiming that it's impossible to run away from society and escape its chains. As a result, at the beginning of the twentieth century, two major critics influenced on the further development of thought. Max Weber (1994) claimed that the ideas and expectations of the Enlightenments thinkers were only an illusion. Despite preserving connection between science, rationality and universal human freedom, so necessary for the project, the general idea was of purpose-instrumental rationality. Moreover, the growth of this rationality influenced both social and cultural life, and had opposite consequences to the expected ones: it encouraged the creation of the so-called iron cage from which there was no escape whereas the Enlightenment thought was promoting universal freedom. Nietzsche, on the other hand, clearly stated a completely different point of view – he was sure that the modern was nothing other but the vital, primitive energy, desire for life and power. The philosopher compared modern to the swimming in a sea of disorder, anarchy, destruction and despair claiming that vital energies are

merciless and wild. (Harvey, 1990) Therefore, the idea of a project created

by the Enlightenment philosophers and all their efforts were pointless.

It is worth to pay attention to the fact that Harvey (1990) mentions the

notion of " creative destruction" as a true characteristic of a human nature.

He emphasized on the importance of the image of " creative destruction"

since derived from the ethical dilemma that could not overcome the project

of the Enlightenment thinkers.

I would also to point out that Habermas (1983) provides alternative ideas for

the implementation of the modernity as a project. He mentions the

bourgeois art that used to have two expectations at once from the audience.

First, a person enjoying the artwork should be educated enough to

understand the true meaning of it; moreover, he should educate himself to

achieve the required level of knowledge. Second, he should be a competent

consumer as well, in order to be able to use art, implement his art

experience to the own life and use it to solve his problems. Therefore, the

above-mentioned conditions have the inner logic and can be accepted by

both artists and experts. However, the artwork perception of a person who is

new to art and of a professional is completely different and cannot be

modified. Further, Habermas states that the aesthetic experience may not be

influenced by an opinion of an expert and can be different even if the

artwork is strongly criticized. He claims that as soon as such experience is

used to solve or relieve some life problem, it enters the domain of language

and loses the aesthetical value for a critic. Supporting his idea, Habermas

provides an example describing how young people with evening high-school

education managed to acquire the required skills to understand art and

learned to represent their milieu as well the work of European art. The example shows that the knowledge and skills for treating and perceiving art can be acquired with time and a person with low art awareness can gain the knowledge and become a real expert. The understanding of art is only one of the aspects and, thus, the project of modernity has not been fulfilled yet. Nevertheless, Habermas believes that the project is aimed at reestablishing new linkages between the modern culture and everyday life. Furthermore, this process still requires vital heritages reduced by simple traditionalism. It is also important to say that this new connection requires special condition according to which it can be done only when societal modernization is moving to another direction. It means that the all the immediate experiences, activities, and contacts that make up the world of an individual or corporate life are supposed to develop new institutions to control the economic system and its complements. Nevertheless, Habermas claims that at that period of time the implementation of the modernist project doesn't have chances high enough to be a success. According to the philosopher, the main reason is that the society has already passed the stage of modernism and moved to capitalism. The failures with the negation of art and philosophy resulted in the development of conservative point of view. Hence, appeared anti-modernistic currents that prevented realization of modernity as a project.

I would like to point out that Habermas claimed modernist culture to be incompatible with the moral aspect of rational life – that can be treated as a negative feature of modernism and its project in particular. Also, it should be taken into account that at the time when his article was written, modernism

was dominant and avant-garde was expanding. Despite that, he believed that avant-garde current lost its creativity and, thus, modernism was dead. On balance, I would like to sum up the positive and negative features that Habermas saw in modernist culture and its project in particular. The philosophers of the Enlightenment period were moving towards the progress in society. Every progress is a positive feature and presupposes changes, it also provokes rivalry, creativity and desire to move forward. In my opinion, these are the advantages of the project. Also, it I worth mentioning that the project's idea was to promote morality and universalism. As for the negative features of the modernist project, Habermas highlighted the fact that it cannot be fulfilled due to the time period and the modernization of society. Furthermore, what is also important, the philosophers could not solve the problem of distance between culture of experts and wide public that lead to further misunderstandings in society. At the very same time the avant-garde current of modernism distinguished in society and emphasized its ahistorical nature and changeability that can be understood as disadvantages of the period.

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