

WORKING FOR A “NEW AND TRUE SYNTHESIS”.

EDVARD BENEŠ’S VIEWS ON THE POSTWAR CRISIS AND CRITICAL THEORY

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This article aims to discuss some aspects of Edvard Beneš’s view on what he and other thinkers perceived as deep crisis in society during the interwar years. In an attempt to reconstruct elements of Beneš’s social philosophy the article will focus on the theoretical aspects of his work and on the views he held as the sociologist and political scientist he was by training. In doing so, Beneš’ role as an active statesman will be of secondary consideration. In 1999, the Czech historian Eduard Kubů pointed out that precisely this theoretical side of the Foreign Minister’s and later President’s oeuvre has not been thoroughly researched.¹ Since then, little has changed in this regard, although many contributions on the more political and practical aspects of this career, and re-editions of his writings, have been published.² By discussing Beneš’s theoretical views and by comparing them to similar contemporaneous endeavors, this article attempts to contribute to closing this gap.

The Post War Crisis

In 1928 – ten years after the end of World War I and well before the economic crash of 1929 – Edvard Beneš, then the acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czechoslovak Republic, presented his views on what he dubbed the “Moral Crisis

1 Kubů, Eduard: *Tvorba zahraniční politiky první Československé republiky. K domácímu pátrání o zahraniční politice meziválečné ČSR a zvláště pak k bádání o mechanismech její tvorby*. In: *Co nevíme o první Československé republice. Záznam z diskuse pořádané 25. března 1999 v Cefres v Praze*. Praha 1999, p. 58.

2 Just to name a few of these important contributions: Dejmek, Jindřich: *Edvard Beneš. Politická biografie českého demokrata*. Praha 2006; Hauner, Milan (Ed.): *Edvard Beneš. Paměti I–III*. Praha 2008; Hájková Dagmar et al. (Ed.): *Edvard Beneš, Němci a Německo (5 volumes)*. Praha 2014. An attempt to underscore Beneš’s political thought and his analysis of fascism and German national socialism can be found in Ruttner, Florian: *Pangermanismus. Edvard Beneš und die Kritik des Nationalsozialismus*. Freiburg i. Br. 2019.

of the Postwar World”³ in a lecture held in German. Beneš understood the crisis as one of society as a whole and discussed several of its aspects, which comprise the crises of nationalism, of democracy, of socialism, of science, and of religion. This text will focus on this lecture not only because it is one of the earliest and most comprehensive contributions of Beneš on the notion of crisis. It is also noteworthy that, while Beneš continued discussing different aspects of the notion of crisis in the early and mid- 1930s,⁴ he identified in those texts the year 1927/1928 as a turning point: “From this year on, the impression emerged that democracy is doomed to fall”.⁵ This was an impression he strongly opposed, in theory and in practice. This idea of the year 1928 as a turning point makes the focus on Beneš’s early text productive for a discussion of his notion of crisis.

The notion that Beneš saw the postwar world in a moral crisis might be surprising at first glance, given his philosophy of history and his interpretation of World War I. To him, as to his mentor and predecessor as president of the Czechoslovak Republic, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk,⁶ the Great War appeared not only as an armed conflagration, but also as a confrontation of two philosophical camps. On the one side the democratic allied powers as champions of modernity; on the other the central powers which were still rife with medieval detritus. As Beneš elaborated in a lecture in the early 1920s, “On the one side stood the philosophy of the free individual, raising the standard of the principle of liberty, designing a whole philosophical conviction of human and national rights, [...] defending as a result of human and civil rights the principle of thorough democracy, republicanism, law, progress, modernity and a new age; on the other side the philosophy of the opposite camp, where all medieval powers stood, representing violence and deceit, absolutism, theocratic monarchism, national suppression, militaristic drill and the barbaric theory of Machiavellianism, that the end justifies the means.”⁷ Although Beneš was realistic enough to concede that this is a black and white depiction, and that he was aware that it is not the case that “all light [is] on one side and all darkness on the other” and that also “the Allies had and have their dark sides”, he maintained that “in outline, the presented characteristics conform

3 Beneš, Edvard: Die moralische Krise der Nachkriegswelt (1928), Masarykův ústav a Archiv AV ČR (further AV), fond Edvard Beneš IV/1 (further EB IV/1), ID 252, box 78.

4 Cf. the following texts and notes: Beneš, Edvard: Smysl dnešní hospodářské krise (1931), EB IV/1, ID 255, box 82; Idem: Světová krise po stránce politické (1931), EB IV/1, ID 255, box 83; Idem: Spěje demokracie k zániku? (1935), AV, EB IV/1, ID 259, box 92; Idem: Wohin führt die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung der Nachkriegszeit? (ca. 1935), AV, EB VI/1, ID 252, box 78.

5 Beneš, E.: Spěje demokracie k zániku?, p. 2. All translations to English are mine, FR.

6 Cf. Masaryk, Tomáš Garrigue: Das neue Europa. Der slavische Standpunkt. Berlin 1991.

7 Beneš, Edvard: Smysl československé revoluce. První přednáška cyklu ‚Československá Revoluce‘. Prague 1923, p. 5–6.

to reality.”⁸ Given this background, one might think that after the victory of the Entente powers, the fall of the Central Powers’ dynasties and their empires, and the creation of the central European nation states, it should be smooth sailing for the newly liberated.

However, Beneš pointed out that there was still work to do, that while “altogether the tenets of democracy have been triumphant” this did not equate to a triumph “in full”.⁹ He underscored that especially in the area of social justice there was still room for development and warned (as early as 1923) of the dangers of new nationalist ideologies, amongst them the “Hitler’s radical-national movement in Bavaria”.¹⁰

This was the backdrop for Beneš arguments in his 1928 lecture. In line with the general framework of his philosophy of history, he maintained that “[o]ur whole postwar existence is characterized by restlessness, nervousity, and insecurity, which always mark the change from one generation to another. This also marks the struggle of an old world with a new one, the subversion of old conceptions and the concrete forms of a previous life and the creation of conceptions and concrete forms of a new one.”¹¹ To him, crisis appeared to be a passage that follows fixed rules. The second major point he made is that the crisis is one of society as a whole and cannot be limited to a special sphere, as it has ramifications in each of them. He pointed out that he cannot cover all aspects of this “moral crisis”, as this would mean including the contemporaneous European’s “views on today’s forms of government as well as today’s forms of family, his views on the nature and mission of today’s schools, questions regarding the army, education, science, religion and art, in short all central ideas and components of the private or public life of each individual.”¹²

Beneš added that while he could not possibly cover all of these topics in his lecture, he wanted to show nonetheless that “the past prewar beliefs on e. g. democracy, nationalism, socialism, pacifism, science and religion formed a system of generally accepted notions, which can be considered an ideological whole, a [...] framework of nearly mystically accepted articles of faith [...] against which the man of the postwar is now rebelling, trying [...] to replace it by a newer, firmer, and more secure structure.”¹³

8 Ibid., p. 6.

9 Ibid., p. 61

10 Ibid., p. 67.

11 Beneš, E.: *Moralische Krise der Nachkriegswelt*, p. 2.

12 Ibid., p. 2f.

13 Ibid., p. 2.

In thoughts like this, Beneš tried to conceptualize the crisis of modern subjectivity, a crisis triggered by the experiences of the war, which made nearly all prior knowledge obsolete. In so doing he came close to similar attempts made by a group of theoreticians that is today known as the Frankfurt School or Critical Theory, which formed around the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. In 1933, Walter Benjamin expressed a similar insight (the text was originally published in the Prague newspaper ‘Die Welt im Wort’¹⁴): “This much is clear: experience has fallen in value in a generation which went from 1914–1918 through the experience of one of the most horrible events of world history. [...] Never has experience been proven so thoroughly wrong: strategic experience by trench warfare, economic experience by inflation, physical experience by hunger, moral experience by the rulers.”¹⁵

While Beneš’ and Benjamin’s diagnosis of the crisis were similar, the causes and the expected consequences differed quite considerably. The differences in the diagnosis stemmed also from the different backgrounds and historical situations before which Beneš and the critical theorists formulated their views. In Prague one could look back – with the reservations Beneš hinted at – on a successful revolution that had created a new republic, changed the governing elites, and in which the idea that history was heading towards a more humane future had some credibility for broader parts of society. In post-war Germany, Max Horkheimer, the director of the Institute for Social Research, used an aphorism to judge the situation in a starker way: “In today’s Germany, the two elements of the French Revolution, pedantic philistinism and revolution, appear as distinct historical powers. If they do it in the service of the dominant bourgeoisie, the petit bourgeois and the peasants may rebel and call for the henchman, but the forces directed toward the creation of a more humane world are now embodied in the theory and practice of smaller groups of the proletariat.”¹⁶

In a closer discussion of one of the areas Beneš scrutinizes in his lecture in 1928 (and of one he omitted but discussed in other texts), these differences and similarities shall now be highlighted.

Economic aspects

Among the aspects of the crisis that Beneš discussed in his extensive lecture in 1928, the lack of a chapter on the sphere of economy is noteworthy. The omission hints at one of the main differences between his view on the crisis and

14 Weidner, Daniel – Weigel, Sigrid: Walter Benjamins ‚Erfahrung und Armut‘. Drei Lektüren. In: Idem (Eds.): Benjamin Studien 3. Leiden 2014, p. 261.

15 Benjamin, Walter: Erfahrung und Armut. In: Idem: Gesammelte Werke. Ballingslöv 2020, p. 1305.

16 Horkheimer, Max: Dawn & Decline. Notes 1926–1931 and 1950–1969. New York 1978, p. 106.

that of the Frankfurt theoreticians: the role of economy in the social process as a whole.

For critical theory, standing in the tradition of Marx's critique of political economy, the forms of economy were central for understanding social problems, although it always rejected traditional Marxism's simple scheme of the basis determining the superstructure. In his "Notes on Science and the Crisis", Horkheimer point out that his "view that cultural disorder is connected with economic relationships and with the conflicts of interest that arise out of them says nothing about the relative reality and importance of material and intellectual values",¹⁷ rejecting all forms of simple determinism.

Beneš agrees with this to a certain degree. While describing the crisis of traditional Marxism, of "scientific socialism" in his 1928 talk, he pointed out that, for example, the phenomenon of class struggle of course exists. But he rejected the contention that it was "what the pre-war ideology of scientific socialism made of it. In that view, class struggle was a social law, emerging from the depths of the nature of society and deriving from its scientific-fatalistic development."¹⁸

In texts after the economic crash 1929, for Beneš the sphere of economy is just one among many spheres of society which are afflicted by the crisis: "If we were to live through this [economic] crisis in times of general political and moral calm, its scope would perhaps not be too large. But today we are in a time of one of the biggest upheavals of history and of mankind in terms of politics and morality."¹⁹

To a certain degree, Beneš' thoughts echo what Henryk Grossmann, the central economist of the early days of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, said about Masaryk and the latter's critique of Marx: "There is no easier way to refute Marx's system of thought"²⁰ Beneš is also criticizing what contemporaneous Marxism made out of Marx more than discussing Marx's notion of social forms and how these forms are connected to social domination.²¹

That is not to say that Beneš ignored economic phenomena. In a later text on the economic crisis, his analysis of the increasing importance of the role of the state in economic affairs comes close to similar deliberations of members of the

17 Horkheimer, Max: Notes on Science and the Crisis. In: Idem: Critical Theory. Selected Essays. New York 2002, p. 9.

18 Beneš, E.: Moralische Krise der Nachkriegswelt, p. 14.

19 Beneš, E.: Smysl dnešní hospodářské krise, p. 3.

20 Henryk Grossmann: Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des kapitalistischen Systems. Frankfurt a. M. 1967, p. 35.

21 For an overview of these different readings of Marx, cf. Ingo Elbe: Between Marx, Marxism and Marxism – Ways of Reading Marx's Theory, viewpointmag.com/2013/10/21/between-marx-marxism-and-marxisms-ways-of-reading-marxs-theory/ [3. 1. 2022].

institute. Heinz Langerhans, a student of Horkheimer's, wrote in his theses on the crisis that "Capital and State [...] have been smelted together by the world crises into a single armor-plating to the end of assuring their continued existence. From the automatic subject Capital with the sponsor State as a special organ there has grown the unified state-subject Capital."²²

Beneš mirrored this thought but saw this development in a brighter light: "Today we enter a new phase of the development of the state in which the state acquires more and more economic, social and cultural functions. [...] Today's state and the state that is formed today, will assume more and more control of the production of goods and their distribution, of interest and its institutions. It will create monopolies, it will become an entrepreneur working for its own profit (in most cases on the basis of entrepreneurial, i. e. individual management). In other words, we are entering the phase of state capitalism."²³

Again, the critical thrust of Langerhans' theses, which pointed towards the problems and dangers of such an accumulation of power and which also saw the dimension of domination within the sphere of economy, was lost on Beneš. This occurred even though similar processes were described and even the desired outcome was similar: for Beneš it was clear that state capitalism will take a turn for the better within a democratic environment: "This way, it [the economy] will be socialized step by step. This won't be the creation of a socialist society according to stipulated doctrines and according to a preconceived statal socialist system. It is empirical socialism, driven by daily experiences, necessitated by daily needs, by daily fight and by daily cognition."²⁴ Beneš is so convinced that events will take this turn and that this "development is unstoppable",²⁵ that he even imbues the crisis with meaning, perceiving it as a necessary step for progress. How deep this optimism is rooted in his thought can be also seen in 1931, when he saw Germany as one of the locomotives and positive examples for this development as he was writing an article on the "Meaning of the Economic Crisis".

Nationalism

The way Beneš treats the economic sphere also hints at his theoretical background. The use of the term "moral crisis" in his 1928 lecture already points to the influence on Beneš of French sociology, especially the influence of Émile Durkheim, although the Société de Sociologie in Paris, in which Beneš was ac-

22 Anonymous [Langerhans, Heinz]: The Next World Crisis, the Second World War and the World Revolution (Theses). In: International Council Correspondence 8, May 1935, p. 9.

23 Beneš, E.: Smysl dnešní hospodářské krise, p. 5.

24 Ibid., p. 6.

25 Ibid.

tive during the World War I²⁶ had been established by René Worms, an opponent of Durkheim’s.

However, for the latter’s notion of sociology, the category of morality played an important role, as the sociologist Stephen Lukes made clear: “Here we can see what was the constant object of Durkheim’s sociology from beginning to end: the domain of the moral. [...] To appreciate this, we need to realize that ‘moral’ in French has an extra meaning largely absent from its English usage, signifying what pertains to the mind (*esprit*) and thought (*pensée*) and contrasting with material (*matériel*) and physical (*physique*) and that for Durkheim this embraced not only thought but also emotion, not only beliefs but also ‘sentiments’.”²⁷

Durkheim’s influence also becomes evident when Beneš discusses the crisis on nationalism, which he considers one of the key aspects of the crisis: “As I have already suggested, the events of the war turned the national idea and a certain kind of nationalism into an unanalyzable component of the worldview of today’s European.”²⁸

The idea of social phenomena that are impenetrable, unanalyzable and gain a reality of their own echoes Durkheim’s notion of the social facts that, as the “first and most basic rule” should be considered “as things.”²⁹ This streak in Durkheim’s sociology was strongly criticized by critical theory, as it affirms reification in modern society and makes a state of affairs that developed historically appear as given and natural.³⁰

But Beneš’s position is more nuanced, and he sketches a more detailed history of nationalism in order to explain its role in the postwar crisis. For him, nationalism is a modern phenomenon that has its roots in the renaissance and in the “humanitarian philosophy of the French Revolution”³¹ and was thus closely connected to the ideas of democracy. Again, for him World War I is a central point in the history of nationalism, as it resulted in the self-determination of many nations.

Beneš’s insistence on the connection between nationalism and democracy does not mean, however, that he would omit criticizing problematic aspects and developments of the idea of the nation. On the contrary, he voiced a sharp critique on these aspects. Beneš compared the “collective ideology of nationalism”

26 Dejmek, J.: Edvard Beneš, I, p. 138.

27 Lukes, Stephen: Introduction. In: Durkheim, Emile: *The Rules of Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and its Method*. Hampshire 2013, p. xvi.

28 Beneš, E.: *Moralische Krise der Nachkriegswelt*, p. 5.

29 Durkheim, E.: *Rules*, p. 29.

30 Cf. Adorno, Theodor W.: *Einleitung in die Soziologie*. Frankfurt a. M. 2003, p. 67.

31 Beneš, E.: *Moralische Krise der Nachkriegswelt*, p. 3.

with “religious collective ideologies of past centuries”³² and voiced the hope that in coming centuries man will look back at this age as contemporaneous man looks back at religious wars. Mankind will look back at current time “as one of the greatest eras of history, but as an ineluctably concluded one, which saw so much futile strife, which resolved so many questions erroneously und was guilty of so many delusions.”³³ He explains this analogy in more detail. Like religion, nationalism “permeates the society’s social morale as a whole [...] the complete political life, the complete life of nations, classes, public players” follow their conviction even against impulses of self-preservation: religion “was, seen from this angle, a downright tyrannical, intransigent, unconditional and merciless ideology. Likewise, and no less relentless is today’s ideology of nationalism.”³⁴ He even ponders that religion at least promised a life after death for believing, while “a life sacrificed for today’s nationalism does not safeguard anything.”³⁵

Beneš also touches the problem of the pan movements, of “Pan-Germanism, Pan-Slavism, Pan-Latinism, Pan-Islamism (which is a combination of nationalist and religious ideas) [...] which are all one-sided and exaggerated accentuations of this [this national] idea.”³⁶ These movements, closely linked to *völkisch* or “tribal nationalism”, are as well for Hannah Arendt one of the central origins of total domination and have “little in common with the nationalism of the fully developed Western nation-state.”³⁷ They are not only a newer phenomenon, but also characterized by an expansive drive, and “in their dreams of expansion, transcended the narrow bounds of a national community and proclaimed a folk community that would remain a political factor even if its members were dispersed all over the earth.”³⁸

For Beneš these new forms of nationalism posed a threat that should not be underestimated. To him, there were “certain theoreticians of nationalism, who explicitly vindicate the view that in the name of the nation and the nation state everything is allowed in public, political and international life: deceit, fraud, deception, murder and war. This view might be a moral degeneration, but it is a fact that in this form the mysticism of the post-war ideology reaches its apogee.”³⁹

32 Ibid., p. 6.

33 Ibid., p. 6f.

34 Ibid., p. 7.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., p. 5.

37 Arendt, Hannah: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Orlando 1973, p. 229.

38 Ibid., p. 232.

39 Beneš, E.: *Moralische Krise der Nachkriegswelt*, p. 8.

Again, some of Beneš's views were similar to those of Horkheimer, who reflected on the altered character of nationalism as well: "The idea of the nation also contains productive core in perverted form. Since the Enlightenment, the love of nation and country has been the way in which supraindividual, common interests became conscious. It set itself not merely against the narrow egoism of backward members of the bourgeoisie but especially against the class interests of the aristocracy. Napoleon not the Bourbons could put it to good use. In the hands of industrial barons their allies the factory owners the Junkers and their following the concept of the nation which originally included a sense for the life of the community as a whole has been degraded and become an ideological tool of domination. Just as they use the religious machinery which has been emptied of all meaning and become the embodiment of capitalist morality so they manipulate the masses with the fetishized name of the nation behind which they hide their own interests."⁴⁰

While for Horkheimer the rational spark in the idea of the nation has already been extinguished by social development and cannot be resurrected, for Beneš this is not the case. He seeks to tame nationalism through a humanitarian philosophy and use its possibilities: "Thus, the national ideology, which is on the one hand dangerous mysticism and part of the world crisis of today's man, becomes at the same time a mighty social force of today's states and of today's politically organized world in general which is indispensable and util for our world's gradual consolidation."⁴¹

This means confronting tendencies like the pan movements, if necessary by force. He opposes the opinion that "a humanitarian morality to be tantamount to weakness, as the philosophy of force tries to persuade the masses."⁴² For him, the philosophy of humanism "knows how to judge and wield force and might, but it brings force and might as tools into service of the idea of law and truth and repudiates the moral cynicism which wants to derive from material force and might the idea of law and justice."⁴³

So even given these obstacles, Beneš is convinced that the historical tendency is on his side; national ideology already points towards "unstoppable development towards a new, correct synthesis."⁴⁴

The Snares of Optimism

While his thoughts on social crisis helped Beneš to clearly identify dangerous developments and to act accordingly, their conceptual framework, the philosophy

40 Horkheimer, M.: *Dawn & Decline*, p. 59.

41 Beneš, E.: *Moralische Krise der Nachkriegswelt*, p. 9.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

of history they were embedded in, was fundamentally flawed. A comparison with the concepts of critical theory highlights this flaw, although there is consensus in the judgement of concrete phenomena.

In his very sympathetic essay on Beneš' philosophy (not by accident titled "Militant Reason"), Slavacist Leopold Silberstein wrote in 1937: "(A)ccording to Beneš, reason is fundamentally capable of foreseeing all possibilities and to take all necessary measures – I call this an interventionist rationalism, which undertakes to intervene in the real world and to reshape it by regrouping the rational elements already present in the real world according to a plan."⁴⁵ In this sense, Beneš's political thought circles around the idea of balancing these elements in a reasonable way, of creating the new synthesis mentioned in the end of his 1928 lecture. But these elements themselves are never called into question: that they themselves have been created historically, in concrete social relations, and can change their meaning when these relations change. Paradoxically, for Beneš the crisis is only a chance and a – perhaps painful – phase that will turn out for the best. He lacked the consciousness of the potential catastrophe that lurks in the crisis. Beneš's optimism surely had its merits, as it enabled him stay the course in dark times and continue the fight when nearly all seemed lost after the Munich Dictate and the creation of the Protectorate. It also bolstered his position against a cultural pessimism à la Oswald Spengler. But it also had the tendency to imbue meaning into the historical process, building on categories like progress.

Here the main difference to critical theory can be found. Horkheimer and Adorno, facing the deepening crisis, realized that the central categories of modern thought like progress, modern subjectivity, and enlightenment itself can be damaged by its course: "Under the given circumstances the gifts of fortune themselves become elements of misfortune. If, in the absence of the social subject, the volume of goods took the form of so-called overproduction in domestic economic crises in the preceding period, today, thanks to the enthronement of powerful groups as that social subject, it is producing the international threat of fascism: progress is reverting to regression."⁴⁶ Especially the rupture in the process of civilization that constituted eliminationist antisemitism put into action by Germany brought them in their exile in the USA to reflect on the "Limits of Enlightenment", as they subtitled their chapter on antisemitism in their book "Dialectic of Enlightenment". These historical shocks betrayed Beneš' historical optimism and his faith

45 Silberstein, Leopold: Die Verwirklichung der Philosophie in der Politik: T. G. Masaryk und Dr. Edvard Beneš. In: Idem: Kämpfende Vernunft. Das Beispiel von Masaryk und Beneš. Prague 1937, p. 39.

46 Horkheimer, Max – Adorno, Theodor W.: Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments. Stanford 2002, p. 17.

in guaranteed progress. For critical theory, more than just a new synthesis of the rational elements of society was needed to fulfill the promises of enlightenment and modernity.