

# FILOSOFIJA, RELIGIJA IR ANTROPOLOGIJA



Aleksandros Vilimaitės kaligrafijos darbas iš ciklo  
„Augalijos pasaulis“, 2021, tušas, popierius

# (Post)Modernizing Contemporary Intellectual Culture

AIVARAS STEPUKONIS

Lithuanian Culture Research Institute

*astepukonis@gmail.com*

The article constitutes the first part of a broader investigation into the intellectual culture of contemporary (primarily Western, but ever more global) societies.

The main focus is on the general tendencies of contemporary culture at large as a condition for the emergence of its intellectual proclivities. Those general tendencies comprise increased geographical mobility, the ensuing relativization of views and values, the rise of mass culture, hedonism, and a preoccupation with gender questions.

**Keywords:** globalization, mobility, contemporary culture, relativism, hedonism, feminism.

## Human Diasporas and Intercultural Hermeneutics

I shall start with the more general tendencies of contemporary culture and society, so that later, after determining the 'spiritual diagnosis of the age,' I can observe the intellectual traits characteristic of today. It goes without saying that only a panoramic overview of events is possible within the framework of this article, more detailed analyses of problems will have to be set aside.

From time immemorial, various nations and states have been engaging in conflict and friendship, peace and war, building economic and political bridges and then tearing them down. Even many centuries ago, for example, between the Tiger and the Euphrates or in the Mediterranean Basin, many Babylonians, Egyptians, Persians, Jews, Greeks, and Romans – regardless of

who they were, deputy emperors, colonial rulers, diplomata, merchants, mercenaries, travelers, adventurers, prisoners of war, exiles, slaves, or helpless helots – were born and raised in one culture, later became foreigners in another culture and were surrounded by people of a foreign language, strange customs, and often different color. Thus, already in ancient times, man<sup>1</sup> faced the existential need to understand a foreign culture. From his study of human history, Robin Cohen<sup>2</sup> derives as many as five types of diaspora, by 'diaspora' meaning a complete or partial separation of a nation from its homeland and dispersal in other nations and lands: military (in the conqueror's territory), labor (in the employer's territory), trade (in the market

1 Depending on the context, the masculine personal pronoun 'man' is used throughout the article, both in the generic sense of 'human being' and the specific sense of 'male.'

2 See Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 1997.

territory), imperial (in colonies), and cultural (in post-colonial autonomies). When I talk about diasporas, I mean not tens and not hundreds, but thousands and millions of people who have left their homeland and found (?) asylum abroad.

Two statistically underpinned examples should suffice: 1) thousands of Armenians were killed at the end of the 19th century and more, about 1.75 million, deported by the Turks to Syria and Palestine between 1915 and 1916, from where most moved to France and the United States. There are currently about 6,613,000 Armenians in the world and only 3,000,000 of them settled in Armenia itself. 2) In the nineteenth century, the abolition of slavery in Africa, Europe, and America was established with the reluctance to abandon plantation farming, and this required new and cheap labor. The African slaves were supplanted by the coolies and pariahs from India. In the period of 1829–1924, the number of those with fixed-term employment contracts with the colonists increased to 1.4 million, all of whom ended up – often without a chance to return – in countries such as Fiji, Guyana, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Kenya, Martinique, Trinidad, and Uganda.

Apparently, every nation, including Lithuania, has had and still has its own diaspora and immigration, the reasons for which can be various – usually political or economic. Historically, such mobility of social groups further diversifies both the gene pools and the cultures of nations.

However, at the end of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first, we can confidently say that the world has never before seen such a large movement

of people from one country to another as it is now. Sociologists and cultural scientists see this epidemically growing mobility of members of modern society as one of the consequences of multi-dimensional globalization: various forms of activity driven by advanced technologies are beginning to manifest themselves on a global scale. What has happened is that the idea of a unitary world, which has caressed the imaginations of individual thinkers for centuries, is finally being materialized into the practice of a unitary world.

According to McGrew<sup>3</sup>, the new global relations have been actualized by six factors: 1) The politicians of the most influential states and the leaders of democratic movements almost unanimously recognized the thesis of the Enlightenment that the human mind and nature are equally embodied in every nation. 2) Multilateral interdependence in financial, economic, technological, and environmental matters has prevailed worldwide. 3) Most people who often see satellite images of the Earth tend to imagine the Earth as a single planet. 4) With the break-up of the Soviet Union, the division of the world into two camps no longer made sense, and at the same time, the Third World lost its strict contours. 5) Goods, capital, knowledge, images, communications, crime, culture, pollutants, drugs, fashion, and attitudes all flow from one region to another without major obstacles. 6) Humanity is on a “rough path to the first global civilization,” that is, a global order intertwined with common values, processes, and structures.

3 See Anthony G. McGrew, “A Global Society”, 1992.

As though in a glimpse of a moment – after all, what are a few generations of mortals in human history? – the global economy, global politics, global law, the global entertainment business, global communication systems, global means of transportation, and the infamous two World Wars have sprouted before our eyes – even if the seeds of these had been maturing for many a century. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the World Bank, the International Finance Corporation, the International Development Association, the International Monetary Fund, transnational companies IBM, AT&T, General Motors or Sony, the United Nations (UN), the International Charter of Human Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and all other international instruments on civil, political, economic, social, and cultural human rights, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), etc. – these represent global organizational networks whose ‘spheres of service’ encompass the whole of the Earth.

Cohen talks about another recent phenomenon – a global metropolis, a kind of “cosmopolis.” Global hubs such as New York, London, or Tokyo become progressively more integrated into other global cities, usually at the expense of their relationship to their hinterland. As transactions and interactions between global cities intensify they lose their major national characteristics and their significance resides more in their global than in their national roles.<sup>4</sup>

Cultural diversity, multi-ethnicism,

multilingualism prevail here, entertainment business, the arts, sports, the press, journalism, and other mass media thrive here. However, the most significant feature of a global metropolis, symbolizing the fundamental trend of our age, is the constant increase in the flow of arrivals and departures. At Heathrow, London’s largest airport, planes land and take off every 2–3 minutes. In 1994, as many as 52 million passengers visited this port and, most importantly, about two-thirds of them landed here just to board another plane! The conclusion appears to be obvious: we travel frequently and extensively, we experience a lot when we travel, and we change quickly as a result of our experiences.

### The Dialectics of Tastes and Opinions

Thus, the modern man has been overwhelmed by the dizziness of global “tourism.” As the kaleidoscope of images, sounds, scents, and tastes was gathering momentum, the ordinary traveler has nothing left but to soak in the variegated dialectic of tastes and opinions. Then happens what has to happen: it must be acknowledged, along with Peter Berger, that the “immensely broadened possibility of travel, in person and through the imagination, implies at least potentially the awareness that one’s own culture, including its basic values, is relative in space and time.”<sup>5</sup> It is true that a person who travels tens of thousands of kilometers every year may still be interested and surprised by a

4 Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, p. 167.

5 Peter L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, p. 63.

thing or two, but shocked no more. Such a feeling requires a claim to objective norms. But instead, what's in the air is perplexity that later escalates into indifference: each to his own! "In modern society," Berger continues, "identity itself is uncertain and in flux. One does not really know what is expected of one as a ruler, as a parent, as a cultivated person, or as one who is sexually normal."<sup>6</sup> What can 'normal' mean when what is normal for me is abnormal for another, and vice versa?! Today's man feels helpless against the dialectic of tastes and opinions. *De gustibus non disputandum* – has become a universal axiom. And the society that believes in this axiom declares itself "liberal" because its members have once and for all realized that "[v]alue judgments are subjective" and that "liberal society grants to everybody the right to express his sentiments freely."<sup>7</sup>

Another feature of modern society – what José Ortega y Gasset calls "hyperdemocracy," but what may also be (perhaps more precisely) called "ochlocracy" – is illustrated by the onslaught of mass culture against elite culture. The weight categories are really unequal (after all, 'mass' is the majority, and 'elite' is the pinch), so there is no doubt in advance who will win. Radio, television, and the press act like doping to satisfy the insatiable appetite for mediocrity. There is no limit to Gasset's tact: he still "doubt[s] whether there have been other periods of history in which the multitude has come to govern more directly than in

our own."<sup>8</sup> We should talk about power here apparently in the broadest sense of the word. The ideals, achievable for a select few, are melting at an astronomical speed. The authorities, whose essential premise is the attribution of spiritual superiority to another, are collapsing. In the crowd, everyone is a king, a life teacher, a sage, a prophet, a therapist, a guide, even a lover (people have never been so strongly influenced by the spells of Narcissus as they are today – I'm talking about an entire masturbation culture!). The end result is – yet another accurate observation by Gasset – that "[t]here are no longer protagonists; there is only the chorus."<sup>9</sup> The roots of this candid observation may actually run a little deeper. "No shepherd, and one herd!"<sup>10</sup> Where do these words come from, if not from Nietzsche's loud trumpet, if not from the lip-preaching of Zarathustra, who descended to proclaim to the people the good news of the superman?

The new social stratum brings with it new needs and a new culture based on the production and consumption of things, while spiritual values lose their focus and are pushed to the outskirts. This tendency was thoroughly explored by Georg Simmel in his *Philosophy of Money*<sup>11</sup>. The essence of the question raised by Simmel, according to Lawrence Scaff, was the "perceived contradiction between a simultaneous 'increase' in material or objective culture and 'decrease' in individual or subjective culture: whereas in the modern age the former

6 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

7 Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, p. 173.

8 José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*, p. 18.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, p. 12.

11 See Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, 1978.

becomes more and more refined, complex, sophisticated, expansive, comprehensive, and domineering, the latter in relation to it becomes cruder, simpler, more trivial, limiting, fragmentary, and anarchic.”<sup>12</sup>

Since the main purpose of life for most people has been to satisfy their bodily needs by material means, hedonism flourishes as never before in our age. God's laws turned out to not be as firm as our ancestors thought. We cannot help but admit that after traveling the world and indulging in sight, talking about “one God” is no longer decent. Not only are table manners diverse, but also the gods, demons, and laws. Consequently, trying to look for an objective basis for man's behavior – be it the image and likeness of God, the natural law, or simply the advice of ‘adults’ – is a completely futile pursuit. Everyone has to start from scratch and create – create themselves, summon from non-existence – that fate-trading witch. It is this carousel of life alternatives that makes the average person think that every goal and choice – whether his own or someone else's – is equally subjective and arbitrary, and that the wisest thing in life to do is to pursue what is most easily attainable – earthly pleasures. As a result, the “individual's attempt to ‘justify’ life-activity is either surrendered completely or (in what amounts to the same thing) reduced to the compulsions of ‘mundane passion’ – the pursuit of pleasure, entertainment, self-gratification, or (in a word) money.”<sup>13</sup> After all, one who delves

too deeply into life will sooner or later find himself in a state of weightlessness; he will feel as if he is in a hall of mirrors, whose deceptive images, their abundance and mockery, cause pain and lead to madness. According to H. W. Janson, the “only escape” from a situation in which “nothing has intrinsic worth is inaction or hedonism.” Therefore, (post)modern people are “fated to become pleasure-seeking narcissists without any strong identity, purpose, or attachments.”<sup>14</sup>

### The Great Awakening of Woman

Yes, it is – the great awakening of woman! “This,” Karla Gruodis is convinced, “is the great question of our epoch, the axis of the transition to a new chapter in human history.”<sup>15</sup> This statement, even if a tad exaggerated, embodies a theoretical problem, but it also expresses a certain mood that is characteristic of feminism, both as a sociopolitical movement and as a philosophy.

Not so long ago, about a century ago, the worlds of woman and man were separated by a seemingly insurmountable chasm. In many European countries and the United States, the ‘weak’ (!) or ‘gentle’ (!) sex did not have the right to vote, could not own property or pursue higher education, was financially and morally dependent on her parents and, when married, on her husband, let alone things like a ban on wearing more comfortable clothes. In a word, woman did not belong to herself, she belonged to man. She understood

12 Lawrence A. Scaff. *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber*, p. 193.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

14 Horst Waldemar Janson, *History of Art*, p. 887.

15 Karla Gruodis, „Įvadas“, p. 12.

herself as man understood her, and was defined as the opposite of man, relating to him in the role of the Other<sup>16</sup>. Simone de Beauvoir describes the situation of her female contemporaries rather dramatically, somewhat eager to lay the blame, but still true to reality: “[W]oman has always been, if not man’s slave, at least his vassal; the two sexes have never divided the world up equally; and still today [1949 – A.S.], even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped.”<sup>17</sup>

Eventually, however, like constant dropping wears a stone away, woman broke through. In addition to the civil rights she won in the 20th century, four other significant changes took place in her life. First, new jobs were being created at the beginning of the last century, and it is women who were successfully filling them. They were employed as typists, telephone operators, saleswomen, and teachers. There was income that gave women new economic power, allowing wives to be independent of their husbands and daughters to be independent of their parents and their arranged marriages, which girls could not always resist because they were dependent. Second, measures to prevent pregnancy were being invented and were increasingly used. A woman could embrace sexual life, perhaps for the first time, dissociate sexual pleasure from the intention to conceive, and could more successfully decide when to start a family and of what size. These changes, even if slow and gradual, liberated woman from the hard confinement of the

household related to childbirth, parenting, and housekeeping, the confinement that had made woman’s life a “private sphere” and separated her from man’s world, called the “public sphere” (i.e., paid employment, politics, military affairs)<sup>18</sup>. Thirdly, even if a woman chose to be a housewife and raise children, housekeeping technologies such as piped water supply, central heating, electricity, canned food, detergents, washing machines, gas stoves, and vacuum cleaners were invented to save her endless time, which she could turn into meaningful leisure for herself, her thoughts, intentions, and ideas<sup>19</sup>.

Hence, easing the burdens of life promoted women’s awareness, and the political movement of liberation was eventually complemented by an independent philosophical current focusing on issues of femininity – equal rights with men, women’s relationships (women’s culture), patriarchy (male dominance), and sex politics (man’s control of woman’s sexual life and reproductive capacity). In the second half of the 20th century, feminism triumphantly found its way into almost all the humanities: philosophy, history, literary theory, anthropology, sociology, and cultural theory.

Heidi Armbruster distinguishes three stages in the development of feminist theory: 1) women’s studies inspired and spearheaded by Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex* dubbed the “Bible of Feminism”; 2) a critique of the “universal

16 See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 10 ff.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

18 See Linda Kealey. „Historical Division of Public/Private“, p. 749.

19 See John Morris Roberts, *History of the World*, pp. 695–696.

woman,” which aims to cleanse the women’s movement from the biased influence of the white middle-class European and North American women by adding feminists of color to the ranks and showing that femininity can take on many meanings depending on the society and culture women belong to; 3) the recognition of the multifaceted meaning of ‘gender’: on the one hand, the question itself is raised in a different manner, not “why are all women oppressed?” but “how is a female embodied subject constituted?”<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, as feminism reaches a higher theoretical level and gets rid of overly fierce ideology and militancy, Natalie Zemon Davis<sup>21</sup> and others summon their colleagues to conduct historical research not only on women but also on both sexes. Thus, feminism is gradually evolving into a general anthropology of gender. “At the end of the 20th century,” Karla Gruodis remarks, “it can be said that woman has completely entered the world of men. Perhaps in the next century, we will see man begin to enter the world of women.”<sup>22</sup> The opposition of man and woman, the divide between the two worlds, is still felt in these words. Once, however, it is admitted that the social and cultural

roles of women and men are inherently fluid and flexible, it becomes increasingly difficult to speak reasonably about what is essentially ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ in them. The worlds of women and men appear as though they are shelters or hiding places where personal problems are solved under the guise of one’s own or others’ gender identity.

These are then the general features of modern society and culture: the increasing frequency of travel around the diverse world and the dialectic experience of conflicting tastes and opinions while traveling; the nearly universal conclusion that the truths and values other people hold and cherish are only relative; the dominance of mass (rather than elite) culture; and with it, the spread of material (rather than spiritual) culture; the pursuit of bodily pleasures, i.e. an obvious proclivity toward hedonism; and the great awakening of woman with fundamental changes in the conception of gender. The list of ‘symptoms,’ which I have presented as salient and defining, cannot be complete because contemporary society and culture are still in the making. Too many of their (symptoms’) living manifestations and forms have not become permanent. Too many of their traits and features are so volatile and evasive as to make it impossible to say firmly whether we face a lasting phenomenon or just a transition to something more enduring and stable.

20 Heidi Armbruster, “Feminist Theories and Anthropology”, p. 15.

21 See, for example, Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women’s History” in *Transition: The European Case*, 1976.

22 Karla Gruodis, „Ivadas“, p. 31.

## Literature

Armbruster, Heidi.  
“Feminist Theories and Anthropology,” Polylog,  
2000, vol. 2, p. 1–37.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde, Sheila Malovany-Chevallier.  
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

Berger, Peter L.,  
*Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. London: Penguin Books, 1991.

Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas*, London: UCL Press Limited, 1997.



- Davis, Natalie Zemon. "Women's History" in Transition: The European Case," *Feminist Studies*, 1976, vol. 3, no. 3/4, pp. 83–103.
- Gasset, José Ortega y. *The Revolt of the Masses*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1932.
- Gruodis, Karla. „Įvadas“, iš anglų kalbos vertė Zita Čepaitė / Karla Gruodis (sud.), *Feminizmo ekskursai*. Vilnius: Pradai, 1995, p. 7–43.
- Janson, Horst Walde-mar. *History of Art*, revised and expanded by Anthony F. Janson, 5th edition. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995.
- Kealey, Linda. „Historical Division of Public/Private“ / Daniel Robert Woolf (ed.), *A Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*, vol. II, New York, London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998, p. 749–750.
- McGrew, Anthony G., "A Global Society" / Stuart Hall, David Held, Anthony G. McGrew (eds.), *Modernity and Its Futures*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992, pp. 61–102.
- Mises, Ludwig von. *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 3rd edition, Chicago: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1966.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translated by Thomas Common. New York: Random House, Inc., 1917.
- Roberts, John Morris. *History of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Scaff, Lawrence A. *Fleeing the Iron Cage: Culture, Politics, and Modernity in the Thought of Max Weber*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1989.
- Simmel, Georg. *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), translated by Tom Bottomore, David Frisby. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978.

## (Post)modernizuojant dabartinę intelektualinę kultūrą

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnis sudaro pirmąją, įvadinę platesnio tyrimo, skirto dabartinių (pirmiau Vakarų, bet paskiau ir globalių) visuomenių intelektualinei kultūrai, dalį. Pagrindinis dėmesys nukreiptas į bendrąsias dabartinės kultūros tendencijas, ilgainiui nustatančias

šios kultūros intelektualinės raidos kryptis ir polinkius. Minėtos tendencijos apima didėjančią geografinį žmonių judrumą, jo nulemtą pažiūrų ir vertybių reliatyvėjimą, masinės kultūros, hedonizmo įsigalėjimą ir lyčių problematikos sklaidą.

**Esminiai žodžiai:** globalėjimas, judrumas, dabartinė kultūra, reliatyvizmas, hedonizmas, feminizmas.