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Moral hypertrophy and degeneration of institutions - Arnold Gehlen's warning against the consequences of Hobbesian nature

(Hipertrofia moralności i degeneracja instytucji – przestroga Arnolda Gehlena przed konsekwencjami hobbesowskiej natury)

Abstract

Arnold Gehlen is the 20th century thinker and philosopher of philosophical and political anthropology. He is best known for his theory of institutions that connects the problems of contemporary man with a reflection on the “initial” state of human being. Gehlen often referred in his research to the works of classics of modern philosophy. His views on human nature are definitely bringing him close to the 17th century English thinker - Thomas Hobbes. What strikes within the comparison of these two authors is Gehlen's transfer of Hobbes's assumptions to modern science. The pessimistic vision of modern human relations is grounded on the basis of a careful description of both man as an individual being and the history that shaped him. Certainly Gehlen's research is an interesting way to modern reinterpretation of Hobbes's views on the consequences of human nature.

Keywords: Gehlen; Hobbes; Leviathan, political anthropology; philosophical anthropology; theory of institutions; moral hypertrophy; state order; discipline

1. The starting point of German anthropology

Hobbes's famous proverb *homo homini lupus est* (Man is wolf to man) is considered an expression of anthropological pessimism, which until the present time is the basis for the interpretation of the English philosopher's thought. Hobbes's perspicacity in transferring the biological basis of human existence to the consequences of life at the state level is constantly being rediscovered with new analyses in the spirit of the present. In the face of new social unrest, recalling the classics seems necessary. Returning to the sources allows us to re-examine human nature, which according to the author of Leviathan makes us all equal and thus constitutes us as our greatest threat. Arnold Gehlen, representative of 20th century political anthropology, that grew up on the basis of German philosophy, takes

Hobbes's work as a basis for his research. By observing contemporary trends in human behaviour, he recalls Hobbesian theses again and tries to warn us against the ignorance of the classic's theory. By showing the real mechanisms of power derived from the observations on human nature, Gehlen presents the concept of hypertrophy of morality. It speaks of the outbreak of false morality, which leads to the collapse of the necessary forms of control - institutions. The natural instability and uncertainty of human nature simultaneously means the willingness to degenerate, which always has tragic consequences. Therefore Gehlen wants to defend the Hobbesian's Leviathan from his creators.

When analysing Gehlen's approach to the author of *De homine*, it is worth to pay attention to the broader context of his interpretation. As Helmuth Schelsky, a German sociologist and Gehlen's student wrote, the most important elements of Hobbes' interpretation are based on two main factors (Heidegren 1999, p. 27). On the one hand, German thought was primarily concerned with the anthropological basis of Hobbes's reflections. On the other hand, Hobbes created the theory addressed to the citizen in order to evoke a specific response. The anthropological foundations of English philosopher's thought, with a particular emphasis on the role of language, ability to act and possibility of planning, are also clearly recognized in Gehlen's theory. Directing the content straightway to the citizens is interesting too. The effect, which according to Schelsky Hobbes wanted to achieve, is obedience to power, which for Gehlen becomes the basic postulate in his theory of institution (Heidegren 1999, p. 28).

When analysing the author of *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, very often one can encounter a reference to the classical thought. Despite Gehlen's distance to the very concept of the state of nature, he clearly understood that the ideas formulated at that time were a timeless description of the individual which he had sought in his work. The conviction that even a man-made order requires superhuman control marks the axis that connects Hobbes's conservatism with his contemporary interpretation by the 20th century anthropologist (Rehberg 1994, p. 74). Not without reason Gehlen states that it is time for an anti-Rousseau's position in science. Like Hobbes, he wants to restore the philosophy of pessimism and bring back the seriousness of life that can save humanity from ultimate degeneration (Rehberg 1995, p. 226). Gehlen's project is not merely a recapitulation of *Leviathan's* author main theses, but a plan to inform about the importance and consequences of them. The Hobbesian man is also a modern man. There are new threats, but as Gehlen reminds, demons that torment people are usually part of them.

2. What is human nature?

“Nature hath made men so equal in the faculties of body and mind as that, though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he.” (Hobbes 1651, p. 76) writes Hobbes. Speaking of differences, the thinker has in mind not only the physical aspects of human being, but above all the level of intelligence. He rejects the contrast between appearance, as too insignificant to be the basis for judging of the differences between individuals. In addition, he points out that the common belief in one’s own wisdom and the frequent unwillingness to recognize the intellectual superiority of others means that, in the general sense, there is no greater difference in this field within human kind. For that reason, when describing the natural state of mankind - their natural properties - Hobbes does not distinguish any additional categories that could divide the human race. This approach is clearly noticeable in Gehlen’s thought. The 20th century anthropologist when describing man as a defective individual, defines his scientific project as elementary anthropology (Gehlen 1988, p. 8). Researcher’s aim is to describe such a basis of human existence, which on the one hand would not be possible to further reduce, and on the other hand could bring a special traits to human beings. Equality between individuals at the congenital level is therefore essential in order to reach the characteristics of the general being and the drives that guide it. Of course, in the work of both thinkers, the description of human nature is an analysis not yet embedded in the political and cultural social reality. Hence, the Hobbesian state of nature and Gehlen’s anthropogenic project, can fully rely on this assumption.

a) Equality

Hobbes’s equality automatically generates negative consequences. Similar aptitudes mean similar hopes for obtaining certain goods (Hobbes 1651, p. 76). This obviously causes mutual enmity, rivalry and distrust. For Gehlen, natural equality is essentially, compared to animals, “inferior” starting position in life. He describes man as a being marked by lack of something (*Mängelwesen*). This concept is derived from the biological comparison of humans to animals. At first glance one can see how human being is unadjusted to life in an unchanged environment. While animals have fangs, claws, thick fur or wings depending on their species, humans are not only deprived of those physical properties, but additionally their puberty is unusually long compared to the animal world. In addition, as

most animals have their place of “occurrence” within a given climate or continent, man is „homeless” until he interferes in the environment. Of course anthropological category of Mängelwesen has been known in philosophical literature for centuries, and the authorship of the term is attributed to Johann Gottfried Herder (Herder 1988). Gehlen, however, mentions mainly Nietzsche’s definition of man as an unstable and not determined animal (Gehlen 1988, p. 4). It shows the poorness of human physiology and the indefinite nature of its disposition, as opposed to the clear nature of the animal. This lack of a place in the world of nature becomes one of the reasons why life beyond the institutions is dangerous. Hobbes states that equality which caused lack of confidence between people leads to war. State of nature is a state of lack of control. The scarcity of fear-inducing power leads to a well-known Hobbesian concept of the state of war one with each other (Hobbes 1651, p. 78). For Gehlen, the main reason that makes life without institutional and social ties impossible is the lack of natural animal instincts. Referring to Schiller, Herder and Kant the author of *Urmensch und Spätkultur* cites philosophical views on the poverty of human instinctive behaviour. On the one hand, by Kant it is seen as a superiority, because man as the only one has the power to break the bond of coercion, to which all the other creatures of nature are dependent (Gehlen 1988, p. 25). On the other hand, Schiller rises the statement that the lack of a set path of acting in life makes a person left alone by nature. Gehlen notes that the lack of a natural filter does not allow people to cope with the so-called. flood of stimuli (*Reizüberflutung*). The unchanged environment becomes dangerous to man. The goal is therefore the safety that both Gehlen and Hobbes are pointing as the most important motivation for action (Schmitt 2008, p. 41). What matters is, that it is so significant that people, in the vision of the authors, should agree to give up much to achieve peace and almost no price is too high.

b) Action and language

While natural human characteristics according to Hobbes, or deficiencies for Gehlen expose people to dangers, they are also motivators to take specific actions. In Hobbes’s theses, the goal is to break away from the unnatural state of nature, where human qualities such as rivalry, mistrust, or lust of fame governs the lives of individuals in an uncontrolled manner (Hobbes 1651, p. 77). This is also the case in Gehlen’s research, as he states that a man who would not take any actions is condemned to the madness of uncontrolled drives, living in a constant sense of danger and fear. Therefore, through various means, man is actually forced to act. Most of the negative aspects of human exis-

tence, which the German anthropologist accepts following Hobbes, are both a cause and a constraint to change man's situation. Category of acting (*Handlung*) is a central point for Gehlen's theory. It is a direct connection of the inner life of man with the external situation of the surrounding nature (Deege 1996, p. 29-30). The ability to act in a human perspective is not just a physical act induced by a stimulus, as in the case of animals. It is a combination of action taken with special requirements, willingness, certain feedback and physical activity (Gehlen 2004a, p. 6). This is Gehlen's response to the philosophical dispute over the spiritual and physical union of human nature. It introduces a sociological approach in place of psychophysical dualism, which allows Gehlen to consolidate his approach as a comprehensive theory of the human being.

By acting man is supposed to separate from a hostile environment. It can be manifested in various ways. One of the most famous and at the same still unexplained phenomena by which man escapes from his pernicious nature is language. Hobbes has noted that the most noble and useful of all inventions was the invention of speech (Hobbes 1651, p. 19). For him, it allows not only to move and communicate in the world, but also introduces so-called universal concepts that allow human to break out from anchoring in the present. Provided by the language communication is also necessary for concluding a social contract between members of a given community.

Gehlen also sees a similar role in language. First and foremost, he is fascinated by the question of "detaching" a person from experiencing the present. For the anthropologist language exists not only within a man, but also outside of him (Gehlen 1988, p. 125). Thanks to this, one can create language constructs and pass them on, allowing us to react to the past and gain experience. Man is a Promethean being for Gehlen, which means that he is capable of designing and anticipating. He is not stuck in the given reality but uses its natural ability to move forward. This is the basis for differentiating humans from animals. Although animals can plan, they never take actions not related to their current situation. Man, thanks to the language, is gaining relief from the pressure of "here and now" (Paczkowska-Łagowska 1997, p. 172). This theses was strongly inspired by Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, who also in language saw the potential for man to break out of the existing situation.

Gehlen bases the natural situation of man on a certain kind of duality. On the one hand, we are dealing with a backward step comparing to the animal world. Our physicality is severely limited, impulses useless in nature, and natural tendencies only work to our det-

riment. On the other hand, however, we see that all of it motivates man to take action and break away from hostile reality. Both philosophers note that, despite all these extraordinary qualities, the man in the starting state constantly faces a number of dangers. Its enemy can become both his compatriots, who are equal with him, and the outside world itself, which does not help with leading one's life. Actions, even of all individuals, do not produce results when they are directed at one's own individuality. Natural selfishness makes both the Hobbesian and Gehlen's man, unable to climb the heights of altruism. Therefore, the necessity of external force, the discipline that could bypass the level of individual selfishness, is essential. Security and survival are the stakes a man must fight for, renouncing his natural freedom.

3. Theory of institutions and a Leviathan

Author of *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*, when constructing the basis for his most famous theory of institutions, has always pointed the necessity of the existence of discipline in the life of man, imparted from the outside. By observing natural human tendencies, Gehlen concludes that people are unable to maintain peace by being single-handed. Discipline determines the path of certain action, subjected to a broader sense of need, which is necessary for survival. The multitude of stimuli and sensations reaching the human senses does not allow us to focus on specific goals. Instead, man stands before the choice of many paths of life, each of which appears to him as the last resort. It becomes necessary to relieve the need to make every decision about the smallest aspects of life (Gehlen 2001, p. 113). The assurance of existence can be guaranteed only when the path of life is previously determined. For Gehlen, the institutions are, to some extent, responsible for replacing animal instincts that govern the life of nature. If we look at the world today, we can easily see that every culture chooses certain variants from available multiplicity. On this principle, Gehlen bases his theory on institutions, calling them the cultural patterns of behaviour (Gehlen 2001, p. 113). Life within institutional system is a way of living where changes and evolutions are possible, but a stable foundation is maintained. The basis of the institution activity is a rational, action-oriented operation that can evolve and adapt its goals to a given situation (Gehlen 2004a, p. 40). Control and limitation in the form of discipline are the price people have to pay for stabilization. But what they gain is first of all safety and the guarantee of survival. In addition, they can develop their own personal qualities and focus on grave activities. Anthropologist believes that in the society of the most sensible people, the presence of strong and stable institutions would

always be desirable. Traditions, especially those built on history and experience, are for him the source of continuation of society. However, he also realizes that people embraced by their passions, reluctantly accept the oppression of discipline. That is why he refers to Hobbes, recognizing that it is the power of Leviathan that will allow people to discipline themselves. The English thinker himself defines discipline as a necessary condition to keep all individuals in fear and to direct their actions to the common good (Hobbes 1651, p. 105). The durability of such a power, which is supposed to guide a lives of subordinates, not only in times of danger, is also important.

Hobbes presents the theme of discipline by using the metaphor of the sword, which defines a state ruled with appropriate amount of strength and fear. Countries without “sword”, although they have a sense of existence, are not, in the end, effective. The contract without a certain coercion may be able to force the obedience of a just man, but falls under the pressure of the multitude of individuals ruled by their natural tendencies. The purpose of the rules of the sword is not the transformation of the unjust people into the worthy ones. Its primary task is the coercion to fulfil certain obligations. For Hobbes only those commitments that are armed with the constraints of the creators have the power to provide security to the parties (Hood 1964, p. 130). Without this, people will act against each other. In this premise also Gehlen seeks the legitimacy for the existence of strong institutions. He does not see the lasting order which supposed to be built on the act of human reason (Rehberg 1994, p. 80). Only institutions can sculpt the individuals so that they can reach the next level on the ladder of humanity. How important are the elements for human existence one can clearly see when this institutional stability is for some reason disturbed. All revolutions, state breakdowns, violent attacks against a given order have the direct effect of losing the sense of confidence that was attained during institutional life (Gehlen 2001, p. 116). Destruction of the social foundation always results in the emotions of fear, which then creates aggression or social withdrawal. When the institutional order is demolished, the conditions for safe living are undermined. Gehlen believes that in the chaos of institutional decay there is no place for discipline. This means denial of all those actions that lead a man out of a hostile environment. Therefore he defends the idea of Hobbesian Leviathan and states that acting against it means denying of foundations of society. The purpose of the institution is clear - it is the relief needed to survive. The defence of the institution is an expression of a deep-seated conservative thought that does not refuse to evolve, but only within a predefined framework. For Gehlen, the violent devastation of many years

of tradition pushes man into the depths of his poor nature. This may be due to external factors such as war invasions, but Gehlen introduces us to the theory of the institution to discover another threat to us. Nowadays, also modern times slowly undermine the foundations of thinking in terms of discipline and obedience. It is precisely the sign of the present for the 20th century researcher to be a warning signal of the chaos of the non-institutional world. The fall of institutions means living in chaos, but what if the very circumstances of modern times just leave the discipline away, asks Gehlen. His response is a criticism of a modern tendencies which support disorganization under the cover of falsely interpreted freedom.

4. Contemporary overgrowth of subjectivity

The stability of human nature depends above all on the position and strength that institutions occupy within the state. Power and obedience are the conditions necessary to ensure the state's primary objective: safety. For Hobbes, the idea of obeying the law without coercion contradicts with the innate human feelings (Hobbes 1651, p. 147). Therefore, force becomes a guarantor to fulfil the obligation of protecting the subjects. Thinker claims that criticism of force is always unfounded in the face of the pursued objectives. His praise to power meets with Gehlen's approval. German anthropologist openly criticizes contemporary approaches, according to which the power and respect of the state would become unnecessary. For him the strength of the citizens lies in the strength of its state. If it is not to be found in institutions, it cannot be discovered in everyday life either. What is more, Gehlen presents a theory according to which the character of modern times is not conducive to institutional order. The historical development of technology, transformation in decision-making at the political level and the negation of hierarchical order have resulted in overload of relief. Too sophisticated culture imposes intellectual overload combined with physical relief from work, which leads to questioning the traditional order. The place that used to been filled up with work is occupied with leisure. Coupled with the trends undermining institutional power, individuals lose support in a stable cultural system and at the same time gain an excess of time they did not previously possessed. Civilization progress eliminates old norms. For Gehlen, at this moment, the echo of Hobbes's human nature arises. Unrestrained selfishness turns into a subjectivist look at the world. The man left alone has no choice but to turn to his interior. His inner convictions suddenly rise to the rank of universal importance. When the impartiality of the institution ceases to matter, man's own convictions are beginning to speak out. What matters is that they are directed

not only to the specific person but also to other members of the community. Nature erupts in the absence of external firmness.

Contemporary trends in combination with Hobbesian nature affect not only single units but also the general state condition. The so-called *hypertrophy of morality*, that is excess of it in everyday life, leads to the fall of the state-citizen system. Ethos of obedience and discipline is replaced by a humanitarian-eudemonistic one. The attitudes that we support in the family life and in the private sector are beginning to be transferred to the state level. This outburst of subjectivism and the rise of the importance of one's own beliefs puts people in a position of claim against Leviathan. Gehlen describes him as a milch cow, which only goal is to fulfil the demands of the loud crowd (Gehlen 2004b, p. 107). The issues of service and devotion are completely removed from the media discourse, and even take on a humorous expression. "When the state falls people lose their value - this state can also be called freedom." (Gehlen 2004b, p. 107) concludes the 20th century thinker with sadness. New subjectivism confuses freedom with an unlimited liberty, which is fatal in effect. This leads to a change in perspective on the political decision making process. Contemporary expansion imposes a magnifying glass of morality, which does not fit in with the political process. For Gehlen state ethics is not a private ethics and should never be mistaken for such. Private ethics does not lead to compromises, because it is based on emotions and moralizing attitudes, where problems are subject to eternal discussion, but that does not lead to a solution. In the absence of institutions, people cannot communicate. The lack of rationality of citizens resembles the situation described by the Spanish essayist José Ortega y Gasset, who criticized the admission of masses to the political decision process. Gehlen's modern man is undefined as he loses his personality in the illusion of freedom. Times of hypertrophy of morality is a period of devouring tradition, while not giving anything in return. To make decisions for the future, we need stable basis and impartial rules. True creativity is only possible in the state of certainty, which modernity does not provide. When the state loses its strength, also a man does so, and so for Gehlen our freedom is only a delusion.

It was the image of the modern world that made Gehlen find so much in the mind of an English philosopher from the 17th century. Anthropological pessimism is not only a result of a top-down assumption about human nature. It is based on the observation of history, which indicates how sensitive a human individual is in the face of changes in his environment. Gehlen warns against ignoring Hobbes's recognitions. He sees in them

knowledge and a good basis for judging about state relations. Theory of institutions is also a theory of a man who can only fulfil himself in a certain circumstances. Contemporary mingling of terms confuses freedom with the enslavement - returning of man to the pre-institutional state of nature. Gehlen understands the wolf nature of man and sees weaknesses that do not allow all to rise without help beyond ones individuality. He knows that people can use their own flaws to ensure their safety. Anthropologist's vision of the present reveals an ignorance of one's own weaknesses. Both Hobbes and Gehlen do not want us to forget who we are. Remembering natural deficiencies is motivation to create a system that will protect us from ourselves. Even if we are egoistic and selfish, it is because we can change, that make us human beings.

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