

COMPLEX SOCIETY

In the Middle of a Middle World

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“It is only with the fall of dusk that the owl of Minerva spreads its wings.”

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), German philosopher
[in *The Philosophy of Right*. Transl. by S.W. Dyde. London,
George Bell and Sons, 1896, p. xxx.]

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Prologue

In *Nostalgia*, one of Andrei Tarkovsky's most poetic and introspective films (1983, Mosfilm and Gaumont), and the first of his works accomplished after emigration, the main character, Russian emigrant writer Andrei Gorchakov, travels to the Tuscan countryside to study the works of an eighteenth-century Russian painter. There he befriends Domenico, a local eccentric who is persistently trying, but repeatedly failing to cross a mineral pool in his village holding a lit candle, in his efforts to save the world. One day Gorchakov visits Domenico at his home, where he notices the paradoxical equation '1+1=1', inscribed on the wall of the kitchen. In the next sequence, Domenico takes a bottle of olive oil, pours two drops into his palm, and explains: one drop plus one drop makes a bigger drop, not two. Domenico alleges that Andrei and he are essentially the same. Both are enlightened searchers for a deeper truth. Both are excluded and ignored as irrational by a blinded majority of compatriots, and only the excluded can really understand one another.

The paradoxical summation rule may be gratifying for Andrei, but is in fact very exclusive. Drops can merge into a single body only because they are identical parts of the same essence. Holistic reasoning about radical differences, which is characteristic for contemporary complex societies is impossible with such an exclusive summation principle. People put things together in very different ways since they have different concepts of connectedness in mind. They have different ideas about how things are connected in the real world, what is the most significant and valuable, and what must be ignored as irrelevant or irrational. If something is complex, it can be adequately presented only from radically different viewpoints that do not share a common denominator so they cannot be directly compared and synthesised. Complex conditions raise genuine obstacles to aspirations of comprehending things in a holistic manner.

The search for truth from incommensurable standpoints threatens either with confrontation between principal claims or with a vagueness of relativism in multiplicity. The scholars of Sufism in ancient Afghanistan dealt with these sorts of problems at approximately the same time that the Pythagoreans in ancient Greece discovered their triangular theorem.

The old parable of the blind men and an elephant tells about the quarrelsome subjects of a king who could not reach an agreement about an important matter for their kingdom. Upset with the inability of his subjects, the king ordered six blind men who had never seen an elephant to approach the throne and describe the strange thing that he had placed before them,

only by touching it. The first man investigated the trunk and described the elephant as a snake, the second touched the giant ears and 'saw' the strange thing as a fan, the third tapped a leg and told that it was a tree, others described the tusk as a spear, the side of the elephant as a wall and the tail as a rope. Each described the animal in a way that could not be recognised by the others because each perceived a partial truth, even though objectively confirmed. The moral of the parable, recapitulated by the wise king was that people often portray their narrow views as a whole truth while ignoring the partiality of their insight. This invokes insurmountable contradictions, which in matters of common concern, incapacitates people as ignorant and unable to think holistically about a kingdom's matters.

The wise king is, of course, a deceitful king who submerged subjects in false problems to find a solution that fits him most. He manipulates subjects by challenging cognitively constrained people with an assignment that can not be resolved. Their inability is not related to blindness, since the understanding of essentially uncertain world, is not possible without bias and ignorance. The king deludes his subjects by forcing a commensurable solution to an incommensurable problem with a strategy that is coercing one concept of the whole against others as if the kingdom's problems were not complex, consisting of contradictory wholes, but binary and therefore simplified.

A holistic understanding of complex social matters requires more subtle approaches compared to exclusion of difference or antagonism between principal opposites. We propose an evaluative approach from the middle ground between the rational and irrational, between order and chaos, facts and values.

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Bojan Radej, Mojca Golobič, Ljubljana, October 2020

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