

**Jan Keller: Až na dno blahobytu.
K společenským kořenům ekologické krize
[To the Bottom of Affluence. The Social
Origins of the Environmental Crisis]**

Brno, Ekocentrum 1993, 127 p.

Jan Keller's *Až na dno blahobytu* presents the environmental movement's desire to move beyond the simple protection of the environment and to become a prominent spokesperson on the subject. This book could well play an initiatory role similar to that of N. Gruh's *Ein Planet wird geplündert*, Frankfurt 1975, or E. Goldsmith's series of articles, *Blueprint for Survival* (Ecologist 1972). It is distinctly different from those publications on environmental themes which address either an expert or a wider audience (Hadač, Moldan, Vavroušek, etc.).

Keller's second noteworthy collection of articles and essays, which describe the critical state of the late modern world is divided into six main parts: *The Market, Economic Growth and Nature, Needs, Consumption and Nature, Real Communism as a Natural Disaster and the Crisis of the State of Affluence, An Obstructed Solution: The Hypnotised Society, An Appeal to Survival: Decentralisation*, an introduction entitled *The Products of Affluence and a Conclusion*.

The author knows his subject well. He also knows how to engage it effectively, with both irony and sarcasm. He lets us enter into dialogue on the future without letting us lose the sense of being mid-crisis. He does not merely list the problems, but rather tries to diagnose them. He links economic growth with the mechanisms of the market economy, passive democracy and consumerism within conditions of excessive centralisation („centralisation stands in the way of the possibility of survival“, p. 119).

The degree of universality in which Keller is so much at home and the radical conclusions he draws have their own inspirational strength and intellectual attraction, despite the misgivings aroused by their consequences and by certain oversimplifications. The radical aspect comes from the author's having moved beyond the theoretical paradigms of the industrial society which are directed towards the production

of goods (cf. A. Gorz, *Wege ins Paradies*, Berlin 1985). Keller's diagnosis has as its source a distinctively heterogeneous group of authors and thinkers, including R. Douthwaite, R. Collins, M. Crozier, R. Boudon, M. Weber, M. Ostrogorski, R. Aron, H. Marcuse, D. Riesman, E. Fromm, N. Elias, R. K. Merton and A. Durning. It is difficult to dispute the original fundamental „green alloy“ (O. Maquard) of such diverse intellectual concepts.

While there is some agreement in the description, perhaps even in the recognition as to the extent of the danger, differences begin to appear in the diagnosis of the sources of the environmental crisis. It is Keller's concentration on the question of why the extent of the danger does not correspond to the precautions taken against it, mercilessly uncovering the self-destructive mechanisms („the developed society is also distinctive in that if it does not radically change the way it functions, it must be destroyed by the results of those principles on which it was founded“, p. 13), that distinguishes this book from other publications to date.

Keller is a radical environmentalist and is not trapped in the paradigms of the industrial society, such that his critique is one of more or less distinct irrational strength of rationalist forms to date. He draws from Max Weber in his analysis of the modern, from Eric Fromm in his critique of the consumer society, from M. Ostrogorski as a political scientist, from Herbert Marcuse as a philosopher, and from post-modernist ideas. It is therefore not a simple reconstruction of the idea of progress or of mass democracy, of mere protection of the environment, but concentrates on raising new and promising goals on the basis of a new understanding of the fundamental elements. According to Keller, the choice that faces us is a life-and-death one: „if we do not renounce affluence, we ourselves may have some hope of survival but future generations will not. If we stand up against such affluence, it may destroy the market system in its current likeness, it will certainly lead to a crisis of the legitimacy of passive democracy and it will, of course, eradicate the possibility of consumerism on a mass scale.“ (pp. 13-14). It is this fundamental ecological imperative (the destruction of the un-

sustainable system before it reaches its agonising collapse) that is the basis for both argument and terminology.

Keller's work is thus an exceptionally rich dictionary of themes which, in a limited space, collects and radicalises those subjects which form the discussion of the modern crisis, of the post-modern society in crisis. At the same time, however, it moves them towards a solution under the bulwark of the ecological imperative. The number of consenting or dissenting voices does not seem to have any particular relevance. The reader, however, not deprived of the alternative to decide for him or herself: a decision which by no means lacks significance.

This also invites a comparison with writers who adopt a subtler approach and a more liberal orientation, as for example with some works by B. Moldan and V. Bělohradský. Keller moves the debate between the adherents of the degree and form of regulation and control, of corrective measures, to the point where we should be interested in „the environmental links and the environmental outcomes of both points of view alone. How does the position of the official differ from that of nature?“ (Keller, p. 87) B. Moldan sums this up: „As long as the rules of the market economy themselves comprise criteria and principles they (i.e. the rules of the market economy) are the only functioning example of continuing sustainable development at the present time.“ (B. Moldan, *Ekologie, demokracie, trh* [The Environment, Democracy and the Market], Prague 1992, p. 51) The „as long as“ is, of course, crucial, as is the maintenance of fundamentals: „Environmental rules must be constructed so that they take the mechanisms and strengths of the market into account and do not work against them. If they did so, they would be doomed to failure from the outset.“ (Ibid., p. 50) Moldan considers that since the situation in which „neither market nor administration endows nature with its own status, a status which would be distinctively different from other commercial and administrative matters“ (Keller, p. 87) does not accommodate the radical extension of economic-environmental accounting („natural phenomenon also acquire financial value“), it must become enmeshed in

the overall system, defined as the market economy (B. Moldan, *ibid.*, p. 57).

Keller, on the other hand, concentrates on revealing those mechanisms which lie in the way of a solution: „Nor is bureaucracy capable of recognising the particularity of nature or of distinguishing it from the other factors in its deliberations. Bureaucracy is therefore a completely inappropriate instrument for resolving environmental problems which, if not solved, will not bring lasting safeguards and status, but the collapse of the whole system.“ (Keller, pp. 88-89)

Both with a leaning towards political science, Keller, the sociologist and historian, and V. Bělohradský, the philosophical sociologist, produce diametrically opposed analyses of the company, McDonald's. For the former, McDonald's is a place in which irrationality and those mechanisms which bring us closer to planetary disaster can be seen *in nucleo* (Keller, p. 48-49). For the latter, McDonald's is on the contrary a place in which the world-wide civil society appears. (V. Bělohradský, *Hamburger, džiny a demokracie. Chvála mcdonaldizace světa*. [Hamburgers, Jeans and Democracy. All Hail the McDonaldisation of the World], *Respekt*, 24-30 January, 1994, p. 14). Both authors use the triviality of this example to demonstrate something far from trivial. Keller shows the relative nature of needs, the unnatural nature of consumption and the suffering of nature. The concrete example of McDonald's becomes part of the all-embracing strategy of unification, the concentration of production and the demands on energy when production technology is based on „the absolute disregard for the value of anything that does not concern the greasy hamburger“ (Keller, p. 48), and hence ultimately on the principle according to which the modern, centralised state functions. For Bělohradský, this „example“ is not simply destruction (the traditions destroyed are moreover very uniform), but also the „promotion of the democratic style of life: the neutral zone of McDonald's is a place in which the world-wide civil society is formed by people who have been deprived of their traditions and the context of their life“ (Bělohradský, *ibid.*).