

Extropy or Anti-utopia? – “Posthuman” Society in Stanisław Lem's *The Futurological Congress* in the Context of Extropians' Visions

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An analysis of earlier historical periods shows that technological advancement was often accompanied by a change in lifestyle and applicable norms (for example, the phenomena collectively referred to as the “industrial revolution”). Modern discoveries suggest that in the near

future people will have to face further challenges related to adapting the functioning of society to the emerging new technologies. One worthwhile example of this is the CRISPR/Cas method (also known as “molecular scissors”), which gives the opportunity to interfere with genetic code sequences [Głowacki]. Today, many experiments are carried out using CRISPR/Cas to modify the genotype of animal organisms [“Are we allowed”]. Government authorities are well aware of the importance of controlling the introduction of new solutions for widespread use. Attempts to create international law that would contribute to controlling this process to some extent, are noteworthy: for example, The Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights, and the Convention on Human Rights and Biomedicine [Skrzypczak 293]. The above-mentioned developments can also be considered in the context of the transhumanist trend, which focuses on analysing the evolutionary possibilities of the human species in connection with the emergence of new technological solutions. The interest of state factors, manifested in, among others, the creation of regulations, shows that transhumanist projects have ceased to be seen solely in terms of a certain intellectual curiosity, and are beginning to be considered as serious programme proposals.

The Extropians

Some philosophers dealing with bio-improvement issues, including Jürgen Habermas, argue that manipulation of the genetic code and technological improvements may

result in the disappearance of traits of “humanity” [21, 26, 29]. The first transhumanist programmes not only perceived such radical changes positively, but also promoted their unfettered implementation. It was decided that people should use all the available tools that might allow them to create a perfect being in the future. Proponents of this trend believed that humanity will always strive to cross certain barriers in order to further improve their species [Hołub 83]. The words contained in Simon Young’s book are a kind of slogan for transhumanism: “As humanism freed us from the chains of superstition, let transhumanism free us from our biological chains” [32].

Julian Huxley laid the philosophical foundations for the doctrine of transhumanism. Some emphasised the similarities visible in the eugenic concepts of the early twentieth century and the transhumanist currents of this period. However, away from the common bio-utopian vision of society, there was a significant difference in how it might be introduced. Eugenicians focused on socio-political reforms that would enable the controlled development of humanity, whilst transhumanists adopted a libertarian approach, and emphasised the possibility of free development of an individual [“The Politics” 761].

Nowadays, there is a large, visible diversity in transhumanist groups’ programmes. One such group is an organisation founded by Max More in the 1980s, which brings together people who define themselves as Extropians [“The Politics” 763]. In a nutshell, it can be said

that Extropians believe in “a state of permanent physical, mental and intellectual development”, which stands in opposition to “the finite development of the species characterised as utopia” [Szymański 169]. The question of whether transhumanist extropy qualifies as a category of utopia has been considered already in an article by Kamil Szymański, So, rather than duplicating his definitions, I would urge readers to study his article for a broader discussion on the topic.

Transhumanists emphasise that social relations will deteriorate as a result of achievements in the field of biotechnology [“The Politics” 763]. Max More claims that the posthuman society will have to face new challenges [Szymański 169], however, the postulates contained in the 2010 Extropian manifesto (which is based on the postulates from 1998 developed, among others, by More) show an unwavering faith in the possibilities of human development carried out with the help of modern technology (including artificial intelligence) [“The Extropist”]. Extropians do not take into account the opinions and impact of society in their considerations, which is to some extent offset by the activities of scientists from another transhumanist organisation, Humanity+. This group emphasises the considerable role of social factors in influencing the creation of a new vision of the future. For this reason, they are taking steps to bring them into mainstream philosophical and theoretical considerations regarding the effects of technological improvements for general use. The core tenets of Humanity+'s programme

were presented in the so-called Transhumanist Declaration [“Transhumanist”].

Psychemised society in *The Futurological Congress*

The purpose of the article is to confront Lem’s vision of the future with extropist postulates, based on the analysis of *The Futurological Congress*, a novel from the writer’s anti-utopian period. It is worth noting at the outset that Lem’s predictions differ significantly from the optimism shown by transhumanists. For the Polish writer, not only does a technological breakthrough not necessarily lead to the development of the human species, but it can even be the beginning of its destruction. Social reality presented in *The Futurological Congress* is based on the illusion of prosperity brought about by new means, known as psych chemicals.

Psych chemicals are widely applied: they affect human emotions (evoking fear, sadness, love, etc.), memory (“entering” specific memories) and knowledge (due to the limited capacity of the human brain, regular “resetting” of information is necessary). There are even concoctions available for experiencing complex hallucinations in which a person believes that what they see is really happening. Psych chemicals certainly cannot be understood solely as drugs intended to restore a person to a “natural” state. Rather, they represent a certain lifestyle. Theoretically, no one forces anyone to use them (or at least this seems the case at the beginning of the story), nevertheless, giving them up results in social ostracism. The use

of psych chemicals to induce specific feelings is perceived as the norm by the community of posthumans. A “spontaneous” feeling in public is perceived negatively: “He who does so is very bad. One should always use the drug appropriate to the occasion” [Lem 64]. The preceptoriest¹ convince Tichy that the productstaken to induce certain emotions do not constitute aggressive interference in the selfhood of individuals: “It will assist, sustain, guide, improve, resolve. Nor is it it, but rather part of one’s own self, much as eyeglasses become in time, which correct defects in vision. [...] And I have no intention of ever using psychem myself. Such objections, says the preceptor, are typical and natural. A caveman would also resist a streetcar” [64]. The last sentence particularly aptly illustrates how a psychemised society perceives people awakened from a long sleep. Tichy repeatedly encounters signs of resentment from his friends. He later finds out that even people who are kind to him often do this for show. They compensate their kindness towards the “caveman” in a way typical of those times –by giving him a particular concoction that makes him experience mystical revelations towards objects regardless of whether they are animate or inanimate. He ends up worshiping tableware until the host gives him a drug that eliminates the effects of psychem [79].

The use of psych chemicals is an important determinant of the new human civilisation, but the changes that have occurred in the philosophical and ideological field are

¹ Computer that teaches people who have been woken up.

equally important. This is evidenced, for example, by the fact that people have abandoned historical sciences for the sake of becoming “futurologians”, whose focus is on creating scenarios for the future of humans. This is certainly one of the more revolutionary changes. For the psychesed society, the past becomes invalid. All attention is focused on discovering new ways of shaping the world, including improving the quality of life of the human species. An important issue here is the emergence of a “post-human” that goes far beyond the capabilities of modern representatives of our species (according to Extropians, it is the basic condition for the emergence of a new society) [Szymański 163]. In Lem’s vision, the human body can be freely shaped thanks to the development of bioengineering, but these methods are used only for aesthetic purposes (they are modelled depending on current fashion). Nonetheless, one can speak of the emergence of a post-human society (in line with the definition of Extropians), as their abandonment of a practical use of bioengineering was somewhat a result of achievements in other fields of knowledge.

Nowadays, ways of implementing transhumanist programmes are considered not only in the context of technological and medical discoveries, but also in the context of popularising certain ideas (e.g. beliefs about the infinite possibilities of human development) [Hughes 632]. It is clear that in Lem’s vision of the world, the idea about the infinite possibilities of human development is reflected in the views of the local community. One of the main char-

acter's friends, Professor Trottelreiner, deals with linguistic futurology, which "investigates the future through the transformational possibilities of the language" [Lem 97]. Language is an important determinant of changes in human culture. Trottelreiner believes that it is not the emergence of new technological solutions that conditions the creation of new language forms, but that language itself influences the shaping of future development paths. To some extent linguistic futurology resembles the predictions of transhumanists and the work of science-fiction writers. First, a word appears and then it can take a material form over time.

In *The Futurological Congress* there is also reference to the currently popular direction of considerations related to the Anthropocene. Some researchers argue that the appearance of the Anthropocene was the result of the development of so-called human geological agency. This Oreskes's concept can be understood as the impact of the sum of actions of the entire human population on shaping "the most basic physical processes of the earth". In order to define the human species as "geological agents", collective action, combined with technological development was necessary [Chakrabarty 179]. *The Futurological Congress* touches upon the topic of the repopulation of the earth with animal species. This would not be surprising if it were not for the fact that instead of referring only to specimens that existed in the past, a "creative" approach to the subject is proposed by, among others, creating life forms that we could safely term "fantastic".

For example, Lem writes about a luminigriff, a cross between a mastodon, a glowworm and a seven-headed dragon [Lem 86].

People who live in a psychemised society have the ability to completely shape the surrounding space and environment, as evidenced by the monthly “preferendums”, in which they determine the most optimal weather. Sometimes there are some perturbations that spoil the intended effect (e.g. inappropriate cloud shape) [66]. Attaching importance to such trifles proves that, while modern interest in the state of the environment is due to both egoistic reasons (i.e. the desire to survive by the human species), and moral responsibility towards the rest of the world [Ciążela 111], in a psychemised society it is rather a matter of aesthetics (people involved in the design of new animals are referred to as “zooartists”).

Three levels of the psychemised society – from utopia to anti-utopia

The action of Lem’s novel begins at the inauguration of titularfuturological congress. During the inauguration, a chemical leak causes severe hallucinations. The main character, IjonTichy, who is an astronaut, is exposed to it. Doctors are unable to help him as he thinks that everything that surrounds him is merely a product of his mind. Therefore, they decide to put him in hibernation, in the hope of finding a new drug in the future. Tichy is awakened after 50 years of sleep, in a world in which humanity has begun to use psychemics on a large scale. At the

end of the novel, it transpires that all of the main character's experiences were actually hallucinations caused by the chemical released during the futurological congress. Although a psychemised society was only a product of the mind of the main character, it would nonetheless be interesting to analyse the subsequent phases of it being "stripped" of its apparent perfection.

Initially, the psychemised society seems close to the ideal of transhumanist extropy. Technological development has significantly improved the quality of life, but there is still room for further improvement. On the other hand, post-humans live in the lap of luxury – they are served by intelligent machines and use psych chemicals that allow them to experience every fantasy and acquire knowledge without any effort.

However, Tichy's conversation with his neighbour Symington shows him the less pleasant face of the psychemised society. The main character's interlocutor works in Procrustics Inc., a company that produces and administers psych chemicals that allow people to experience "evil": "You see, we have resolved a great dilemma. Now everyone can do unto others what he's always wanted to—without causing them the least harm. For we have harnessed Evil, as medicine harnesses the microbe to inoculate and immunize" [Lem 88]. Talking to his neighbour makes Tichy depressed because it makes him realise that utopia can be a goal, but it will never become reality. Luxurious life comes at the price of control of its every

aspect. Even “evil” becomes an ordinary product tailored to the customer’s needs. Tichy notices that the psychemised society has been deprived of spontaneity and that individualism is limited to the necessary minimum (as evidenced by, for example, the name of the institution satisfying orders for “evil” which refers to the legend of the procrustean bed).

The knowledge about Procrustics Inc.’s activities becomes an incentive for Tichy to attempt to seek “truth”. Our protagonist gains insight into “reality” for the first time thanks to meeting Professor Trottelreiner. Through him, he learns that the freedom to take psych chemicals is really an illusion. “Mascons”, special substances that create illusions to make humanity believe that they live in prosperity, float in the air. It turns out that the professor was elected as a “soothseer”, i.e. a person who can see through these hallucinations thanks to a special chemical cocktail. His role is to both control the social situation and discuss probable scenarios for the future development of humanity with other “soothseers”. After taking Trottelreiner’s concoction, Tichy is in state of shock. A picture that is far different from the one he was already used to appears in front of his eyes. The elegant restaurant where he is eating dinner with Trottelreiner transforms into an ordinary shed with wooden benches and cars are really “drivers” moving in cardboard boxes. What is more, effectively every person suffers from some genetic disease. Over time, however, it turns out that even “soothseers” are exposed to psych chemicals. They are simply presented

with another false vision of reality, closer to the truth, so that they can be convinced that they know the actual state of affairs. Trottelreiner has a concoction thanks to which he is able to remove the influence of any mascon, but he does not have the courage to take it. But Tichy's determination makes him decide to take this "drug". He discovers that virtually all the knowledge of the psychemised society turns out to be a lie. Not only is the environment changing (global glaciation continues on Earth), but also the grotesque nature of the whole improvisation comes to light. Robots are really rag-clad people. Any manifestation of "abundance", that is, the shed seen after taking the first drug cocktail, is also an illusion. People die of hunger, cold and fatigue on the streets and in buildings.

It turns out that the puppeteer controlling the whole process of hypocrisy of reality is none other than Tichy's neighbour – Symington. He is looking for Tichy's approval, as one of the few people who have realised what the surrounding reality looks like. He portrays himself as a doctor who administers anaesthetics to patients for whom there is no hope, in order to make their last moments painless. The words spoken by Symington to the main character are significant: "Soothseers aren't monsters! [...] We are prisoners of the situation, backed into a corner, forced to play out the hand that history has dealt us. We bring peace and contentment in the only way remaining. We hold in precarious balance that which without us would plunge into the throes of universal agony. We are the last Atlas of this

world. And if it must perish, let it at least not suffer. If the truth cannot be altered, let us at least conceal it. This is the last humanitarian act, the last moral obligation” [Lem 127]. Tichy describes his neighbour as an “eschatological anesthetist” [128], who does not believe in the means he uses. Despite his doubts, Symington systematically, and with determination, implements his plan. This distinguishes him from the rest of the posthumans, who live in a world that presents virtually no challenges to them. It is not certain, however, whether the indifference of the society is not primarily due to the interference of Symington, who realises the extropist vision of the world by means of psych chemicals.

The anti-utopia presented by Lem not only focuses on the tragic material situation of humanity, but also shows a world in which it was deprived of the possibility of making free choice. This is in clear contradiction to the ideals of Extropians, who place great emphasis on the free choice of individuals in the application of technological improvements. Lem, however, raises the question of whether in some situations it would be better to limit this privilege. If the destruction of humanity were certain, would keeping a larger part of the community in ignorance constitute a kind of blessing? Tichy does not think so, but the dialogue between him and Symington raises some doubts. The arguments of the “eschatological anesthetist” could be understandable to the reader in some situations. The main objection is certainly that the use of psych chemicals in order to escape from reality has been im-

posed from above. On the other hand, an awareness of the end would not help these billions of people, but only increase their suffering. The question then arises: is it better to be aware of inevitable death and to experience the last moments in suffering caused by terrible conditions, or to die immersed in the vision of prosperity that gives happiness? Symington claims that making everyone aware would only cause chaos: “We keep this civilization narcotized, for otherwise it could not endure itself. That is why its sleep must not be disturbed” [127].

Posthumans living in a psychemised society are far from the vision presented by Extropians. Democratic governance (in which even fashion is controlled by the majority) [76] are only a smokescreen to hide the fact that people are deprived of the opportunity to make independent decisions. Psychemhasled to a reality in which people not only feel every emotion they want, but can also access any knowledge (which is immediately available in the form of a pill), and also indulge in sublime hallucinations. For this reason, striving for anything and the effort put into fulfilling any dreams become unnecessary. This certainly increases the indifference and stagnation seen in the psychemised society. If you can have everything thanks to psych chemicals, why seek change in the real world? (By “real” we mean here the vision of the world available to ordinary people under the influence of mascons.) Just one pill is sufficient in order to dispel all doubts about such a lifestyle and enjoy unrestricted happiness again.

Of course, there are some social problems (so this is not a realised utopia). However, most ordinary people lead an undisturbed life (interestingly, their life revolves around similar issues as today, that is, work and various forms of spending free time). This situation is caused, among others, by ubiquitous robots, that do a large part of the work for people. Ironically, computers are programmed so that they always do what is easiest for them, “just as water will inevitably flow downhill and not up” [79]. It seems that posthuman society behaves in a similar way – it tries to live without unnecessary effort. Tichy comments on the situation with irony: “Children learn their reading and writing from orthographic sodas; all commodities, including works of art, are readily available and cheap; in restaurants the customer is surrounded and serviced by a multitude of automated waiters, each so very specialized in function that there is a separate machine for the rolls, another for the butter, another for the juice, the salad, the stewed fruit—a computer—and so on. Well, he has a point there. The conveniences, the comforts of life, are truly beyond belief” [79].

The remark of Crawley, who is a lawyer and gives Tichy advice, seems to be a good summary of the posthuman community created in *The Futurological Congress*: “A dream will always triumph over reality, once it is given the chance. These, sir, are the casualties of a psychemized society” [83]. For many representatives of transhumanism, it is not the way of reaching the state in

which humanity passes into the “posthuman” stage that matters, but the very fact of this possibility. Of course, it is currently difficult to conclude which of the proposals is more likely to come into existence.

It seems, however, that although an analysis of more pessimistic scenarios may allow for avoiding some errors, uncritical adoption of a utopian (or extropist) vision of the future gives a lot of hope, but it does not prepare society for problems related to the emergence of new technological solutions. Karl Popper spoke about the mistake of assuming that people living today, based on past and present events, are given the opportunity to create universal laws that can be applied in any period of human history [Szymański 166]. Using terminology from *The Futurological Congress*, we can say that both Lem and the transhumanists are “futurologians”. Lem argued that “even with an absolutely fictitious premise, conclusions can have real cognitive value” [Handke 408]. However, in the case of the author, it should be remembered that his work was marked by much more pessimism at the end of his career – this phase is also called “catastrophism” [Czapliński 62-66]. It was characterised by great scepticism, including when it came to the possibilities of predicting the future structure of society on the basis of modern technological solutions.

Lem presents a comprehensive vision of a new society (he takes into account evolution in terms of language, axiology and ethics). He does so in such a skillful way

that the reader is able to imagine the possibility of the scenario offered by *The Futurological Congress*. Combining the vision of utopian and dystopian reality (within one society) distinguishes it from more typical literary works, in which only one of the visions is usually presented. Thanks to this, Lem's futurological reflections gain depth and provide the opportunity to show new concepts of mutual relations connecting the population that inhabits the reality he created [Jarzębski 88].

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