

Radovan Richta's legacy is also inspiring for economists

Zuzana Džbánková 

(email: zuzana.dzbankova@vse.cz), University of Economics in Prague, Czech Republic

Sirůček, P.: *Nové čtení Radovana Richty. S předmluvou R. Valenčíka* (New reading of Radovan Richta. With a foreword by R. Valenčík). 1. elektronické vydání (pdf), resp. 2. doplněné a upravené vydání. Praha: Institut české levice 2024. 600 s. ISBN 978-80-908974-0-3 (pdf).

On the 100th anniversary of Radovan Richta's birth (born 6 June 1924), an extensive specialist monograph by Pavel Sirůček, *New Reading of Radovan Richta*, was published in e-format. Its pilot edition was published in 2023,¹ in connection with the 50th anniversary of Richta's death (died 21 July 1983). The explicitly declared goals include initiating discussion about the open legacy of this Czech visionary. At the same time, the questions of other civilizational crossroads are once again becoming extremely relevant today.

Radovan Richta was one of the most important Czech scientists of the last century. He was an academic, philosopher, sociologist and prognosticator. As a leader of interdisciplinary research teams, he devoted his lifetime to the scientific-technological revolution (VTR) under socialism and its social and human consequences. His theories of technical evolution (tool-machine-automation) and his vision of post-industrial socialism are particularly well-known and appreciated. His book *Civilization at the Crossroads*, which was in many ways ahead of its time, has been widely translated in the East and West. Richta's legacy remains inspirational for today's crossroads of civilization and beyond. According to Sirůček, Richta can rightly be considered a forerunner of the so-called knowledge society, the cyber revolution, globalization, the fourth industrial revolution and the considerations on the consequences of technologies 4.0 or 5.0, *etc.* His name can be

1 Slaný: Melandrium 2023. 500 pp. ISBN 978-80-87990-30-8.

indirectly associated with the Club of Rome reports, human capital theory, the systems approach, (post)modern chaos theory, *etc.*

Sirůček's book, on a respectable six hundred pages, traces in detail Richta's life and work in the context of his times and today. The 2023 pilot edition has been modified technically and for clarity and reading comfort. Additional sources and studies have been added, including, for example, (old) new perspectives on the Prague Spring process.

However, it is not a popularization work, easily accessible even to the ordinary – non-professional – interested party, which is perhaps a shame and the main problem of the reviewed study. It is a question of how many readers can read such a complex text. The author painstakingly strives for a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the person and topic of Radovan Richta and strives for a relatively comprehensible interpretation accompanied by summaries, repetitions and many references and citations, perhaps too many.

Reading and studying this text is definitely not easy or relaxing. This is not only because of the topic itself, but also significantly due to Sirůček's complex writing style with many, many digressions and hundreds and hundreds of miscellaneous footnotes. Their number is 1,880. The list of sources is also expansive, including the works of Richta himself, covering a total of 60 pages. The final brief and extensive summary in both Czech and English can be commended. The carefully prepared name index facilitates navigation through the publication, and so does partly the material index.

The main question that runs through Sirůček's entire study of Richta is whether Richta's work and legacy remain intellectually interesting today: whether he has anything to say about the problems of the 21st century. In this sense, both the originality of the approach and the contributions of Richta and his research teams are widely discussed. The author concludes that, in many ways, Richta's work was truly pioneering for its time, emphasizing that his work cannot be reduced to the iconic *Civilization at the Crossroads* and the socialist VTR research. The multifaceted development of man remains the central theme. Richta uniquely emphasized the human dimension not only of VTR, but also, for example, of economics. According to Sirůček, Richta's work cannot be regarded as a mere transfer of Western concepts of post-industrial society to the socialist Czechoslovakia of the 1960s. Nor is it a mere adoption and dusting off of Marx's ideas outlined in the *Grundrisse*. The monograph devotes considerable attention to the *Grundrisse*, including careful references to the Czech editions.

Views on Richta remain varied. The monograph strives to present his ideas with a particular perspective and distance. At the same time, it tries not to slip into one-sided, tendentious, and too sharp or categorical judgments. The author attempts to distance himself from the cultivation of a cult of Richta, to which uncritical interpretations – intentionally or unintentionally – sometimes slip.

On the one hand, scientist and politician Radovan Richta is remembered as one of the liberal reform faces of the Prague Spring. He was one of the creators of the *Action Programme of the Communist Party* of the Czech Republic and is considered a key figure in formulating the further development of socialism in Czechoslovakia. The “revival process” was to find theoretical expression precisely in the concept of VTR and the *Action Programme of the Communist Party* of the Czech Republic. On the other hand, Richta’s academic and other posts, reversals of opinions and activities after 1968, and his works themselves are criticized. Richta is regarded as the leading standardizer of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences.

The monograph proves that Richta’s brief contemporary evaluations are often “obligatorily” strongly anti-communist and uncritically – even naively – adoring the liberal 1960s. At the same time, Sirůček does not overlook the changes in Richta’s views nor his specific controversy – judged, of course, through today’s lens. The monograph also mentions Richta’s son, whom Sirůček consulted. Karel Richta admitted that some bits and pieces of their family history will always remain, at least in part, shrouded in a haze, as the direct actors are mostly dead and did not want to talk about everything during their lifetime.

Sirůček tries not to impose his opinions on the reader and patiently presents different opinions and perspectives. It is apparent not only from the notes, for example, that he is not personally inclined to liberal interpretations. Strong scepticism is also evident in the question of the realism of the specifically Czechoslovak paths to socialism (so-called third paths) in the contemporary context or in a system firmly divided by the Yalta agreements. Sirůček’s strongly conservative view of digitization, the 4.0 phenomenon, *etc.*, which has already become a kind of folklore in (almost) all of his works, cannot be overlooked.

The publication opens with an apt foreword by Radim Valenčík, one of the well-founded “rightologists”. After a more extensive introductory and recapitulating passage, the introduction is followed by a section called “... and, at the same time, an open Conclusion (Or was R. Richta a utopian?)”, performing as an (open) conclusion to some extent. Chapter I, *Life destiny and research focus of R. Richta* (with six sub-chapters) introduces the life and work of Radovan Richta. Richta’s Terezín traumas and his severe, long-standing health problems are not forgotten. The emphasis is on a detailed presentation of Richta’s two pamphlets (“blue” and “red”) from 1963. Worthy of attention are the numerous memories of Richta’s collaborators, many of whom later became colleagues and some even friends of the author of the monograph.

Chapter II, *Civilization at the Crossroads by R. Richta*, is among the key, with seven sub-chapters. *Civilization at the Crossroads* is an economic, sociological and technological forecast of development dealing with the transformation of industrial society into a post-industrial (or information, *etc.*) society. It lays out a vision of post-industrial socialism, with the decisive importance of VTR for socialism and future communism, in the spirit of the ideals of Marxist

humanism and a systemic perspective. It became a bestseller, attracting extraordinary attention at home and abroad. It remains the world's most published original domestic work in philosophy, economics and sociology.²

The author presents the four parts of Richta's pioneering work *Civilization at the Crossroads* in a contemporary context, including commentary. He compares the first three editions (1966, 1967, and the 3rd expanded edition of 1969) and recounts shifts in knowledge and methodology, emphasizing the interdisciplinary nature of the research team and Richta's creative, conceptual approach. The work also recalls Richta's co-investigators. Sirůček summarizes the "anti-revisionist" adaptations of the socialist concept of VTR based primarily on the Soviet-Czech work *Man/Science/Technology* (1973, 1975).

Here, objections to Richta's concept are formulated, which are further addressed in Chapter III. *The visionary work of the scientific and technical revolutionary R. Richta*. Richta's legacy is critically discussed in light of the deepening crises of the 21st century. Emphasis is placed on attempts to creatively develop Marxism or the visionary dimension of Richta's work. An Appendix is included – as a critical analysis of the Slovak title *Civilization at the Crossroads Half a Century Later* (from 2019), supplemented by other Slovak inspirations. In his own words, the author could not forgive himself for including two P.S. The first one reflects on polymathy in Czech (and Moravian and Slovak) history, including the problematic nature of the polymath category. The second one presents games with artificial intelligence on the theme of Radovan Richta, including the indication of several open problems and the darker side of digitization.

Sirůček's monograph considers the critical question: Is labeling Richta as a utopian justified? He concludes that it is. Richta was a utopian Marxist or an original Czech Marxist visionary-dreamer. The author also mentions that Bernard Bolzano's extensive *On the Best State* (1932) remains the first original and, to this day, only comprehensive and systematic Czech utopia (socio-economic and political, not fictional). The author states that even though this scholarly treatise is not well known, it is equally original, surprising and in many ways timeless, like the work of Richta and his collective *Civilization at the Crossroads*. According to Sirůček, these two are fundamental contributions of Czech thought to visions of future societies.

It cannot be denied that Sirůček's monograph collected practically all available sources regarding the person and work of Radovan Richta and indicated many open questions. His processing and presentation methods as well as possible shift in knowledge can be discussed. However, Sirůček repeatedly emphasizes that his work does not have the ambition to elaborate on the ideas

2 Sirůček's monograph has traced translations of this work into twelve languages.

of Richta (let alone Marx). He likes to leave this to professionals. Relatively less judgmental ones in most cases, I should add.

Sirůček's monograph looks at the personality, work and legacy of Radovan Richta primarily through the lens of political economy, political science and historical sociology. At the same time, Richta was not an economist, but his entire work, headed by *Civilization at the Crossroads*, also has a distinct political-economic dimension. Richta also has something to say to economists. Therefore, Richta's centenary deserves attention.