

## B. BOLZANO AND R. RICHTA - THE GREATEST CZECH SOCIO-ECONOMIC VISIONARIES

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### Abstract

Utopia B. Bolzano's *On the Best State* remains the first original and, to this day, the only comprehensive and systematic Czech utopia with elements of utopian Christian and state socialism. The interdisciplinary study of the research team led by R. Richta, *Civilization at the Crossroads*, with its vision of post-industrial socialism, has a timeless and at least partially utopian character. This has become the most translated Czech scholarly work. These works represent two critical contributions of Czech thought to visions of future societies. They also have their economic or socio-economic dimensions that are the focus of this paper. The multifaceted focus of the Renaissance scholar and original thinker B. Bolzano remains relevant and inspiring regarding interdisciplinarity, just like at Richta's who shares a humanistic and visionary dimension with Bolzano. While Richta places man at the center, for Bolzano, the common good remains more important than the man himself. However, the central theme of Bolzano's work remains the all-round development of man and socialist humanism. B. Bolzano and R. Richta remain the greatest Czech visionaries.

**Key words:** a social concept, the scientific and technological revolution, the utopia, visions of the future of humanity

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### Introduction

The article presents two of the most important Czech visionaries. Utopia B. Bolzano's *On the Best State* is a timeless work. The interdisciplinary study of the research team led by R. Richt, *Civilization at the Crossroads*, is also timeless and at least partly utopian. These texts represent two fundamental contributions of Czech thought to visions of future societies. They also have an economic or socio-economic dimension. The starting point of Bolzano's economic reflections was the category of property. His visions of the welfare state, the public sector, and elements of welfare economics can be traced. One can appreciate the thoughtfulness, logic, and precision of the project of the purposive state. The interdisciplinary nature of Bolzano's legacy

is reminiscent of R. Richta, who concentrated his life's work on studying the problems of the Scientific and Technical Revolution (S&TR) under socialism and its social and human contexts. *Civilization at the Crossroads* was in many ways ahead of its time. It remains inspiring even in the light of today's civilizational crossroads. The article is an original scholarly essay using a historical approach, a search of the available literature, and the methods of description, comparison, induction, and deduction.

## **1 Morally anchored social critic and utopian reformer Bolzano**

Bernard Bolzano (1781-1848) was not only a mathematician and logician of European stature, theologian, philosopher, teacher, and educator but also a critical social thinker and reformer. In Bolzano's vision, economic aspects play a crucial role and are not based on naive fantasy. In his work, one can trace the visionary nature of the welfare state, the public sector, and the germs of elements of welfare economics. The thoughtfulness, logic, and precision of the project of the purposive state should be appreciated. Thanks to his work *On the Best State* (Bolzano, 1932), which Bolzano refused to publish during his lifetime, he became the best-known Czech utopian. The work remains the first original and, to this day, the only comprehensive and systematic Czech utopia. The classification of Bolzano as a utopian socialist, however, remains debatable, as the religious-ethical underpinning of Bolzano's entire work cannot be overlooked, or the fact that the link between all of Bolzano's activities remains the supreme moral law. The socialist priest Bolzano is closest to state socialism. Bolzano can be interpreted as a Czech personality, albeit writing in German, with reminders of provincial patriotism and an idealistic worldview.

The last Czech polymath, Bolzano, can be seen as an educator, a noble philanthropist, a priest-heretic, a reformed theologian, a specific representative of the Czech Catholic Enlightenment, and a critical late Josephist advocating Catholic renewal. However, he is at odds with the interests of the Catholic Church and the Austrian monarchy, including his painful search in the context of his vocational choice and lifelong loneliness. Devoted admirers and diverse followers surrounded Bolzano, but only indirectly. In literature, Bolzano is a peculiarly provincial patriot (with idealistic ideas about the coexistence of Czechs and Germans),<sup>1</sup> a revolutionary skeptic, an original philosopher, mathematician, and logician. There are numerous overlaps (e.g., the notion of land patriotism with a social and moral dimension) and problematic classifications not only in philosophical schools. With the conclusion that, as a

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<sup>1</sup> As a scientist and a human being, he remained absorbed in the distant future. He did not understand the reality of the times (including the events of 1848) - in its socioeconomic, ideological, and national conditioning.

scientist, he was not of the right time. The above applies not only to philosophy or logic but also to other activities. It is a possible interpretation that he was ahead of his time in many respects. On the other hand, it is also possible that he "overslept" in some respects<sup>2</sup>, which is also true of his utopian thinking, which is closer to the 18th than to the 19th-century utopians.

Bolzano's social and political thought also focused on economic issues. He considered property to be a fundamental economic category. He dealt with the state's role and budget, developing a novel public sector vision. He linked the basis of governance to the municipality, proposing adjustments to property, taxation etc. His practical proposals, which often waited decades to be implemented, should not be overlooked. Bolzano can be ranked among the founding fathers of Czech economic thinking. However, he did not significantly influence the history of Czech economic thought.

Theology was at the center of Bolzano's attention, and he associated his greatest service to the common good with his role as a priest and educator, dealing with education both theoretically and practically. He articulated his social-reform ideas in hundreds of lectures, Sunday and holiday educational sermons – exhortations that were individual-ethical, social-critical, and religious-philosophical in nature (Bolzano, 1834).<sup>3</sup>

Bolzano's social-utopian ideas are most comprehensively represented by *On the Best State, or the Ideas of Someone Who Loved Mankind, on the Most Expedient Arrangement of Civil Society*, conceived in 1809-31 or later. The year 1831 is often cited. The work was not published publicly for the first time until 1932 as a historical document. Its impact during Bolzano's lifetime is minimal, although Bolzano gave it to friends to read. He refused public publication, however. The concept of utopia is profoundly influenced by social criticism from the exhortations, partly published at home and abroad, including under the name of M. J. Fesl or F. Příhonský. The parallel conception with the treatise *Wissenschaftslehre* (Bolzano, 1837) is often recalled, and methodological connections can be found. The logical work became the theoretical basis for formulating the fundamental moral law of the general welfare, the practical application of which was to be brought about by visionary writing.

Utopia (Bolzano, 1932) is divided into twenty-eight shorter chapters in which Bolzano describes the organization of the ideal state in detail. Outlining the legal system, the constitution, and the purpose of social institutions, Bolzano describes laws, government, health care, property, and economic issues, including money or trade, and personal and social life. It

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<sup>2</sup> On the life, work, legacy, and traditions of Bolzanoism and the Bolzanians, see in more detail (Sirůček, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> The exhortations demonstrate that Bolzano's highest moral law – the beatitude of the human race – was also to be the highest principle of religion.

deals with death, education, art, entertainment, housing, food, clothing, and who can be a citizen of the state. It systematically discusses all aspects of human life from birth to death. Throughout the work, Bolzano analytically presents arguments for and against and carefully and constantly refutes the "expected objections" to his proposals. Utopia (Bolzano, 1932) remains primarily a political work, but it devotes considerable attention to economic issues in many respects. Chapters X-XIV and Chapter XXVI characterize the economic organization of a purposefully constituted state. However, economic dimensions can also be found in Bolzano's proposals, which are projected in other chapters. Chapter X – On Property can be identified as the key chapter. Even the category of property is viewed through the prism of the highest moral law, or the pursuit of the welfare of the whole. Bolzano therefore does not oppose all private property, but asserts the right of the state to limit it for the benefit of society and the general welfare.<sup>4</sup>

Bolzano projects a radical reconstruction of society, linking the reform of the individual with the reform of the state system, laws, and the functioning of the state and society as a whole. In doing so, politics is supposed to promote rational freedom in the name of the common good. It is to lead citizens to good and combat the human tendency to evil without the individual perceiving this as a violation of personal freedom. The reconstruction is to extend to the economic sphere, with projects for the reform of agriculture, production, and trade. Bolzano's ideal state is responsible for the economy, owning both natural and cultural resources. Bolzano does not abolish the market economy or money but envisages control and regulation by the state. Bolzano promotes cooperativism and the ideas of cooperation and collaboration. Industrial production is to be organized primarily through producer cooperatives. However, Bolzano pays more attention to agricultural and commercial reforms. Agriculture is to operate on cooperative principles. Bolzano's ideal state is not a vision of a centrally planned economy and society. The vast majority of directive interventions in the economy here take place at the local – self-governing – level, under the supervision of citizens who themselves participate in the measures. All decisions about setting tax levels, salaries, the distribution of property after the deceased or the redistribution of living space are made publicly through elected municipal institutions. Only when municipalities cannot solve problems locally (e.g., in natural disasters), do higher levels of government, from district to national level, intervene in the autonomous economic decision-making of municipalities.

Mention may also be made of the work *On the Right of Clergymen to Receive Means of Subsistence from Persons Not of Their Religion* (Bolzano, 1838). It also contains a critique of

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<sup>4</sup> For a closer analysis of the whole utopia, see (Sirůček, 2022) or the economic passages (Sirůček, Šetek, 2023).

property relations, with Bolzano trying to apply utopian ideas. The essay *Practical Suggestions for Removing the Poverty Now Prevailing Among a Considerable Part of the Population of Prague* (Bolzano, 1847) drastically depicts the misery of the Prague workers and suggests ways to improve their material condition. Including the idea of voluntary taxation of the richer citizens for the benefit of the poor. Among the charitable proposals is the recommendation to sell to the poor at wholesale prices. Bolzano also proposed other measures, e.g., improving the poor institutions, considering housing a pressing issue, etc

Bolzano did not limit himself to promotion and also tried to put some of his proposals into practice. Examples of philanthropy and charity include his contribution to the establishment of the Society for the Support of Poor University Students or his donation of the proceeds from the sale of his writings to the care of the poor. As an enthusiastic promoter of the ideas of co-operativism, he supported the establishment of an agrarian co-operative in Těchobuz. He proposed the establishment of cooperative granaries and a self-help credit union. He intended to build a school for working-class youth. He tried to promote a similar idea in Prague. He proposed flats for workers' families and called for measures to raise workers' wages or protective workers' legislation. He can thus be considered a forerunner of modern social policies.

The work (Bolzano, 1932) is utopian but firmly grounded in reality, and it does not usually resort to irrational dreaming and delirium. In Bolzano's visions and proposals, the realistic contours of utopianism can be traced. As with other Enlightenment utopias, he does not limit himself to describing a dreamed-of establishment but outlines concrete measures for change. The realistic contours of Bolzano's utopianism are already derived from the idea that the best, ideal state is not conceived as absolutely perfect, a new paradise on earth. However, it is to be a state set up purposefully – so that it chooses, if possible, the least of the necessary evils. Sophisticated economic foundations contribute significantly to the realism of the vision. State intervention in the economy is more thoughtful and sophisticated in Bolzano than in the Enlightenment utopians. To some extent, Bolzano tries to reconcile utopian visions with emerging industrial production. In addition to the economic dimension, he emphasizes the realm of politics, including the primacy of politics over economics. The citizen actively co-determined and co-created all (not only) political events in the ideal state. In Bolzano's utopia, the individual has greater scope for self-realization and is not merely a passive recipient of the state's beneficence. Related to this are aspects of self-government and decentralization. Even about the regulation of social relations, Bolzano's proposals do not always resonate fully with

the typical ideas of the Enlightenment. The educational and training dimension is not overlooked.

Nevertheless, the path to the ideal state remains strongly utopian, a non-violent, reformist path of peaceful enlightenment. The cautious reformist Bolzano does not recognize rapid and radical change, including revolution. Among the idealistic and utopian features is an almost naive belief in a harmonious world order in which the victory of goodness and justice is to be assured in advance. What is missing is an adequate subject for change. Bolzano's moral or educational appeals are directed primarily at the educated upper classes.

## 2 Scientific and technical revolutionary Richta

Academician, philosopher, sociologist, prognosticator, leader of interdisciplinary research teams PhDr. Radovan Richta, DrSc. (1924–1983) concentrated his lifelong efforts on the study of the scientific and technical revolution (S&TR) under socialism and its social and human contexts. He became famous in the East and West for his book *Civilization at the Crossroads*, which was ahead of its time in many ways. Richta's theory of technological evolution (tool-machine-automation), his vision of post-industrial socialism etc., have been appreciated. He is one of the co-authors of the term post-industrial society<sup>5</sup> and one of the first to think about the global revolution.<sup>6</sup> Richta can be described as a forerunner of reflections on the knowledge society, cyber revolution, globalization, 4IR and the impact of technologies 4.0 or 5.0, the Club of Rome reports, as well as theories of human capital, the systems approach, chaos theory.

The milestones of Richta's work (and the progression of the stages of his research teams) are marked by the works *Communism and the Transformations of Human Life (On the Nature of Humanism in Our Time)* (Richta, 1963a), *Man and Technology in the Revolution of Our Days* (Richta, 1963b)<sup>7</sup>, *Civilization at the Crossroads: the Social and Human Context of the Scientific and Technological Revolution* (Richta et al, 1966a) and *Man/Science/Technology: Towards a Marxist-Leninist Analysis of the Scientific-Technical Revolution* (Collective, 1973). Richta contributed to the Czech edition of Marx's *Manuscripts of the Grundrisse* and wrote the introduction. Richta's oeuvre includes dozens of entries, including books, anthologies, magazines, newspaper and television publications, etc.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Richta's ideas about the scientific-technical revolution and post-industrial socialism are highly relevant to analyzing and discussing so-called digital/communicative socialism (Boucas, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> V (Richta, 1983) deals with global problems.

<sup>7</sup> The essays reflect on the upheavals in human relations and the transformations of work.

<sup>8</sup> On the life, work, time, and legacy of R. Richta, see in more detail (Sirůček, 2024).

Richta was brimming with creative and bold, innovative ideas. The essays (Richta, 1963a) contribute to the term technology becoming one of the central concepts of philosophical reflection in the 1960s. He analyzes the revolutionizing processes of S&TR in a Marxist spirit, concluding the work with the question: "*Do we behave like revolutionaries?*". Richta formulates the central "*question of questions*" as "*does the formidable power of modern technology ... weigh people down or give them wings?*" He frames with many other questions, e.g., do we even understand the revolution we provoke? The elaboration of this study, in particular, culminates in the seminal work *Civilization at the Crossroads* (Richta et al., 1966b), which is an economical, sociological, and technological forecast of development dealing with the transformation of industrial society into a post-industrial (or information, etc.) society. It sets out a vision of post-industrial socialism in the spirit of the ideals of Marxist humanism and the systems perspective. Richta understands the concept of S&TR<sup>9</sup> as meaning a revolutionary change in the totality of the productive forces. It will inevitably culminate in a society that replaces the objective function of profit maximization with the function of all-around human development.

The interdisciplinary study became a bestseller when it attracted considerable attention at home and abroad. It has also been referred to as the "*Capital of the 20th Century*". It remains the world's most widely published original domestic work in philosophy, economics, and sociology and has been translated into twelve languages. It has attracted interest for its rigorously critical approach, holistic scope, originality, and extensive use of new findings from world scholarship. The study also led to the creation of a new discipline of S&TR. It was exceptional for its time in its genuinely interdisciplinary approach, with experts from philosophy, sociology, economics, urban planning, medicine, etc., participating in the work. Also significant is the effort to systematically compare developments in capitalist and socialist countries and search for valid indicators.

*Civilization at the Crossroads* seeks to provide a comprehensive and synthetic explanation of the S&TR, its context and implications, including the human and social dimensions. Moreover, this is against the background of the clash of two systems – socialism and capitalism. The text contrasts the S&TR and the Industrial Revolution. The crossroads concerned the possibility of further securing the development of the productive forces in a harmonious manner, including human development. Richta notes the presence of a "*nodal line*"

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<sup>9</sup> Richt's S&TR concept is discussed further in, e.g., (Sommer, 2017).

of modern civilization, beyond which further development of the productive forces is no longer manageable by industrial means, only by a transition to the S&TR.

*Civilization at the Crossroads* can be described "in a nutshell" by an article (Richta, 1966). It summarizes the key premises, hypotheses, and conclusions. *The first and second editions of Civilization at the Crossroads* consist of four thematic sections in addition to the preface, introduction, and appendix passages. *The introduction* is subtitled *Towards an Understanding of the Meaning of Change*. *The appendices* contain passages, *A few Summary Points for Reflection for Practice, Tables, and a List of References*. The book is 256 pages long. *The third expanded edition* is now 417 pages. It includes new sections on growth pattern changes or embedding S&TR in the history stream and numerous additions from background studies. The titles of some passages have been revised, and notes have been added.

The first section, *On the Nature of the Scientific and Technical Revolution*, traces the changes in the structure of the productive forces, the technical and social upheavals, and the approach to S&TR in the CSSR. It further contains three chapters structured internally. The second section, *Revolutions in Work, Skills, and Education*, targets the effects of the S&TR on the structure of work and education. It consists of two chapters. S&TR is also changing the way of life in which one deals with an artificial environment. A man steps out of the original natural world and lives in an environment that he has artificially created. This is analysed in section three, *Modern Civilization and Human Development*, which consists of two chapters. The two chapters of Section Four, *New Features of Social Development in the Scientific and Technological Revolution*, emphasize the new status of science and address the issues of governance and the social and ideological problems of the 'epoch of science and technology'.

The section *Civilization at the Crossroads* assesses the impact of S&TR on human life in spheres such as the environment, work organization, lifestyle, relationship to nature, etc. Implementing S&TR is central to the open competition between capitalism and socialism. Recommendations on how to improve the performance of the Czechoslovak economy are thus included. Expert advice on changes in the management of society and the economy should have been considered by the leadership of the time.

Regarding Richt's concept of S&TR, there are criticisms concerning the definition of S&TR and its interpretation as a panacea or the visionary idea that S&TR should automatically lead to communism. Related to this are reservations about the academic nature of the research and its utopian dimensions. Despite the limitations of the time (including exaggerated techno-optimism), Richt's S&TR theory encompasses most of the social and civilizational growth factors. Moreover, it concerns human needs and developmental changes in man and society.

One of the key inspirations is the emphasis on the spheres of science and research. Related to this is the emphasis on education, the role of the human factor, and investment in this direction.

"Anti-revisionist" modifications of the concept of socialist S&TR are summarized in the Soviet-Czech collective work *Man/Science/Technology*. It stresses the historical role of the working class (and the leading role of the Party) even under the conditions of the S&TR. The outcomes of the period of consolidation operate with the idea that competition under the conditions of the S&TR should already be decided in favor of world socialism. The orientation toward the critique of Western theories of sociology, political science, economics, etc, underlines this.

Views on R. Richta remain different. His work in the social sciences is often relativized and interpreted as ambivalent and ambiguous. Although on some issues, Richta was necessarily beholden to the times, his work demonstrates both the strength of his spirit and his commitment to a scientifically objective vision not only of the present but, above all, of the future. On the one hand, Richta, a scientist and politician, is often remembered as one of the liberal-reformist faces of the Prague Spring. He was one of the architects of the *Communist Party of Czechoslovakia's Action Programme* and is considered a key figure in formulating the further development of socialism in Czechoslovakia. The so-called "*revival process*" was to find theoretical expression in the concept of the S&TR and the *Action Programme of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia*. However, it is necessary to stress the illusory nature of a specifically Czechoslovak path in a divided world firmly anchored by the Yalta system. On the other hand, Richt's academic and other positions, his turns of opinion and activities after 1968, and the works themselves are thus blamed.

The central theme of Richt's works remains the all-round development of man and socialist humanism. These are not merely a transfer of Western concepts of post-industrial etc. society to the socialist backdrop of the liberal ferment of the 1960s. Nor, on the other hand, is it a mere finding and dusting off of Marx's reflections outlined in *the Grundrisse*. Richt's entire work is imbued with humanist ideals. Even *Civilization at the Crossroads* suggests how to achieve a general transformation and progress in society in the sense of man's self-realization as a self-purpose. The all-round development of man is to be the basis, as well as the goal, of the development of the productive forces.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In the context of reflections on social transformation, Rycht's legacy can be inspiring (e.g., Jurásek, Leinweber, Valencik, 2016).

## Conclusion

Without the authors of this article wanting to forcefully connect the completely different personalities and worlds of Bolzano and Richta and artificially search for their points of contact, many similarities emerge. Bolzano and Richta are not yet fully appreciated and their works remain unknown abroad. Bolzano and Richta can also be remembered in connection with the question of the last Czech polymath. The broad scientific scope did not mean superficiality and shallowness of reflections and concepts. The multifaceted focus of this Renaissance scholar remains a current inspiration in the sense of interdisciplinarity like Richta. Both share a typical humanistic and visionary dimension. While Richta places the human being at the centre of his concern, for Bolzano the general welfare remains more important than the human being himself.

Bolzano was aware that humanity had not found an ideal, perfect form of state in the thousands of years of its existence, and he did not believe that his visionary ideas could soon be realized. That is why he refused to publish his utopian treatise (Bolzano, 1932) during his lifetime. His health, unpopularity with the Austrian authorities, and the revolutionary events of 1848, which frightened Bolzano, all contributed to this. Nevertheless, he encouraged the dissemination and development of visionary ideas and the search for the good that might come from them.

On the question of whether the scientific and technical revolutionary Richta can be rightly called a utopian, the authors are inclined to the conclusion that he is. Richta was a dreamer and the original Czech Marxist visionary with ideas about post-industrial socialism or future communism. The utopianism of Richt's S&TR theory can be viewed in different ways. It was truncated during the normalization period, and the S&TR became a "*fictitious revolution*". It was a mythical vision which, insofar as it dealt with capitalism, was excessively dystopian. If it was about socialism, it was usually rosy utopian. Nevertheless, Richta's work has brought many impulses to the discussions on Society 4.0 or 5.0. *Civilization at the Crossroads* is a truly scientific treatise. Richta and his teams wanted to communicate something to the world and thus help change the world toward humanistic ideals.

*On the Best State* (Bolzano, 1932) is a scientific treatise, originally surprising – similar to the legendary interdisciplinary study *Civilization at the Crossroads* (Richta et al., 1966). These are two seminal contributions of Czech thought to visions of the ordering of society, including ideas about the economy. Bolzano considered the category of property to be quite fundamental. B. Bolzano and R. Richta remain the greatest Czech visionaries.

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