Karel Hlaváček

A Literary Piece as a Sociological Work: The Concept of Modernity in Karel Čapek's *War With the Newts*

In this text,¹ I analyze Karel Čapek's (1999) novel *War With the Newts* (*Válka s Mloky*, 1936, first publication in English 1937). In it, Čapek (1890–1938) recounts the catastrophic end of both the natural world and the social world of the 20th century. A new species of intelligent salamanders is discovered and exploited, forced to serve as workers and soldiers. The newts eventually revolt against their human masters, create their own underwater civilization, and finally destroy human civilization by transforming the continents into shoals that they use as their habitat.

I interpret Čapek's story as a full-fledged sociological work.² This may seem to be a risky and potentially contestable undertaking. I will certainly face a strong challenge

¹ This text is an expanded version of my newspaper essay *Život na naší planetě: Co nám sir Attenborough neřekl a Karel Čapek ano* (Hlaváček, 2021), where I criticized reductionist interpretations of the novel that consist in exclusively stressing its historical anti-fascist aspect. For example, Dubow and Steadman-Jones (2013, p. 119) interpreted the novel as a "satire on twentieth century totalitarianism"; Ort (2013, p. 2) viewed the novel as "an apocalyptic satire in the age of dictatorship"; and Kussi (1990, p. 7) described it as a "brilliant satire on European dictatorship and other follies of the age". Although these interpretations are certainly correct, they are also extremely one-sided. They exclude the possibility of learning something from Čapek today. In my efforts to show that Čapek may not be dead for us, I follow Haman and Trensky (1967, p. 174), who have remarked that Čapek's *War With the Newts* reflects "the problems of modern civilization and its technical explosion".

² Čapek is usually not connected with sociology but rather with philosophy, which he studied (see, e.g., Harkins, 1960). Nevertheless, he was familiar with the sociology of Émile Durkheim, and even wrote about it, criticizing Durkheim for not including human agency in his theories (Musil, 2008).

from sociologists, who may draw inspiration from literature but would otherwise insist that there is a fundamental difference between sociology and literature. That is why no poems or tales are published in sociological journals. Why do I expose myself to this risk? In one of my previous texts (Hlaváček, 2020, p. 80), I claimed that in general, social scientists no longer try to understand the social world. Instead, they mainly seek to avoid being criticized by their colleagues, because criticism means that their texts do not get published. Thus, great questions about the functioning of the social world as a whole and bold theses seem to have disappeared from the field. Great questions are too demanding to be answered, and bold ideas can always be criticized and are hence “unpublishable”. Therefore, daring openness is a luxury no one can afford. I see this as an unfortunate development.

Even though a sociological reading of a literary work surely does not represent any kind of exclusive sociology, there is a different problem: Does literature not fundamentally differ from sociology? Literature is, after all, art, whereas sociology is a social science. Nonetheless, I contend that a piece of literature can be considered a sociological work. Thus, I feel obliged to divide this text into two parts: in the first part I defend my approach, and in the second section I analyze the novel.

I do not want to support my approach by stressing the intentions of the author him- or herself because the author is dead, both literally and in a figurative sense.³ Instead, I must question the distinction between sociology and literature, which rests upon the difference between science and art. I believe that no such dichotomy exists. Does distinguishing between science and art really give us a clearer understanding of our society? Do contemporary sociologists understand our own society better than Balzac understood 19th-century France or Tolstoy 19th-century Russia? Who would be willing make such a claim, and who would be able to defend it?

Nevertheless, relevant objections to understanding literary works explicitly as “sociology” can certainly be made, and I feel obliged to address them. The first and most important objection is as follows: works of art, be they novels or dramas, do not proceed methodically, nor do they follow any scientific methodology. As a result, they do not arrive at any “knowledge”, and thus, they remain obscure for the purposes of interpretation. A second possible objection could be formulated as well: literary works can be considered proto-

³ Čapek is really dead, to be sure. More importantly, Roland Barthes (1977) tells us in “The Death of the Author” that the author’s intentions cannot be considered of importance when interpreting a text. I follow Barthes’s approach.

sociological at best because no empirical work underpins them. Sociology is an empirical science, and its method consists in empirically validating theories. Therefore, literary works are not sociological in nature, although in some cases they may be read as hypotheses. A third objection involves literature's lack of scientific concepts: sociology as a social science does not work with mere "words". On the contrary, it introduces concepts; its starting point are definitions. Thus, novels cannot be considered "sociological", for they do not define and elaborate concepts.

To counter these objections, I draw on the ideas of sociologist, philosopher, and musicologist Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969), "postmodernizing" his theory of aesthetic experience and sociological knowledge. Let us see how it responds to the first objection. Adorno developed a kind of methodological anarchism in sociology. In his discussion of Descartes's *Discourse on the Method*, he decisively stated that knowledge creation as he understood it proceeded in a "methodically anti-methodical" (Adorno, 1984, p. 161) fashion and must not be bound up by any rules. As a result, he claimed to create sociological "essays" that were very loose in both their form and content. Their form did not follow the track of linear argumentation, and their content began where Adorno wanted it to and ended when he felt like it. Hence, they are just like literary pieces. Not surprisingly, Adorno said that poetry was a sister of his essays (Adorno, 1984, p. 151).⁴

Adorno also dealt with the other two objections mentioned. First, he did not consider the empirical validation of theories to be an essential part of sociological work. Even though Adorno himself authored several famous empirical studies, he strictly refused defining sociology as empirical in a scientific sense. He claimed that the basic characteristic of sociology was not scientific empiricism but the concept of social totality (Adorno, 1967, pp. 19–20), and that totality was not verifiable or falsifiable by empirical work. Sociology without empirical validation is entirely possible – and Adorno's own work is an example of such a sociology.⁵ By contrast, empirical sociology without an elaborated concept of social totality is a very problematic notion.⁶

⁴ Contrary to the seeming arbitrariness of such essays, Adorno's anti-methodological stance is anything but arbitrary. Central to Adorno's sociological work are childish play, spontaneity, and creativity, without which we cannot arrive at any "original" or "innovative" truth. And it is these qualities that methodological rules could endanger.

⁵ Adorno and Horkheimer's portrayal of modernity in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) is not based on scientific empiricism. Nonetheless, this work firmly established the whole tradition of critical theory. This is possible because it described and analyzed the modern social totality.

⁶ The problem lies in the fact that empirical findings always take place against the background of an imaginary of social totality (which may be just implicit). When not articulated, the imaginary may be unreflected, and as a result, scientific empirical sociology without any idea of totality may merely serve the already existing totality.

In Adorno's view, sociology does not need to clarify concepts, either. In fact, Adorno refused the very possibility of defining concepts. In his sociology, concepts are clarified in the same way they are clarified in normal language (and in literary stories, too). Words simply appear in the text without being explained or specified and as the essay proceeds, they become increasingly precise concepts. Instead of being defined, concepts are situated in a "force field" (*Kraftfeld*) of meaning connections, and within this force field, they occur in specific configurations, in typical relations with other concepts. Our gradual recognition of the configurations typical of each force field is what clarifies concepts. Hence, the meaning of a concept remains open to debate because new configurations are always appearing, and thus, our understanding of each force field is in constant flux.⁷ According to Adorno, this flexibility is essential for concepts and it is impossible to constrain them with definitions because when we do this, concepts die and their meanings are no longer able to develop.

As a result, Adorno did not dogmatically separate knowledge from art. To avoid any misunderstandings, I would like to point out that Adorno never claimed sociology and literature (or science and art) were the same, and neither do I. Indeed, they are not the same. Here, Adorno argued that over the course of human history our consciousness was divided, images and concepts separated. He warned that attempting to force a reversal of this fact could lead to unsound developments. If we try to put image and concept together, the result might be a "second-hand thinned-out cultural reminiscence of Hölderlin or Expressionism" (Adorno, 1984, p. 155). This statement may be true, but in my view Čapek avoided the danger Adorno is talking about. No reasons arise here for not considering his *The War With the Newts* to be sociological.⁸

The process of knowledge creation is, then, simply the process of articulating contemplative experience.⁹ By the same token, art also emerges from contemplative experience,

⁷ "All of its concepts are presentable in such a way that they support one another, that each one articulates itself according to the configuration that it forms with the others. [...] Through their own movement the elements crystalize into a configuration. It is a force field, just as under the essay's glance every intellectual artifact must transform itself into a force field" (Adorno, 1984, p. 161).

⁸ Adorno himself deemed many literary works to be sociologically relevant. Nonetheless, I do not adopt his approach here. Generally, Adorno was overly critical of great authors, looking for ideological influences in them. I, however, concentrate on what is exceptional about Čapek.

⁹ Debates about the conception of the *empirical* should be mentioned here. *Empirical* refers to experience. Experience is related to the human senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching. The scientific concept of empiricism (though well-established) is secondary, derived from our contemplative experience (*offene geistige Erfahrung*). If it is stressed too much, it leads to a disconnection from experience. A "mind which does not know experience anymore" (Adorno, 1970, p. 69) may arise.

even if in many of its manifestations it need not be articulated discursively (Seel, 2004). Their shared origin results in basic commonalities between the two. Hence, the difference between art and science, between image and concept, is historical and analytical, not ontological and fundamental. Therefore, reasons may arise to cross the border, even though there may be no intention to reverse historical development and tear the border down. Such a crossing of the existing boundary is what I will attempt in this text.

Adorno himself would have said that he described the social world around him “objectively”. Such a claim, however, cannot be true, and when looking at his writings carefully, we see it clearly. The social world as we know it – for example – from his and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2009), is not “really real”. Adorno did not describe the social world objectively. Rather, he took some of its features which he experienced through contemplation, and omitted others. There are, after all, many social theories that stress different features of reality. The result of Adorno and Horkheimer’s undertaking is not an objective description but an abstraction from reality, which allowed them to emphasize some elements in this very reality as if they were the most important ones. Therefore, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* could be seen as a literary dystopia.¹⁰

In conclusion, sociology may be thought of as a “methodically anti-methodical” attempt at understanding our society as a whole, a depiction showing us the entirety of our society as something we may not have conceived clearly before. It may be interpreted as a result of our contemplation that shows us what could happen if some features of contemporary society are strengthened while others are suppressed. If we accept that sociology can be considered in this way, then Čapek’s novel *War With the Newts* is undoubtedly “sociological” in a strict sense. Sociology need not be connected with methodology and empirical validation. And “concepts” which are not explicitly defined can be understood in terms of their force field and typical configurations.

My point of departure is a preconception of what Čapek thought about modernity that stems not only from *War With the Newts* but also from my knowledge of his other utopian works (*The White Disease* (Čapek, 2019), *Krakatit* (Čapek, 2018a), *R.U.R.* (Čapek, 2018b), and *The Absolute at Large* (Čapek, 2013)). Nevertheless, I consider *War With the Newts* to

¹⁰ There are differences between the social world presented in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and dystopias. To start with, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not contain a story. I stress just the common qualities to exemplify the virtual aspect of sociology, not to erase all existing differences.

be Čapek's central work about the modern age. Thus, I complete my analysis with brief remarks about his other works but keep the main focus on *The War With the Newts*. Another remark must also be made. I take the concept of modernity from Čapek's dystopian work, which means that I concentrate on analyzing what Čapek considered dangerous about the modern age. This is a considerable reduction of Čapek's complexity because his other literary works suggest that Čapek was fascinated by the ordinary lives of modern people and their poetics (see, e.g., Málek, 2018).

The first configuration of the "modern age" force field is the "hand of fate", that is, the predominance of structural necessity over human agency.

What does "the hand of fate" bring in Čapek's text? It ushers in profound change, the newts represent a rupture in the relationship between people and the world. The old relationship was "romantic and beautiful" (emotional); the new one is rational, as newts become objects of "a vast horizontal and vertical enterprise" (Čapek, 1999, p. 107). However decidedly Čapek rejected Marxism and communism, the structural or "fateful" character of the capitalist economy plays a crucial role in the destruction of the world in his novel. It is Bondy's company that creates the entire problem, and it is economic structures which support salamanders when they destroy the world. Bondy does not make decisions as an individual; the hand of fate guides him. He is just a personalization of the market economy. In the end, he is replaced by institutions. Čapek wrote, "Do you know who is lending money to the Newts, who is financing this end of the World, this New Flood? I do. Every factory in the world. Every bank. Every country" (Čapek, 1999, p. 251).

Why did the economic structures support the destruction of the world? As soon as the newts start generating large profits for many corporations and concerns, they become indispensable. Banks lend them money; agricultural firms sell crops to them; industries make instruments, machines, and weapons for them. Institutions defined in terms of profit cannot abandon profit. Thus, the second basic configuration of the modern age is related to the market economy.

The third basic configuration of the modern age is connected with nation-states. As we have seen in the above citation, the "End of the World" is financed by "every country". Čapek portrayed international relations as a nation-state anarchy in a way that could be called "realist" in international relations theory. In the book, each state seeks to expand militarily at the expense of other states, which leads the states to turn newts into soldiers. Čapek, however, clearly suggested that realist logic may be dangerous.

The newts do not accept the logic of nation-states; they build their own civilization, and turn against people. This plot twist implies that Čapek was an adherent of idealism in international relations.¹¹

So far, I have identified three basic configurations of Čapek's concept of the modern age. These configurations correspond to two institutional elements of the modern age – the profit-driven capitalist economy and the state system as an anarchy of a realist nature, driven by the desire for territorial expansion – and the mechanism of their functioning, consisting in the predominance of structural necessities over individual agency. Yet how is it possible that these two structural elements, the economy and the state, operate completely undisturbed by the democratic will of the people? How is it possible that the will of individuals does not form a common will that could regulate and oppose the “fateful” dynamics of modernity?

To understand this, we must recognize that in Čapek's work, the configuration of the concept of the modern age is itself very unusual. He characterized modernity in its entirety as the “Newt Age”. So, what did the newt stand for in the novel? I understand the newts to be a metaphor. Paul Ricœur (1997) has influentially defended metaphors and their cognitive potential. Metaphors typically have two associated meanings: they denote (imparting literal meaning) and connote (imparting metaphorical, figurative meaning), and both denotation and connotation have cognitive relevance. Let us now examine the newt metaphor. I interpret Čapek's newts as representing both a fictional new species (denotation) and an underdeveloped form of human existence (connotation). Čapek characterized them as creatures who speak and work, but who lack the “higher” aspirations typical of humankind. They do not philosophize; they do not create works of art; and they do not long for beauty, truth, and the good.

This interpretation is not arbitrary. Čapek himself clearly associated newts with people when he spoke of “people of the Newt Age” (Čapek, 1999, p. 161), describing them as follows:

Real, self-assured Newt Age people will no longer waste their time meditating on the Essence of Things; they will be concerned solely with numbers and mass production. The world's entire future lies in a continually increased consumption and production – so we need even more Newts to produce even more and consume even more. The Newts are simply Quantity. (Čapek, 1999, p. 161)

¹¹ This may not be totally clear just from the novel *War With the Newts*. It becomes clear, however, when reading Čapek's *The White Disease*, in which the desirability of eternal peace is a key motif.

As is evident, “Newt Age people” actually share basic characteristics with newts. Hence, I posit that “Newt Age people” can be considered newts themselves. We must, however, respect the double meaning of the newt metaphor because in Čapek’s work the meaning of the metaphor is constantly shifting back and forth between denotation and connotation.

People of the Newt Age are not only deprived of “higher” human aspirations but they are also deeply intellectually deficient, as Čapek portrayed them, when he yet again closely associated people and newts:

[the] salamander can read, though only the evening papers. It is interested in the same things as the average Englishman and reacts to them in a similar manner, i.e. in the direction of established general views. Its intellectual life – in so far as one may speak of any – consists precisely of ideas and opinions current at the present time. (Čapek, 1999, p. 90)

Thus, Čapek actually conceives of the salamander as an underdeveloped form of the human being, represented by the “average Englishman”¹² (Čapek, 1999, p. 90). This underdevelopment is the root of the problem; it neutralizes not only the individual will but also the collective will of the public. No obstacles stand in the way of the all-important economy and state pressing forward.

One question about Čapek’s portrayal of modernity remains unresolved. Why should the imperatives of the economy and the state lead in a deadly direction? In the case of the international relations functioning in a realist way, the answer is clear, particularly when we realize that Čapek was an idealist. In the idealist view, striving for territorial expansion leads toward war. The market economy, however, is not clearly associated with the modern civilization’s disastrous end. After all, doesn’t the market economy support prosperity and well-being?

Here, the great potential of Čapek’s metaphor becomes visible, for there is also an etymological nuance that enriches its cognitive content. Čapek drew an etymological

¹² Čapek did not have anything against Englishmen, to be sure. Rather, he thought that this underdevelopment may be a result of a general inclination of the human heart confronted with the imperatives of the economic and the state system, as well as a result of the educational system in the Newt Age. Schools in the human world are “reformed with a view to bringing them as near as possible in line with the Reformed School for Newts” (Čapek, 1999, pp. 148–149). (Čapek analyzes the “lower” inclinations of the human heart in his drama *The White Disease* (Čapek, 2019), in which people appear completely unable to stand against the political and economic system, and in his novel *Krakatit* (Čapek 2018a), in which the inventor of the miraculous explosive is confronted with his own lust for power and women.)

line between the Czech word for newt, *mlok*, its German equivalent, *Molch*, and the name of an ancient pagan idol, Moloch. Thus, *newt* (*mlok*) simply means an idolater who worships Moloch, a monster that swallows up everything around it. Čapek wrote:

Newts themselves came to accept a different faith whose origin among them is unknown; this involved adoration of Moloch, whom they visualized as a giant Newt with a human head [...] no further details leaked out of their cultic rituals since they were conducted under water; they are, however, believed to be exceptionally cruel and secret. (Čapek, 1999, pp. 155–156)

We can see that even though newts lack “higher” human aspirations, they are religious. And it is their religion that lies at the heart of all the problematic aspects of Čapek’s modern age. Here, an extraordinarily interesting connection becomes manifest: newts can be understood as people of the Newt Age, confessors of the cult of Moloch and Quantity (Čapek, 1999, p. 161) at the same time. When carefully analyzing Čapek’s novel, we find that the cult of Moloch is fixed in both the futile actions of individuals and the very nature of the economy and the state. The aim of the economy is to maximize profit and production, the aim of the state is to maximize its territory, and the newts in the story breed extraordinarily fast. In the world portrayed in the book, quantity is maximized everywhere. It is this maximalization of quantity as the leading value of modern civilization that Čapek described as the cult of Moloch, and it is this maximalization of quantity which represents the deadly element within the modern institutions of the economy and the state.

We have thus described the force field of Čapek’s concept of the modern age. Its basic configurations consist of meanings related to the market economy and the state, the operation of which is regulated by neither individual human will nor public opinion. Instead, they follow the commands of the monstrous idol of the Newt Age, Moloch, to maximize quantities at any cost, even if both the human and the natural world must be sacrificed. In view of this, I consider Čapek’s novel to be a form of critical theory.

Does Čapek’s concept of the modern age have any importance for us today? Even though this novel was originally published in 1936, it is more than just a literary artifact. It can tell us much about today’s society, shedding light on things that contemporary mainstream sociology and philosophy are unable to adequately grasp.

In Čapek’s novel, religion plays a critical role. The democratic societies of the 1930s claimed, as do those today, to be religiously neutral, founded on secular institutions such

as the state and the economy, which leave space for freedom of religion. Čapek's greatness lies in his observation that modern-age institutions do not indeed leave that space open and empty. Čapek suggested that we live in the Newt Age and that the newt (*mlök*) is a believer in Moloch. Hence, state secularism and economic secularism cannot exist in our modern age. On the contrary, it is these institutions that form the base of the cult of Moloch.¹³ These structures inherently demand quantitative growth of everything at all costs, be it production, profit, or territory. We could even understand these structures to be Moloch himself. At the very heart of our allegedly secular society may be hidden a religious cult worshipping a hideous, cruel idol.

What are the consequences of such perverse religious worship? In Čapek's work, it is the destruction of both the natural and the human world. And what do biologists and ecologists tell us today about our planet? The human and the natural worlds in their current forms may well be irreversibly damaged due to environmental destruction and climate change. According to these scientists, the cause of this problem lies in the constant growth of the human population, production, and demands on natural resources. The resemblance to Čapek's novel is striking. He may not have been just a great sociologist; he may have been a prophet, too. He understood the nature of the modern age so well that in his portrayal of it we still recognize the fundamental features of our own world: its Moloch-like quality and the newt-like proclivity of people. These characteristics of our world result in the predominance of economic and state egoism over wise individual action and reasonable public will. Here, current secular sociology and philosophy can still learn something new.¹⁴ Our modern age may still be in the middle of the war with the newts.

¹³ Čapek himself was not religious in the traditional sense. Nonetheless, he employed religious concepts to enrich his views (Opelík, 2016, p. 91). He was strongly influenced by Judeo-Christian ideas and often included them in his literary works, e.g., in *R.U.R.* (Čapek, 2018b) and *Krakatit* (Čapek, 2018a). On the other hand, Čapek clearly warned of the dangers of religious zeal in his novel *The Absolute at Large* (Čapek, 2013).

¹⁴ The idea of a hidden modern religion is not new at all. Walter Benjamin (1991) wrote an unfinished work about capitalism as a religion (*Kapitalismus als Religion*), and today there are elaborate conceptualizations of religion that have a partial potential to grasp what Čapek had in mind (e.g., *Invisible Religion* by Thomas Luckmann (2014) or notions of civil religion). Nonetheless, understanding the secular world as being idolatrous is a religious notion, not a sociological or philosophical one. Thus, it has considerable potential for enriching those fields.

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A literary Piece as a Sociological Work: The Concept of Modernity in Karel Čapek's *War With the Newts*

In this text, I interpret Karel Čapek's novel *War With the Newts* (1936) as a sociological work and analyze the concept of the modern age that it presents. First, I show in what sense Čapek's work was sociological. Following Theodor Adorno, I suggest that the difference between literature and sociology is not of a fundamental but of a historical and analytical nature, and that what defines sociology is not method, empiricism, or explicitly defined concepts, but the insightful notion of social totality. In Čapek, I analyze a totality that I find in his concept of the modern age. Such an analysis provides insight into the self-destructive power of modern society. I suggest that Čapek's portrayal of modernity still applies today and that we can recognize the same patterns he presented in the world around us.

Keywords:

Karel Čapek; *War With the Newts*; Theodor W. Adorno; literature; sociology

Utwór literacki jako dzieło socjologiczne. Koncepcja nowoczesności w *Inwazji jaszczurów* Karela Čapka

W artykule analizuję powieść Karela Čapka *Inwazja jaszczurów* (1936) jako pracę socjologiczną, skupiając się na zaprezentowanej w niej koncepcji nowoczesności. W pierwszej części tekstu pokazuję, w jakim sensie można uznać pracę Čapka za socjologiczną. Podążając śladami Theodora W. Adorna, uważam, że różnica między literaturą a socjologią nie jest fundamentalna, a jedynie historyczna i analityczna, oraz że wyróżnikiem socjologii nie są metoda, empiryzm czy jednoznacznie zdefiniowane koncepcje, lecz dające głęboki wgląd pojęcie całości społecznej. W drugiej części tekstu analizuję zidentyfikowane przeze mnie pojęcie całości społecznej, jakie stanowi jego koncepcja nowoczesności. Analiza ta pozwala

uzyskać wgląd w autodestrukcyjną moc nowoczesnego społeczeństwa. Staram się dowieść, że przedstawiona przez tego autora wizja nowoczesności jest wciąż aktualna, a opisane przez niego wzory możemy zaobserwować w otaczającym nas świecie.

Słowa kluczowe:

Karel Čapek; *Inwazja jaszczurów*; Theodor W. Adorno; literatura; socjologia

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