

ALVIN TOFFLER AND THE ECONOMICO-SOCIAL EVOLUTION

Alina-Petronela HALLER¹

E-mail: hallalina@yahoo.com

Abstract

In the present paper we analyse, from an epistemological standpoint, the phases of economic and social development in Alvin Toffler's perspective. In his works, he analyses economy and society at three distinct levels, which he calls "waves". In Toffler's view, humankind passed through two such phases (waves) and presently it is prepared to enter the third one, the knowledge one. The way from the first to the current (third) wave was long and difficult, marked by deep changes in all domains as well as at a mental level. From an agrarian society, whose primary objective was subsistence, characterizing the first wave, we have now reached the stage of a society where knowledge comes to the forefront, the third wave, after having transited the industrial one, which has characterized the second wave.

Currently, humanity faces a turning point, that Toffler regards as a "quantum leap" towards a totally different civilisation. The changes of the third wave will be deep and will eventually open the way to a consciousness society, as Mihai Drăgănescu calls it in his book "Culture and the knowledge society", a much subtler and maybe anti-economic one. The risks associated to the second wave (the wave of industrialization) are certain causes of the shift of paradigm and of the more and more important emphasis on knowledge. If in the industrial society technology dominated both the economic and the social levels, in the knowledge society man will dominate technology and will have the control of the major directions of progress.

Key words: economy, society, progress, doctrine

MATERIAL AND METHOD

This paper is a theoretical research, based on the methods of descriptive analysis of Alvin Toffler's doctrine.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

From its early beginnings to now, humankind has covered, in its evolution, a long way and has suffered significant physical and mental modifications, which, altogether, represented the basis of the current progress and the platform of the future one. There have been several crucial moments in history: the agrarian revolution, the industrial revolution and the revolution of knowledge. All of these propelled the humanity on higher steps of economic and social development.

In his works, Alvin Toffler analysed this evolution and anticipated the future one. From his point of view, we are now standing on a third evolution level, which he calls the third wave (in the present paper, we will use the terms wave, civilization and society to describe the three stages that humankind has covered from its early beginning up to now with a similar meaning). Each of these three waves has its own characteristics. From the primitive, mainly agrarian society, we passed to the industrial period, dominated by

technology and are now in the third wave, dominated by knowledge. Toffler thinks that at the end of the 20th century, the first wave, characterizing the agrarian society, abated, while the second wave, of the industrial society, which revolutionised everybody's life, keeps on going, still powerful (there are underdeveloped and developing countries who still fight to develop their agriculture and industry, and which are separated from the developed countries by huge gaps of development and economic and social growth).

Meanwhile, a third wave, more important than the previous ones, set out. Many countries simultaneously feel the impact of two or even three completely different waves of change, moving along with different speeds and pushed by different degrees of force (Toffler Alvin, 1983, p.49). Each new type of society emerges at the moment when, in their dynamics, the waves of history cohere and whole civilizations collide (Toffler Alvin, 1995, p. 31).

Each wave or stage that the society covered involved, in Toffler's view, a redefinition of God, of justice, of love, of power, of beauty; it roused new ideas, attitudes and analogies; it undermined and replaced old opinions about time, space, matter and causality, the conception about the world.

¹ Romanian Academy – Branch of Iași - Economic and Social Research Institute „Gh. Zane”

We will present here the three waves of social evolution from Alvin Toffler's perspective and through his eyes, from the first social forms to that kind of civilization where knowledge rules.

The Society of the first wave (the agrarian or traditional society)

The society or civilization of the first wave started, from Toffler's standpoint, in about 8000 B.C. and ruled, without competition, up to the years 1650-1750 A.D., when the first industrial revolution occurred.

At its beginnings, the civilization of the first wave was a primitive one, living in tribes and small communities and carrying on simple activities. As time went by, where agriculture appeared, the civilization started to develop, based upon the main factor of production – the land – and on a simple division of labour, the foundations, for a long time, of the economy, of life, of culture, of family and even of political structure.

A general feature of the first wave society was the economic decentralization. Each community produced almost all of the necessary assets.

The goods were made through traditional methods, usually by hand, hence the name of manufacture that the first forms of industry received. The circulation of products was difficult because of the big distances between communities and of the rudimentary transportation.

In the agrarian communities, peoples were living in community, the families were large, made of several generations living under the same roof and working together. Each community consumed what it could produce or could get from exchanges, within the limits of the surplus. Poverty, hunger, diseases and the fight for survival were the characteristic features of the traditional agrarian society.

The economy of the first wave was made of two sectors: in one of them, people were producing for their own consumption, in the other for exchanges. Initially, the former had the biggest weight, because "production and consumption were combined in one single life-giving function" (Toffler Alvin, 1983, p. 77). In the agrarian society, most of the population lived outside the market.

The first wave of civilization led to the spreading of agriculture everywhere in the world; it gave birth to rural settlements where people were living their whole existence, in a horizon relatively restricted to the place where they had been born. Agriculture imposed a sedentary life and generated strong local attachments.

The traditional society suffered slow changes, benefited by little information, and the

most influential persons in the community were the priest, the teacher, the ruler and the members of family, the area of development being a very tight one. Yet, only one impulse was necessary to make things change in a radical way, in an extremely alert rhythm.

The second wave society (the industrial society)

Over the decades, agriculture beat a retreat, while industry, under the form of manufacturing, at the beginning, progressed. The first sector withdrew, while the second moved forward. Although there is no exact delimitation, Toffler considers that the moment of passage from the agrarian to the industrial society is the year 1712, when the steam engine appeared. The emergence and utilization of electrical power allowed for a huge step to be made forward at all levels: the economic, the social and the cultural one. The population was somehow forced to leave its lands in order to provide labour to the more and more numerous manufactures. The passage from the agrarian to the industrial society was a conflicting one: strikes, uprisings, insurrections. Yet, the industrial society was quickly enrooted. Over the second wave, the wave of the industrial society, the distinctive sign was the sign of technique and industry.

The first wave of change, due to the agrarian revolution, was not depleted when the first industrial revolution started, in Europe (17th century), and grounded the industrial society. The industrialization generalized fast. According to Toffler, two waves of change occurred concomitantly, separately and with different speeds. One with a lower speed, the other with higher speed. The emergence of the railways and of streets opened the access to the inside of communities and states.

The industrial society was auspicious to investments and to the great corporations, and people adapted themselves to that. The family became, according to Toffler, nuclear, that is limited (mother, father and three children at the most), and people are now attending, in their big majority, factory-like schools, where the focus is placed on punctuality, submission, repetitive (mechanical) work. The mass education system makes nothing else but prepares the labour for the great corporations. Children go to school earlier and earlier, and the schooling gets longer and longer. Each phase in a human's life is dominated by a key-institution.

The social and economic evolution that took place in the industrial society allowed the existence of some intercorrelated dimensions: the technosphere, which produced and distributed

wealth, the sociosphere, which created the specific social networks, and the infosphere, which provided and allowed the spreading of information, so that the whole system should work properly. The technosphere, the sociosphere and the infosphere represent the architectonics of the industrial society.

If the civilization of the first wave predominantly lived outside the market, the civilization of the second wave obtains necessities by exchanges, this being dependent on the market.

A characteristic feature of the second wave economy is standardization. The standardization process has initially manifested itself as far as products were concerned, but subsequently it concerned methods, procedures, labour, education, money, prices and life. The “*bon à tout faire*” man was replaced by the narrowly specialized employee, very good in his own field and able to carry on repetitive activities.

Centralization is another characteristic of the industrialized society. The decentralized economy of the first wave needed, in time, centralization, as the mass production had to be sold on larger and larger markets, and the international exchanges need rigorous organization and not isolation. The national markets became components of the global market. Cultures that had lived, for thousands of years, independently from the economic point of view, producing their necessary food, were absorbed, whether they wanted it or not, into the world commercial system and obliged to participate in the trade or disappear (Toffler A., 1983, p. 138). The population’s standard of life became dependent on the economies of other countries, very remote ones from a geographical point of view, lying on different continents.

The mass production, mass consumption, mass education, mass media, they all gave birth to the industrial society.

The industrial society, due to the progress it registered, created hope for the diminishing of poverty, of hunger, of diseases, for peace, for a better life expectancy and a higher standard of life.

In the euphoria of progress and of gains, within the industrial society, decisions were made whose medium and long run consequences were neglected. The idea that nature was meant to be exploited offered a welcome rational explanation for myopia and egoism (Toffler A., 1983, p.145), especially that the idea that history irreversibly goes on towards a better life and a higher standard of life for the whole humanity was a dominant idea. Reality however opposes this idea: “never before has a civilization created the necessary means to literally destroy a whole planet, not a city. Never before has been threatened with

poisoning whole oceans, have species disappeared from the earth because of the people’s greed and inattention and has the thermal pollution threatened the planet’s climate” (Toffler A., 1983, p. 173).

At the moment when a major part of the population understood the situation that the planet reached because of the overexploitation, as well as the risks that humanity is exposed to, the intensity of the second wave started to diminish and make place to the third wave, dominated by knowledge.

Many would think, starting from a natural logic and from the technological dynamism, that the industrial society will be followed by a supraindustrial one, but, to everyone’s stupefaction, the third wave has another dominant characteristic, namely knowledge, by which humanity will be able to make a “quantum leap forward”. Knowledge, which has undergone some impressive dynamics all over the industrial society, unbalanced, by its outcomes, the natural man-environment equilibrium, which now it has to recover, during the third wave, that of the knowledge society.

The industrial society or civilization, a product of the second wave of major changes, approximately spans the period 1650-1950. Over two centuries (1750-1950) it dominated the planet, but at the end of the 20th century, the development of communications (computers, aircrafts, robotics, space conquest, etc.) it has left room enough for a new type of civilization and society, that is for a third wave.

Third wave society (the knowledge society)

The knowledge society (or the third wave) has its epicentre in the USA of the 1950s, being started by some innovations and revolutionary actions.

Land, labour and capital represented the main factors of production in the industrial society. Knowledge (information, images, symbols, culture, ideologies and values) represents the primary factor of production in the knowledge society, becoming the main modality to obtain wealth.

The society of knowledge brings forth changes in what family, economy, the way of living, of working, of loving are concerned and, above all, it brings forth a modified consciousness.

Toffler, anticipating, characterized the third wave as a totally new civilization that we are building and which will lead, sooner or later, to social upheavals and restructuring, ampler than ever.

The knowledge society is called by Toffler a society of presumption, as it is a very technical and at the same time anti-industrial society, founded on sources of diversified recoverable energy, on

modern methods of production and on corporations that are totally different from the current ones, on new behaviours, on the elimination of standardization, so that a suture will occur between producer and consumer.

The role of technologies in the knowledge society has changed. They should create labour opportunities, avoid environment pollution and degradation, produce especially for the personal or local benefit and less for the world one, avoid waste, allow each secondary product of one branch to become the raw material for another branch. The result of this will be the humanization of technical progress, a major characteristic feature of the knowledge society. In the third wave, attention will be rather focalized on humans and less on profit.

Changes will be radical due to the massive flux of information, which will be accessible to everyone, unlike the case of the traditional society, where changes were taking place slowly and information was received from few sources. The knowledge society opens a new era of the demassified media. Knowledge will collapse those who will not be able to or will refuse to assimilate it, but will make competent those who will capitalize it; it will strengthen personality, it will change manners of acting and living. The man's intelligence, imagination and intuition will be much more important than machines in the immediately following decades (Toffler A., 1983, p. 238).

Mass production will be replaced by the limited production, personified according to the clients' tastes. The third wave will comprise both an unpolluting technosphere, which will allow a rational consumption of raw materials and resources, and an infosphere that is based upon a big volume of information and a sociosphere centred on varied family structures, where the traditional family will lose ground, the number of individuals that are not involved in some couple relation will increase and the family centred on adults – that is without or with no more than two children – will dominate. Family, in the knowledge society will be built, according to Toffler, on feelings, on human qualities, and not on financial situation and intellectual power (Toffler A., 1983, p. 276).

Family is not the only one that gets divided and diversified; information too, as well as production and market. The last one is divided into minimarkets, which grow more and more numerous, and are continually changing. In this type of market will work demassified corporations, responsible for both the production they make and for the effects of their activities on environment and consumers.

The knowledge society, it seems, will be, as far as its development shows us, similar with the agrarian society in many respects, such as: decentralized production, recoverable energetic sources, deurbanization, work from home, high level of prosumption. A careful analysis shows that knowledge society has more similitude with the agrarian society than with the industrial one.

Knowledge, the dominant characteristic of the current stage, offers new possibilities to the poor countries and populations, provided that research and new technologies should be oriented in their direction.

Knowledge again will change trajectory in the education field. The educational system specific to the industrial society is blamed everywhere. In both the rich and the poor countries (that have lately borrowed the educational models from the industrialized countries, which turned out to be ineffective) the re-examination of conceptions and concepts about education is required. First of all, because in the knowledge society the main, inexhaustible and continually dynamical resource is information. The people who will assimilate it in a responsible thorough manner will be productive and effective, while those who will do it in a superficial way will be the laggards of the new system.

Therefore, the world is made of three sectors: the sector of the first wave provides the agrarian and mineral resources, the sector of the second wave provides cheap labour and achieves the mass production, while the sector of the third wave, continually expanding, goes up on the dominant position, basing upon new ways of creating and exploiting knowledge (Toffler Alvin, 1995, p. 36).

If the agrarian society spans thousands of years and the industrial only 300 hundred years, the knowledge one, says Toffler, will pass through history and reach its completion point in a few decades, in order to make room for the society of consciousness, anticipated by Mihai Drăgănescu (Drăgănescu Mihai, pp.1-2), probably the society of the fourth wave.

CONCLUSIONS

The deepest economic and strategic society of all times is, as Toffler says in *War and Anti-War. Survival at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, the imminent division of the world into three different civilizations potentially colliding: one attached to the land, a product of the agrarian society, one originating in the first scientific discoveries, attached to techniques and technology, and one obviously attached to knowledge.

The knowledge society will gradually impose new archetypes. Technique will not be the one that establishes the objectives any more, but the people who use knowledge in order to stop the process of irreversible deterioration of the environment.

The knowledge society does not involve the emergence of a completely new economy and society, but it will merge the characteristic features of the agrarian and industrial societies, that is the characteristics of three contrasting societies: one symbolized by the plough, one by the assembly line and one by the computer.

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