
VYTAUTAS KAVOLIS' SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT: BETWEEN FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM

Summary

The monograph is devoted to the Lithuanian-American sociologist Vytautas Kavolis (1930–1996).

Kavolis was born on 8 September 1930 in Kaunas, the provisional capital of Lithuania at the time. In 1944, together with his parents, he retreated from Lithuania to West Germany. He completed his secondary education (Gymnasium) in Hanau. In 1949, he emigrated to the United States, where he studied at the University of Chicago, the University of Wisconsin, and Harvard University. In 1960, he defended his doctoral dissertation entitled *The Failures of Totalitarian Socialization: A Theoretically-Oriented Case Study of the East German Socialization System*. Kavolis taught various sociological courses, primarily in social theory, social psychology, and civilizational studies, at Tufts University (1958–1959), Defiance College (1960–1964), and Dickinson College (1964–1996). He published more than one hundred scholarly articles and reviews, authored eleven books, and edited four collections of academic papers. His scholarly interests encompassed the sociology of visual arts and literature, social psychology, comparative civilizational studies, and Lithuanian studies. Kavolis served as President of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations from 1977 to 1983 and as editor of its journal *Comparative Civilizations Review* from 1978 to 1996.

Kavolis also played an active role in the political and cultural life of the Lithuanian émigré community in the post-war period. He was one of the founders and leaders of the liberal-oriented organization *Santara-Šviesa* (Accord-Light), served as editor of its cultural and political journal *Metmenys* from 1959 to 1996, acted as a leading ideologue of Lithuanian liberalism, and was a prolific commentator on political, social, and cultural issues of the Lithuanian diaspora. After the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990, Kavolis actively engaged in the country's public and academic life. In 1993, he was awarded the Lithuanian National Prize for his contribution to Lithuanian studies. Kavolis died on 25 June 1996 in Vilnius.

One of the most persistent features of Kavolis' intellectual legacy is its apparent lack of coherence. This applies both to his scholarly work and to his political reflections. Kavolis himself did not explicitly identify a central theme of his sociological research, the logic of its development, or its general methodological principles, nor did he systematically explicate the concepts he employed. As a result, at first glance his sociology resembles a mosaic whose elements are not logically interconnected. This impression of fragmentation is further reinforced by his extensive use of diverse theoretical and empirical resources from various branches of the humanities and social sciences, often without sufficient clarification of how they fit into a unified scholarly project. In the case of his conception of liberalism, no explicit explanation is provided of how its heterogeneous elements – democracy, culture, morality, individual autonomy, and commitment to community – are logically related.

The problem of the unity of Kavolis' intellectual legacy becomes even more acute when two additional questions are raised. The first concerns the relationship between his scholarly convictions and his ideological commitments; the second concerns the philosophical foundations of his scientific and political thought. Some scholars have argued that

these foundations lie in existentialism, as articulated in Kavolis' work *Nužemintųjų generacija* (*The Generation of the Humiliated*, 1968). However, Kavolis himself never attributed an exceptional philosophical status to this work within his overall oeuvre.

The problem of the unity of Kavolis' legacy has been addressed on several occasions, yet previous attempts have remained partial, incomplete, or insufficiently systematic. This monograph seeks to resolve the issue in a comprehensive and systematic manner. The first part examines the theoretical, thematic, and philosophical foundations of Kavolis' sociology; the second part analyzes the corresponding foundations of his liberalism. The third part compares the presuppositions of sociology and liberalism and investigates their genetic relationships. It also discusses the possibility of interpreting existentialism as the underlying basis of Kavolis' sociological and political thought as a whole.

On the basis of the research conducted, it is concluded that Kavolis' sociology, liberalism, and existentialism form a relatively coherent intellectual whole. At the theoretical level, they are integrated by a shared fundamental structure consisting of the concepts of personality, society, and culture.

Kavolis adopts a mentalistic conception of personality. Personality is understood as that which resides within the individual and cannot be directly observed: *needs-dispositions* or *attitudes* directed toward objects in the physical, social, and cultural environment, which determine how these objects are perceived, emotionally experienced, and behaviorally treated. These needs-dispositions form a more or less coherent structure. In explaining the organizational principles of this structure, Kavolis rejects the substantialist notion of a central personality core. According to him, there is no unified self at the deepest level of personality from which all needs-dispositions could be derived. Instead, their organization into a coherent structure takes place at the surface level of personality.

At the core of Kavolis' concept of culture lies a normative understanding based on four fundamental assumptions. First, culture consists of values. Second, values are embodied in symbols, which may take the form of works of spiritual culture – such as religion, philosophy, art, science, morality, and law – as well as verbal and non-verbal language. Third, cultural values are institutionalized within the social fabric of society and thus shared by its members. Finally, values are internalized within individual personalities.

Kavolis conceptualizes society in relational terms, defining it as the totality of social relations among individuals. These relations are organized into systems of varying scope, coherence, and significance. One of the most important of these systems is the *societal community*, which is distinguished by its function of overall integration. On the one hand, it fosters solidarity among individuals and social groups and generates a sense of collective belonging; on the other hand, it integrates the *economy, polity, culture*, and itself – the systems of the greatest scope – into a single overarching structure.

The definitions of these key concepts are not static throughout Kavolis' intellectual career. The concepts of society and culture underwent the most significant changes. The understanding of culture evolved from an all-encompassing definition – according to which culture comprises the totality of all human-made artifacts – to the normative conception outlined above. Likewise, Kavolis long deliberated over whether society should be regarded as part of culture or culture as part of society. Nevertheless, despite these transformations, the concepts of personality, society, and culture retained their theoretical significance throughout his work. All questions are formulated and addressed, explicitly or implicitly, through the interplay of these three concepts. Accordingly, the fundamental theoretical structure of Kavolis' thought can be expressed as the triad *personality-society-culture*.

The relations among personality, society, and culture within this structure are defined in three principal ways. First, their partial overlap is emphasized and interpreted not as a sign of ontological weakness, but as a necessary condition of their completeness. Second, while their interdependence is stressed, it is also acknowledged that under certain circumstances they may become disassociated from one another. Third, in defining the relationship between creative individuals and society and culture, Kavolis adopts an intermediate position between determinism and indeterminism, assuming that individuals retain varying degrees of freedom of thought and action despite social and cultural influences.

Kavolis was motivated to address questions of personality, society, and culture by scientific, political, and existential concerns that initially emerged independently of one another. However, neither political theory nor existential philosophy alone provided satisfactory answers to these questions. Social theory enabled him to integrate these concerns into a coherent analytical framework.

In developing his approach, Kavolis was most strongly influenced by the American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). Parsons' theories of social action, society, culture, and personality played a central role in shaping Kavolis' thinking. By interpreting these theories in his own way and combining them with insights from other thinkers, Kavolis explored the nature of personality, society, and culture and the relations among them.

Kavolis' receptivity to Parsons' ideas can be attributed not only to their theoretical persuasiveness, but also to their correspondence with his existential and political concerns arising from life in the diaspora – particularly the challenges of personal identification with the Lithuanian community and its culture, and the reconciliation of competing political currents within the diaspora through a unifying ideological framework.

The deepest philosophical foundation of the personality-society-culture structure lies in Kantian epistemology and metaphysical assumptions

about physical reality and human nature. On the one hand, these concepts are treated as *a priori* conditions for the possibility of scientific knowledge; on the other hand, the psychological, social, and cultural structures they refer to are understood as objective *a priori* forms of consciousness and behavior. These forms are neither entirely arbitrary nor entirely non-arbitrary: they are constructed by selecting certain elements from a polymorphic, changing, and incomplete reality and shaping them into relatively stable and coherent structures. Once established, such structures tend to persist historically and are rediscovered and partially adopted by subsequent generations. Furthermore, Kantian apriorism is reflected in Kavolis' treatment of the relationship between these structures and the concrete cultural works in which they are expressed, the former being regarded as conditions of possibility for the latter. Finally, the concepts of personality, society, and culture constitute the *a priori* conditions of Kavolis' existential and political thought.

At the political level, this fundamental structure presupposes *republicanism*, which Kavolis himself refers to as *integral liberalism*. Kavolis' republicanism represents a synthesis of classical liberalism and conservatism, with personality corresponding to the liberal pole and society and culture to the conservative pole. Like other republican thinkers, including his mentor Parsons, Kavolis affirms both individual freedom and commitment to community and its culture. While individuals possess freedom of thought and action, their choice of goals and means is guided by the values of the community.

Finally, the monograph highlights Kavolis' original contribution to sociology. It argues that his most significant scholarly achievement lies in applying Parsons' theory of expressive symbolism to the sociological study of visual arts. Kavolis thus developed an early version of a structural-functional sociology of art several decades before neofunctionalists turned their attention to this field.