TREADING IN KOŁAKOWSKI’S FOOTSTEPS

By

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1.

Self-deification of man, which Marxism gave a philosophical expression to, ends the same way as all individual and collective attempts at self-deification: it appears as a farcical aspect of the deplorable plight of man. This is the conclusion of one of the saddest philosophy books that came out in the 20th century. It dispels hope and rids you of illusions—throughout the 1212 captivating pages it brings you down to earth. Treading on his own former illusions, Leszek Kołakowski destroys perhaps all temptations of positive political thinking.

He became a great skeptic, which meant he preferred to doubt rather than design. A subjective reception of the world [“As far as I remember I have thought the world is sad. (...) The world is sad.”] was solidified by the experience of two totalitarian regimes. Lined with a sorrow of his personal experience, this getting even with aberrations in politics was to be Kołakowski’s trademark, as did his clear, transparent style. Alienated against hazy reasoning, he shared with us his highest-quality prose which respects its reader. This is how he wrote the Main Currents of Marxism which put him on the map of the history of philosophy. One might want to say: alas!

This vast book is amongst the best known alongside The Gulag Archipelago and—as can be inferred from the works of today’s philosophers of politics—the least read masterpieces in our time (John Gray, now nicely positioned as a public intellectual, courteously reduces Kołakowski’s book to but a side note in his Black Mass). Today we can add: precisely because it vastly contributed to the fall of Communism. In fact, Kołakowski and Solzhenitsyn—although they discussed universal issues—seem to be fading away in the wake of a serious interest in Communism. It is Zygmunt Bauman who appears to be determining the philosophical rhythm of the modern day. Well, only a handful of experts will be able to prove anything to the contrary.

2.
Should any criteria of popularity be applied to philosophers at all, though? In the case of Kołakowski, I believe they should. It is because of his convictions, his passion for action in the public arena. We cannot really agree with the opinions that the author of “In praise of Inconsistency” operated outside of the current politics (such as the recent opinion by Jerzy Jedlicki). Kołakowski was into public affairs since his youth, and one should say he liked extreme challenge. He took risks in, first, his commitment in Communism and then in Revisionism. He put all his eggs in one basket when he made the address on the tenth anniversary of the events of October 1956. This resulted in his being expelled from the Communist Party and exile, following the events of 1968. Even after his emigration, however, he was always at the heart of intellectual life. It is a common belief that with his text “The Theses on Hope and Hopelessness” of 1971 he influenced the idea to set up the KOR Committee for the Defense of Workers, whose member he later became. Until 1989 he supported in a number of ways the political opposition, but that most important date of Poland’s modern history did not weaken Kołakowski’s activity. In the texts of 1990s he voiced his opinion on probably all key issues of the heated public debate (abortion, contraception, moral censorship, etc.), and it was not necessarily compliant—if I may use that understatement—with the official line of the Catholic Church in Poland.

Kołakowski’s “inconsistent skepticism” also meant civic commitment: precisely through the dissemination of the very skepticism. If there is something important, it was—as he put it—showing the ambiguity of confessions, commitments, duties, etc., where “human nature needs a world that makes sense (…), which must be found somehow.” This could possibly explain Kołakowski’s consent to a flirt of between philosophy and pop culture. Well, one could be a good citizen in e.g. providing arguments both against historiosophical pessimism and historiosophical optimism.

3.

Leaving aside the philosopher’s life in columns and TV programs, it is impossible to say whether the heritage of the author of The Presence of Myth can be in some part taken up by, say, the Catholic Church. He was never a formal member of any church, nor was baptized in childhood, but in his adult life he dealt with the matters of faith. In 1990s he wrote that he was relieved to see “a come-back of the sacred,” but he was ever more appalled by the image of the world that has forfeited its religious heritage (“the blown-up myths are not being replaced by enlightened rationality but rather by their lay caricatures and substitutes.”). He did not hesitate to criticize the
current policies by the Catholic Church; he even admonished the Church that its role should be one of discussing the “misery of the human plight” (the phrase making a clear reference to the work of Pope Innocent III) rather than dealing with trivia (like the interventions against the allegedly obscene films). He realized his own unorthodox approach to religion and the Catholic Church when he wrote of the infamous stakes, in his jocular tone: one might seek a concern about the salvation of the soul therein, but “I would hardly benefit from those.” Incidentally, he mentioned that his most favorite film director was the anti-Christian Luis Buñuel. He did represent an attitude that was hard to imitate—this part of the legacy will not yield to easy reception.

One cannot see any actors of the Polish political life as interested in upholding the legacy of Kołakowski. Neither the Left nor the Right—unless in their moderate forms leaning towards the center—could have anything to do with the author of Ethics Without a Moral Code and Other Essays on Ethics. On the one hand Kołakowski staunchly rejected the national-democratic tradition as “culturally sinister and personally repulsive;” on the other, he carried out a profound criticism of the modern Left, e.g. the Frankfurt School in his Main Currents of Marxism, all the gauchist tradition (his disgust for leftist obscurantism). Also, we remember his ironical remarks about Noam Chomsky. In his popular text Jak być konserwatywno-liberalnym socjalistą [How You Become a Liberal-Conservative Socialist] he addressed, with a pinch of salt, the otherwise serious issue of an excessive habit of easily labeling.

When Father Tischner was speaking of Kołakowski as a “philosopher of liberal intelligentsia” this could be understood as an indication that Kołakowski was an author of a certain generation and he would go with its demise; it was about the readership for which texts such as Śmierć bogów, [Death of Gods] Kapłan i błazen, [The Priest and the Jester] “In Praise of Inconsistency” or the book The Presence of Myth were turning points—intellectual tremors.

4.
So, who can follow in Kołakowski’s footsteps? Perhaps—and this is a truly appalling thought—young generations will have to go through their communisms in order to understand the author of The Main Currents of Marxism...

If not, will Kołakowski’s voice ever be heard any more? Wouldn’t he have then dedicated his creativity—like Stendhal did with his famous novel—“to the happy few?”
He did...?
No...
Or perhaps yes, he did, indeed.

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Translated by Lesław Kawalec