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REGARDING MARXISM¹

Expelled with several of his colleagues from the University of Warsaw in the memorable year of 1968, and thus having some spare time, Kołakowski makes an effort to analyse his persecutors' worldview. These are the external circumstances of the work's initiation. His book, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origin, Growth, and Dissolution*, occupies a special position among numerous publications on Marxism, publications written before both by apologists of Marxism and its critics, as well as by analysts and historians of different methodological persuasions. His book is exceptional both in terms of its size and the profoundness of philosophical insights, as well as due to the sophisticated techniques of applied by Kołakowski.

Kołakowski's intention was, as he admits, to write a textbook. How modest and peculiar an intention it is in view of the circumstances of its coming into existence! However, this work shows that coping with such a concept was not easy at all. It was necessary to review a lot of material. Moreover, it was necessary to familiarize oneself not only with the works of the founders of, as Kołakowski says, "the biggest fantasy of our century", but also with the works of their followers and epigones, and finally with at least more valuable publications concerning the subject literature. The comprehensive and global character of the doctrine initiated by Karl Marx requires from its researcher competence not only in the field of philosophy but also in the broadly defined social thought, political economy, and sociology. What is more,

¹ English translation of the essay originally published in: Zofia Gromiec (ed.), *Honoris Causa. Księga pamiątkowa ku czci Leszka Kołakowskiego*, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1994.

it is also required to possess knowledge of the socio-historical realities wherein the said doctrine was born and started its expansion. Ultimately, what is needed is a profound insight into the realities and trends of the present, both in its intellectual and political aspects. Writing a pamphlet would demand far less trouble!

As a textbook on the history of Marxism Kołakowski's book plays its role perfectly, because it gives a total and exhaustive account of problems referring to its broadly defined subject of research; all the most important adherents of Marx's thought, who worked as politicians, revolutionists, or as intellectuals and theoreticians parade in front of reader's eyes.

Readers of *The Main Currents of Marxism* will not need to analyse it thoroughly to easily notice that they face a peculiar textbook. They quickly learn that they deal with a work whose author obeys the rigors of honesty in presenting the subject matter. At the same time Kołakowski can be seen as the voice in the dialogue with Marx's project, as the thinker who tries to understand the other author's reasons as thoroughly as possible – so as to, needless to say, evaluate it from his point of view.

Kołakowski is known in the philosophical community as an experienced researcher of the 17th century West European philosophical and religious thought. His work dedicated to this thought is unparalleled in the subject literature. At the same time he was engaged in the most pressing problems of the present. It is thus clear that when he turned to projects of reforming the world and humanity inspired by the philosophical ideas of Karl Marx after the research on Dutch, French, and German religious reformers, and considering his enormous experience as the history of ideas analyst, he could not and would not practice the cold stare of a historian, who looks at his subjects from a few centuries afar. This time the doctrine he was interested in affected a great many people, simultaneously being the ideological foundation of socio-political institutions in many countries.

Thus he took up the live and pressing issue, conscious of the fact that even the simplest and elementary information on the doctrine he was interested in must have implicated him in numerous controversies, interpretive and ideological. Being aware of the complex entanglements in said controversies, the author did not want to limit his polemics with Marxism to some external arbitrary point of view. It was because he

wanted, above all, to reveal the dramatic process that made up the essential part of the modern era, in which the giant effort of realizing the project of liberation and auto-affirmation of mankind has brought about, as everybody knows, monstrous crimes and horrendous suffering of a great many people. It is understandable that the author, as a philosopher and a moralist, would wish the mankind to learn from this monstrous experience. Let us note, incidentally, that his warning message of the moralist-philosopher is very distinctive in numerous essays, where he warns of all the versions of ideas of the immediate and total redemption or liberation of mankind. Here, in “the textbook”, where there is room for exhausting and meticulous analyses of historical material and detailed analyses of Marx’s theoretical theses, the author does not want to explain the story of “embodiment of the idea in life” in a simplified way. Besides, he is aware that from the standpoint of a historian of ideas it is impossible to fully explain the transformation of Marx’s idea of reforming the social system into the monstrous architecture of totalitarian regime. He knows very well that the major role is played by the circumstances that are not ideological, but are rooted in realities that refer to the past and also to the present of nations and peoples who were unlucky to find themselves in the force field of Marx’s formula for creating the happiness of mankind. He is aware of the otherwise obvious fact that the initial project was subjected to different modifications and transformations during the process of its realization. Its assumptions are simplified and trivialized (in the intellectual sense), so the realization of the theoretical program most often involves the loss of original values.

However, this—not very often observed in the history—process of “the embodiment of an idea into life” is for a historian of ideas especially interesting and deserves a careful study because one can trace here a complex mechanism in which certain, so far hidden, features of the original project come to light. It is, so to speak, an exam for an idea, one that may reveal the idea’s secret, but can also as easily bury it. This is exactly what happened to Marxism as an intellectual proposition and it took place—one can read about it in many works of the author of *Main Currents of Marxism*—before the fall of “the first country of workers and peasants”.

As befits an experienced researcher of religious and philosophical thought, Kołakowski is careful and in no way does he

state that Stalinism with all its monstrosities stems directly from the assumptions of Marx's doctrine. According to Kołakowski, it is one of the possibilities, which, unfortunately for mankind, has achieved its historical fulfilment, partly due to coincidences and social mechanisms that were not ideological. But from this follows that the initial doctrine cannot be thought of as completely innocent in this regard.

He touches here upon the problem that is delicate and not easy to resolve (although it is not the proper subject of his considerations), namely, to what extent the authors of different philosophical conceptions are responsible for the use that their future adherents and followers make of these conceptions. As a historian of philosophy, who analysed many metaphysical ideas, he knows very well that in the history of thought there are no doctrines free of ambiguity, that basically all of them *in nuce* involve different and even mutually exclusive interpretations. He is aware of the fact that this or that theme in the doctrine, which is mobilized by politicians or social activists or, especially, reformers to legitimize their activity, will be extracted and accepted by them without taking into account other themes, does not have its source in the doctrine itself, but in the circumstances of the activity of these politicians, reformers, or their parties.

The historical fate of Marx's doctrine is puzzling mostly because what its author had in mind was human happiness, i.e., the liberation of mankind from the chains of alienation and repressive social forms. Marx projected such a form of social life, in which people would be free to realize their capabilities and callings, and yet all the known efforts of realizing his ideas had the opposite, negative effect. Prometheus, who by his own efforts was supposed to create the world of freedom, revealed the face of Gregor Samsa, as Kołakowski sadly states. Why did it happen? Did it have to happen?

There are no definitive answers to these questions, and the author is not capable of giving them, for they would require a groundless assumption that historical events are subjected to some fixed necessities. But the fact that it was exactly what happened makes the historian inclined to take a closer look at the fundamental assumptions and theses of the initial project. That is exactly what Kołakowski does in his honest work as an historian of ideas. But at this point the standards of the textbook narration are transgressed and the textbook is made into a philosophical treatise in which Marx's doctrine

of mankind and the program of its liberation are critically analysed and reinterpreted.

Kołakowski thinks that Marxism is by no means, as its adherents proclaim, a scientific theory of mankind and ways of its transformation that move towards a classless form of society, but it is the philosophical project *par excellence* with certain axiology embedded. The core of this conception is the idea of man, his nature, and his calling. It is based on the belief that real existence of humans is not identical with their essence. This belief, dating far back to the structures of mythological thinking, and distinctly emphasized in the Platonic tradition, as well as in some currents of the Christian thought, expresses an acute awareness of the contingency of a human being, its imperfections and randomness, which are the starting point of reflection on human lot. At the same time, it includes the postulate of making an effort to overcome this contingency, i.e., to find permanent support in the necessary and unconditional being, or even a complete union with it. Thus the broadly defined prehistory of Marxism—as showed in the first chapter of the book—reaches back to Plotinus' *Ennead* and Johannes Scotus Eriugena's *De divisione naturae*, to speculations that pertain to the dialectical connection of man with the absolute by Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa, finally to Jacob Boehme and Hegel. The essence of all these conceptions, despite their various expressions, consists in a dynamic depiction of the absolute that realizes itself, i.e., becomes compatible with its own nature as a result of its own transformations. Man participates in this dialectical process of the realization of the absolute, and thereby merges with it in the final stage of this movement, which is equally theo- and anthropogenesis.

This conception, however clearly present in the Christian thought, is not compatible with the orthodoxy, for the latter emphasizes the fixed distinction between the finiteness of man and the infinity of God, to whom a man can only come near, not by the power of its own effort, but by God's grace given in God's arbitrary act.

Thus, by the reference to a rich and historically substantial context of the Western tradition of thought Marxism receives a kind of legitimization: the author of *Capital* takes up in his own way themes that are persistent in the Western culture, and gives them a form and expression compatible with the spirit of his own time. Simultaneously Marxism becomes situated in this tradition perhaps not as much as

heresy is in relation to orthodoxy within Christianity, but more like the unusual dialectical Gnosticism that places itself on the Christian antipodes, inasmuch as it not only holds the claim of overcoming the gap between the contingent being and the absolute, but also raises this contingent being—the human being—to the level of the absolute. Due to cognition and labour, the mankind is supposed to become a sort of self-reflexive and autonomous being, completely free and in control of its forms of existence, freely affirming itself through the complete realization of its potentials. In this sense Marxism is a kind of Prometheism, which proclaims the glory and endless power of man who, by his own effort, is establishing himself as the fullness of existence. The rejection of the possibility of the existence of transcendence—as a consequence of this deification of man—constitutes another characteristic of this doctrine, and qualifies it as not reconcilable with the Christian orthodoxy.

In his view of Marxism as a kind of Promethean Gnosticism or even secularized quasi-religion, Kołakowski continues interpretations which appeared in Poland and elsewhere in the 1950's after the "discovery" of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. For this reason, he rejected all the interpretations of Marxism that consisted in emphasizing the caesura between the "young" and "mature" Marx and in denying the continuity of his thought. In spite of the absence of the prophetic tone, so typical of the *Manuscripts of 1844*, in the later writings, they in fact realize the same project that expresses the striving for the liberation of man from the shackles of alienation and for control over means of his existence as a precondition of his autonomy. From this perspective Kołakowski interpreted Karl Marx's economy: his theory of value, labour as a source of values, surplus value etc. According to Kołakowski, Marx intended to present capitalism as a social form, in which people are controlled and enslaved by man-made objective and impersonal arrangements, and to look for, in the next step, a way of overcoming this enslavement through a radical shift in social relations.

Kołakowski stressed—not only in this treatise—the radical and global character of Marx's project. Time and again he emphasized that it was not Marx's intention to overcome the impoverishment of the worker, to lighten the lot of the working man, but to abolish all forms of alienation and to liberate all the people from the limits and boundaries

stemming from the reification of their previous productive effort. Kołakowski reminds us that the author of “scientific socialism” wished to sharply separate the future state of the realization of the ideal from the previous course of history, to make the impetuous leap from “the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom”.

Perhaps it is important to notice that this interpretation of Marx’s conception succours, so to speak, a philosopher who enters into a dispute with Marx’s program of the liberation of man. This dispute, consisting in revealing limits, deficiencies, and even possible threats potentially deductible from Marx’s theory, could not have earned the intellectual importance it has in Kołakowski’s work if it hadn’t been preceded by the solid analysis of the content of Marx’s theory.

It seems that in his interpretation of Marxism, which we tried to briefly present above, Kołakowski aims especially to take a position on two fundamental issues that are essentially connected not only with a certain understanding of Marx’s doctrine, but also with the appraisal of its historical role. Firstly, as we already noticed, he wishes to indicate that Marxism cannot be treated as a scientific theory in the rigorous sense. Secondly—and this is the most important to him—he tries to prove that the contemporary conception of man, which forms the foundations of Marxist doctrine, and which, to some extent, puts man in Gods’ place, is based on an intellectual abuse. In other words, it is based on accepting certain assumptions that do not hold water or on ignoring other doubtful ones. Developing his program of liberation of man, Marx thinks that the radical shift in the social relations (abolishment of the private property, etc.) will become a sufficient condition to abolish all the restrictions that have been holding down the emancipatory possibilities of the human subject. He presupposes that all the evil that oppressed man had its root not in man and his condition but in the defective social arrangements and institutions. In an attempt to express this thesis, Marx is forced to ignore all the limits carried by the physical existence of humans, i.e., the diversity of sexes, age, intelligence, being subjected to natural disabilities and diseases, etc. Kołakowski suggests that in Marx’s theory a social utopia is connected with an existential utopia, which is easy to show especially in his early works.

Naturally, he notices the deficiencies of the Marxist idea of radical change of the human existence in many other aspects. After all there are difficulties in organising the production and distribution of

manufactured goods, which lead to the impossibility of reconciling the totally spontaneous form of life in a classless society with the rigors of central planning, etc. This disability, fundamental according to Kołakowski, cannot be overcome in human life. This is why in every attempt at realizing this utopian design the promise of its overcoming can only lead to dangerous results. Therefore, an existential utopia, i.e., the conception that the final condition of the humanity is possible, that it is possible to build a community, in which all the limitations and conflicts will disappear, that evil, which has bothered people for so long, will be completely and finally eradicated, must lead to the annihilation of the cultural forms of human existence, to the total collapse that takes a form of absolute tyranny precluding any spontaneous manifestation of the personalities of people making up this monstrous community of individuals. The idea of the final stage, of the reconciliation of everything with everything, of the final fulfilment, if it is not some border ideal that one knows is impossible to realize, can only bring death and destruction.

In the European tradition of thought Kołakowski seems to see, on the one hand, a tendency to radicalism, to the final resolution of eternal problems of human existence in all its dimensions, the tendency that is never ending but only changing its historical forms, and, on the other hand, the constantly renewed effort of balancing the terms of insuperable opposition or tension between finite beings and the ideal, the fulfilment, or the absolute, understood in one way or the other. His attitude of a philosopher or a wise man shows itself in a resolute objection to the final and definite solutions, since he is aware of their unreality and the dangers connected to them. He opts for an infinitistic view on human destiny, which treats man as doomed to the contingency of life and yet, at the same time, compelled to struggle with life's discomforts. In this struggle—the reason teaches us—a final victory will never happen and yet this struggle cannot be waged without the irrational hope for a victory. Without this constant struggle—of which the fate of Sisyphus is not a symbolic figure—it would not be possible for man to raise upon the natural determinants of his being and, therefore, his humanity, non-derivable from nature, wouldn't be possible.

According to Kołakowski, Marxism, as a contemporary form of millenarianism, broke a subtle and unstable balance, which conditions

the possibility of beginning and continuing the existence of man as a moral being, manifesting himself in the culture. In the world full of tensions, poverty, universal evil, and in the face of helplessness of the struggle against it, Marxism could easily tempt the masses with the alluring promise of an earthly paradise. This promise is but an old dream disguised in contemporary clothes, a dream that appears every time when conditions of the human existence become unbearable, and the possibilities of amelioration are diminished or absent altogether. It appears when the hope of a radical transformation of life conditions and change of fortune expresses nothing but helplessness and growing frustration.

Consequently, following Kołakowski's train of thought referring to the monstrous experiences of our era connected with the efforts to realize Marx's (and not only Marx's) project of bringing about the happiness of mankind — expressed not only in the treatise on the history of Marxism but also in numerous essays —we can conclude with a moral that is important for earthlings: Man has never lived in a paradise, but, nevertheless, he perceives himself as banished thereof; and he will never enter a paradise, although supposedly he could not live without the faith that this is somehow possible. Therefore, what he should do is to have a minimum of common sense and skepticism related to it, for they would protect him against the traps laid by the promises of false prophets, repeatedly asserting him that they know the means to construct this paradise today or at least tomorrow.

translated by Ewa Modrakowska

ABSTRACT

REGARDING MARXISM

My paper refers to Leszek Kołakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origin, Growth, and Dissolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1987). Kołakowski's intention was to write a textbook on the history of Marxism based on his lectures but his book is much more than that. It is a philosophical treatise in which Marx's doctrine of mankind and the program of its liberation are critically analysed and reinterpreted. The core of Marx's philosophy is the idea of man and the belief that the real existence of humans is not identical with their essence. Kołakowski shows that this belief is rooted in mythological thinking, the Platonic tradition, and in the Christian thought. A moral that follows from Kołakowski's critical analysis of Marx's doctrine is that man has never lived in a paradise and yet he perceives himself as banished thereof; that he will never enter a paradise and yet he cannot live without the faith that this is somehow possible. Therefore, what he should do is to have a minimum of common sense and skepticism related to it, for they would protect him against the traps laid by false prophets repeatedly asserting that they know the means to construct the paradise today or at least tomorrow.

KEYWORDS: Marxism, Leszek Kołakowski, critical analysis, liberation of man

WOBEC MARKSIZMU

Artykuł traktuje o Leszka Kołakowskiego *Głównych nurtach marksizmu* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1987). Zamiarem Kołakowskiego było napisanie podręcznika z historii marksizmu na podstawie prowadzonych przez niego wykładów, ale jego książka jest czymś więcej. Jest to traktat filozoficzny, w którym marksowska doktryna człowieka i program jego wyzwolenia poddane są krytycznej analizie i reinterpretacji. Sednem filozofii Marksa jest idea człowieka i przekonanie, że rzeczywista egzystencja ludzi nie jest tożsama z ich istotą. Kołakowski pokazuje, że źródłem tego przekonania jest myślenie mitologiczne, tradycja platońska i myśl chrześcijańska. Morał, który wynika z Kołakowskiego analizy doktryny Marksa jest taki, że człowiek nigdy nie żył w raju, a jednak uważa, że został z niego wygnany; że nigdy nie znajdzie się w raju, a jednak nie może żyć bez wiary, że w jakiś

sposób jest to możliwe. Powinien zatem zachować odrobinę zdrowego rozsądku i związanego z nim sceptycyzmu, co zabezpieczałoby go przed popadnięciem w sidła łatwych obietnic fałszywych proroków, niezmiennie zapewniających, iż znają skuteczne środki osiągnięcia owego raju już dziś, a najpewniej jutro.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: marksizm, Leszek Kołakowski, analiza krytyczna, wyzwolenie człowieka