

Leszek Kolakowski 1927–2009



LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI

LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI begins his magisterial three-volume history of Marxism with the sentence: 'Karl Marx was a German philosopher.' The sentence 'Leszek Kolakowski was a Polish philosopher' is, similarly, revealingly true while neglecting all that was distinctive and significant about his life and work. He was, indeed, author of many works on the history of philosophy and of numerous searching essays, often laced with irony and sharp wit, that reflect philosophically on central issues of our time: on Communism, under which he lived half his adult life, and on the Marxism that inspired it, which he called 'the greatest fantasy of our century ... [which] began in a Promethean humanism and culminated in the monstrous tyranny of Stalin' and on the illusions of its true believers in the West; on the need for hope (as against hopelessness); on the dangers of utopianism; on evil ('the Devil', he wrote, 'is part of our experience' and evil 'a stubborn and unredeemable fact'); on original sin (to explain humanity's darker side); on the role of the sacred in culture; on 'God's unforgettability' (hence his presence 'even in rejection') and the persistence of transcendence (the religious need, he argued, 'cannot be excommunicated from culture by rationalist incantation'); on arguments for and against God's existence; on philosophers, whom he divided into 'diggers', who 'neither sow nor harvest but only move the soil', and 'healers', who 'apply sceptical medicine' in order 'not to let us get carried away by wishful thinking'; and on the enterprise of philosophy itself, which, he thought, could never 'discover any universally admissible truths'. About philosophers he held a refreshingly and characteristically self-ironic view. 'A modern philosopher', he wrote, 'who has never experienced the feeling of being a

charlatan is such a shallow mind that his work is probably not worth reading.' Further, 'If a philosopher happened to have made a genuine contribution to science (one thinks, say, of mathematical works of Descartes, Leibnitz or Pascal), his discovery, perhaps by the very fact of being admitted as an ingredient of the established sciences, immediately ceased being a part of philosophy.'

But, arguably, his greatest achievement was not merely to write (and he wrote some thirty books over five decades) but to be heard. He was massively influential in his native Poland, above all during the Solidarity era, and, indeed, across central and Eastern Europe. After Kolakowski's enforced exile in 1968, first to North America and eventually to Oxford, the late Ernest Gellner told me that when he visited Poland people would ask 'How is he?' without needing to say whom they meant. On the liberation of Poland he was awarded the Order of the White Eagle. And Adam Michnik, editor of the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* and leading activist and often-imprisoned resister under Communism, wrote of him after his death that for 'decades he has been the symbol and moral authority of a Poland that is spiritually sovereign, that defies enslavement, of a Poland of free thought and unbending soul'. At his death there was an outpouring of eulogies in Poland, where he was buried with military honours and a minute of silence in the national Parliament. He was also widely celebrated elsewhere, receiving accolades and prizes in France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Holland and Israel. In the United States he was awarded the first John W. Kluge Prize from the Library of Congress for lifetime achievement in those fields of scholarship (the humanities above all) for which there is no Nobel Prize. And yet in England, his adoptive home, he was, as Tony Judt has remarked, 'largely unknown' and 'curiously underappreciated',¹ although he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy (in 1980). He was also a Fellow of the Académie Universelle des Cultures, and of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

He was born in Radom, Poland on 23 October 1927. His father, an economist and political writer, was killed by the Gestapo after the Germans invaded and the family was exiled to a primitive village in eastern Poland. There he found a library in the house of a minor aristocrat and set about educating himself with help from people in the neighbourhood and from teachers supplied by the Polish underground, who helped him pass exam-

inations. As the Russians drove the Germans out of Poland, he embraced Communism, partly in opposition to the anti-semitic and nationalist bigotry that he saw among Polish Catholics and partly (to use his own words in interviews) because he believed that 'radical, fundamental social changes were necessary' and because 'communism was for us the conqueror of Nazism, a myth of a better world, ... of a kingdom of equality and freedom'.

After the war he joined the Communist youth organisation and the Communist Party and studied philosophy at the University of Lodz. He became junior assistant there to the Chair of Logic headed by Professor Tadeusz Kotarbinski. He had been studying for a doctorate in Warsaw since 1950 and was also teaching at the Party School of Social Studies. In 1952 he started teaching at the Department of Philosophy in Warsaw University and in 1959 was appointed to the Chair of the History of Philosophy. He joined the editorial boards of the weekly *Nowa Kultura* and the magazine *Po Postu* (*In Plain Words*), both run by young Communist intellectuals.

During this time he was moving away from Soviet-style Marxism and became increasingly influential upon the younger generation as a leading voice for democratisation and a spokesman for what came to be called 'revisionism'. After the Poznan riots in 1956 and the subsequent 'thaw' and accession to power of Gomulka in October of that year, it seemed that the hopes in a reformed Communism that Kolakowski encouraged might have a chance of realisation, but these were short-lived and he was attacked by the Party leadership: he was criticised by Gomulka for being 'the main ideologue of the so-called revisionist movement'. His writings were often seized by censors and his lectures attended by the secret police.

He nevertheless kept his Party card until 1966, when he was expelled for criticising the Government on the tenth anniversary of the Polish October. Two years later he was expelled from Warsaw University for 'forming the views of the youth in a manner contrary to the official tendency of the country' and left Poland, with Tamara, his wife, who is a psychiatrist and of Jewish origin. This was the time of a heightened anti-semitic and nationalist campaign against 'Zionists', but that was not, as sometimes suggested, the reason for their departure. The reason was that he could neither teach nor publish (by this time there was a total ban on his publications) and he was under constant police surveillance. He therefore accepted an invitation from Montreal, intending to leave for one year, thinking that it might perhaps be extended for two. Thereafter for the next

¹Tony Judt, 'Goodbye to all that? Leszek Kolakowski and the Marxist Legacy', repr. in Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (New York, 2008), pp. 129-46; this quotation, p. 129

twenty years his writings remained officially banned in Poland, though they circulated widely in samizdat form and were hugely influential in shaping the intellectual opposition which, in combination with the Solidarity movement, contributed greatly to the collapse of Communism in Poland.

Kolakowski meanwhile went first to teach at McGill University in Canada and then to the University of California at Berkeley, where he encountered the student radicalism of that time, about which he commented that 'there are better arguments in favour of democracy and freedom than the fact that Marx is not quite as hostile to them as he first appears'. In 1970 he was elected to a senior research fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, combining that position with appointments first at Yale and then, from 1981 to 1994, the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. I was among the first to welcome him to Oxford and recall his very central-European reaction to the place. He had visited several colleges and was clearly impressed but curious about one thing: 'Where', he wanted to know, 'are the cafes?'

During this period of exile, he gave active support and advice to Solidarity in Poland. In fact his contacts with the Polish opposition long pre-dated Solidarity; he was a member of KOR (the Committee of Workers' Defence). He wrote articles, gave interviews and helped in fundraising. His writing focused on ethics, metaphysics and, increasingly, religion. And he became increasingly critical of Western Marxist and marxisant intellectuals and even of the very idea of socialism (see his contribution to *The Socialist Idea: a Reappraisal*, a collection which he co-edited with Stuart Hampshire: London, 1974), claiming that democratic socialism was as 'contradictory as a fried snowball'. This evolution was seriously disappointing to some left-wing intellectuals who had sympathised with his earlier revisionist Marxism. In 1973 the distinguished historian E. P. Thompson published 'An open letter to Leszek Kolakowski', in *The Socialist Register*, berating him for betraying the aspirations of the left. Kolakowski, unlike Thompson, held out no hope for the renovation of the Communist idea: 'This skull,' he wrote, 'will never smile again.' His response, 'My correct views on everything' (which appeared in *The Socialist Register* in 1974 and was republished in a collection of essays with that title: South Bend, IN, 2005) was an onslaught on thinking in terms of a 'system' and thereby purporting to solve 'all the problems of mankind in one stroke'—a theme succinctly restated in his essay entitled 'How to be a liberal-conservative socialist' (reprinted in *Modernity on Endless Trial*: Chicago, IL, and London, 1990).

Thereafter he lived quietly in Oxford, surrounded by his library of books in English, Polish, Russian, French and German—books of poetry, European novels, and books on art, on Christian theology, on the Jewish and other religions (he had a special interest in Buddhism), on the Bible, on witches and on the devil—and travelling from time to time, to give lectures and to receive prizes in his native Poland and across Europe. He was a member of the board of the Vienna-based Institute for the Human Sciences (Institut für die Wissenschaften von Menschen) and took part in regular meetings in Castel Gandolfo at which its members engaged in discussions, to which various other intellectuals were invited, with Pope John Paul II. Towards the end his eyes failed him, but his spirits, his wary scepticism and his irony, sometimes sardonic and always both sharp and subtle, never did. Back in 1959 he had launched his career as an essayist with an essay entitled 'The Priest and the Jester' (for which he received both the Veillon Foundation European Prize for the Essay and the Erasmus Prize in 1980), which counterposed the Priest, the guardian of tradition and accepted absolutes, to the sceptical Jester who 'doubts all that appears self-evident'. (This essay is reprinted in a collection of his essays published in translation in 1968 under the title *Towards a Marxist Humanism* in the United States and, less misleadingly, as *Marxism and Beyond* in the UK. The British edition includes an introduction explaining that he no longer held the views expressed in some of the essays.) He himself remained a jester to the end; one of his jests was to refer to his own essays as 'semi-philosophical sermons'.

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In Britain his *Main Currents of Marxism* is his most widely known work. Its 1,200 pages, first published in English in three volumes (London and New York, 1978), and subsequently in one, is not a history of socialism and Communism; its focus is not on the social and political embodiments of Marxist ideas or their historical contexts but on their attractive power and dangers. His interpretation of these joins those of many other such twentieth-century diagnoses—such as those of Karl Popper, Jacob Talmon, Isaiah Berlin, Sidney Hook, Raymond Aron and many others—but it is more interesting than most, focusing, as Tony Judt has observed, on Marxism's fusion of 'Promethean Romantic illusion and uncompromising historical determinism'.² Kolakowski's view was that the Leninist version

² Judt, 'Goodbye to all that?', p. 133.

of Marxism, 'though not the only possible one, was quite plausible'. In support of his view that these features of Marxist thinking anticipated Communist tyranny, he cited many observers and critics, from Mikhail Bakunin to Rosa Luxemburg. And Judt is right to notice the 'unflinching efficiency and clarity' with which the arguments of the classical Marxist thinkers are expounded and placed within the overall story.³ The second volume includes many European Marxists, including Poles, whose contributions have been little noticed in standard accounts. In the third volume, however, which treats of Marxism since 1917 and is entitled 'The Breakdown', the tone changes, as Judt comments, to one of 'almost unrelenting contempt'.⁴ (Interestingly, this third volume has never appeared in French translation.) Its last chapter, covering the period since Stalin's death, is perfunctory and the prospect of a further volume was renounced because, as its author remarked, 'I am not convinced that the subject is intrinsically worthy of treatment at such length.'

Regrettably less well known in Britain are Kolakowski's life-long achievements as philosopher and historian—one might say as philosophising historian—specialising in European intellectual history between 1500 and 1800, especially philosophical and religious ideas of the seventeenth century. Indeed his interpretations of European intellectual history between the Reformation and the Enlightenment are not only a major achievement in their own right but have a direct bearing upon his exposure of what he came to see as the leftist illusions of Marxism as well as his own philosophical reflections on religion, most succinctly expressed in *Religion: if there is no God* (Oxford, 1982) and in his analysis of the dilemmas of modern secular societies, as summarised in *Modernity on Endless Trial*.

He set out his methodological approach in an early book on Spinoza, available only in Polish, entitled *Individual and Infinity: Freedom and the Antinomies of Freedom in Spinoza's Philosophy* (Warsaw, 1958). His goal was to interpret classic problems of philosophy

... as problems of a moral nature, to translate metaphysical, anthropological and epistemological questions into a language suitable for expressing moral problems, to reveal their hidden human content: in other words, to present the problem of God as a problem of man, the problem of heaven and earth as a problem of human freedom, the problem of nature as a problem concerning the value of human life, and the problem of human nature as the problem of inter-human relationships.

³ Judt, 'Goodbye to all that?', p. 131.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

It was, however, in his most substantial philosophical-historical work, *Religious Consciousness and the Church: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Non-Denominational Christianity* (Warsaw, 1965), that his methodological views are most fully presented. This work was published in 1965 but he had been working on it since 1958. (It is available in French under the title *Chrétientés sans Église: La conscience religieuse et le lieu confessionnel au XVIIIe siècle*: Paris, 1969.) Here he made the case for the judicious use of conceptual constructs, or 'ideal types', subordinating the 'empirical elements of the historical world' to 'a central idea which manifests itself in a system of ideal constructions and through them confers meaning on each particular element of the emerging picture'. He sought to understand irreducible 'primary phenomena' through phenomenological insight, insisting that we seek to establish three distinct unities as our objects of inquiry: that of the author's personality, where we focus on his intention; that of his ideas viewed historically, where we focus on locating his ideas in the historical process; and that of the structure of his thought, where we focus on its autonomous logic. Adequate understanding requires identification with thinkers of the past in order to understand them from within, seeing their perspective as open, and viewing them from a distance, thus seeing their perspective as historically closed. We should avoid reducing meaningful structures to their historical determinants while realising that the interpretation of meaning, as reconstructed by us, is always open, liable to be changed by further historical developments, and thus dependent on the age in which we live, our place in it and the peculiarities of our cognitive perspective.

In that work Kolakowski applied these precepts consistently and impressively. Viewing religious faith, the experience of the sacred, as a 'primary phenomenon', he insisted that its various concrete manifestations could and should be explained historically. The book is a study of little-known thinkers from across Europe who embraced Christian ideas while rejecting affiliation with an existing Church. Thus its focus is upon non-denominational religious faith, that is, faith that involves resistance to the organised, institutionally controlled forms of religious life. He singles out mysticism as particularly important, as a special kind of religious subjectivism that is at once subjective, in concentrating on inner religious experience and denying the need for organised Christianity, and anti-individualist in its aim of direct union with the Absolute Being, thereby annihilating the individual self. The book covers the various conflicts between religious consciousness and ecclesiastical bonds, the attempts to abolish any organised mediation between the individual soul and God, the struggle against

religious subjectivism within the existing Churches, and the prudent policy of the Catholic Counter-Reformation of finding a place for it within the Church, thereby giving it an outlet, while at the same time keeping it under control. The book's message of distaste for institutionalised 'Truth' was unmistakable. This theme, alongside Kolakowski's sceptical distrust of claims to certainty, continued to inform all his subsequent writings. He distrusted what Sir Isaiah Berlin, his sometime colleague at All Souls, whom he admired, called 'monism': 'I do not believe', he wrote, 'that human culture can ever reach a perfect synthesis of its diversified and incompatible components. Its very richness is supported by this very incompatibility of its ingredients. And it is the conflict of values, rather than their harmony, that keeps our culture alive.'

This early magnum opus can also be seen as linked to later works that stress the irreducibly irrational components of spiritual life. In *The Presence of Myth* (Polish 1972, English, Chicago, IL, 1989) he argues that the mythopoetic layer of human existence is omnipresent and is the source of meaning-creating energy, that a leap of faith underlies even our belief in objective truth, which is itself a kind of myth, and that myths are necessary to render human existence meaningful since their disappearance would lead to universal nihilism. *Religion: If there is no God ... On God, the Devil, Sin and Other Worries of the so-called Philosophy of Religion* (London and New York, 1982), focusing on religious myths, claims that Dostoevsky's maxim 'If there is no God, everything is permissible' applies not only to morality but to knowledge: abandoning God as an epistemological absolute leads to epistemological nihilism. And *Metaphysical Horror* (Oxford, 1988; corrected edn. Harmondsworth, 2001) focuses on the search for foundations—the 'elusive Grail of unshakeable certainty'—'the quest for Truth and Reality—spelt with capital letters', an inescapable pursuit of an endlessly recurring object of philosophical enquiry, which is a 'structural part of culture or of human minds'. It 'cannot be satisfied with anything less than the Absolute' and yet what it seeks is inaccessible, just as God in the neoplatonic tradition in Christianity is ineffable. Claims to know the Truth, in that sense, are illegitimate in both religion and science (and in political thought serve to justify totalitarian despotism). But epistemological relativism is no less unwarranted and dangerous. No solution is offered other than the maxim that 'The search for the ultimate foundation is as much an unremovable part of human culture as is the denial of the legitimacy of this search.'

God Owes Us Nothing: a Brief Remark on Pascal's Religion and on the Spirit of Jansenism (Chicago, IL, 1995) also explores the theme of inescap-

able conflict. Continuing the discussion of sixteenth and seventeenth-century religious thought from the earlier, major work, it also suggests parallels between the idea of a 'hidden God' beyond the reach of reason and dogmatic Marxism. Its topic is the 'world-shaking controversy about grace' between Augustinianism, emphasising human dependency on divine grace, and Pelagianism, stressing the role of human freedom.

Jansenism represented the Augustinian position and was closer to the Lutheran and Calvinist Reformation than to Erasmus's Catholic humanism. The Jesuit Counter-Reformation, on the other hand, was engaged in the de-Augustinianisation of the Church, modernising it, and was thus linked to the Pelagian view. In this respect, the Jesuits, in Kolakowski's words, represented 'the embryonic spirit of the Enlightenment and the common-sense belief in free will'. Thus the Jesuits, paradoxically, given their reputation, exhibited the spirit of modernism and Pascal reactionary Christian fundamentalism. But, Kolakowski argued, the situation was more complicated still, for in certain respects Pascal was more modern than the Jesuits, since, while disparaging the role of secular reason, he defended secular science against clerical authoritarianism and attacked scholastic reasoning in religious matters, thereby freeing faith from reason and reason from faith. And, in Kolakowski's view, his deep pessimism about the human condition remains a precious antidote against political utopianism which was a necessary by-product of the secularisation of Pelagianism. His opposition to Cartesian rationalism and his 'anti-Enlightenment thrust', he writes, 'makes Pascal our contemporary'.

These thoughts reappear in *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago, IL, 1990), the main conclusion of which is that:

... while it is true that the Pelagian mentality, especially once it has 'secularized' itself and assumed the form of utopian politics, is deservedly discredited nowadays, it may well have played a liberating role in the history of modern Europe. It put into circulation a belief in human freedom conceived as an unconstrained ability to choose between good and evil, it made possible the habit of trusting in our spiritual prowess and our unlimited potential to better our lot, to create and to expand, to apply our curiosity to anything we can think of. If it brought disasters in our age, it also made possible the great achievements of modern European civilization in the arts, the sciences and social institutions. And so, let us accept, in the Pascalian manner, 'two contradictory truths'.

And indeed this embracing, even relishing, of the antinomies of human thought and existence, without seeking to resolve or synthesise them, is a distinctive feature of Kolakowski's style of reasoning and a trait he found intriguing and attractive in the thought of other thinkers. It is to be found,

for instance, in his fine little study for the Past Masters series of Bergson (*Bergson*: Oxford and New York, 1985), which discerns two incompatible versions of ‘Bergsonianism’: the idea that ‘consciousness is a continuous self-creation ex nihilo’ and the idea that the original direction of the entire process of evolution—though not its details—is divinely inspired. ‘Starting with inner experience’, he writes of Bergson, ‘he discovered consciousness as an absolute creator and he made time its property; then he asserted it as a work of the divine artist. To have it both ways within the same discourse proved to be impossible.’

His other studies of European philosophers include *Positivist Philosophy from Hume to the Vienna Circle* first published in Polish in 1966 (English translation as *The Alienation of Reason: a History of Positivist Thought*: New York, 1968, republished as *Positivist Philosophy from Hume to the Vienna Circle*, Harmondsworth, 1972), *Husserl and the Search for Certitude* (South Bend, IN, 1975), and *The Two Eyes of Spinoza and Other Essays on Philosophers* (South Bend, IN, 2004), a collection which contains texts on the history of philosophy, mainly from the seventeenth century, not published before in English. There is also a little book *Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing. 23 Questions from Great Philosophers?* (New York, 2007; in the Polish edition there were thirty questions!)—his last book published in English. The last one written in Polish was *Fractions of Philosophy. The most widely known and most often quoted sentences of philosophers, with a commentary* (Warsaw, 2008). Apart from his many essays, appearing in various collections and ranging from the philosophical to the polemical to the whimsical, he was also the author of literary texts: several plays, (*Dr Faustus* among them), collections of fables entitled *Tales from the Kingdom of Lailonia* (published in Polish in 1963) and of biblical stories entitled *The Key to Heaven* (published in Polish in 1964) and his *Conversations with the Devil* (published in Polish in 1965). These have been republished in English as *Tales from the Kingdom of Lailonia and The Key to Heaven* (Chicago, IL, 1989) and *The Devil and Scripture* (London and New York, 1973).

Kolakowski expressed scepticism about the professed certainties of secular, atheistic liberalism and the prospects for reviving the Enlightenment. He was hostile to the stance of uncritical respect for other cultures, arguing that by failing to make critical judgements of other cultures and civilisations one diminishes the value of one’s own. Yet he saw belief in scientific evidence as itself based on a kind of faith and held rational inquiry to be unable to settle religious questions or furnish a basis for morality, criticising those who ‘try to assert our modernity, but escape

from its effects by various intellectual devices, in order to convince ourselves that meaning can be restored or recovered apart from the traditional religious legacy of mankind’. He viewed the category of the ‘sacred’ as essential for culture but thought that it could not be grounded in secular ways, as ‘godlessness desperately attempts to replace the lost God with something else’. Thus he offered reasons for the need for faith in a way that does not presuppose it, thereby risking offence to religious believers and thoroughgoing rationalists alike.

Leszek Kolakowski died on 17 July 2009.

STEVEN LUKES

Fellow of the Academy

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