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## **SOCIAL AND INDIVIDUAL ASPIRATIONS IN THE POLISH REVISIONIST MARXISM**

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During the post-Stalinism “Thaw”, in the 1960 Polish philosophers and historians of ideas, such as Adam Schaff, Leszek Kołakowski, Krzysztof Pomian offered a rereading of Marxism, challenging one of the last grand narratives of history. They all were branded “revisionists” and gradually forced into silence; while those officials who resented their loss of totalitarian controls were labeled “dogmatists” and were checked in their ambitions by the new First Secretary of the Party Władysław Gomułka who pledged a “Polish road to socialism”. In general, the decade 1956-1966 was characterized by moderate reforms, an uneasy truce between divergent Party factions combating each other behind the scene, between the Party and the Roman Catholic Church, and between the government and public opinion.

Very orthodox and rigid in his early writings, in 1955 Kołakowski joined the editorial staff of *Po prostu* (*Straight Talk*), a rebellious weekly of young Communist intellectuals. The paper was to become a major force preparing the “Polish October” of 1956. This year, he published *Responsibility and History*, four part critique of Soviet-Marxist dogmas, in the Polish periodical *Nowa Kultura* (*New Culture*). Some of his philosophical essays were translated into Western languages<sup>1</sup>, often to his uneasiness, for as a member of Polish United Worker’s Party, he had no wish to add fuel to the non-Marxist or anti-Marxist opposition. In these years Kołakowski won the acclaim of the young generation as the sharpest mind among the “revisionists” and became close to Adam Schaff, considered the official ideologue of the

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<sup>1</sup> Leszek Kołakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism. Essays on the Left Today* (New York, 1968).

Party. In 1965, the latter published *Marxism and the Human Individual* (*Marksizm a jadnostka ludzka*)<sup>2</sup>, placing this one in the center of his reflection influenced by Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). The same year Kołakowski and Pomian published an anthology of *The Existentialist Philosophy* which shows how increasingly fascinated they were by different currents of this thought.

The Polish revisionists pursued three principal objectives. In the first place they rejected Stalinist's dogmas, principally the doctrine of the sharpening class struggle under socialism and the idea that the class enemy must be stamped out by terror. Kołakowski identifies Stalinism with a sect which "surrounded itself with an impenetrable ideological and ritualistic fence" and "peopled its world with a thousand new deities, each demanding worship under threat of excommunication on grounds of atheism."<sup>3</sup> With the rejection of the dogma, Marxism was reappraised and the stress was laid on the thought of the young Karl Marx<sup>4</sup> and the theory of alienation. In Schaff's opinion "when Marxism lost sight of the problems of the individual and emphasis was shifted to the study of mass movement, neglect of everything connected with the individual was a natural result."<sup>5</sup> But, over and above that, the revisionism was an attempt to enrich the Marx's philosophy and to transcend it because, as Schaff says, "it is foolish [...] to remain blind to the fact that [the] course of [history] has been different and has taken place in conditions other than those originally envisaged, and to cling to old formulas that were suited to other conditions."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the Polish revisionists subscribed to Marx's conception of communism as a movement changing reality and not as a steady state of affairs.

Shifting emphasis from masses to individuals, the revisionists reconsidered the role of intellectuals in the modernization of the Marxist's theory. Kołakowski asserts that "the spiritual dominion of any ruling class over the people [...] depends on its bonds with the

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<sup>2</sup> The book was translated in English under the title of *Marxism and the Human Individual* (New York, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> L. Kołakowski, "Responsibility and History", in *Toward a Marxism Humanism*, p. 99 and 100.

<sup>4</sup> The Young Marx was considered part of humanist "bourgeois" philosophy, which Marx later criticized along with German Idealism, on behalf of "social relations" which primed over individual consciousness, a product of ideology according to him. Marxist revisionists stressed the humanistic philosophical foundations of Marx's thought by focusing on the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (first published in 1932, and largely suppressed in the Soviet Union until the post-Stalinist "thaw"). Marx there expounds his theory of alienation adapted from Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841).

<sup>5</sup> *Marxism and the Human Individual*, p. 98.

<sup>6</sup> *Marxism and the Human Individual*, p. 193.

intelligentsia.”<sup>7</sup> By these words he identifies himself with a long Polish tradition which regarded the intelligentsia as an elite of the nation, aspiring to preserve and shape its constantly threatened identity and trying to place itself above all partisan interests. Furthermore, Kołakowski evokes the figure of a priest and a jester, deep-rooted in the Polish and Central European literature and culture:

The priest is the guardian of the absolute; he sustains the cult of the final and the obvious as acknowledged by and contained in tradition. The jester is he who [...] doubts all that appears self-evident [...] reveals contradictions in what appears obvious [...] derides common sense and reads a sense into the absurd.<sup>8</sup>

It is obvious that in the context of the 60 the priest symbolizes all dogmatists, whereas the jester embodies a handful of revisionists. Although Kołakowski recognizes a dialectical interdependence of priest's and jester's philosophies, he declares himself in favor of the second one for which the Stalinist doctrine became a subject of derision. By the way, Kołakowski, apparently inspired by Witold Gombrowicz, sees in the conflict between the jester and the priest the clash between the traits of adolescence and senility. Besides derision, he recommends adopting “inconsistency” as a philosophical method and an “individual attitude [...] which is merely a consciously sustained reserve of uncertainty, a permanent feeling of possible personal error.”<sup>9</sup> Thus Kołakowski revives the old philosophical skepticism which was incompatible with unquestionable optimism and faith in a steady progress.

The revisionists focused on individual, reinterpreting the Marx's theory of alienation adapted from Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). They disagree in particular with Engels's opinion that the transition to socialism is a leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom. In fact, the abolition of private property, as the appropriation of human life, didn't eliminate alienation and the dehumanization of life. In socialist countries there are various forms of alienation, principally resulting from the existence of the State which is an alienated force. During the Stalinist's period, the State was a coercive machine that began to crush and annihilate its makers. The Polish October Revolution was a natural reaction against the “cult of personality” and the dictatorship of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, according to Adam Schaff, in the post-Stalinist socialist countries the State is an indispensable

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<sup>7</sup> L. Kołakowski, “Intellectuals and the Communist Movement”, in *Toward a Marxism Humanism*, p. 139.

<sup>8</sup> L. Kołakowski, “The Priest and the Jester”, *ibidem*, pp. 33 and 34.

<sup>9</sup> L. Kołakowski, “In Praise of Inconsistency”, *ibid.* 214.

administrative and bureaucratic machine whose existence results from the technological complication of the modern world, unimaginable in Marx's epoch. If the vast and complicated State machinery of administration has to remain, a social division based on the exercise of power can't be eliminated. In this situation, the struggle for democratization of social life and against bureaucracy, often identified with "red bourgeoisie" or a "new class", should be conceived in Schaff's opinion "as a struggle against bureaucracy that is bad, unreasonable, incompetent [...] but not against [...] bureaucracy in general". In any case, given the transformations of the modern civilization, the State, under capitalism as well as under and socialism, would remain what it is: a Moloch compared with which the individual is a very atom.

The second major aspect of alienation in socialist societies is the alienation of labor which results from its division and specialization. Marx analyzed the nature of this alienation under capitalism. But Schaff claims that "the technical aspects of the problem cut across all systems – for example, work on an assembly line is inherently the same regardless of government."<sup>10</sup> The only way to overcome it would be by reducing working time. On the other hand, independently of the character of government and political system, a world in which man has attained the power of self destruction and could be unable to control the forces he has himself released, is an alienated world. As we see, Schaff regards as utopian the Marxist's theory of the elimination of alienation in socialist societies. Proposing to soften its effects, he doesn't believe in the possibility to eradicate it entirely in the modern world of ever more universal relations linked with modern techniques of production and means of communication. From this point of view, he differs from both dogmatists and radical revisionists who under the influence of the utopian socialism hoped to create a society of self-governing associations of free producers. Moreover, this idea was still very much alive in the ranks of Solidarity in the 80.

The problem of national and social freedom was a central issue of the Polish October. The slogans like "We want a free Poland", "Down with the Russians" were chanted along with "Down with the Communist dictatorship", "We want free elections" at thousands of meetings. Gomułka himself, enthusiastically supported by the great majority of society, in his public speeches, criticized the hardships of Stalinism and promised reforms to democratize the country and liberalize the State's policy. Thus, Polish communists found themselves unexpectedly at the head of a nation liberation movement. These circumstances combined

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<sup>10</sup> *Marxism and the Human Individual*, p. 148.

with openness to existential philosophy urged the revisionists to re-examine the question of the freedom and individual's relationship to history. Working on the principle that man is not only a product of history but also its maker, they tried in particular to answer how to solve the conflict between the objective Marxist laws of historical development and the individual's free will, necessity and freedom. In chapter "The individual and history" of his book *Marxism and the human Individual*, Adam Schaff attempts to reconcile Marxist historical determinism with Sartre's existential indeterminism, arguing that man could only become free and able to shape his own life and history as he became conscious of the determinisms to which he is subject. He asserts that freedom is a recognized necessity:

For what matters is not that the choice made by man should be unconditioned, but that it should be made of his own free will and not the result of coercion by some external force. Man's freedom is not measured by the degree of his [...] detachment from social determinants (which in any case is a fiction) but by the extent to which he understands his purposes and the ways of achieving them through choice of the proper action.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, freedom is to be found wherever the individual can choose, without being forced, between a number of courses of action, even though his choice is determined by some social or individual factors and can be explained in terms of them.

Kołakowski goes even further reasserting the personal, or "subjective", factor in history. In his essay *Responsibility and History*, he questions historical determinism which is "by nature vague"<sup>12</sup>. In obedience to Stalinist doctrine, socialism was historical inevitability and individuals were subordinated to it as its tools. Morals had to conform to the necessary process of progress whose nature was arbitrary defined by the Communist party. Consequently, all the crimes perpetuated in the name of this historical necessity, described as the demiurge of history, were regarded as morally good actions. Kołakowski claims the "ethical individualism" according to which it is impossible to evaluate morally the good or bad results of an anonymous historical process, of a group or social class. Only human beings and their deeds are subject to moral judgment<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> Kołakowski asserts that "Real social involvement is moral involvement [...] each individual's participation in any specific form of political life is a moral act for which that individual is wholly responsible. No one is relieved of either positive or negative responsibility on the grounds that this actions formed only a fraction of a given historical process [...] A soldier is morally responsible for a crime committed on the orders of his superior; an individual is all the more responsible for acts performed – supposedly or in fact – on the orders of an anonymous history", *ibid.*, p. 140.

In his approach to the dilemmas facing the individual and his relationship to history Kołakowski is undoubtedly closer than Schaff to the existentialist conception of man as an autonomous monad of consciousness, “lonely” and “doomed to freedom”. But both of them take a very similar position claiming the freedom of scientific and artistic expression, subjected to a strict control under Stalinism. According to Schaff, “it must be an axiom that *scientific* work can only be reached through the *investigations of scientists*, and *artistic* truth through the *explorations of artists*.”<sup>14</sup> It can be noted in passing that a relative normality of development that art, literature and science had recovered during the Polish October, has been maintained until the collapse of socialist regime, in spite of the existence of censorship. In the 1960 a flow of translations from English and French brought to Polish readers Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Faulkner, Beckett, Ionesco. Several forerunners of existentialism, such as Witkacy and Gombrowicz, whose names had been forbidden, came to the surface. A multitude of writers whose debuts had been delayed during the preceding period could publish their works. In their poems, Herbert and Szymborska conjured large existentialist puzzles, while the Polish Film School underlined the role of individual as opposed to collectivity.

We can observe that by focusing on the individual, the revisionist Marxists express the Polish society’s aspirations in the post-Stalinist period. In this manner they convey Marxism humanism closely connected with the concept of happiness. As a matter of fact, the young Marx wanted to make man happy by eliminating the existing social causes of human unhappiness and by liberating the individual from alienation. Communism was regarded as the best means to realize this ideal: having eradicated the roots of human misery as a mass phenomenon it should give each person free play in the pursuit of happiness and let him be happy in his own way. From this point of view, Stalinism was the opposite of Marxism because, by abolishing individual identity, it tried to impose the same stereotype of happiness on everybody. Quoting Zamiatin’s *We* and Orwell’s *1984*, Schaff asserts that “a society that, to achieve a fusion of individual and public interests, strives to enforce a *generally binding* model of human happiness must inevitably end with a horrifying tyranny that stifles the individual with a totally dehumanized life.”<sup>15</sup>

However, let us not forget that, according to the revisionists, the pursuit of individual happiness in socialist countries should go hand with hand with the development of a social

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<sup>14</sup> *Marxism and the Human Individual*, p. 157. Kołakowski says on this subject: “There exists now a clearly recognized need to attack the degenerate, cancerous growth of the ideology which led to the belief that Party must profess certain dicta on the laws of biological heredity or the best forms of musical expression, *in Toward a Marxist Humanism*, p. 168.

<sup>15</sup> *Marxism and the Human Individual*, p. 179.

attitude. This one is the reverse of a narrow egoism which results from the market competition and the idolatrous worship of money raised to the status of supreme value. For the aim of communism is, in the words of Schaff, “to make men regard not only such things as stealing as dishonest and indecent, but also any kind of selfish behavior which, by the standards of capitalist society, is perfectly compatible with honesty and respectability.”<sup>16</sup> As for the young Kolakowski, his defense of human and humanistic socialism is accompanied by his criticism of the “lure of capitalism” which, in his opinion, “is very great in Poland.”

The revisionists wanted to democratize Polish society and to involve its members in public affairs through activity in social organizations and by a devolution of certain kinds of power, above all in the economic and administrative field, to civic and workers’ organizations. Nevertheless, some of them tried to justify by international situation the dictatorship of the proletariat which, according to Marx, was to be a relatively brief post-revolutionary phase. In 1965, Schaff puts the question: “can the socialist countries permit themselves as broad a development of democracy as they would like? Can they solve the problem of the personal liberties of the citizen as they would like?”; and he answers: “No, they cannot.”<sup>17</sup> In order to shorten the transition stage from dictatorship to democracy, the revisionists advocate the formation and cultivation of libertarian attitudes and habits, stamped out by the Stalinist terror. Schaff encourages to “cultivate a new human personality that would be distinguished equally by commitment to social concerns and responsibility for them as by independence of mind and intelligent disobedience if this is required by the social good.”<sup>18</sup>

We might reasonably assume that these words show social hopes for progressive democratization after Gomulka’s “thaw”. It is undoubtedly true that the era of Stalinization of Poland had forever ended and that society became more liberal in the late 1950 and in the early 1960. There was some normalcy, life looked a little more comfortable. Tadeusz Różewicz, one of the best known Polish postwar writer, alludes to this in his play *Witnesses*, published in 1962 and subtitled *Our little stabilization*. Already in the play’s first hundred words, the author remarks on the change in climate, stating: “we again have something resembling poetry”, and follows it immediately with what will be a recurring refrain: “we cross our legs” – for the first time in years, one can sit back and relax. But eventually, aspirations for full liberalization were proven false, as Gomulka’s regime became more conservative. In the second half of the 1960 one could observe a growing disparity between

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 216.

intellectual and political life in the country. The revisionists' hopes for progressive political change in Poland were replaced with disillusionment which is one of the principal causes of their breaking off with the Party and, as for some of them, their progressive rejection of the concept of Marxism as a separate school of thought. But, as Kołakowski asserts in *Permanent and Transitory Aspects of Marxism*, the most significant division is not between orthodox Marxists on one hand and everyone else on the other. It is between the Right and the Left in the humanities. And by the intellectual Left he means: "radical rationalism in thinking [...] an entirely secular view of the world; criticism pushed to its utmost limits, distrust of all closed doctrines and systems; striving for open-mindedness, that is, readiness to revise accepted theses, theories, and methods."<sup>19</sup> This attitude is one that, in my opinion, constitutes a permanent aspect of revisionist thought and an interesting proposition for the intellectual Left even today.

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<sup>19</sup> *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, p. 185.