



MARXISM, REVISIONISM, LIBERALISM: A CONVERSATION WITH PIOTR NOWAK

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*We are so very delighted to presented this interesting and wide-ranging conversation with Piotr Nowak, who is Professor of Philosophy at the Bialystok University in Poland. He translated works of such writers as Hannah Arendt, W. H. Auden, Leo Strauss, Alexander Kojève, Allan Bloom, Boris Pasternak, Vasyli Rozanov, Andrei Bely, Pavel Florensky, Jacob Taubes, Semyon Frank. He is the deputy editor-in-chief of the philosophical quarterly Kronos (in Polish), and the annual [Kronos. Philosophical Journal](#) (in English). He is also a member of the Board of the Count August Cieszkowski Foundation. He is the author of the following monographs: *Ontology of Success: An Essay on the Philosophy of Alexandre Kojève* (Gdańsk 2006), *The Prince's Signature: Reflections on Strength and Weakness* (Warsaw 2013), *The Ancients and Shakespeare on Time: Some Remarks on the War of Generations* (Amsterdam–New York 2014; in English), *Troglodyte Breeding: Comments on Higher Education and the Mental Culture of Contemporary Man* (Warsaw 2014), *I Die Therefore I Am* (Warsaw 2016), *The Box with Pandora Within* (Warsaw 2016). His most recent book is *Violence and Words. Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt* (Warsaw 2018), for which he was awarded the 2019 Daedalus' Wings Literary Prize founded by the National Library of Poland. He is also the host of two TV programs and a visiting professor at Warsaw University.*

In this discussion with [Zbigniew Janowski](#), Professor Nowak provides us with a profound analysis of modernity and the kind of society that we are sleepwalking into, where we have become prisoners of democracy.

Zbigniew Janowski (ZJ): I would like to focus our conversation on the topic of "revisionism." We know this term from the history of socialism or Communism. Marxist revisionism was an important stage in the life of socialist philosophers, socialism itself, and Communism's slow demise. It started after the so-called "October Thaw," in 1956, and continued throughout the 1960s. It was an attempt to "revise" Marxist socialism after Stalin's death in such a way as to make it look "human." That is how the famous expression "Socialism with a human face" came about.

It is 2021, Communism is gone. However, over the last 20 or so years, Liberalism has evolved into what is sometimes called "soft-totalitarianism." To be sure, this is not a system that operates on the basis of broken bones, mass-purges, imprisonment, or the existence of gulags, as socialism did; but, if we leave aside the free-market economy, today's Liberalism became an ideology which controls as many aspects of human life as Communism, or even more. The first thing is the control of speech and our

behavior.

Piotr Nowak (PN): Recently, I have reread the memoirs of [Barbara Skarga](#), entitled, *After the Liberation* (1944-1956). Skarga, who later became a prominent philosopher in Poland, was an officer in the [Home Army](#) during the war. She was captured by the [NKVD](#) (Soviet secret police, responsible for purges and murders) when she was 24. She was sentenced to 10 years of hard labor in Siberia. She returned to Poland at a time when former Stalinists were trying to assume a "human face."



Piotr Nowak. Photo Credit: Bartek Syta.

For years I have been reading Gulag literature with my students, among them Skarga's book, but also

[Shalamov](#), [Ginzburg](#), [Herling-Grudziński's *A World Apart*](#). Over time, I noticed a decline of interest in reading these books among students. It is exotic for young people today, but not for me. Unlike them, I know well – fortunately not from personal experience – what the totalitarian regime was like, what Siberia was and what a penal colony in Asiatic Russia was. On the other hand, I know from experience what authoritarianism, martial law, and military rule are. So, I quite dread using the term “totalitarianism” – in a reckless way. In the end, it seems reserved, to paraphrase Karl Jaspers, for liminal situations in history, such as [Kołyma](#) or Auschwitz.

At the same time, I accept your important disclaimer that “totalitarianism” (here the quotation marks are indispensable) exists in hard and soft versions. In my mind, the difference seems to be quite significant. Today, political opponents are not murdered in Warsaw and Berlin; rather, they are denied recognition. However, from a certain point of view – and you got me here – it is one and the same thing. Please note that Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin, the protagonist of Gogol's [The Overcoat](#), does not die from the cold, from the lack of a coat, but precisely from being denied recognition.

ZJ: Can you explain when and in what circumstances Revisionism under Communism came into being.

PN: It's hard to say exactly. It was certainly not immediately after Stalin's death, in 1953, but some three or four years later. In addition to Soviet Marxism, which appeared immediately after the war, the hitherto unknown in Poland, and even more so in the Soviet Union, Marx's [Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844](#) were discovered. At the same time, such prominent figures of Marxist thought as Gramsci, Lukacs, and later also Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, had “arrived” in Poland too. Suddenly, it turned out that there was plenty to choose from; and the stuff was even an interesting read!

Besides, after the war, ideology was important in shaping social practice. If someone shared leftist values, it was difficult for him to question them. We need to remember that at that time the whole world accepted the Manichaeian view of reality. This was the case not just in Europe but even in America. Communism was regarded as an angelic regime, maybe a bit degenerated and fallen, but angelic nonetheless. Such a view was partly because of the fact that it largely defeated fascism – undoubtedly the work of Satan. That is how people reasoned after the war all over the world. And this belief is still cultivated in some places in Italy and, above all, at the French universities.

In Poland, leftist sympathies proved to be strong for yet another reason. It is here that the Germans created the hell of Auschwitz. The very name of this place – apart from the association with the terrible

suffering of millions of human beings – reminded us of the collapse of the old, pre-war, "fascist" moral order. In a place such as Auschwitz or Warsaw, 90% of which was razed to the ground, the mere thought of moral behavior, of old values, such as, honor, good birth, responsibility for others became questionable, or even impossible. The most important values on which humanity was founded turned out to be fleeting and completely obsolete. Hence, calls for the restitution of the old status quo appeared impossible to the majority of the population. For this reason, it was necessary to fill in the empty space, replace the old values with the new – victorious – ones. And that is what the communists did.

The hunger for meaning was sated quite quickly by giving people hope for a better tomorrow, without poverty and without fascists. This prospect turned out to be tempting and easy to accept, especially by those who were not victims. The joyful May 1st parade (International Workers' Day), was celebrated each year. Its goal was to suppress the screams of the tortured victims, the slaughtered soldiers of the anti-communist underground, or the tormented Home Army soldiers. It was supposed to drown out the lamentations of the former landowners, robbed and dispossessed of their family estates by the communists. It was a politics of redirecting people's attention to the radiant – communist – future.

Back then no one wanted to talk about Manichaeism seen from a different angle, that would make you see the face of the devil not only in Fascism, but also in Communism. The Red Army defeated the German Fascists and brought its own understanding of history. History is written by the victor, and the victor was Communism.

The opposition did not come right away; it was only later, around 1957, along with the [Khrushchev Thaw](#). In the literary realm, there was a break too. In 1955, the poet [Adam Wazyk](#) wrote, "A Poem for Adults" which describes the madness of the situation, as in the following last two stanzas:

I went home,
like a man who had gone out to buy medicine,
and returned twenty years later.
My wife asked: Where were you?
The children asked: Where were you?
I was silent, trembling like a mouse.

The trouble with "madness" is that madness isolates and cannot become a collective state of mind. While someone can shout on his own behalf that he is crazy, his shouts can't be repeated in *pluralis majestatis*, unless the term is used metaphorically, to the tune of: "The whole nation lost its mind to walk hand in hand with the communists."

There is a book by [Jacek Trznadel](#) about the entanglement of Polish intellectuals in Communism, which stands in stark contrast to Miłosz's *The Captive Mind*. According to Miłosz, it was the "Hegelian bite" – the intoxication of the great minds with ideology. Trznadel, on the other hand, argues that the mainsprings of ideological commitment and conformist behavior of intellectuals were fear and greed for influence and money, but also the hatred of the "ancien regime."

As far as Revisionism is concerned, the most important attempt was undertaken, in 1956, by the young Leszek Kolakowski in *Światopogląd i życie codzienne* (*Worldview and Daily Life*, and which was published in German under the title, *Der Mensch ohne Alternative. Von der Möglichkeit und Unmöglichkeit Marxist zu sein*).

ZJ: One could say that post 1956 Revisionism was an attempt to create what came to be called "Socialism with a human face." If pre 1956 reality was oppressive and brutal ("Stalinist"), it had nothing to do with Marxism; rather, it had everything to do with the actions and decisions of the corrupt State apparatchiks, who distorted Marx's message. This was a way of absolving Marx's philosophy of responsibility for the practice of socialism, which found expression in the famous slogan, "Socialism Yes. Distortions No." After each upheaval, in each communist country, roughly every decade, we had a new Polit-bureau, composed of the new communists who would dispose of the old bastards who were guilty of abuses and responsible for "distortions." But Marxism, so the argument went, was innocent.

PN: To all those who are able to spot a "human face" in socialism, I have a suggestion – try to find it! [Leszek Kołakowski](#) – probably the most outstanding Marxist revisionist of the second half of the twentieth century – ends his essay, *Karl Marx and the Classic Definition of Truth*, by paraphrasing Thomas Mann: "In the whole universe, man cannot find a well deep enough to not discover, looking into it, his own face down at the bottom." The thing is, sometimes that face – a human face – happens to be a vulgar mug. Kołakowski writes about it in another essay, *The Marxist Roots of Stalinism* (republished in his collection of essays, *My Correct Views on Everything*), which, in my opinion, should be a mandatory reading at contemporary French and American universities.

We were told many times, and some still seem to believe it, that there was nothing Marxist in Stalinism. However, as Kołakowski argues in his essay, even if Stalinism was one of the many incarnations of Marxism, it was a legitimate one. If so, we must assume that even behind the face of a well-bred graduate of the École Normale Supérieure, we may find the face of a butcher.

ZJ: You have mentioned Kolakowski's influential collection of essays which appeared in England as *Marxism and Beyond* and, in America as, *Toward a Marxist Humanism*. I would also add the issue of *TriQuarterly: A Leszek Kołakowski Reader*, with several essays written in the same period. These books contain most of his important Revisionist writings, which were quite influential among Western Marxists, especially in the UK and North America. Interesting as they are, as part of Marxist historiography, they did not save Marxism. The history of several decades – 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, which led to the collapse of Communism – was to demonstrate that. Here is something I would like you to comment on – could one say that Revisionism was a failed attempt to breath new life into a world-view that was bound to breed economic inefficiency, oppressiveness, lack of freedom in the private realm and cultural poverty.

PN: Yes, that's exactly what I was trying to say. It was bound to fail. Communism is a poisoned fruit. A fruit beautiful at times, occasionally even tasty and tempting, but fundamentally poisoned.

ZJ: But only a handful of intellectuals quickly realized that. That is, as you put it, the socialist idea was a poisoned fruit. Here two people, who realized relatively early what it was, stand out – Raymond Aron, the author of *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, and Czesław Miłosz, the author of *The Captive Mind*. Kołakowski was another, but his realization came a decade later (he was also younger than Aron and Miłosz). You referred to his *The Marxist Roots of Stalinism*. But there is another important but less known piece by him where he seems to argue that absolving the old Marx by pointing to the “humanist” young Marx will not do. (He wrote this in “Althusser's Marx,” for *The Socialist Register*, 1971; reprinted in *The Two Eyes of Spinoza and Other Essays on Philosophers*). Which is another way of saying, Revisionism was a waste of time.

Over the last five years or so, given what I experienced at American universities, I decided to teach a class on totalitarianism. I would regularly assign Orwell's *1984*. A friend of mine told me, forget about Orwell, make them read Miłosz, it is by far the best analysis of Communism. What Miłosz realized with full force was that Communism required faith to operate successfully. He called it a New Faith. As soon as people lost faith in the possibility of building “a just” (socialist) society, Communism started cracking.

One could write a history of Communism through the prism of those cracks: 1956, 1966, 1968, 1970, 1981. The final nail in the coffin came in 1981 – the imposition of martial law in Poland. After that, only a few people retained faith, and eight years later, in 1989, Communism was buried in Eastern Europe. Do you agree with Miłosz that Communism required faith? And if, so, why did so many people – some very intelligent ones, like Kolakowski -- "converted" into it? At the beginning of our conversation you answered this question to some extent; historical circumstances after WWII certainly helped.

PN: Different things require different commitment, including faith. Communists believe in a better tomorrow; and therefore they believe in progress. The title of the Czech communist [Julius Fucik's](#) book about a [country](#) where "tomorrow is already yesterday" conveys this idea quite well. This faith is contagious even today. The blind rush, headlong, ever onwards, always ends up in a nosedive. This attitude is perfectly reflected in Alfred Kubin's 1902 painting [The Man](#). It shows a human figure rushing downward from who knows where, going ever faster and faster. The problem is that there is no stopping this motion. As the knowledge of it dawns on her, the terror grows. Left-wing thinkers do not take this into account at all. For them, progress means not only technological advancement, but also a moral one; the improvement of humanity. They are convinced that in order to eradicate evil it is enough to correct poorly functioning social institutions and persistently strive to advocate for justice.

Both the Scriptures and Thomas Hobbes hold a different view: there is an evil in man that resists reforms. Man is terrible; he has done so much evil throughout history that there is no redemption for him in this world. We have to struggle with evil in us. Communism is the embodiment of evil, one of its many forms; perhaps it is the most demonic and bloody of evils. It harnesses beautiful words only to vulgarize and destroy them. Values, such as, hope, love, brotherhood and peace – all of them have fallen prey to the communist practice of vulgarizing them. In their hands, words changed meaning. Peace is a state of war, freedom becomes enslavement, and so on. We find it in Orwell!

As far as Miłosz is concerned, a lot has been written about him. Mark Lilla did a good job adapting him in writing his [The Reckless Mind](#), for use at American universities (incidentally, I helped him with the Polish translation of this interesting book). Miłosz, on the other hand, translated Aron's *The Opium of the Intellectuals* back in the 1950s. These are not only bibliographical details. They show how ideas circulated then and how they circulate today, and their mutual influence. Certainly, the problems of Communism did not concern only this part of the European continent.

Kolakowski, on the other hand, interests and inspires me not when he reaches "belief" in a better tomorrow, but when he abandons it and becomes a Christian. You say he was intelligent. Certainly not

when he wrote that the Catholic Church was responsible for the death camps (*Szkice o filozofii katolickiej* [Essays on Catholic Philosophy], p. 57). He acquired wisdom and intelligence with age, especially when he recovered from "the beautiful disease of leftism."

ZJ: Several points in your explanation as to why Communism was such a powerful force can be applied to Liberalism as well. It is also based on the idea of a better future, equality and justice. Contemporary politics revolves almost exclusively around these two notions. They are the axis of contemporary social policies, and it is there, in my opinion, where the problem of coercive nature of Liberalism lies. To be against "social justice" is to be, very much like the communists saw it, "The enemy of the people," who deserve no place in society. Not to join the "social justice" crusade is tantamount to displaying anti-social behavior, very much like not participating in a May 1st parade, or in various social activities under Communism, which could get you in trouble. Those who dare to do it are castigated, scorned, looked down upon, eliminated, made to look like social pariahs. Elimination is not a physical one, but a social one; being fired from a job, from a university post, being "accused," etc. Would you agree?

PN: Today's Liberalism does not have much in common with classical Liberalism. If Locke and Mill's Liberalism was conceived in such a way that it could support freedom – not only economic, but also academic, spiritual – then the Liberalism we are dealing with today has become hard-headed, moralizing, and schematic. Classical Liberalism fortified people, while the contemporary one wants to tell them how to live; wants to transform and reform them; bring everyone down to the same level; fashion them into one mould, contrived by who knows whom.

ZJ: By whom? By social activists! It is the fastest growing "profession." They are experts in raising "social consciousness" about "social justice." They are the producers of slogans calling on expanding equity and dismantling whatever is left of hierarchy (the so-called "power structure," as we say in America).

PN: You are probably right. Liberals are not interested in the common good, but, as you say, in "social justice." The *res publica*, the State, the nation do not exist in their minds. In consequence, they are nothing but a convenient instrument in the hands of the rich, a bargaining chip for people of influence. Such a weak State can't make decisions or settle disputes. Conformist behavior is rewarded. Ordinary people are intimidated on a massive scale ("next we come for you"), reprimanded or intimidated. Adults are treated like children.

Are the people who influence and shape reality today still liberals? I don't know for sure. I know that

they dominate and willingly refer to liberal philosophy as a kind of legitimization for their ever-bolder actions. They are followers of progress and infinite improvement, which command people to part with everything they have learned at home, which they have acquired through tradition. Old and worn-down values are replaced by new ones.

ZJ: You ask whether they are liberal? I would say, very much so. If you really want to know, observe the actions (or the silence) of those who claim to be so-called classical liberals. They will say to you (in private), "I don't agree with this or that; I don't support this or that policy;" they will even be sincerely appalled by some things the radicals do, but have you seen them vote against the liberal radicals, or raise a voice of protest against the dumbest proposals in local politics, or oppose destructive changes in university curricula? You soon see which side they are on. They invariably support the same policies that the radicals do.

In their outer actions they are as radical as the true radicals; in their hearts they are most likely cowards. They use the term classical Liberalism to find absolution, to distance themselves from the wrongs done by their ideological affiliates. The so-called classical Liberalism exists in their imagination, just like true socialism existed in the heads of those who believed that the socialism in the countries of real socialism had nothing to do with Marx's socialism.

PN: Those who experienced Communism know that the same thing happened half a century ago and earlier among the communists who created Homo Sovieticus, the new Soviet man, in Central and Eastern Europe. In that sense, Martin Heidegger did not err in equating – as he did in his [Letter on Humanism](#) – the degenerated, hurtling rudderless Liberalism with Communism. I remember that back in the time of the communist Polish People's Republic, when I read this text for the first time, I did not understand this kind of association at all. Today I understand it. Both ideologies adhere to two common values: egalitarianism and the complete economization of community life.

Ford, Soros, and Stalin go along with lesser acolytes through the jungle of the 20th and 21st centuries practically side by side, causing untold catastrophes and destruction. Entire villages and cities disappear from the economic map of their countries. In schools and universities, propaganda centers are created, where courses in tolerance, adaptation, sexual harassment, gender identity and the oppressive nature of the modern family are organized. At other training courses – known once as "the reforging of souls" – you can learn how to eat European meringue and what equality is and why it has become the most important value in all areas of social and political life. Thanks to the newest

ideological trends, deeply humanistic values, still so close to Mill, recur as their own caricature, a farce. Because this is how past events come back to us: history – said Marx – always returns as a farce.

ZJ: Historical circumstances – economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s, the rise of Fascism, WWII, and other events – made Socialism attractive to many people. Stalin's death and the year 1956 made Revisionism necessary, at least for Marxists who wanted to save it. It was an attempt to save Socialism's face; to make it look human! However, contrary to their hopes, Revisionism was not tolerated for long. [Nikita Khrushchev](#), Stalin's successor, even insisted that [Gomulka](#), the First Secretary of the Polish Communist Party, organize an international trial of the Revisionists, Kołakowski being the main culprit. In Khrushchev's mind, or those who advised him, Revisionism was dangerous for the maintenance of power, unity of the Party, but above all, its ideological legitimacy. When Kołakowski was fired from the Party's ranks and his university post, the official document stated that he "fashioned the minds of the youth with ideology which was contrary to the development of the country." Whether the communists understood Marx and Kołakowski's reading of him, is irrelevant; but they suspected that philosophers' reading of Marx could be dangerous. Insofar as the communist state was based on Marx's ideas, interpretation of Marx was crucial. It was not just the Communist apparatchiks who were concerned but philosophers such as [Jurgen Habermas](#) who supposedly remarked, in the 1970s, that Kołakowski is a disaster for the European Left.

I bring this up to show that reading and interpretation of philosophical texts matters; and it was the reading of Marx which contributed to the demise of Marxist ideology, and people's loss of faith in the system. Ultimately the system collapsed because the faith in it had been undermined by intellectuals.

As I said, and you seem to agree with me on this point, if Liberalism is becoming, or has become, totalitarian, its eventual demise – if it follows the trajectory of Communism – can be accomplished only if Liberalism finds critics among its own believers, who will come to the inevitable conclusion, as did the Marxist Revisionists, that the system is fundamentally flawed, that "distortions" are not distortions but fundamental features of the ideology. Are there any Liberal Revisionists, not just critics of Liberalism who never claimed to be Liberal? Mark Lilla, whose writings you know, seems to find Liberalism more and more disappointing; but he is far from breaking away from it.

PN: This argument about corrupting the youth is as old as philosophy itself, stretching all the way back to the trial and death of Socrates. We will not come up with anything new here. Politicians will always accuse philosophers of anything and everything, not only corrupting the youth, since they cannot bear

the thought of free people, independent from their decisions.

You say that something in Kołakowski's thought did not sit well with Habermas. That is just fine. There is a problem with German philosophy in general. The thing is that World War II seriously thinned out the Germans; and the Germans killed off the Jews. Meanwhile, for centuries both have provided us with intellectual fuel. War put an end to that. The defeat of the Third Reich has driven all German philosophy to the grave. German philosophy ceased to exist. With one exception – Martin Heidegger, the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century. The French took this opportunity to devise a hokum called postmodernism, talking about which here is a waste of time. We will do well not to refer to either the Germans or the postmodernists in a conversation about Marx, revisionism or Liberalism.

Of course, as everywhere, there are brilliant exceptions. In France, they include – to limit this listing to the living – Rémi Brague, Alain Besançon, who was a gauchist in the 1950s, and Pierre Manent, a French Straussian. That latter said in an interview with Benedicte Delorme-Montini something along the lines of, "if you aspire to understand modern politics, you must have a certain understanding of the United States; therefore you must have a little love for them ... A minimum of sympathy and recognition for American achievements is a basic prerequisite of understanding politics even a little bit." I will add from myself that it is good not only to love and understand them, but also visit and be interested in them.

In my mind the US is entwined – as is the case with of millions of Poles who are Americanophiles – with a childish dream of freedom. Growing up under Communism, we dreamed of the States as if it was Arcadia. Liberalism was also an Arcadian myth for me, a positive myth. In order to be able to revise the ideas on which a political system was founded, one must grow organically in it. Nobody can be a substitute for the British or the Americans in this. The "revisionist" impulse must come from them. Mark Lilla is not entirely convincing in his writings. At first, I was amazed by his book on intellectuals because it was really well-written. Later, as I read his other books and essays he has written for *The New York Review of Books*, I realized that he was a literarily gifted opportunist who woke up one day and realized – like everyone in his social circle – that there is no God. Eureka! His [*The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*](#) came from such a discovery. I stopped reading him after that book.

Today, when the history of ideas in the West has receded several decades in relation to, for example, the late works of Martin Heidegger, the humanistic thought of the young Kołakowski has a chance for a renaissance. It fits quite well with the anticlerical antipathies of such authors as Mark Lilla, Stephen

Greenblatt, Noah Harari, Christopher Hitchens, Giovanni Vattimo, Richard Dawkins, taken in concert with all the Frenchmen who fell out of Alain Badiou's back pocket. These thinkers, like pack-donkeys, gradually and painstakingly reach the ideas developed by Kotakowski in the 1950s and 1960s, which he abandoned in his further philosophical work, and which brought such dazzling gems as [*The Presence of Myth*](#) or [*Metaphysical Horror*](#).

ZJ: What was it about Lilla's book or books that drew your attention? Did you see him as a Liberal Revisionist?

PN: No, Lilla's books do not have that potential. I only skimmed through the latest ones. They adulate the liberal system in all its pathological layers, and if they undertake criticism, it is a predictable and authorized one. But the Americans had ingenious "revisionists." They have forgotten about them. I am preparing an issue of *Kronos* magazine about [*Allan Bloom*](#). So, [*I am re-reading his essays*](#), such as those collected in [*Giants and Dwarfs*](#). I doubt their "revisionist" power is remembered.

ZJ: Unlike Marxism, Liberalism does not seem to have the venerated "founding fathers," to whose writings we can go back to. Juxtapose young Marx to late Marx; only to realize that the theory was flawed from the beginning. There is no body of writings like the Federalist Papers in the US, the Constitution, which we need to know how to read in order to get politics right. Perhaps that is why there is little chance that Liberalism will collapse the way socialism did because the theory contained in the writings of the founders turned out to be simply wrong.

PN: You have published two volumes of John Stuart Mill's minor writings. You do not spare him harsh words. You are right. Something went wrong. We need to investigate what happened and when. But, let's leave it to the Anglos. Personally, I would start by weakening John Rawls's position in the American humanities. I suggest we should reread Bloom's critique of Rawls, which he published in 1975, in [*American Political Science Review* \(69 \[2\]\)](#). I know of no more convincing criticism of his philosophy.

ZJ: I would disagree with you saying, let's leave it to the Anglos, for several reasons. Liberal ideology enveloped not just the US, Canada, the UK. It is doing the same in Continental Europe, including the former socialist countries, and parts of Asia, South America. Liberal language of rights, justice and equality is everywhere the same. Rawls and company are not just an American problem; they are a problem for everyone. It does not matter whether a critique of Rawls comes from America or Scotland or England, so long as someone formulates it. There are others who wrote critically about Rawls: Roger

Scruton and John Gray. The latter wrote a good book in the early 1990s called, [Liberalisms](#) (plural). It is worth rereading today.

Secondly, for critique of Rawls to be effective, one needs to undermine that which underlies Rawls project, that is egalitarianism. His whole theory of justice is based on the premise of the equality of outcome, and unless we go after equality, show how detrimental it is to man's private life and social organization, we will always have another Rawls, another theory of justice. What is needed is a serious historical work, which shows how the egalitarian world came about. No one who read Peter Laslett's [The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age](#) (1965) would give credence to Marx and Engels' philosophy of history. As Laslett shows, in his line-by-line commentary to *The Communist Manifesto*, it was based on an erroneous interpretation of history. Jonathan Clark is doing similar revisionist work, and everybody who is interested in the subject of Liberalism should read his [Revolution and Rebellion](#) and [The Language of Liberty](#).

Be that as it may, here is what I would like to ask: unlike Western Europeans and North Americans who lived through the entire time under the roof of liberal democracy, Eastern Europeans did not; their experience between 1945, the end of WWII, and 1989, the end of Communism, was different. We were inoculated against ideological thinking. Are Poles, for example, better equipped to formulate such arguments and thus can better offer their Western friends a piece of advice?

PN: I do not think so. For this I blame the stupid, naive, childish and probably unrequited love of Poles for the United States. For millions of Poles, Anglo-Liberalism (please do not confuse it with the economic doctrine of [Jeffrey Sachs](#) and [Leszek Balcerowicz](#)) will always be associated with freedom that was still there in the 1980s.

ZJ: As for my decision to put out Mill's [minor writings](#), I wanted to find out who is responsible for the social, moral and political chaos today. Not the chaos and demoralization created by socialism, but the chaos in the formerly admired liberal democracies. Mill appeared to me to be the best candidate. As I was preparing my first volume of his writings, I started realizing that he is to Liberalism what Marx is to Socialism. Just like Marx was not the first socialist, nor was Mill the first Liberal. But they both gave full expression to two traditions that existed before them. They codified them and made them into coherent systems.

When you read those minor writings (the second volume is scheduled to appear in the Fall) you no

longer see Mill as the serious philosopher (as per, [On Liberty](#), [Utilitarianism](#), or [Considerations on Representative Government](#)), but an angry social activist, a propagandist, polemicist, who, like Marx wants to change the world.

What you are struck by is his dislike of the old hierarchical order - the aristocracy, the Anglican Church, religion, the State and, finally, his love of equality. This is what motivated his philosophy of Liberalism. To be sure, he was less radical than Marx and Engels, but his vision of the future of the world is similar: it is a world in which equality reigns supreme. This is what he says on the last two pages of his *Utilitarianism*, which sounds very much like Marx/Engels' *Communist Manifesto*. And equality, like classless society in Marx, is what drives the liberal world today. I consider it to be a dangerous state of mind, which will not stop before it destroys all social institutions. Socialism did it then. Liberalism is doing it now.

PN: You suggested I read Mill, for which I would like to thank you separately. I took his minor writings seriously, and my colleagues in the editorial staff of [Kronos magazine](#) found them interesting as well. We decided to translate a considerable portion of them and devote the issue to Mill. I hope that it will contribute to the debate you care so deeply about here, in Poland.

It is true, there is a lot in them about equality - a noble idea in general, which our times have so exaggerated and vulgarized. For example, mentally ill and dysfunctional people are considered not to be different from healthy people. They are "just different." The result is that we undermine the category of mental health, and thus we can't cure them. We are not allowed to talk of disease; we use the language of "different sensitivity." Less and less attention is being paid to crime victims.

At the same time, huge public funds are being committed to the resocialization of criminals, who often see themselves as victims of the social system, unable to take responsibility for what they have done. My daughter wanted to pursue this topic professionally - she graduated from forensic psychology at one of the English universities - but was successfully dissuaded from doing that. There are topics that may not be discussed in today's academia! And that is utterly unprecedented! Wasn't that what the right to freedom of expression was about, especially in academic matters? Was it not also postulated by Mill in *On Liberty*? The same Mill, who called for the liberalization of the law in relation to criminals.

Today the majority has been cornered by the minority. Nay! By numerous minorities who demand the same rights as the majority. Western democracies are on the brink of a civil war.

ZJ: You expressed concerns not just about American universities but also referred to the French ones, the intellectual scene there, and the French romance with Marxism. To be sure, Poles, unlike the French, may not find reading Marxist literature palatable, but in their general outlook, their thinking about the State as a provider of all kinds of goods and services, the power of centralized government, are, in my opinion, not different from that of the French. The Americans too. Whether it is the French *égalité* or Marx's classless society, the Poles and other Europeans are true believers in equality. I would even go further: I would say that post-socialist countries may be in a worse situation than the Western European countries because we have had a state-sponsored egalitarian (Marxist) ideology for 45 years. We may have shaken off the Marxist new-speak, but not necessarily the belief in equality which socialism engrained in us. It is what Liberalism is doing now in the countries which by Marxist standards were class societies.

The alternative to equality of any kind and provenance would be a society based on hierarchy, merit, and privilege. All three were the primary object of Mill's attack. Except for Sir Roger Scruton and Jonathan Clark, I do not know of anyone who would dare to defend it. Say to the Poles that you are a partisan of hierarchy and inequality based on merit, and you are likely to be socially decapitated, just like in the US. I believe you experienced it as well.

PN: I prefer not to talk about personal experiences, which will not teach anyone anything who refuses to understand the problems of the liberal societies we live in. On the other hand, people like us – you and I – understand the danger all too well. All I can say is that we are coming awfully close to communist reality in various fields, where people were destroyed for even being suspected of having views contrary to the existing ideology. Unless we wake up from our progressive dream, totalitarianism will always be with us.

As for your question about the Poles, let me give you an example. Poles have always shed their blood. You know the slogan "For your freedom and ours." [Tadeusz Kosciuszko](#), the commander of the Polish Army during the 1794 uprising against Russia, was one of the Polish generals who came to America to fight in the war of independence. He designed the defenses of West Point during the revolutionary war, and, later, suggested to Jefferson that Americans establish a military school for officers. There is a monument of Kosciuszko at [West Point](#) and [on the square](#) in front of the White House. Now he did not go to America because he was a partisan of equality! He just could not bear the thought that there are people who live in bondage. When he was returning to Poland, he left Jefferson his American estate to sell and use all the money from the sale – well over a million dollars in today's money – to free as many Blacks as possible. I was tempted to find out how many people could be freed for it and it turned out to be about a hundred!

ZJ: Thank you, Professor Nowak, for such an interesting and invigorating conversation.

The featured image shows, *"The Fair at Kawaria Zabrzydowska, Poland,"* by Wojciech Weiss, painted ca. 1913.

