



WHICH PHILOSOPHERS MATTER? THE CASE FOR LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI

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Few contemporary philosophers have works considered important by non-academics. Their intellectual pursuits, important as they are, have little impact outside academia, let alone are they deemed politically dangerous. Leszek Kolakowski is just such a philosopher. In 2003, he was awarded the first Kluge Prize created by the Library of Congress as the American counterpart to the Nobel Prize for lifelong achievements in the human sciences, a distinction that was both timely and well deserved.

Kolakowski is the author of more than thirty books on topics as varied as Marxism, seventeenth-century thought, philosophy of religion, Bergson, and Pascal. He is also the translator of seventeenth-century philosophical writings and author of several collections of essays, the genre of writing for which he received the European Prize for the Essay. Among the most distinguished American awards that form part of Kolakowski's collection are the Jefferson Award, the MacArthur Prize, and the Kluge Prize. The list of prestigious European awards is no less impressive: the Erasmus Prize, Prix Européen d'Essai, and Die Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels.

Born in 1927 in Radom, Poland, Kolakowski joined the Polish Communist party after World War II. His youthful fascination with Marxism did not, however, last long. Disillusioned with the primitivism of the official state ideology and the practice of real socialism, Kolakowski began drifting away from communism after the 1956 "October thaw." Many of his writings from 1956 to 1966, including the influential essay "Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth," drew the attention of the state authorities and led to his expulsion from the editorship of *Studia Filozoficzne*.

The Revisionist movement in which Kolakowski became the most original voice made Khrushchev, the first secretary of the Soviet Communist party, insist that communist leaders from the "satellite republics" organize an international trial of the "revisionists"—Kolakowski being the main culprit among them. Luckily for the revisionists, Wladyslaw Gomulka, the communist leader of Poland, did not succumb to Khrushchev's demand. He did, however, join the ranks of Kolakowski's critics, attacking him publicly as "the main ideologue of the so-called revisionist movement." In 1968 Kolakowski delivered a famous speech on the state of Polish culture; after this he found himself out of a job, removed from the editorial boards of a number of publishing houses, and stripped of all his scholarly titles "for forming the views of the youth in a position glaringly contrary to the dominant tendency of the country." His writings were put on the index of forbidden authors, and none of his publications could be cited or even referred to in Poland during the entire pre-Solidarity period (1968-1980).

The Western Left subscribed to Kolakowski's revisionist ideas, seeing in them the hope for "socialism with a human face," of which the political practice in the countries of real socialism was believed to be merely a distortion. However, the October thaw did not last long. Ten years later, it became all too obvious to the revisionists that the promises made by the party leaders in 1956 were empty. Young Polish Marxists woke up from their revisionist dream in 1968 jobless. Several of them – Bronislaw Baczko, Zygmunt Bauman, Włodzimierz Brus -- were expelled from their posts and had to seek employment in the West. Kolakowski became probably the best known of them. He was professor of philosophy at McGill, then Berkeley, and eventually found his permanent post at All Souls College, Oxford (1971), and at the University of Chicago (1981), where he taught until his retirement.



If, as a revisionist Marxist, Kolakowski was dangerous for the communist authorities, after his arrival in the West in 1968 he became troublesome for his leftist admirers. The German philosopher Jurgen Habermas remarked: "Kolakowski is a catastrophe for the Western European Left." Having little or no knowledge of his personal peregrinations in 1966 and 1968, they were unaware of Kolakowski's departure from Marxism. Kolakowski laid out his reasons in his famous work, "My Correct Views on Everything" (1973), a rejoinder to the distinguished English historian E.P. Thompson's hundred-page "An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski," published a year earlier in the *Socialist Register*.

Far from having politically correct views on everything, an intellectual trait displayed by Thompson in his letter, who still in 1972 believed socialism to be a panacea for the ills of capitalism, Kolakowski explained to Thompson that he no longer cherished any hope for socialism. Stalinism, he argued in "Marxist Roots of Stalinism" is not a distortion of Marx's thought; it is a legitimate offshoot of it. The socialist idea was dead for Kolakowski, and no "socialism with a human face" could be hoped for. Paraphrasing Shakespeare's Hamlet, Kolakowski ended his sarcastic rejoinder by saying: "Alas, poor idea. I knew it, Edward. This skull will never smile again."

If Habermas perceived Kolakowski's activities of the early 1970s as a reason to see a coming catastrophe, the publication of Kolakowski's [*Main Currents of Marxism*](#) in 1976 must have presented itself as a vision of Doomsday. *Main Currents of Marxism* is an intellectual "death certificate" of Marxist thought written thirteen years before the actual burial of communism in 1989. In this elegantly written work, Kolakowski traces the roots of Marxism to the tradition of European dialectics that goes back to Neoplatonism. He describes Marxism as twentieth-century man's greatest fantasy: it promised utopia, a classless society without greed. What it brought about instead was the most oppressive political system ever known, based on total state ownership of all its citizens.

Despite the Left's fears that Kolakowski's anti-communism provided ammunition for the Right, Kolakowski never truly became a conservative. His later attitude is probably best expressed in two articles published in his collection of essays, [*My Correct Views on Everything*](#). In "What Is Left of Socialism," Kolakowski defines socialism as a set of slogans that "were supposed to justify and glorify communism and the slavery that inevitably goes with it." However, insofar as socialism was the utopian expression of solidarity with the "underdogs," it stood for "social justice."

The notion of social justice has been criticized by economists, such as F. A. Hayek. Kolakowski does not deny the economic validity of such criticism but rejects Hayek's conclusion that social justice is a useless notion. In his typically contrarian style, Kolakowski writes: "In its vagueness, social justice resembles the concept of human dignity. It is difficult to define what human dignity is. It is not an organ to be discovered in our body, it is not an empirical notion, but without it we would be unable to answer the simple question: what is wrong with slavery?" In "Where Are Children in Liberal Philosophy?" he argues that the consistent notion of the minimum liberal state is in danger of not being able to sustain the liberal state. Perfect neutrality of the state, which liberal ideology requires, is incapable of generating values that could foster public virtues to sustain the *res publica*. Those virtues must be inculcated, a position inconsistent with the liberal mindset.

The political turmoil in the 1960s helped Kolakowski's international reputation, first, as a revisionist Marxist philosopher from behind the Iron Curtain, and later as a leading critic of communism. Yet Kolakowski has never been solely a scholar of Marxism. He launched his academic career with a work on Spinoza, *The Individual and Infinity: Freedom and the Antinomies of Freedom in the Philosophy of Spinoza* (1958), in which he aimed to extract "humanistic content" from the European religious tradition and see the whole of it, minus the Greeks, as hiding the same message under different religious garments.

The book on Spinoza was followed by the publication of a massive study of non-confessional Christianity in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, *Religious Consciousness and Confessional Link* (1962). The book, translated into French under the telling title, *Chrétiens sans église* (*Christians Without a Church*), is concerned with the post-Reformation period in European religiosity and philosophy. Despite its length (824 dense pages in French translation) and heavyweight scholarship, the book has become a classic among French, Dutch, and Italian scholars of seventeenth-century thought.

Kolakowski's critics were often puzzled by his interest in religion, but the book is more than a work in a neglected field of the history of religious ideas (most of the sources Kolakowski analyzes were available only in Dutch and Latin in their original seventeenth-century editions). *Christians Without a Church* was perceived as a model for revisionist Marxism like non-confessional Christianity. No single party, just like no single Church, could claim to be in possession of the orthodox creed. Accordingly, one could claim to be a Marxist without supporting the communist state, just as one could claim to be a Christian without belonging to the Church. Not without reason was Kolakowski once described as "Ein Christl ohne Kirche, ein Kommunist ohne Partei" (a Christian without a church, a Marxist without a party).

The young Kolakowski might have believed that revisionist Marxism could save the true Marxist message from its distortions at the hands of the official state apparatchiks and, by analogy, that non-confessional Christianity offered a model of an intellectual position one could assume for the communist state. Yet the validity of the parallel between denominational Christianity and Marxism was false and naive: False, because Stalinism, as Kolakowski himself argues in "Marxist Roots of Stalinism," was not a distortion of Marxism but a legitimate version of it; and naive because "individual revelations," be they mystical or "revisionist," prove perilous to earthly organizations. As Kolakowski's own example shows, his revisionist ideas became corrosive for the states behind the Iron Curtain. Their influence in the countries of the former Soviet empire, where his writings circulated in countless editions in a samizdat form, cannot be overestimated when calculating the loss of faith in Marxism.



Leszek Kolakowski and Zbigniew Janowski, Oxford, 1998.

Although Kolakowski devoted his most scholarly writings to Protestant Christianity, and he himself may forever remain a "Christian without a church," his cultural background and religious sympathies are Roman Catholic. The subject of his book on Pascal, *God Owes Us Nothing* (1992), is the theological battle between the Jansenists and the Jesuits in the seventeenth-century Catholic Church. He rejoices in the fact that the semi-Pelagian (Jesuit) form of Christianity won against the rigidity of Jansenist theology, not because the Jansenists were wrong but because only the Jesuits could save the Catholic Church from being reduced, as he claims it would inevitably have happened with the Jansenists, to a small sect.

Kolakowski's writings on religion are much more personal than the writings of most philosophy professors. For this very reason, however, they are also more exciting to read. In *Religion: If There Is No God* (1980), he takes his reader on a personal trip through most of the "pro and con" arguments for the existence of God to show that the act of faith is a moral, not a logical, commitment and that therefore there are no compelling logical reasons to abandon belief in God in the face of evil. For Kolakowski, who spent his teenage years in German-occupied Poland and who witnessed the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto, the existence of evil was no theoretical construct. In following a French theologian, he says, "I can understand people who do not believe in God, but the fact that there are people who do not believe in the devil is beyond my comprehension." It should therefore not be surprising to see on the list of Kolakowski's publications titles, such as *The Key to Heaven, Conversations with the Devil*, "Can the Devil be Saved?" "The Devil and Politics," or "A Stenographic Report of the Devil's Metaphysical Press Conference in Warsaw, on the 20th of December, 1963."

Kolakowski has often been described as the most perceptive critic of totalitarianism. One needs to note, however, that his criticism goes beyond the anatomy of communist totalitarianism. He has also written on totalitarian Nazism (in "Genocide and Ideology" and in "A Short Comment on Heidegger's Comment on Nietzsche's Comment on the Power of Negativity"); and on several occasions he has expressed concerns about the dangers of democratic totalitarianism. The Nazi and Marxist forms of totalitarianism may be gone for good, but its watered-down incarnations, such as political correctness, are very much alive. It would be naive to believe that liberal democracy may not become totalitarian.

In his "Where Are Children in Liberal Philosophy," Kolakowski is very clear that liberal principles may be turned against themselves. "Liberal states display an obsessive tendency to legislate, in minute detail, about every aspect and variety of human relations.... The more laws and regulations are needed... the more and more repressive" the liberal state becomes. This tendency is the result of the weakening of

the common culture and the agreement on what common religious, traditional, and historical values should obtain to regulate human behavior.

No one who has experienced the ideological indoctrination that took place under communism can fail to be horrified at the extent to which life in present-day America (intrusion of the state into the private realm, the use of language, the ideologization of education) is reminiscent of life under communism. However, everyone who experienced it must conclude that intellectual devastation at North American universities has far surpassed what we know from history of education under communism. In most respects, the ideological brainwashing has achieved more than the communists could ever hope for.

As Kolakowski put it, "Should the 'ideologization' of universities in that spirit prevail, we might find ourselves longing for the good old days of universities ruled by the obligatory Marxist ideology, with its formal rules of historical correctness and truth." Yet there does not seem to be any democratic "revisionist" movement under way. I do not mean there are no critics of political correctness; they do exist. But insofar as the criticism of communism by former believers was fundamental in bringing it down, there are no signs of it here. No sound of breast-beating can be heard from the former heralds of political correctness, who, even if they realize the extent of the damage they have done, display no signs of remorse.

On a few occasions, with true humility and frankness, Kolakowski does explain his own past commitments. "My strong impression is that in the early postwar years, committed communists... in Poland were intellectually less corrupt but more cynical than was the case in other countries. By 'cynical'... [I mean] they knew that what the Party wanted to convey to the 'masses' was a pure lie, but they accepted and sanctioned it for the sake of the future blessings of the socialist community." This is an admirable intellectual and moral trait in someone who gave intellectual support to Marxism as a young man. It appears to me that today's intellectuals and academics lack not only the moral courage but also the intellectual caliber characteristic of the former Marxists. They lack what Leszek Kolakowski could teach them.

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