

THE WARSAW SCHOOL OF HISTORIANS OF IDEAS, POST-STRUCTURALISM AND NIETZSCHE¹

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And science itself, our science – what indeed is the meaning of all science, viewed as a symptom of life? What is the purpose, and, worse still, what is the origin of all science? What? Is scientific method perhaps no more than fear of and flight from pessimism? A subtle defence against – truth? Or, to put it in moral terms, is it something like cowardice and insincerity? To put it immorally, is it a form of cunning?²

Frederick Nietzsche

Post-structuralism was Nietzscheanism. 'Nietzscheanism' particularly in that understanding which Leszek Kołakowski – certainly the most important representative of the Warsaw School of Historians of Ideas – formulated in his 1957 text on current and non-current notions of Marxism in the following way: 'In the history of views on the world, where one may only momentarily imagine the disappearance of doctrinal pluralism and the ossified monopoly of a single system, those terms derived from the names of those who brought especially innovative and insightful perspectives or particularly widespread points of view into philosophical thoughts, will survive for certain.'³ The Nietzschean perspective, more innovative and insightful than widely known, had appeared with great force within French thought of the second half of the 20th century. It also allowed one, as I conjecture, to capture the basic debate which post-structuralism would have conducted with the representatives of the Warsaw School of Historians of Ideas if such a debate had been undertaken.

¹ Certain fragments of this text have already appeared in the work 'Droga powrotu. Warszawska szkoła historyków idei z perspektywy umiarkowanie poststrukturalistycznej', *Przegląd filozoficzno-literacki* 35 (2012).

² Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', in Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs, (Cambridge UP, 1999), 4.

³ Leszek Kołakowski, 'Aktualne i nieaktualne pojęcie marksizmu', in Leszek Kołakowski, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji: pisma rozproszone sprzed 1968*, vol. 2, ed. Zbigniew Mentzel, (Warszawa: NOWA, 1989), 14. In English as Leszek Kołakowski, 'Permanent vs. Transitory Aspects of Marxism', in Leszek Kołakowski, *Marxism and Beyond. On Historical Understanding and Individual Responsibility* (London, 1971).

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The essence of this debate may be well illustrated by two Nietzschean figures, Euripides and Socrates; and the function ascribed them by Nietzsche, in explaining the decline of tragedy.

I

Yet we have to start from political history, and maybe history *tout court*. For both intellectual formations, one developed by Polish thinkers as a history of ideas while the other which exploded in France as post-modernism, were embroiled in historical events. In point of fact the same ones, yet experienced in different ways.

For the inhabitants of Eastern Europe, including Poland, the late 1950s meant 'the end of terror, genuine terror'.⁴ It also meant the end of physical terror threatening the existence of every individual and intellectual terror forbidding people to talk and use language in the true meaning of the word, the end of an intellectual view of Marxism in the interpretation of Zhdanov. However, despite the often mooted conviction in our part of Europe, the 'fossilised' Marxism of the Cold War era cast a shadow over the thinking of Western European intellectuals. We should recall, in this period of the most acute ideological conflict critical reflection on the subject of the Land of Soviets and its theoretical achievements was considered amongst left-wing intellectuals in the West to be at the very least a *faux pas* and often comparable to treason. This was to last until the announcement of Khrushchev's report in 1956. The moral and political delegitimization of Stalin's regime was to burst the dam and result in an explosion of thought, which could at last allow itself to claim that Marxism is not the final embodiment of the 'absolute spirit'. The exploration of what lay 'after and beyond' dialectical materialism was to become the challenge of the moment. Even if at the beginning of the 1960s Marxism outran itself as in the explorations of Althusser, this was already a prelude to an intellectual leap beyond its boundaries, which today we call postmodernism or poststructuralism.

The texts published by left-wing Polish intellectuals during the late 1950s and beginning of the 1960s bear testimony to the 'gasps of fresh air', which those hitherto suffocated were able to draw on. Thought wandered freely, not confined by the terrifying either-or, by the tragic dilemma imposed earlier by terror. For then, even a few years earlier, either one was a Marxist or not, and the ruling on this matter was made by the Administration – as Kołakowski called various institutions shaping ideologies, and which could decide on life and death. A testament to how this perspective was still in 'the bones' of those scholars can be gleaned from the first paragraphs of the aforementioned essay by Kołakowski.

⁴ Małgorzata Szpakowska in a discussion conducted on 18th April 2011 in *Przegląd humanistyczny*. See, 'Zapis dyskusji pt. "Warszawska szkoła historii idei. Powstanie, przekształcenia kontynuacje"', *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 432 (2012), 17.

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The tragedy to which the thinkers of this epoch referred was not a question of the 'form of life' as represented in art, which Nietzsche had written about. This was the tragedy of the revolutionary changes of the first half of the 20th century, of the totalitarian apogee of these changes and the human slaughter that accompanied it. Night set in – as Jan Patočka wrote of this time.⁵ The designation 'the rule of Night' was, for him, not an ordinary allegory for bad times. As the 20th century was characterized by war, Night is a situation in which other standards apply than during the time of day. The world moves according to different trajectories, while meanings arrange themselves into a mosaic, illegible and unclear except for the rule of the Night. One may attempt to grasp it through the prism of the values of day but then, according to Patočka, human death is subject to other values; one wants 'to secure a better future for others by sending people to their death.'⁶ The perspective of night, the perspective of the tragedy of the 20th century is making oneself aware that for the dead there will never be any progress or development. This means: 'the sacrifice of lives loses its meaning as an avenue toward programs of construction, progress, enhanced and expanded life possibilities, and instead acquires a meaning exclusively in and of itself.'⁷

These two perspectives can never meet.

II

When the tragic controversy is read in a classic way the matter concerns the conflict itself, who with whom and who against whom. The tragedy is affiliated with Night, and is Schmittian in character; equally in the sense that there is no place here for rational substantiations of the validity or invalidity of this or another position; only friend or foe. The struggles of the Bolsheviks with the counter-revolution, the butchering of communists on the part of Stalin, were tragic in their own way, tragic too was Stalin's war with Hitler. This Schmittian character in political controversy shows its tragic face particularly in the fact that it does not matter which arguments and reasonings are advanced by the protagonists, of no matter are the masks worn, ultimately only what side they are on is of importance. This is the only identity available. The tragic controversy over an instant precedes the subjectivisation of the individual 'I'. At least this is how matters are viewed by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*:

⁵ Jan Patočka, 'Wars of the 20th Century and 20th Century as War', trans. Karel Kovanda, *Telos* 30 (1976).

⁶ Patočka, 'Wars of the 20th Century and 20th Century as War', 122.

⁷ Patočka, 'Wars of the 20th Century and 20th Century as War', 122.

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It is a matter of indisputable historical record that the only subject-matter of Greek tragedy, in its earliest form, was the sufferings of Dionysus, and that for a long time the only hero present on the stage was, accordingly, Dionysus. But one may also say with equal certainty that, right down to Euripides, Dionysus never ceased to be the tragic hero, and that all the famous figures of the Greek stage, Prometheus, Oedipus etc., are merely masks of that original hero, Dionysus.⁸

In 1957, Leszek Kołakowski wrote cynically about institutionalised Marxism: 'A Marxist is one by displaying his preparedness to adopt all of the content the Administration announces.'⁹ This Administration was demanding influence without understanding, saying – today this is the doctrine, tomorrow it will be that something else – it is the emanation of historical tragedy. Individual fate and reason were subordinated to Cyclopean struggles. For from the perspective of a fanatic, completely immersed in the revolutionary drama of violence, academic investigations and the argumentations of theoreticians designed to explain the actual moment of class conflict were but Zagreus' mask, for in point of fact the matter concerns who (is doing what to) whom. Theory with all its criteria of truth arose from practice, that is out of war. Out of Night.

All of this changes when, from the perspective of the Night, we move on in accordance with Patočka's metaphor, to the authority of the Day. Without tragedy, without the hellish struggles in the background, the absurdity of the Administration comes to the fore, shocking when faced with ordinary life. From the moment when, as Hannah Arendt wrote in 1964, within the Soviet Union the transition from 'totalitarian system to a one-party dictatorship or tyranny' occurred, institutional Marxism was increasingly more grotesque than murderous.¹⁰ Together with this there opened up room for people of average means who, in the whole of the European *Ostblok*, expressed themselves as striving towards a minor stabilization. 'Bourgeois mediocrity, on which Euripides built all his political hopes, now had its chance to speak.'¹¹ This obviously coming from Nietzsche.

Only Mao Tse Dong still wanted the pathos of revolution and terror.

For while in Europe the tragedy had happily passed into the past, space opened up for a thinker who would start to ask questions about the tragic epoch, its protagonists and discourses. Similarly to Euripides to whom at one point tragedy presented itself not merely as something terrible but as something offensive:

⁸ Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 51.

⁹ Kołakowski, 'Aktualne i nieaktualne pojęcie marksizmu', 6.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, (New York: Schocken, 2003), 34.

¹¹ Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 56.

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And how dubious the solution of the ethical problems seemed to him! How questionable the treatment of the myths! How uneven the distribution of happiness and unhappiness! Even in the language of the older tragedy there was much that he found objectionable, or at least puzzling; in particular he found too much pomp for simple circumstances, too many tropes and enormities for the plainness of the characters.¹²

Therefore a thinker's first reaction upon the appearance of the impropriety of tragedy is irony. He starts to perceive a comic moment in this. However, when historical tragedy transforms into comedy, when it leaves the sphere of night, the ironic thinker, as once Euripides, displays concern. He is preoccupied by this impropriety of tone, this loosening of all kinds of standards. 'But if he held reason to be the real root of all enjoyment and creation, he was bound to ask and look around to see whether there was no one else who thought as he did and admitted to themselves, as he did, that this incommensurability existed. [...] It was in this agonized state that he found the other spectator who did not understand tragedy and therefore had no respect for it.'¹³

Irony was the response to the inappropriateness of the work of eminent predecessors. There is something strikingly similar in Leszek Kołakowski's tone when he conducts his analysis of Marxism in the Stalinist epoch. His sentence from 1957 that 'A Marxist up until 1950 knew that Łysenko's theory of succession was right, that Hegel was the aristocratic reaction to the French Revolution, that Dostoyevsky was a rogue, while Babaevsky an excellent writer, that Suvorov was the carrier of progress, and also that the theory of resonance in chemistry was reactionary nonsense'¹⁴ needs supplementing from Zbigniew Herbert: 'Verily their rhetoric was made of cheap sacking / (Marcus Tullius kept turning in his grave) / chains of tautologies a couple of concepts like flails'¹⁵. Hence this where we get that mocking tone in Kołakowski as in Euripides, as he writes that 'every Marxist *knows about this* even if he has never heard what chromosomes are, does not know in which century Hegel lived, or has never read anything by Dostoevsky and so on'.

¹² Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 59.

¹³ Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 59.

¹⁴ Kołakowski, 'Aktualne i nieaktualne pojęcie marksizmu', 6.

¹⁵ Zbigniew Herbert, 'The Power of Taste', in Zbigniew Herbert, *Poezje wybrane – Selected Poems*, trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter, Czesław Miłosz, Peter Dale Scott, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2000), 144.

III

Let us return to the history of ideas. In the 19th century, the thinking of Marx – fitting within German critical philosophy – was to cast doubt on an entire group of philosophical categories previously obvious for the ‘dogmatic philosophers’, as they had already been termed by Kant. One of these categories was the category of man ‘in general’. Even there where this category was used for those aims which today we would call ‘emancipative’, it aroused within theorists of Marxism deep-rooted doubts. We shall recall the criticism of Feuerbach’s ‘man’, quoted by Tadeusz Kroński and expressed by Frederick Engels: ‘Feuerbach’s morality is designed for all times, for all people, for all conditions, and for this reason it cannot be applied anywhere nor ever’. We will note in passing that Engels is here a thinker of Derridean difference, already preparing a criticism of all ‘totalising’ categories. He continues: ‘We are moving from Feuerbach’s abstract man to actual living people only when we view these people as active on the stage of history.’¹⁶ Writing presumably some time around 1952-1953, Kroński intensifies his opposition to the Feuerbach anthropology: ‘But examining a man clearly involves presenting him from the position of social relations, from the position of class struggle. And class struggle precisely, or in general, the existence of antagonistic classes is not found within Feuerbach’s system.’¹⁷

This fragment of Kroński’s preface to *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* illustrates an important moment within the Marxist critique of the category of ‘man’. For Kroński, in a similar way to the ‘founding fathers’ of the theory, historicism and class antagonism tearing at the uniformity of humanity, constituted two designations of the very same phenomenon. Not so for Feuerbach. He describes the history of religious ideas, relativising them in relation to historical epochs and – we should add – civilisational groups, yet at the same time always referring to ‘man’, as the fundamental, universal category of understanding. Exactly as in the well known statement from *Lecture 29*: ‘The Christian God is the imaginary *essence of man* [emphasis AL].’¹⁸ For Feuerbach it is possible to ‘historicise the cognitive process’, and at the same time to sustain the unique, coherent, human subject of that process, the one who thinks ideas; that is why Kroński calls his project ‘petty-bourgeois.’¹⁹ For, as we know, the middle class think: ‘the subject is me’.

In the 1960s and 1970s, thinkers departing from Marxism, and yet at the same time wanting to preserve some of its inspiring elements, consequently had a number of possible routes from which to choose. One of these required preserving the notion of the historical process defining cognition, yet the rejection of the dogma which required this process

¹⁶ Quote from Tadeusz Kroński, ‘Foreword’, in Ludwik Feuerbach, *Wykłady o istocie religii*, trans. Eryk Skowron and Tadeusz Witwicki, (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1953), XVII.

¹⁷ Kroński, ‘Foreword’, XVII.

¹⁸ Feuerbach, *Wykłady o istocie religii*, 307.

¹⁹ Kroński, ‘Foreword’, XVII.

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to express class antagonism. One may say of such an approach as Jacek Migasiński does: 'a worldview in this understanding is not an instrument serving the interests of some class or group, but is just a certain expression – hence Kołakowski's method of expressionistic historiography – it is a certain expression of living, individual and collective attitudes organised around a certain idea, an expression manifesting itself in various spheres of life and various view-point layers: from the theological through the philosophical, artistic activity and even certain economic views...'²⁰ We shall notice that Max Weber, as well as Mircea Eliade, also described religious systems in this same way.

Another route leads to the accentuation of the antagonistic character of everything that is human, an emphasis on conflicts which tear apart any attempt to create a common anthropology. What is more, upon this route an understanding of the said conflicts broadens far beyond the antagonism of class conflicts. I am here referring to Slavoj Žižek's apt notion that 'almost any of the antagonisms which, in the light of Marxism, appear to be secondary [in relation to class antagonism – AL], can take over this essential role of mediator for all the others.'²¹ Each universalising category, used for synthesis, was therefore broken apart by antagonism revealed and internal, referring to all other antagonisms. Deconstruction arose from the destruction of metaphysics, therefore treating History as a theater set torn apart, allowing one to present the cracks in its fabric.

The first of these ways represented a return to modern Humanism, the other postulated the close 'limit of man'.

IV

The departure from Marxism among the representatives of the Warsaw School of historians of ideas, viewed from the perspective of the beginning of the 21st century, was obviously directed towards some form of Humanism. An outstanding example of this were the utterances of many who had taken part in the discussion found in *Humanities Review (Przegląd Humanistyczny)*. Regardless of the many controversies, such as the debate over whether the school was even a school, or who within the group was closer to whom, one keeps returning to the conviction that there was an 'anthropocentric' swing within the thinking of this group of academics. This is most strongly stated in the conviction expressed by Andrzej Walicki, who treats as obvious the fact that 'ideas in "intellectual history" cannot be isolated and only followed in all the realms of history, for they simply

²⁰ Jacek Migasiński in 'Zapis dyskusji pt. "Warszawska szkoła historii idei. Powstanie, przekształcenia kontynuacje".'

²¹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, (London-New York: Verso), xxvii.

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V

We must note though that the 'humanistic turn' occurring within Polish thinking of the 1960s was in no way naïve because it acknowledged the variety in the manifestations of humanity in history and – above all – within culture. From the present-day perspective, Małgorzata Szpakowska formulated it this way: 'A consciousness arose at that time that doctrines are outdated, devised by people, that they are not pure ideas, which particularly is particularly applicable to political ideas, that they are always embroiled within a human context... I recall how Baczko repeated that history is made by people and not dwarves. And it was this conviction, so I feel, which was to thoroughly inculcate us. It should not be dismissed that our – and our students' – turnabout toward the direction of the cultural anthropology originated from this.'²⁴ Cultural anthropology, similarly to the history of ideas, relativizes humanity.

However, this relativisation has its limits.

Marcin Poręba, in his discussion in *Humanities Review [Przegląd Humanistyczny]*, notes that the works of Baczko, Kołakowski or Siemek may be compared to '*Ideengeschichte*, which... arose as a certain opposition to *Geistesgeschichte* particularly through the isolation of the factor of thought, ideas and its treatment in the most autonomous manner possible, in as far as this is possible in cutting it off from the historical and any cultural context whatsoever.' And later he claims that 'it is from just such a viewpoint that, in my view *Solitude and Community [Samotność i wspólnota]* is written – first and foremost – as a book on the subject of a certain, I would say, view of the world, one *conditioned by a certain human perspective, existential or whatever we call it, yet universal*, [emphasis added], not tethered by historical conditions. And to an even greater degree, the *Idea of Transcendentalism in Fichte and Kant* contains, even in its preliminary parts, a programme manifesto for ahistorical understanding.'²⁵

Once again, if the strongly emphasised trait of the contemporary mode of thinking was an 'aversion to all absolutes',²⁶ one may risk the conjecture that besides the differences dividing the representatives of the school, they were joined together by a certain 'human perspective, existential, or however we should call it, but universal'.

So what is the distinctive trait of this perspective that is 'human yet universal'? Thinkers coming out of a terrible and tragic epoch sought legitimization in the very laws of thought.

²⁴ Małgorzata Szpakowska in 'Zapis dyskusji pt. "Warszawska szkoła historii idei. Powstanie, przekształcenia kontynuacje".'

²⁵ Marcin Poręba in 'Zapis dyskusji pt. "Warszawska szkoła historii idei. Powstanie, przekształcenia kontynuacje".'

²⁶ Małgorzata Szpakowska in 'Zapis dyskusji pt. "Warszawska szkoła historii idei. Powstanie, przekształcenia kontynuacje".'

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VI

This is clearly visible in Kołakowski's text discussed here, 'Aktualne i nieaktualne pojęcie marksizmu' ['Permanent vs. Transitory Aspects of Marxism']. In it he subjects Marxism to an investigation using the methodology of the Humanities and the very way in which the philosopher's calling is chiefly academic and from this very perspective he places revolutionary theory and practice before the tribunal of reason, would have aroused Nietzsche's anxiety as well as that of his post-structuralist successors.

Thus Kołakowski, in mocking institutionalised Marxism, gradually introduces elements of Marx's theory into the general accomplishments of science.²⁷ As if the figure of Nietzsche's Euripides had appeared in it: though not the dramatist but the academic, about whom Nietzsche wrote: 'And Euripides was, in a certain sense, only a mask: the deity that spoke through him was neither Dionysus nor Apollo, but an altogether new-born demon, called *Socrates*'.²⁸ Euripides, who we abandoned at the moment when, having ridiculed all the unfairness and transgressions of taste in the old tragedies, looked around for an ally, one 'who did not comprehend tragedy and therefore did not have respect', we meet him at the very moment as he found this ally in the very clarity and transparency of academic thought.

After all, it is worth considering that the two strong figures of philosophers Kołakowski created, the jester and the priest, may be identified with the two forms in which Euripides appeared to Nietzsche – the taunter as he was a dramatist, while on the other hand the thinker or the priest, in the understanding of the Athenian citizen.

Kołakowski establishes in passing the clear predominance of theory, theoretical truth, over Marxism as revolutionary practice, which only in action could establish new criteria for truth, thus relativising the concept of natural truth. Next, within the domain of such a created space he situates Marxist fragments on the side of 'the humanistic left' in science. This left is 'distinguished by: radical rationalism in thinking; steadfast resistance to any invasion of myth into science; an entirely secular view of the World; criticism pushed to its utmost limits'²⁹ and so on.

Alongside all this sympathy for 'radical rationalism' and 'an unconditional lay understanding of the world' it is difficult not to notice that a programme of this sort could easily be endorsed by, let's say, Rudolf Carnap. But on the other hand, the dismissal Kołakowski presented in the essay 'Nieracjonalność racjonalizmu' ['The Non-rationalism of rationalism'] to the claims that neo-positivists possess a monopoly on rational thinking

²⁷ Kołakowski, 'Permanent vs/ Transitory Aspects of Marxism' in *Marxism and Beyond: On Historical Understanding and Personal Responsibility* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1969), 205.

²⁸ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 60.

²⁹ Kołakowski, 'Aktualne i nieaktualne pojęcie marksizmu', 12-13.

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hinges upon the exposure of this school's completely arbitrary practical principles, which cannot make sense of genuine theoretical rationalism.³⁰

This work on rationalism, in itself a critique of this orientation's pure cognitive, scientific understanding does, despite this, display a deep-rootedness within the 'Socratean' paradigm. This is clear not only in the theses preferred by Kołakowski but also in the style, rhetoric, and type of argumentation. This can be seen in the following sentence contained in a fragment devoted to the refutation of the pure cognitive character of the rationalist position and the disclosure of its moral dimension: 'And therefore the responsibility of the rationalist, if he is seeking support for his programme, is to pursue evidence that the realisation of the values of rationalism is the realisation of the most universal human values.'³¹

VII

A tendency to bring thinking before the judgement of science remains hidden in the style, in the means of argumentation and the conducting of the line of reasoning, but is a common thread in many works of authors today considered to be part of the Warsaw School of Historians of Ideas. This element appears repeatedly, for example, in Jerzy Szacki's book on counterrevolutionary paradoxes, as if it was necessary to justify the non-adherence to the – always unattainable – rigours of academic research. This is articulated in such, seemingly purely methodological sentences such as that concerning research on the thought of de Maistre: 'since we are not involving ourselves especially in the worldview of the author of *Considerations sur la France*, we are unable to analyse in particular the pathways that led to his formation.'³² And then straightway: 'Nor are we researching the views of de Maistre in their entirety, but we are analysing them exclusively in relation to the formula of revolution contained within'. This can be sensed in his clarity of distinction when he writes that 'in many cases different legal-natural traditions overlapped so exactly that their precise division often exceeds the capabilities of the researcher.'³³ Within the frequent demarcation of the boundaries of a research field 'we do not have the possibility or intention to undertake even the most cursory look at all of these concepts which had developed in the 17th and 18th century', or straight afterwards, 'nor are we going to try to present this problem area exhaustively within counterrevolutionary thought, thus limiting ourselves.'³⁴

³⁰ Leszek Kołakowski, 'Nieracjonalności racjonalizmu', in Leszek Kołakowski, *Pochwała niekonsekwencji: pisma rozproszone sprzed 1968*, vol. 2, ed. Zbigniew Mentzel, (Warszawa: NOWA, 1989), 120-123.

³¹ Kołakowski, 'Nieracjonalności racjonalizmu', 124.

³² Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, 68.

³³ Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, 82.

³⁴ Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy*, 105-106.

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All these stentences, starting from the negation of opinion, show how the paradigm of academically defined 'truth and sense' has transformed imagination into an indivisible precept departing from Marxism and from revolutionary theory in the end. Nietzsche draws attention to the role of negation, stipulation and objection for the essence of the Socratean attitude emerging at the decline of the tragic formation: 'In particular situations, when his enormous mind began to sway uncertainly, he was able to get a firm hold on things again thanks to a divine voice which made itself heard at such moments. Whenever it appears, this voice always warns him to desist. In this utterly abnormal nature the wisdom of instinct only manifests itself in order to *block* conscious understanding from time to time.'³⁵

For also the foundation of all rationalism – the logical law of consistency – has a negative character; it is a stipulation, a limitation of creative freedom and the fertility of the imagination. For if we are to recognise that the rhetoric emanating from the tragic shadow of Polish intellectuals is ruled by the Socratic paradigm then it expresses itself first and foremost in a certain form of necessity connected with the preservation of logical coherence. The logical order of the senses determines the appearance of new senses. Finally, it was Szacki himself who wrote at one time: 'colloquial thinking and practice may be treated without [logical] coherence while *any theory unconditionally demands it*'. [emphasis added].³⁶

The prevalence of this law of consistency is excellently shown by the deduction that Jerzy Szacki conducts in the subchapter 'Restoration and conservation', explaining why 'representatives [of counter-revolutionary thought – AL] accuse each other constantly of lacking authentic anti-revolutionariness'.³⁷ This is the case because their political positions are defined through two opposing philosophical paradigms. Therefore at base, struggles between opposing political positions' were logical since they resulted from the fact that they were based on completely different interpretations of tradition: 'for some this was a frozen model of good society, for others a fluid principle of the continuity of social life'. However, the philosophical genealogy of the political debate dates further back. The author of *Counter Revolutionary Paradoxes* exposes its deeper logical structure, writing: 'the schism within anti-revolutionary ideologies became inevitable: some maintained the older *is* as an absolute obligation, while others in the name of the paradigm *is* have given up on former obligations'.

This beautiful sentence can be seen as an abridged treatise on 'the logical structure of reality'. In a single move, it combines the issue of situating absolute being within time, its normative strength and, the matter of linguistic modality connected with these questions, thus allowing these relationships to express themselves. Only the situating of

³⁵ Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 66.

³⁶ Szacki, *Kontrewolucyjne paradoksy*, 66.

³⁷ Szacki, *Kontrewolucyjne paradoksy*, all quotes 62.

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is in the timeless, in point of fact, mythical sphere of the past allowed him to fulfil the role of the absolute being, the source of permanent *obligation*. The intellectual movement transferring *is* into a historical present was to deprive it of normative strength. The logical contradiction was to provide, at this point, the absolute impossibility of reconciling political positions: 'the further the *ancien régime* was to retreat into the realms of dream, the greater counter-revolutionary thought was forced to display a split, the best expression of which was the contradiction of the two fundamental postulates: *restaurer* and *conserver*'.³⁸

Despite a personal predilection for such a type of construction, this author has to note that they require the adoption of a perspective defined by a entire complex group of premises. First of all, the premise expounding *that social or political reality is determined by the logical structure of the system of ideas connected with it* and that talented Szacki, able to reconstruct this system and the dynamics connected with it is situated in a certain sense within a privileged cognitive perspective in which language becomes the transparent medium for the necessary intellectual laws.

This perspective referring to a specific rationalism, and the influential way of understanding the 'academic' emanating from it, should not be seen as necessarily 'anthropocentric'. Does then Jerzy Szacki, in his book on the thinkers of the counter-revolution, fit into the 'humanistic turn' that we have developed above, with all of its philosophical and political consequences? Yes, if we are to treat Kołakowski's exposition seriously, where in *The Irrationalism of Rationalism* he writes: '[Rationalism] appears to people not as something external to be adopted or rejected; it appears to them as their very own nature, the nature of a constant limitlessness; in as far as it demands acceptance, it demands from man that he accept himself'.³⁹

Hence this tendency for rationalisation turns out to be simply 'man's nature'. The Nietzschean commentary reads thus: 'We can therefore now closer to the nature of a e s t h e t i c Socraticism, whose supreme law runs roughly like this: "In order to be beautiful, everything must be reasonable" – a sentence formed in parallel to Socrates' dictum that "Only he who knows is virtuous".⁴⁰

Andrzej Mencwel's opinion expressed during a discussion of *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, confirms the durability of this tendency: 'given the interpretation of this maxim [of Pascal, in the *Introduction to Counter-revolutionary Paradoxes*] a work makes sense even when there is no sense whatsoever. And herein lies the true lesson of the humanities'.⁴¹ The procedure of 'giving sense' is based on the reconstruction of a certain logical continuity, whose role for human understanding appears to be inalienable. Andrzej Walicki reveals

³⁸ Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne*, 20.

³⁹ Kołakowski, 'Nieracjonalność racjonalizmu', 148.

⁴⁰ Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 62.

⁴¹ Andrzej Mencwel, in 'Zapis dyskusji pt. "Warszawska szkoła historii idei. Powstanie, przekształcenia kontynuacje"', *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 432 (2012), 16.

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this premise when he talks of his work: '... that I *really wanted to understand something, that I wanted to reconstruct a certain continuity* [emphasis added]. This was important for me as a value – the reconstruction of continuity'.⁴²

Although, as we know, the opposite route is possible, from sense to the senseless conditioning it. Usually representatives of this way of thinking avoid the adjective 'humanist'. On this route there is a break with the idea of continuity, so important for a reconstruction of humanism.

VIII

An excellent example of the discussion on the consequences of an 'anthropological' interpretation of the history of ideas is the well-known text by Jacques Derrida of 1968 'The Ends of Man' ['Les fins de l'homme']. The fragment of interest to us entitled *The Loosening of Humanism*, starts from this very paragraph: 'The anthropologicistic reading of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger was a mistake in one entire respect, perhaps the most serious mistake. And it is this reading which furnished the best conceptual resources to postwar French thought'.⁴³ Quite possibly a similar view could be formulated concerning Polish thought, obviously not in relationship with the three H's that defined philosophy in France but in view of its relations with anthropocentrism. An 'anthropological' interpretation of the history of ideas characteristic for the Warsaw school was incredibly fruitful, not that this excluded the presence within it of certain immanent limitations, which the author of *The Limit of Man* would have presumably called 'a mistake and quite possibly of the most serious kind'.

Derrida convincingly shows how an anthropocentric theory remains separate from the character of concrete people in the name of certain universal rules of sense, rules of rationality. The reduction of man to sense, which we have already seen in Husserl and Heidegger – and which may also be discovered in the thinkers of the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas – is still anthropocentric, only 'the reduction of meaning – that is, of the signified',⁴⁴ is an attempt to go beyond the boundary of thought so defined.

In order to show the 'anthropologism' hidden in Heidegger – who, after the famed 'turn' – spoke about the distancing himself of humanism as perhaps the last island of 'onto-theology', Derrida had to ask not so much about the subject, the materiality of the argument, but about where the argument leads us. The famous theoretical 'we', always

⁴² Andrzej Walicki, in 'Zapis dyskusji pt. "Warszawska szkoła historii idei. Powstanie, przekształcenia kontynuacje"', *Przeгляд Humanistyczny* 432 (2012), 12.

⁴³ Jacques Derrida 'The Ends of Man', in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, (Brighton: Harvester Press), 117.

⁴⁴ Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', 134.

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appears there where the thinker, in the spirit of learning, gets to know reality. This is a fertile perspective for us as it shows that in criticising certain theoretical positions, one may remain within the realm of premises close to the subject of criticism. Just like Kołakowski writing the *Irrationalism of Rationalism*.

In the fragment entitled 'We the readers' Derrida promises: 'It is in the play of a certain proximity, proximity to oneself and proximity to Being, that we will see constituted, against metaphysical humanism and anthropologism.'⁴⁵ And, this time, he keeps his promise. He shows, as in Heidegger's work, that 'Looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing access to it – all these ways of behaving are constitutive of our inquiry, and therefore are modes of Being for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves'⁴⁶ Behaviours defined by rational procedures for searching for sense. Socratic procedures.

In Heidegger something more can be finally found: 'This style of reading which makes explicit, practices a continual bringing to light, *something which resembles, at least, a coming into consciousness without break, displacement, or change of terrain* [emphasis added];'⁴⁷ and therefore a form of constant search for the continuity of sense. The very same moment accentuated by Andrzej Walicki.

Derrida in opposition to this, while describing the emerging post-structuralist thinking, postulates: 'Rather it is a question of determining of the possibility of *meaning* on the basis of "formal" organisation, *which in itself has no meaning* [emphasis added], which does not mean that it is either the non-sense or the anguishing absurdity which haunt metaphysical humanism.'⁴⁸ We should note here that this too is not irrationalism, anyone is accused who critically observes the application of the modern regulations of rationalism in philosophical theory.

Of course, one cannot call Heidegger a 'modern humanist' because the whole of his thinking – and perhaps more importantly – also his biography contradict such a designation. Therefore presumably the theoreticians of the Warsaw School would have shuddered at such a comparison. However, Jacques Derrida identified the heart of the matter in the radical environment of May 1968 in Paris: a certain means of situating the thinking 'we', a certain – in essence hermeneutic – practice of 'making sense' of a speculative matter, still belongs to the tradition of modern humanism.

Therefore, in point of fact, the history of ideas researched in Poland by intellectuals emerging from the shadow of tragedy, from the perspective of Night, is the history of thinking in its purely rational form. And not even the fact is that ideas 'are thought by

⁴⁵ Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', 124.

⁴⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 26 quoted from: Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', 126.

⁴⁷ Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', 126.

⁴⁸ Derrida, 'The Ends of Man', 134.

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people' makes this current affiliated to the tradition of modern humanism. It belongs to this tradition because the researcher himself, in employing rationalism managing the paradigm of 'making sense', has to situate themselves within Derrida's 'we', because his way of asking questions is the very structure of rationality, because 'insight into something, the comprehension and understanding of something' are modes of our behaviour, constitutive of who we are as cognitive beings. We shall once again recall Kołakowski: '[rationalism] in as far as it demands acceptance, it demands from man that he accept himself'.

And it is no accident that the phrasing appears – as if borrowed from Kant's essay *What is Enlightenment?*: 'Rationalism is nothing more than the final abandonment of childhood, this being the rejection of all the devices which exempt the individual from responsibility'.⁴⁹

IX

Derrida's penetrability should be treated with respect as he aims, within the very form of the philosophical exposition to lay bare its anthropological premises. However, the relentlessness with which he tracks down humanity is puzzling, as if the matter concerned a sly enemy, threatening and deadly. When Polish historians of ideas rather size the ideological fanaticism of the dark epoch – the epoch of Night – French thinkers see Night in the form of man, in a figure 'recently created, which will soon leave the stage' – as Foucault wrote with reluctance. Why?

It appears that Stalinist terror was the fundamental experience of Polish thinkers, which prodded them in the background of their considerations. For Europeans from the West, particularly from Germany and France, that experience was the revelation of the truth about the Shoah. James Berger formulates a similar intuition in his book on post-apocalyptic thought: 'Given this general and understandable avoidance of such a recent and overwhelming horror, it is not surprising that poststructuralist theory in the late 1960s and early 1970s (both in France and in the United States) also neglected the Holocaust. What becomes striking in retrospect, however, is that this neglect of the central, most traumatic violence of the century coincided with a rhetoric that was intensively apocalyptic, filled with invocations of rupture, decentering, fragmentation, irretrievably lost identity, the shattering of origins and ends'.⁵⁰

For thinkers of the West, from the times of Adorno right up to Agamben, Enlightenment, rationalistic humanism was connected with the Shoah. Correctly or incorrectly, rationality was read not from the perspective of the Kant's *Critique of practical*

⁴⁹ Kołakowski, 'Nieracjonalności racjonalizmu', 144.

⁵⁰ James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 107.

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reason, but rather as the emanation of a purely instrumental reason. The bourgeoisie were ready to sacrifice everything on the altar of self-preservation turned into greed. And guaranteed by instrumental reason.

Here Nietzsche was also a precursor, when he showed the dangerous, blind character of such rationality: 'the logical drive which appeared in Socrates was completely incapable of turning against itself'. Let us pause to mention that Kołakowski postulated that self-critical feature of rationalism was crucial for it 'in its unfettered flow it reveals a power of nature such as we encounter, to our awed surprise, only in the very greatest instinctual forces'.⁵¹ Hence reason, changed through the drives of self-preservation, becomes once again a blind force, manifesting itself as 'practical pessimism which could generate a horrifying ethic of genocide out of pity'.⁵²

The consequences of such 'Socreatean' thinking on man have been discussed already many times; from the Dialectics of Enlightenment through to Bauman and Agamben. I do not intend to undertake this discussion for I am rather drawing attention to the fact that the Warsaw historians of ideas, in adopting this Socrateran paradigm, situated their undertaking right in the centre of the debate. At the same time, for them, this predominance 'of the reduction to sense', the predominance of the humanism of sense 'continuity', as recalled by Andrzej Walicki and Andrzej Mencwel, was so obvious that it simply was not problematized. They did not reflect on the fact that only when rationality and transparency start to be treated as language, as one of many, and speaking as a language game a la Wittgenstein, can one ask the question as to the subject that plays in this game and about the game itself in a new way.

As if the steady shadow of the Lwów-Warsaw School⁵³ had fallen upon them.

X

One could ask whether, given the clear waning of post-structuralist thought, the 'humanistic turn' of the Warsaw School discussed here is not easily defensible, if only for the fact that all ideas are discussed after all, constantly and quite simply, by people. So

⁵¹ Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 67.

⁵² Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', 74.

⁵³ 'The Lvov-Warsaw School (LWS) was the most important movement in the history of Polish philosophy. It was established by Kazimierz Twardowski at the end of the 19th century in Lvov, a city at that time belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The LWS flourished in the years 1918–1939. Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, Tadeusz Kotarbiński, Stanisław Leśniewski, Jan Łukasiewicz and Alfred Tarski are its most famous members. It was an analytical school similar to the Vienna Circle in many respects. On the other hand, the attitude of the LWS toward traditional philosophy was much more positive than that of logical empiricism'. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lvov-warsaw/>, accessed: 3 June 2017).

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is it not legitimised through the obviousness disproving the 'death of man' endorsed by Michael Foucault?

It seems to me that the matter is not that simple. French thinkers of the late 1960s beginning of the 1970s reached out for Nietzsche against Husserl, against Hegel, but also Levi-Strauss – with his overwhelming desire to make the humanities scientific – they wanted to avoid a return to modern, Enlightenment humanism at all costs. They did not want, first and foremost, a return to intellectualism, with its preference for cognition as the fundamental attribute of humanity. The spirit of *Dialectics of Enlightenment* was too conspicuous in their thinking, bourgeois reconciliation with the crimes of the 20th century after 1945, recent fascist history, the colonial past; they connected all this too strongly with the primacy of theoretical reason. For them, the best personification of a primarily thinking man was Marquis de Sade.

This critique, this deconstruction which they conducted is ambiguous in its results similarly to the thought of its predecessor, Nietzsche. However, it allowed for the problematisation of certain categories fundamental for the modern West, which had until the mid-20th century absolutely controlled humanistic thinking; similarly – for instance – to the predominance of cognition, and the cognitive character of philosophical reflection or the universal character of 'humanity'. This deconstruction therefore conditioned, I feel, an openness to ethical thinking about the philosophical foundations appearing in such thinkers as Levinas, Lyotard, and in the later decades of the twentieth century in such ruthless muckrakers as Derrida and Foucault.

It was also to open up a route for those questions in post-humanist reflection that we are asking only now. I will give but a single example. Is the history of ideas merely a discipline of science about man? In his book, *On The Natural History of Destruction*, Wilfried G. Sebald writes about the massed allied bombardments of German cities towards the end of the war. The very use of the term 'natural history', in pointing to forces far exceeding that which is humane – and such was, after all, the sense of the old *Naturalis historia* – it leads to the unheard of astonishing stake in Sebald's deliberations. He wrote: 'The war in the air was war pure and undisguised. Its continuation in the face of all reason suggests that, as Elaine Scarry has put it in her extremely perspicacious book *The Body in Pain*, the victims of war are not sacrifices made as the means to an end of any kind, but in the most precise sense are both the means and the end in themselves.'⁵⁴

Is therefore our thinking best when we think of it as the thought of man? Or maybe the instrumental reason of Odysseus is merely a concealed pretence for something else? And cannot care about man, not set up an acquaintance, with a certain un-human structure of care in itself? And would we not then be standing before the miracle that is after all the human gesture of one man in relation to another?

⁵⁴ Wilfried G. Sebald, *On the History of Natural Destruction* (New York: Random House, 2003), 19-20.

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And the history of ideas is left with such questions, with post-structuralism slowly departing into the past. The humanistic turn of the Warsaw School were to make such reflections difficult because of its anthropocentrism, in a simultaneous uncritical return to modern criteria of academic correctness in thinking about human matters. I am therefore of the opinion that – as Marcin Poręba says in the Humanities Review discussion – ‘having the potential, first and foremost to be able to conduct philosophy and here at the highest level, [they made the choice] to be involved to a great degree in the historiography of thought... However, this meant that the choices went in the direction of researching interesting things, yet they belonged to the history of thought in a situation when it would have been possible to create something which could have been a voice in the discussion of European philosophy, in my view at least a voice on a par with that of the French, the Germans or the British.’⁵⁵ I do not believe however that this choice was only ‘dictated by historical pressure: these were not times enabling one to speak out freely within the field of philosophy.’⁵⁶

The issue was that they adopted a certain trajectory of thought, a trajectory which I would call the way backward, which forced them to think in such a way as if everything had already been thought of.

TRANSLATED BY Guy Torr

⁵⁵ Marcin Poręba in ‘Zapis dyskusji pt. “Warszawska szkoła historii idei. Powstanie, przekształcenia kontynuacje”’, *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 432 (2012), 26.

⁵⁶ Marcin Poręba in ‘Zapis dyskusji pt. “Warszawska szkoła historii idei. Powstanie, przekształcenia kontynuacje”’, *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 432 (2012), 26.