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Interview with Leszek Kolakowski:

“I don't consider *Main Currents of Marxism* my *opus magnum*”¹

(The 19th of January, 2009 I went to see Professor Kolakowski in Oxford with an intention altogether simple, or so I thought. Last year 2008 had marked the 30th anniversary of the first publication in English of what many consider his most influential work – *Main Currents of Marxism* —, and I wanted to join in the commemoration. Above all, I wanted to acquaint the Spanish youngest public, a public which only recently is approaching Kolakowski's thought in any detail, with that work's (and related ones') main ideas. Having his author speaking about *Main Currents*, I gathered, is the best way to go. Yet, life most often finds a way of surprising us and, as the reader will read below, I had to somehow wrestle with Kolakowski himself for him to finally acknowledge the originality of his – if not *magnum*, at the least impressive — *opus*.)

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¹ This interview was originally carried out, transcribed and written in English. Leszek Kolakowski revised and authorised the English version. The Spanish translation of the interview has appeared in *Cuadernos de Pensamiento Político*, Nº 22, Abril/ Junio de 2009, Fundación para el Análisis y los Estudios Sociales (FAES), Madrid. (FAES only owns the copyright of the Spanish version).

At the end of the interview, the reader can find a short biography of Kolakowski. The edition of *Main Currents* I will be referring to is the latest in English: *Main Currents of Marxism. The Founders, The Golden Age, The Breakdown*, Norton and Company, New York, 2005.

The philosopher receives us, me and Eduardo Jiménez, who is in charge of the recording, in his Oxford home where he lives with his wife Tamara, a psychiatrist by profession. I am rather nervous because, besides his erudition, Kolakowski's straightforwardness and irony are well known. The apprehension disappears immediately, though. The thinker is an attractive man of almost 82 – handsomer in person than he appears in pictures on the net — and his voice and welcome are very warm. He has pale blue eyes and a well-built, elegant body, even if he is carrying a stick and admits not to seeing very well anymore. I give him as a present a bottle of *Rioja* and he declares to enjoy good wine very much. He offers us a coffee. And as we settle down in his living room while he himself waits by its door for Tamara to bring some coffee, he asks,

LK So you teach at the University, don't you. And what do you teach?

PS Mostly political philosophy.

LK Political philosophy, yes. *An what is that, political philosophy?*

PS (I smile) Well, for sure you must know what Isaiah Berlin – (*was he an acquaintance or a friend of yours? I couldn't find out on the net*) – said about it in his essay, that...

LK Yes, yes, we were friends. He was also in *All Souls*!!

PS ...that political philosophy – or political theory, as he preferred to put it — can never be reduced to political science because the former's mode of reflection and subject matter must necessarily involve values... By the way, it was Berlin who liked to relate a little anecdote about you. You once said to Berlin, who asked about your current circumstances, "*Well, you see, England is an island in Europe, Oxford an island in England, All Souls an island in Oxford, and I am an island in All Souls*".² Are you still an island?

LK Yes, I am.

Is Kolakowski joking or completely serious in this matter? I do not know. As he is still standing by the living room door, courteously waiting for Tamara, he hands me

² The anecdote was heard and recounted by Enrique Krauze. See Enrique Krauze's Interview with Leszek Kolakowski, "La noche del Marxismo"; in *Vuelta 101*, April 1985, in the net.

two books of his, in Spanish, as a gift. The first is *Trece cuentos del reino de Lailonia para pequeños y mayores* (in fact fourteen tales), written in 1963 and recently published by KRK; and the second, *Las preguntas de los grandes filósofos*, a collection of conferences he gave for Polish television which were then published in Polish in 2006-2008, and have been published in Spanish in 2008 (Arcadia). Since I consider the gifts excessive, two books and in their Spanish version, I propose to just accept the *Tales*. But he insists.

PS Thank you so much, Professor. I like short stories very much. I understand that literature was one of your first interests as a young man?

LK Those are fairy tales I wrote many, many years ago. I also wrote a few dramas.

Coffee comes. We are introduced to Tamara, a very charming woman who almost immediately leaves the room. On many occasions, for instance his 1981 Preface to *Main Currents*, Kolakowski has stated that his work “owes much to her good sense and critical comments”.

PS Should we begin?

LK I would like to first know – (he chortles) — what we are going to talk about, if you do not mind.

PS As I told you in my letters, my main intention is to help familiarize the Spanish public with your work, especially *Main Currents*. I have divided the interview into roughly, three different parts; let's see if we have the time. The first focuses on *Main Currents of Marxism*, which I personally consider a very important book. As I see it, as time goes by, it will come down in the history of political thought as a crucial work together with the works of Popper, Aron, Berlin, and others. The second part is about your work in general, especially your interest in religion. In the last part I am interested in your opinions about some serious issues in today's world, like terrorism...

LK Terrorism? And what can I say about terrorism? (He laughs quietly again).

PS Well, I understand that you have written an article on it. And after all, you are a political thinker.

LK Am I? I am not sure, really. As for *Main Currents*, all that was a long time ago. I forgot about it.

PS Should we begin?

LK Let us drink the coffee first, for a moment. *Señora* (sic), I understand that in Spain people have double last names...

Here ensues a completely relaxed chat about Spain, its habits and present situation. Professor Kolakowski thinks it is a very good habit to inherit last names from both parents. He briefly inquires about *Cuadernos de Pensamiento Político*, the journal where this interview will be published, and asks whether the president of FAES “is former prime minister Mr. José María Aznar”. He confesses he is not much acquainted with current politics in Spain although he declares he has “some doubts about the present prime minister, Zapatero”. For sure, he wants me to tell him more, he wants to listen. I inform him that I, personally, am very concerned about some developments in our country, like the government’s confrontation with the Catholic Church in a manner which is unprecedented in all other liberal democratic countries...

LK A confrontation probably not needed at all.

PS Not needed at all, for the Spanish Catholic Church has been very respectful of politics, the independence of politics, during the whole Transition [to democracy after the death of Franco in 1975].

LK Yes, I guess. I understand that the Spanish Transition was an attempt to forget about the Francoist past, to consign all that to the past, how would you put it, “el olvido”?

PS Yes, but in the last few years, with Zapatero, the efforts have rather been directed to disparage the Transition and dig up the past, of course in a very partisan way. Although we have more important problems.

(I then tell Kolakowski about our peripheral nationalisms and the flaws, in that respect, of our 1978 Constitution. I tell him that, in some Autonomies, many Spanish families are finding it difficult for their children to learn the Spanish language or get educated in the Spanish culture; that, completed the Transition, there took place, in the different Autonomies, extreme processes of linguistic and cultural “normalization”, etc.).

LK Does Catalonia aspire to a political secession from Spain, do they want a separate state? *What for?*

PS Not the whole of Catalonia, a very active (and growing) minority but a minority, nevertheless. Our Constitution, unfortunately, turned out to be too open-

ended regarding the different Autonomies' prerogatives in numerous fields, like the essential one of acculturation.

LK But is possible, say in Catalonia or the Basque region, that many primary schools only teach in Catalan or Basque? *How is that possible? It's terrible!*

PS In most primary schools there and in other Autonomies, children get immersed in Spanish as though it was any other second language, just a few hours a week. In some cases, like small towns, it might happen that Spanish is not at all taught; the excuses on the part of the town councils are small budgets... As I see it, it is a human rights violation that not everyone in Spain can learn Spanish or the Spanish culture without hindrances.

You asked me before whether the Spanish Transition had endeavoured a clean break with the past. I personally believe that the Transition was impeccable in that respect. However, since Zapatero's coming to power, there has been an attempt to rewrite our recent history, to disseminate the idea that “not all interests were then fairly represented”, that is, by the parties which at the time played the leading role; that way of thinking about our recent past only fuels, I think, minority and centrifugal interests, even if those sorts of interest had developed before Zapatero. ...By the way, what is your opinion on the Spanish Transition?

LK I do not have a separate opinion of my own because I do not know enough. Of course, everybody was happy at the end of Franco's dictatorship. But I did not closely follow all that happened afterwards.

PS The Transition was an effort on the part of the principal political parties and positions at the time to strike a new consensus on the feasibility and worth of liberal democracy, an effort overwhelmingly backed by the Spanish population, even if in the era of Zapatero we are back to the “same old story”. And that despite – or precisely because of — the findings of the so-called “new”, very often Spanish, “historiography”; for instance, on our Second Republic, ...which was not a splendid era of “tolerance” nor of “liberal” democracy wantonly undone by a bunch of “maniacs”, far from it, the Spanish Left in general has strongly reacted against this new historiography, because the “old story” (the story of “the two Spains”), was a better rationale, for its own and indefinite permanence in power, of course.

LK So, the attempt at *el olvido* (sic) has not worked?

PS It is paradoxical, but I think that precisely because Spanish democracy began as a success –and can still be a success, I hope, if we amend all our errors – the reactions against it have been and still are many.

LK I see... (All this time, Kolakowski has shown a great deal of interest and, on several occasions, astonishment. We have now finished the coffee).

Well, let's start. Although I am not sure whether I will be able to answer all your questions.

PS Very well, then. Professor Kolakowski, your contribution to the history of ideas, the history of philosophy and, particularly, the philosophy of religion is wide ranging.³ What do you think about being best known for your *Main Currents of Marxism*? And do you mind if I begin this interview by focusing on such work since last year 2008 was the 30th anniversary of its publication in English?

LK I forgot about it. (He smiles, but seems to be rather serious about the matter).

...What can I say about your question, how do I feel about being popular, or famous, because of *Main Currents*? I do not think in such categories about my work. *Main Currents* is not a text I consider, so to put it, my *opus magnum*, if there is such a thing. If there is an “opus magnum” of mine, it is rather a short brochure under the title *Horror Metaphysicus (Metaphysical Horror)*⁴, “opus magnum” *not* in the sense

³ Kolakowski's interest in religion is lifelong. Already in 1965 he published, in Polish, what many consider a very significant study, *Religious Consciousness and Church Allegiance*, which is an examination of little-known thinkers from all over Europe who embraced Christian ideas while rejecting denominational affiliations. The book appeared in French in 1969 as *Chrétiens sans Eglise*.

For this and other matters see “Leszek Kolakowski” (author unknown), *The John Templeton Foundation* (2007), p. 1. In the web in

http://www.templeton.org/humble_approach_initiative/Enlightenment,Modernity,andAtheism/kolakowski.html

⁴ The book, first published by Blackwell (London) in 1988, was published in Spanish (Tecnos) in 1989. Blackwell's editorial information on it reads,

“‘A modern philosopher who has never once suspected himself of being a charlatan,’ writes Leszek Kolakowski at the start of this endlessly stimulating book, ‘must be such a shallow mind that his work is probably not worth reading.’ For over a century, philosophers have argued that philosophy is impossible or useless, or both. Although the basic notion dates back to the days of Socrates, there is still heated disagreement about the nature of truth, reality, knowledge, the good, and God. This may make little

that I regard it as the best of my works, because *that* is not up to me; rather in the sense that I try to explain there the questions – not really to answer them but explain the questions — I consider the most important in philosophy.

PS I see. Let me, however, center now on *Main Currents*. I am very interested in the writing itself of the work, its historical, Polish context and the personal aims in it. It took you 8 years, from 1968 to 1976, to write its almost 1300 pages. Although in 1968 you had already abandoned your country, the conception or gestation of such an erudite and lengthy work is, I assume, thoroughly “Polish”. What led you to write *Main Currents*, what were your aspirations and hopes when you did it? Did you expect it would help change things in the Communist bloc?

LK Yes, the conception is Polish. But no, I did not expect the work would change things in the Bloc... I left Poland at the end of 1968, because I was expelled from the University and I had a total interdiction of publishing or teaching. I then took the opportunity to go to Canada, to Montreal, for a year. At the time I expected that it would probably take more than a year – two years perhaps — for me to be able to go back. But it is now 40 years.

I started *Main Currents of Marxism*, I wrote the draft of the first volume, in Poland. I had no plan to write the entire history, especially because I couldn't – obviously — publish it in Poland. Only somewhat later I decided to continue. But it was just by accident. I wrote the second and third volumes in 1970-1976, during my Fellowship at *All Souls College*, Oxford.

practical difference to our lives, but it leaves us with a feeling of radical uncertainty, a feeling described by Kolakowski as "metaphysical horror." The aim of this book, for Kolakowski, is finding a way out of this seeming dead end. In a trenchant analysis that serves as an introduction to nearly all of Western philosophy, Kolakowski confronts the dilemmas head on through examinations of several prominent philosophers including Descartes, Spinoza, Husserl, and many of the Neo-Platonists. He finds that philosophy may not provide definitive answers to the fundamental questions, yet the quest itself transforms our lives. It may undermine most of our certainties, yet it still leaves room for our spiritual yearnings and religious beliefs. The final sentence of the book captures the hopefulness that has survived the horror of nothingness when Kolakowski asks: *'Is it not reasonable to suspect that if existence were pointless and the universe devoid of meaning, we would never have achieved not only the ability to imagine otherwise, but even the ability to entertain this very thought—to wit, that existence is pointless and the universe devoid of meaning?'*

PS I personally think that your analysis of Marx's philosophy is unimpeachable. It is written in such a clear and strong way; and the same happens with the rest of authors. In the 1981 Preface to *Main Currents*,⁵ you say you want the work to be used as a handbook; and that is how I use it in my political philosophy classes, as a handbook, particularly the chapters dealing with Marx himself or Leninism-Stalinism.

LK As a handbook, yes; if it can serve as a handbook, then that is the best thing I could expect. I couldn't say it is completely neutral, of course it is not. On certain subjects one cannot be neutral. Nevertheless, I tried to be as objective as possible and include in the work all the principal facts about Marxism if, that is, one is seeking an introduction to the subject. There are some malicious comments in it, for instance on Lukács and others, I admit.

PS (An introduction to the subject? My goodness!, I think to myself).

When did you become a “revisionist” Marxist? In the mid 1950s, when so-called “de-Stalinization” permitted criticism of some aspects of life, as you say in *Main Currents*?⁶ Or were you one all along, i.e., since your affiliation to the Party which, I believe, dates back to 1945? You see, I want our readers to have information on these matters.

LK “Revisionism” is a word which was used by party officials; it is not my self-definition. Especially because, historically, the term is connected with Eduard Bernstein (the German socialist and critic of Marx) and, thus, associated with a completely different situation and completely different ideological problems. In a sense, then, I would not accept the word “revisionist” to refer to my own position. But it has been accepted, I mean, the party branded myself and a number of other people as a separate current, a hostile camp.

PS Exactly. You also say in MC that in 1955-57 the so-called “revisionists” of Poland – a number of authors who attacked Communist dogmas⁷ while remaining Marxists or even party members — began advocating a return to “authentic” or non-

⁵ Op. cit. 2005, pp. xxiii- xxiv.

⁶ On Revisionism in Poland, see *Main Currents* – from now on MC —, op. cit. 2005, p. 1153 on.

⁷ Generally speaking, the Polish revisionists wanted, against historical determinism, to restore the role and importance of the individual in the cognitive and the historical processes. And they both supported and encouraged the popular demands of the time for freedom and democratisation.

Leninist Marxism. Yet, as they confronted the “sources” of Marxism, they became less and less inspired by Marxist ideas or, rather, they went well beyond Marxism. So, after all, one needs to give a name to such endeavour...

LK It was for a short period that I tried to find in Marx some ideas which were completely different from Leninism's; and of course they were different. Nevertheless, in spite of appearances, I found out that Marx himself was not innocent, so to say, as regards the murders of modern Communism. Of course I realized Marx was different and, yet, he was not innocent. Leninism was a version of Marxism well-justified, well-founded.⁸

PS Did you find out all this in the mid 1950s, or you suspected that much from the very beginning? I mean, since the times you were a philosophy student at Łódź

⁸ That, I take it, is *Main Currents'* most influential and original thesis: the “roots” in Leninism-Stalinism were Marxian or, more accurately perhaps, Lenin's interpretation of Marx's philosophy was a well-founded one. Thus, Communism was not a “degeneration” or “falsification” of Marxism. Marx himself had declared that the whole idea of Communism could be summed up in a formula, “the abolition of private property”. But as a matter of fact, as an empirical matter – Kolakowski points out —, the state's centralised management of the means of production or “mere things” is not detachable from its centralized management of the whole of human life, from totalitarianism.

In *Main Currents'* Book I, chapter XVI.3 and the 1978 Epilogue (2005, p. 1206 on), Kolakowski singles out the two basic elements in Marx's philosophy which made possible the latter's conversion into the ideology of the Soviet state: the “romantic vision” of a perfect unity of mankind in the future and the “mythology” of proletarian consciousnesses as “historically privileged” (i.e., as possessing a special understanding of history's final and indubitably “progressive” purposes). The “romantic vision” requires, in Marx's philosophy, the collectivisation of private property, and the “mythology” leads, in Leninism, to the Party as “vanguard”. Especially problematic is, according to Kolakowski, Marx's historical materialism, particularly his theory of “social formations”, i.e., the theory that social development entirely depends on the change in the modes of production and the class struggle. For, inherent in that theory is “the doctrine that the meaning of a historical process can only be grasped if the past is interpreted in the light of the future, i.e., that we can only understand the past and the present if we have a knowledge – a “scientific” knowledge— of what will be” and, thus, that one can “scientifically” know and predict the future. All these fantasies, together with the mythology of proletarian consciousness, lead to rigid, Leninist-Stalinist, historical determinism.

Kolakowski expresses the same ideas, in a perhaps more systematic manner, in his “Marxist Roots of Stalinism” (in Robert C. Tucker ed., *Stalinism*, Norton and Company, New York, 1977; in the Net, in Spanish, in <http://www.cepchile.cl>).

University you were declared to be a very brilliant, privileged intellect. I have the impression that since 1945, since your affiliation to the party, you were already looking for something beyond orthodoxy, would that be correct?

LK Yes. I tried to find some ideas in Marx and Marxism which could be different from the stereotypes, but I did not believe my endeavour could be reconciled with my political affiliation. Of course we were young, me and my friends, but we were not completely stupid. There were many facts of our political milieu, which provoked our laughter, ...or horror; but this could not be expressed in public.

You see, I was especially struck by what I saw in Russia. I was there for three months, in 1950, during the Stalinist period. Me and several colleagues were in Moscow and Leningrad – but mainly Moscow – and, there, they prepared for us the teaching of their best philosophers and political scientists. (Well, that latter expression was not in fact used; they were called “social scientists”). They were supposed to be the best minds we could listen to. But, really, the experience was extremely unpleasant because they were completely ignorant. Not that we were so terribly learned, no; nevertheless, by comparison, those “luminaries” of the Soviet philosophy were ...something horrible. We still tried to explain to ourselves, ideologically, that even if they were people with so miserable an intellectual level, nevertheless in this (Soviet) political struggle all over the world, there must exist a strong ideological horizon, a strong ideological framework for thinking and so on. Never mind; all that was nonsense, of course. We could understand, though, that something was wrong.

PS In 1950 you were only 23, which means you – and your comrades – were very brilliant minds. Was Poland, by comparison with other countries behind the Iron Curtain, one where the *intelligentsia* was more advanced, more conscious, less orthodox?

LK First of all, and despite the losses we suffered during the War at the hands of the Germans and the Russians, Polish intelligentsia survived and was still in existence; not that it was very active politically, but was in existence. On the other hand, after the War, a good deal of intelligentsia, including well-known writers and scholars, somehow accepted the new regime and worked for it in good faith. Yet, when the “new era” came, they easily rejected the regime and easily became different men. This “conversion” included people who had been very strong Stalinists, people like the

Polish poet Adam Wazyk, who had been a Stalinist, not only in the sense of his beliefs, but in the sense that he had done unpleasant work for the Party among the literary circles. He was a Communist from before the War but, later on, Wazyk became the author of one of the best-known poems in Polish language, a political, strongly anti-regime poem entitled *A Poem for Adults*. He used to say of his Communist period, “*I was crazy*”; as if he was a psychiatric case.

In any event, after Stalin’s death, more pronouncedly after Khrushchev’s speech in 1956, things changed. Khrushchev’s speech has not been published in Russia; but it was, already in 1956, printed in Poland for party activists; in fact, it could actually be read, in samizdat publications, by whoever was interested; and as far as I know, it was from Poland that the text reached America. Everyone could listen to the text on Radio Free Europe. That speech was important but, even earlier, the criticism of the Communist ideology was already well-developed in Poland. After the speech, there came the change of the party’s leadership and Gomulka’s coming to power. More and more, after 56, fewer and fewer people believed in the ideology, even if it was obligatory and an essential part of the apparatus.

PS You point out in MC that “revisionism” itself, especially Polish “revisionism”, was “a major cause of the fact that the party lost its respect for official ideology”; that it was the Eastern Communists’ criticism itself, which proved to be the most active and effective in that respect, as compared with, say, non-Communist or even Western intellectuals’ criticisms.⁹

LK I do not remember exactly what I say there about the subject. But, yes, the French Communist party, for instance, remained for a long time Stalinist indeed; and I think they were right, in a sense, ...because their aim was not to have again one or two ministers in a Socialist government; their aim was Communism, a totalitarian regime. They knew their aim could only be achieved through war, by the Soviet Union’s invasion of France; if that happened, then what mattered was not the number of members of the party but their strong discipline. You see, there would have always been enough people to set up concentration camps and execute enemies, but those

⁹ Already in the mid-1950s, Kolakowski was singled out and reprimanded by the government as the principal culprit of revisionism in Poland. In 1966, he was definitely expelled from the Party.

people had to be themselves organised. Therefore, the French Communists' Stalinism was not stupid, ...that ideology was properly “practical”. It was another matter with the Italians. In Italy, there has always been an undercurrent of revisionism to some extent. It was easy for the Italian Communists to get rid of the Stalinist ideology.

PS Moving to different matters, what was this “*Institut Littéraire*” in Paris, which in the years 1976-78 published your MC in Polish, making it possible for the book to be then copied by underground publishers in Poland?

LK It was a association of émigrés in Paris, very important; a Polish venture which worked in Polish language. They published a monthly, *Kultura*, a literary-political magazine which, of course, could not be legally imported to Poland. Nevertheless, enough people brought it from abroad and it was very well-known in some circles in our country. *Kultura* was very important in the cultural and political development of Poland. In addition, they published many books, also in Polish language. “*Institut Littéraire*” was just a name, an address in Maisons Laffitte, near Paris, not that there was any “institute” there. Maisons Laffitte thus became a famous geographical name in Poland. As I said, a small group of people made the venture possible. The contact with them was forbidden and the secret police tried to closely follow all the people who had had any contact with the group or published in the journal under pseudonyms. I visited them for the first time when I was the first time in Paris, in Autumn 1956. Later on I published in the journal; and they published MC.

PS Let us discuss a bit *Main Currents* itself, its structure and contents. I personally consider it a unique book, for I do not know of any other philosophical criticism of Marxism, from its roots in dialectics to its collapse in the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, which combines such a wealth of knowledge and analytical rigor.

LK (Professor Kolakowski does not say a word at this point. He cannot be less interested in his own originality, at the least regarding the subject of Marxism, as the reader will immediately discover).

PS I told you before that I use your book as a handbook; but only fragmentarily. Am I wrong, is the younger generation wrong for its little interest in many other central figures of Marxism such as Luxemburg, Lukács or even Gramsci?

LK Not at all, you are right. There is much less interest in Marxism, not only in Poland but in the West as well. There are still, of course, some centres of Marxism, but

nothing of importance. I believe that not many people teach Marxism at the university anymore.

PS I do teach Marx, although in a very critical way. And I in part owe that critical standpoint to you, to your MC or your 1977 article “The Marxist Roots of Stalinism”. I do not think that things can be stated in a clearer way than in those works of yours: “These are the roots – the fantasies and mythologies — of what happened later”. Don't you consider your analysis of Marx unique?

LK There are many critical books on Marx; although I have not read any books on him for many years. It is difficult for me to say exactly what is new in that book of mine. Perhaps as a textbook it can be useful.

PS (Here I get a little impatient, in an affectionate way).

Had anybody said, Professor Kolakowski, before you that Marx's romantic dream of a perfect unity of humankind in the future, a dream, which in turn necessitated the collectivisation of property, together with the “mythology” of proletarian consciousness as historically privileged, ...that those were essential roots of Leninism? Had anybody before you said that with the same clarity and forcefulness? I do not know of any other thinker; but forgive me, maybe I am just ignorant.

LK *No..., I do not know any books of this kind.* But, of course, criticism of Marx did exist since Marx's own time, especially by the anarchists. ...Really, don't ask me about it, because I got rid of this kind of problems long ago.

PS Let us go to more general matters then. Marxist ideology fell apart a long time ago and yet you have said that we would be ill-advised to consign Marxism to oblivion, for it belongs to the intellectual and political history of the 19th and 20th centuries – thus to the history of humanity's efforts and mistakes — and, more relevantly, it may again gain strength.¹⁰ Can the spectre of Marxism walk again, is it

¹⁰ Kolakowski says this in the 2004 Preface to the latest, 2005, Norton edition (op. cit., 2005, p. v on):

“Main Currents is the intellectual history of both a philosophical (or semi-philosophical) doctrine and a political ideology so central in the legitimation of Communist rule..., that when the ideology fell apart (due to its growing distance regarding reality)... Communist power died out in Europe (...) Yet, there are reasons that make Marxism worthy of study (...) Philosophical doctrines that for a long time enjoyed considerable popularity ...never die out entirely, ...they are still able to attract people or terrify them.

walking again in the midst of our present economic crisis and, as usual since the 1960s, as you point out, “supported by certain intellectually miserable but loud movements” whose only relation with Marxism are their anti-liberal, anti-capitalist, anti-Western, etc., slogans?

LK Yes. There are of course various movements and centres which hate capitalism, or say they intend to destroy capitalism, and such things. But usually they do not know much about Marxism or the Marxist roots of their ideas. Nevertheless, they are in existence. I do not think that Marxism can resurrect in its old form. But the criticism of capitalism and utopian thinking in general are still in existence and, obviously, all the “negative” phenomena that we are right now witnessing may gain force. But I do not want to make predictions ...because we never know what will happen.

PS But we all have read the slogans and catchwords in the press nowadays, at least in the Spanish press: *“Marx was right, Capitalism was wrong. The crisis signals the end of Capitalism. These avaricious bankers and entrepreneurs have brought us all to the brink of poverty...”*

LK Nonsense. That is there, but it is of no great importance. The “anti” slogans, the anti-capitalist criticisms can occasionally invoke the name of Marx. But they do not know much –or anything— about Marx.

PS Why did you start MC with “Dialectics”? I do not think I have been able to understand you on this subject. Is Dialectics a legitimate endeavour or a dangerous one?¹¹

Marxism (moreover) belongs to the intellectual tradition and political history of the 19th and 20th centuries; as such it is obviously interesting”.

¹¹ According to Kolakowski, Dialectics is, putting it very generally, the belief that Humanity is not the same in its empirical being as it is in reality or essence, together with the imperative that the two should once again become “identical”. (Is Dialectics, then, I ask myself, a sort of total salvation project?) The author points out, though, that Kant’s, Hegel’s and Marx’s Dialectics (and the “eschatologies” that go with them), are very different: only with Marx, with “the conception of Humanity self-present as an Absolute in its own finitude” were all the solutions which “involve man’s realizing himself by the actualisation, or at the command, of an antecedent absolute Being” rejected.

MC, op. cit., 2005, pp. 66-67.

LK The word “Dialectic” is somewhat risky. In some historical periods Dialectic was no more than logic, a part of logic. Then it became a great intellectual event with Hegel; so, Dialectic as we know it, we inherited mainly from Hegel. I do not think there are any orthodox Hegelians in existence nowadays. Yet, we inherited some things from Hegel as we inherited other things from other great philosophers without needing to be followers in the strict sense. Dialectic is a part of our intellectual inheritance and Marx, obviously, was part of it.

PS Do you think there are problematic facets in Hegel’s Dialectics, in Marx’s? The immanence, perhaps?

LK I am not really able to define, strictly speaking, what Dialectic is. What it was in Marxism I tried to explain in the book (MC); but I do not think I have more to add, no.

PS You never forget that Marxism brought indescribable poverty, pain and death to a significant portion of humanity. Even if MC is primarily the history of a doctrine and only secondarily a history of facts, what were some of the historians of Communism you relied on while writing MC? And what do you think of the so-called “new historiography” of the crimes of Communism, the historiography made in part possible by the disclosing of records during the Yeltsin period? Have you read, for instance, *The Black Book of Communism*, a book which many intellectuals in the West have categorized as a piece of “right-wing anti-Communist rhetoric”?

LK Yes, I read the book edited by Stéphane Courtois when it came out. I found it interesting and true in essence. Not a piece of rhetoric, for sure.

PS A horrifying book, isn’t it? Did you know that the history of Communism was so really horrid?

LK By then, yes; not from the very beginning. But we learned step by step what was going on in the Soviet Union, the history of the camps. It was Solzhenitsyn’s work, of course, which did much in that respect.

In MC I relied on Richard Pipes, Boris Souvarine, and other historians. In any event, most of what I read on the crimes of Communism I read when I left Poland, simply because this sort of information was not available there. When I was in Poland I could read Orwell, for instance, or Koestler, or other literary books on the subject. I also read some memoirs on communism, for instance by Weissberg-Cybulski, a

German communist who spent some years in the Soviet Union and was imprisoned there. So, we knew some of it; enough.

As to Chinese Communism we knew little, really. It was again step by step that the horrors of Maoism reached us. That was unspeakable horror, as we now know; the cultural revolution and all the rest.

PS Do you have a “theory” of Totalitarianism?

LK No, I do not have a separate theory of Totalitarianism. But we all know what happened, we all know what kind of regime is a totalitarian regime. We have come to realize that there are various forms of it, not all of them equally horrid. But, roughly, we have an idea of what totalitarianism is: an attempt to reach total power, total power on everything; not only in the political activities but also on the arts, literature, ...on ideas. And especially, of course, it is an attempt to make the state the owner of everything, including the human soul. Totalitarianism has never achieved completeness, perhaps, although it was very close to completeness during the last period of Stalinism and in Mao's China, ...not to speak of others at work such as North Korea's.

In Poland, totalitarianism got more and more limited in the mid-1950s. For instance, after the great cultural event that was the 1955 Exhibition of young Polish artists, the party practically stopped imposing any of the old rules and rigors on painting. Socialist realism ended both in painting and many other areas.

PS Even if this is a delicate matter, can a consummate comparison be established between the Nazi and the Communist totalitarianisms? The late Francois Furet once asserted –in an exchange of letters with Ernst Nolte titled *Fascism and Communism* (1994)— that there was a “plus”, an excess of evil in Nazism vis-à-vis Communism, even though he did not elaborate the subject further. Professor Kolakowski, you were a youth when the Nazis turned Poland into a very real hell and you later experienced the tyranny of Communism. What do you think of Furet's view?

LK I would agree with Furet. The word “totalitarianism” is well-justified as regards both regimes. We can accept that both regimes were totalitarian. Nevertheless, I would also accept it was not the same thing. They attracted different sorts of people, people of different kind, so to put it. And ideologically they were different. One can label both as “totalitarianisms”, yet, racism, the idea of the

superiority of one nation and the attempt to physically destroy other nations entirely – entire nations, like the Jews as a race— and reduce to slavery the so-called “inferior” races, all that was the Nazi idea. You cannot say that Stalinism did the same or something similar; it was not similar. Of course Stalinism was horrifying, but it was not the same.

PS As I see this matter, not only the aims in the ideologies but also the actions taken were different. There is “something” in the actions taken by the Nazis, I do not know what it is, which makes them the lowest actions, the most sadistic, the most degraded. Is it just because they intend to inflict in the victim the utmost suffering, the utmost degradation, ...or is there something more in those actions, say, an unprecedented undertone?

LK Well, Leninist-Stalinist ideology, even though it served as an instrument of so many horrors and so much slavery was, however, full of humanist ...slogans. Hitler's ideology was not. Therefore, Nazi ideology was much closer to Nazi reality than Communist ideology to the Communist reality. Communist ideology and Communist reality were far apart; everything was a big *lie*. Nevertheless, in Nazism this distance between ideology and reality was almost non-existent.¹² They did say what they wanted to achieve: they wanted to establish the rule of Germany all over the world and turn all the “inferior races” into slaves of them. They not only murdered thousands upon thousands of people; not only thousands upon thousands died in a horrible torture; in addition, there were no schools, no universities, nothing ...for Poles and other peoples they invaded. And if they existed –as in Poland during the occupation— their existence was illegal. Thus, Poland felt the end of the War, the end of the invasion, as a liberation. It was a liberation, in spite of repression, especially in the years 1948-1954, and despite the fact that democratic institutions were not restored. The next day we again had Polish schools, Polish universities, Polish journals, Polish books. Of course, there was censorship. But even under Stalin's censorship, we could

¹² Isaiah Berlin, (in some article of his which I do not right now remember), says something analogous. Soviet communists, says Berlin, kept the old words – truth, goodness, freedom — but emptied them of their old meanings (that is the technique of *double-speak*). When the Nazis came however, he adds, they did not even care about the old words; they could do without them.

translate and publish some books from the West. In any event, all of this was nothing compared with Nazi rule in Poland.

PS Intellectuals. You do not find intellectuals' attraction to Marxism “excessively” problematic, in spite of Marxism's insensibility to facts and arguments, the failure of its predictions, its double standards of evaluation and its moral arrogance, and so on.¹³ And yet, that theme has occupied your attention and the attention of some other very brilliant minds, and is still with us. Let me put it this way, why an important proportion of intellectuals and educated people in the Western world are not attracted –indeed, are violently opposed – to capitalist liberalism, despite its social and economic benefits?

LK All over human history there has been a tendency to value equality above all. The idea of equality has some Christian roots, too. And it is easy from the idea of personal equality of people – the fact that we all are human beings and, therefore, we are equal to each other in dignity – to go to the idea that we should be equal in all

¹³ In different places, Kolakowski asserts that “*One of the causes of the popularity of Marxism among educated people was the fact that in its simple form it was very easy; even Sartre noticed that Marxists are lazy. Indeed, they enjoyed having one key to open all doors, one universally applicable explanation for everything, an instrument that makes it possible to master all of history and economics without actually having to study either*”. (See, for example, E. Krause's “La noche del Marxismo”, op. cit. 1985, or L. Kolakowski, “What Is Left of Socialism?”, in *First Things*, October 2002, in the net).

Nevertheless, Kolakowski's interest in intellectuals is old and important as can be seen, for example, in his “Intellectuals, Hope, and Heresy” (*Encounter*, October 1971), “Intellectuals against Intellect” (*Daedalus*, Summer 1972), or his more recent “Intellectuals” (*Modernity on Endless Trial*, 1990). In the latter article, Kolakowski denounces intellectuals' cult of power, their need for a status of honour in their societies, or their contempt for ordinary people and mass culture in general while, at the same time, they want solidarity with the poorest strata of society.

MC's chapters on the Frankfurt School and Marcuse are, arguably, the only “angry” chapters in the book, deploring pretentious professorial jargon, absolutely vacuous “progressivism”, or elitist nostalgia for a pre-capitalist culture. Immediately after his exile, Kolakowski was shocked by the so-called 1968 “protests” in the US campuses: “*irrational and destructive revolts*”, he calls them, *driven by “the meaningless idea of global revolution” and “symptomatic of a genuine sickness of our civilization*”. The philosopher has denounced on many occasions that, taken to the highest level, Western culture's self-criticism, tolerance, or pacifism ...can only be suicidal.

respects. But the idea of perfect equality in the distribution of goods is self-defeating; because perfect equality is possible only in a totalitarian regime; and a totalitarian regime cannot be egalitarian because some very important goods – like access to information, participation in power, and so on – must be restricted to a political elite. No totalitarian regime can ever be egalitarian, because it always necessitates a separate elite.

And yet, the egalitarian idea has strong roots in human history; after all, who invented communism? The Apostles of Jesus Christ; they had everything in common, the Gospel says.

PS Richard Pipes gives a humorous reply to that. He says that while Jesus and the Apostles put in common what was theirs, what had been given to them in charity, for instance, contemporary socialists and communists attempt to make common and distribute what belongs to others¹⁴... Don't you think that the confusion between equality of dignity and equality of every condition may be fuelled by other sentiments – resentment, say, or envy, etc. – as Mises and other economists of the Austrian School pointed out?

LK Yes, envy is one of them. Envy is one of the strongest emotions in human beings. You cannot destroy it by institutional means. It is why the egalitarian desire, the desire for an egalitarian society is strong as well, in spite of all arguments against it.¹⁵

PS I forgot to ask you before. Regarding the criticism of Marxian economics in MC, what were some of your influences in that respect? Were you in the late 1960s already acquainted with the works of Mises, Hayek and other influential theorists of the Austrian School?

¹⁴ Richard Pipes, *Historia del Comunismo*, Mondadori, Barcelona, 2002, p. 16. (Spanish translation of *Communism. A Brief History*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 2001).

¹⁵ See L. Kolakowski, “Sobre la Envidia”, in the net in <http://www.lettraslibres.com/index.php?art=6966> He there says that envy only requires an ideological justification when it has become a social phenomenon, a significant phenomenon socially speaking, as opposed to just being a personal emotion (and vice, eventually). In “Intellectuals against Intellect” (op. cit. 1972), Kolakowski points out that “envy, rather than a striving for justice, the pulling down of mankind to the level of its most ignorant strata, illiteracy as the road to liberation, ...those are important underlying motivations of anarchism and other social utopias”.

LK I knew some of it; Hayek, for instance, as well as the authors of other liberal doctrines.

PS Let us now discuss a little the rest of your work if you find it convenient. And the first question is about your friend Isaiah Berlin. Are there similarities between your thought and Berlin's? For instance, you have said in different ways and places, that utopian thought, the vision of a happier, more fraternal and less antagonistic world is “a permanent and essential part of human life”, yet “utopias must remain utopias”, that is, utopias become dangerous with their institutionalisation or realization. What is the problem with the implementation of a utopia, that it prioritises just one value or set of them to the detriment of other, equally important values? That it needs to develop a “social plan” and an apparatus of bureaucracy and coercion? Both?

LK As you know, “utopia” is a word coined in the 16th century by a Christian writer and thinker, which has become a common word since then. But utopia means “no place”, a place that does not exist; it is a negative word. *Utopia* is in More's book an island of happiness; people there are really equal and have everything they need, ...but that is precisely the point: that human needs have no limits and a utopia is an attempt to define what is a real need and what is imaginary. So, a doctrine according to which we can – our institutions can — give people everything they need is an absurdity in a sense, because our needs can grow indefinitely. I am not saying that it is good or bad; it is just a fact that there are no limits to our needs.

PS And of course to pretend to define limits gives a lot of leeway or power to the ones so pretending.

LK Yes, naturally.

PS To somewhat continue the question, do you share Berlin's idea that the final, absolute values that human beings have aspired to are hardly ever compatible and can oftentimes be incommensurable? And do you share Berlin's vision of politics – as a reformist, fallibilist, mostly “experimental” endeavour — and his indirect defence of “negative freedom”?

LK I share all those ideas and I wrote about it. Berlin was quite right that the most important values we humans share, which are real values, are incompatible if taken to the highest level. One cannot put them to the highest level together. We value equality and we value freedom, but they limit each other. Absolute freedom is

anarchy, absolute equality entails totalitarianism. Because they limit each other, our thinking about society, even more our acting in society, are always attempts to reconcile what cannot be completely reconciled.

PS Are we not witnessing today new attempts to erect absolute values? Ecological radicalism or pacifism at any cost, no matter what...

LK Of course. If we hold a value, which is real, but want to extend it above everything else, at any possible cost, then we end with dangerous absurdities, ...as many ecological movements or animal rights movements can go to the point of absurdity. Our (human and social) life is a never ending compromise between irreconcilable values.

As to negative freedom, there is no other freedom in society. Negative freedom is the area in which we are not restricted by law, by the state or by others; and, yes, as Berlin said, the area in which we individually are allowed to make mistakes in our attempts to reconcile personal values.

PS Kant is an important figure in your work, among other things because of his “regulative ideas”¹⁶, or his view that the distinction between good and evil is independent from people’s behaviour and historical processes. Why are those views vital to the survival of our civilization? And speaking more philosophically, how can the distinction between good and evil be independent from, even prior to, human behaviour and human history?

LK Well, that is an arbitrary and in fact religious view, that we are not inventors of what is good and evil but that we find the distinction in reality. This reality is not, for Kant, the empirical reality of the distinction between the red and the yellow colours, it

¹⁶ “Regulative ideas” (as opposed to “constitutive ideas”) are those, to use Kolakowski’s words, “which serve us as signposts, i.e., show us the direction towards an unattainable goal, instead of asserting that the goal has been, or is about to be, reached. See, for example, “The Death of Utopia Reconsidered” (*Tanner Lecture on Human Values*, delivered at The Australian National University, June 22nd, 1982, p.237), or “Why Do We Need Kant?”, both in *Modernity on Endless Trial*, 1990. The first article can also be found in the web in <http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/kolakowski>, (pp.229-247).

In *Modernity on Endless Trial*, the reader can find as well other essential articles by Kolakowski, such as “In Praise of Exile”, “Can the Devil Be Saved?”, “The Self-Poisoning of Open Society”, or “How to be a Conservative Liberal Socialist”.

is not empirical. However, we tend to believe –and I do believe this as well– that the distinction is not a human invention which can easily be changed, for example, depending on our whims or ideological fancies. No; it is something we find ready-made, so to say.

PS Do you then agree with contemporary attempts to somehow preserve what was correct in the *ius naturale* way of thinking? Hayek, for instance, insisted in the value of (legal) precedent vis-à-vis mere legislation, in the –to put it some way– critical history of humanity therein.

LK I do believe that the distinction between good and evil is not our arbitrary decision, that we find it ready-made. It is in human nature yes, but more than that, it is something that we cannot change because it is imposed on us by... (Kolakowski meditates a long while).

PS By the Universe?

LK By the Universe, or God, or any other way of putting the same thought.

PS Hayek says we do not know so much what justice is as *we know* what is unjust: “you must not kill”, “you must not steal”...

LK But that is enough, because if we know what is unjust, then we know what justice is. On the other hand, whether the negative way of putting it is logically first, we do not know. It is perhaps an educational matter to start in the negative way; we often do that educating our children, “Don’t do that, don’t do that, my child”.

PS You have written important works on Positivism, Phenomenology or Existentialism but your interest in religion, especially Judeo-Christian religion, has been lifelong.¹⁷ Already in the 1970s you wrote, for example, that “religious consciousness is

¹⁷ In *Religion: If There is No God* (1982), Kolakowski analyses the arguments for and against the existence of God that have been advanced through the ages. In *God Owes Us Nothing* (1995), he examines the concepts of sin and grace and asks, generally speaking, how a good God can permit evil.

At times, our author has drawn parallels between religious and political utopias while, at other times, he has carefully illustrated the distinctions. Thus, according to Kolakowski, Marxism was an eschatology, a modern variant of the apocalyptic hopes which have been a permanent feature of European history. Marxist “faith”, moreover, was not unlike the faith in certain millenarianist sects: even if the prophecy did not materialise, the faith remained untouched. However, in Enrique Krauze’s interview (op. cit. 1985), Kolakowski considers that there are important differences between the Marxist and the Christian Medieval “churches” (even if intolerant versions of the latter are taken into account). He emphasizes

an irreplaceable part of human culture and human beings' fuller attempt at self-identification". Are you a "catholic" thinker –as you are called in the web— in any sense of the word?

LK No. I am not a Catholic because I do not take part in the sacraments. One cannot be a Catholic that way. I do not take part in the sacraments but I do feel, if one may say so, friendly towards Christianity and the Christian tradition. It is not a denomination.

PS The admiration comprises Judaism. For instance, sometimes you have said that Judeo-Christianity is more amiable regarding human life, the importance of human life, than Buddhism.

LK Judeo-Christianity has been an immense contribution to the history of humankind, and our culture is fundamentally Christian and I accept it as such. But I am also a great admirer of Buddhism; I love Buddhism, really. Nevertheless our culture is not Buddhist, it is Christian.

Buddhism is a religion that shows us the misery of life. As you might remember, in the first biography of Buddha we are told that he was educated and lived in luxury, among all sort of pleasures, and he knew nothing of human misery. But Gods one day decided to enlighten him. First he saw a man who was very old, almost completely disabled and unable to walk or do anything. Then he saw a man who was gravely sick, an incurable invalid on the verge of death. Then he saw a corpse being carried to its cremation. And he understood that that is our destiny in this world: to be sick, to be old, to die. And it was only then that he started looking for a way of liberation, that is to say *nirvana*.

Buddhism is thus a way of thinking and feeling, an attitude to the world that apprehends nothing more in it than misery and suffering. Of course we should be always aware of misery and suffering, and compassionate. Nevertheless, we should not say that there is nothing more than that, because this makes our life barren; we are unable, by so saying, to be creative. So, as much as I admire Buddha himself and

Communism's greater ambitions –its unprecedented aspirations to monopolize and coerce all aspects of life —, its "lifeless" faith in the later times, or its being, after all, a "caricature" of religion and faith, even in the periods when the Communist faith was real and backed.

Buddhism, I realise Buddhism was not able to produce the kind of civilisation that the Christian West produced.

PS Perhaps, then, your interest in religions is due to the fact that religions do answer fundamental questions of human beings which other endeavours – philosophy, even art — do not?

LK Of course. As much as there are points of contact between religion and philosophy and between religion and the arts, nevertheless, if we want to have real answers to the fundamental worries of human beings, then, we find them in religion. We *need* to believe that human life has a sense. But we do not find a sense elsewhere but in religious traditions.

PS Who is the Devil in Kolakowski's thought? Why does he need to be saved? Can he be defeated in the absence of a God? And more relevant, perhaps, to your philosophy, can God remove the consequences of his deeds?¹⁸

¹⁸ The author's writings on the Devil are many. Besides his "Can the Devil Be Saved?" (op. cit., 1990), he has published *Devil and Scripture* (UK title of his *Key to Heaven*, of 1957), *Conversations with the Devil* (1965) and, recently, "The Devil in History", in *My Correct Views on Everything* (2005). In the last essay he says: "*The Devil is part of our experience. Our generation has seen enough of it for the message to be taken extremely seriously. Evil, I contend, is not contingent, it is not the absence, or deformation, or the subversion of virtue (or whatever else we may think of as its opposite), but a stubborn and unredeemable fact.*"

Thus, Kolakowski seems to somewhat subscribe to Kant's doctrine of "radical evil". In his "Why Do We Need Kant?", for example, our author points out, approvingly, that Kant's doctrine of radical evil is clearly anti-utopian for it is intrinsically related to Kant's doctrine of the free will: in Kant's philosophy, freedom does include not only the capacity of doing evil but implies that evil itself cannot be eradicated. According to Philip Rossi (*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*; <http://www.stanford.edu>), whom I here quote for the readers' information on this complex subject:

"Kant presents the notion of radical evil in Book One of *Religion* under the guise of a philosophical counterpart to the Christian doctrine of original sin. His discussion of moral conversion in Book Two then parallels the Christian doctrine of redemption. Kant places particular emphasis upon human responsibility for both radical evil and moral conversion. Unlike original sin, which Christian belief has understood as inherited, radical evil is self-incurred by each human being. It consists in a fundamental misdirection of our willing that corrupts our choice of action. In Kant's terminology, it consists in an "inversion" of our "maxims," which are the principles for action we pose to ourselves in making our choices. Instead of making the rightness of actions — i.e., the categorical imperative — the fundamental principle for choice, we make the satisfaction of one of our own ends take priority in the willing of our

LK I was interested in the Devil all my life. I published a book, *Conversations with the Devil*, long time ago.

Well, that is the question of evil, what is the *origin* of evil ...assuming that there is a God, a Creator who is not only omnipotent but perfectly good? That is a very traditional question, of course; many people have asked how it is possible that a perfectly good God created a world so full of evil and suffering. And, obviously, the whole of Christian philosophy is full of attempts to answer this question. We cannot get rid of it.

PS What do you think of Kant's doctrine of radical evil? Why do we need to remember that evil is an inerradicable part of reality?

LK That is the question of the eternity of Hell. If there is an eternal Hell, then evil cannot be destroyed completely. But there are Christian writers who deny the reality of eternal evil. For instance, there is this interesting Polish theologian, Waclaw Hryniewicz, who wrote a number of books trying to prove that punishment in the other life cannot be eternal. He tries to elucidate the New Testament's fragments addressing the eternity of Hell by making it clear that some Greek expressions lose their complete meanings in their Latin translations. I cannot discuss this question here; nevertheless, his aim is clear: he denies very strongly the eternity of evil and, therefore, the eternity of Hell. I do not know how it is in reality, though, I don't know.

actions. We thus inculcate in ourselves a propensity to make exceptions to the demand of the categorical imperative in circumstances when such an exception seems to be in our own favour.

Overcoming radical evil requires a “change of heart” — i.e., a reordering of our fundamental principle of choice — that we are each responsible for effecting in ourselves. Effecting such a change, however, leaves unresolved our moral culpability for those choices that were made under the inverted maxim of evil. In the language of traditional Christian theology, What happens to the “old man” — and to the consequences of choices made under that guise — when conversion makes us “new”? In answer to this question, Kant reinterprets the Christian doctrine of the atonement through the death of Jesus Christ. He rejects the view of “vicarious atonement” — that Christ takes away the guilt of previous evil conduct by standing as a substitute for all of us — in favour of an “exemplary” one. Christ thus provides a model in which we recognize steadfast adherence in both word and action to the principle of moral rightness which we already possess in the categorical imperative as the principle for the exercise of our practical reason. Such adherence to the principle of moral rightness is fundamental to what Kant considers to be the religion of reason.”

PS Kant's question was, *What happens to the consequences of evil choices and actions?* And I ask myself: if I cause enormous suffering, suffering to a large number of people, if I am a criminal tyrant, can that suffering inflicted *on others* ...ever be abolished? Must God not be, in the other life, not only loving and forgiving but also *just*?

LK That I do not know, really. There is the question *Can the devil be saved?* Papini wrote a book about it in which he affirmed that, yes, the Devil can be saved eventually. Because if the Devil can never be saved, then evil cannot be eradicated.¹⁹ But some people who, like Swedenborg, claimed to have visited the other world during their lifetime, did *not* believe that evil can be destroyed completely.

PS Philosophy. You have said many important things about philosophy. In “The Death of Utopia Reconsidered”, for example, you say that the role of philosophy is not to deliver truth but to build the spirit of truth. But you add that there are other, equally important, roles for it.²⁰ Must philosophy then also concern itself with the preservation of some human ends and ideals, and in what way? Can philosophy for example, and as Hayek wanted in the 1970's, “help restore the enthusiasm for individual freedom which seems to have disappeared from the realm of public ideas in much of the Western world”?

LK Yes, philosophy can help there. Philosophy can help in many different ways. But nobody can predict the results of those different philosophical efforts; because we can still argue and quarrel about whether some philosophers – with the best of

¹⁹ In his book *Il Diavolo* (1956), G. Papini says: “Many Christians ...think that a God who is truly a father cannot torture his children eternally ...that, at the end of time, that is, the present world, mercy will have to prevail over justice. If this were not so, we could think that Christ's own Father is not a perfect Christian.” And he adds, “There is a great difference between a theologian who establishes a doctrine and a Christian who wants to hope.”

²⁰ Op. Cit., 1982, p. 234. Kolakowski says,

“The cultural role of philosophy is not to deliver the truth but to build the spirit of truth, and this means never to let the inquisitive energy of mind go to sleep, never to stop questioning what appears to be obvious and definitive, always to defy the seemingly intact resources of common sense, always to suspect that there might be ‘another side’ in what we take for granted, ...and never to allow us to forget that there are questions that lie beyond the legitimate horizon of science which are nonetheless crucially important to the survival of humanity as we know it”.

intentions — did ultimately contribute to the good or the evil of our world. Probably most philosophers want to contribute somehow to the good, *but do they?* Even after centuries we cannot be certain that their work contributed to the good. It is a matter of the character of our life: we do not know what really remains after we leave this world, if what remains is good or not.

PS Is it true what Richard Rorty used to say, that when we philosophers concern ourselves with human ends and values we do not really do “anything special”; that our “instruments” may be different but the philosopher is, in the political realm, just another citizen?

LK Well, Rorty did not believe that we can achieve truth in the sense we traditionally meant “truth”. He was a pragmatist, essentially: our ideas, our words, our language, really, ...are instruments. He construed them in such a way that they just are for practical purposes: they are good insofar as they contribute to our well-being and happiness. But what is happiness? We can never define what happiness is. The utilitarian concept of truth I find therefore dangerous. Simply, we cannot get rid of the desire for truth in the traditional sense. Truth is truth. I understand the reasons why many people accept the pragmatist concept of truth, but I think it is very risky.

PS Professor Kolakowski, are you a “conservative liberal socialist” in political matters?²¹ Is a general position of yours that social and political life has to be approached in that manner?

LK Yes, we must keep in mind that we can never reach ultimate goals, like perfect fraternity or solidarity. On the other hand, I think that all those words, “conservative”, “liberal”, “socialist”, have lost their old meanings. Today we do not

²¹ In “How to be a Conservative Liberal Socialist” (*Modernity on Endless Trial*, 1990), Kolakowski endorses Conservatism’s tenets that traditional forms of life and belief may be essential for human life in general, that not all “good things” are absolutely compatible for they have “prices” which must be taken into account, and that human nature cannot be transformed into an “angelical” one even through the “right” institutions. Of Liberalism he applauds its conception of the state and negative freedom: the legitimate role of the state is the “security” of persons and property through the rule of law and not happiness nor “substantive” freedom, and the best way of guaranteeing personal initiative and competition is non-interference on the part of the state. Of Socialism he wants to preserve the view that “economic freedom exclusively centred on profit can and must be limited on behalf of personal “security” (as understood in Liberalism).”

really know what they mean unless we come up with some arbitrary definitions. Thus, I cannot define myself with the help of such words; I don't need them, really; I don't need to say that because I think this and that, and so on, I am a “conservative”, a “liberal”, a “socialist”. There was a time one could say what, for instance, “socialism” meant; that was before the First World War, in the 19th century: then “socialism” was a pretty well-definable concept, but later on lost its meaning. And so it happened with other concepts, like “liberalism”. In America, liberalism is something completely different than in Europe. So, to me all those concepts seem obsolete.

PS In “What is Left of Socialism?”, though,²² you criticize Hayek's “caricature” of the expression “social justice”. But why preserve the expression “social justice”, does it not entail more dangers than benefits, is it not terribly vitiated?

LK Hayek did not accept for himself the expression “social justice”. I remember him saying that for 50 years he had heard people repeating the expression “social justice” but nobody ever explained to him what it was. But one can of course use the expression if one is able to say what it means.

PS Hayek wanted to distinguish “justice as background” – basically the rule of law; for him, the only genuine justice — and “justice as concrete results” ...which is what many people mean when they vindicate social justice, even if it subverts the rule of law and impartiality.

LK Yet, one thing is justice in the legal sense and another thing can be social justice. If we go back to Aristotle, we learn that justice is to give to everybody what is his, what belongs to him; but how do we know what belongs to me, and to you, and so on?

It is true that “social justice” has a strong ideological force and was used as the ideological tool of totalitarian socialism; it is true that one cannot infer from the expression any useful answer to real economic problems (like the system of taxation, or the social benefits, or the aid that are justified); it is true that more often than not the expression is employed by individuals or entire societies who refuse to be responsible. Nevertheless, the concept might still be useful as an intermediary

²² Op. cit., 2002.

between charity and distributive justice, important as those are. For it suggests to us the *morality* of that other concept, the concept of “humanity”.

(The interview has practically finished. We have been with Professor Kolakowski for almost two hours, which was the time we had agreed on. So, we start preparing to leave. Kolakowski's opinions on today's world — terrorism, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the foreseeable future of Liberalism and, particularly, Europe — will have to be read elsewhere).

PS You said at the beginning of this interview that your main concerns are in *Metaphysical Horror*, is that correct?

LK Yes; the book was originally written in English; unfortunately I do not have extra copies with me... It was later translated into Polish and other languages and, yes, it addresses, in my opinion, some fundamental questions of Philosophy. The questions, not the answers.

PS I will read it. Would you like to read the interview before it is published?

LK I would prefer to revise it, if you do not mind. But preferably in English and not in Spanish. Spanish I do not know except that, when I have been in Spain, I have understood enough to determine what was the main topic of a newspaper's article, roughly. French is my best foreign tongue.

(We are still sitting in the living room. Professor Kolakowski is kind to the end).

LK I should tell you, I have a special admiration for Spanish culture in spite of my ignorance of the tongue. It is the passion which is in the Spanish culture that I admire, apart from ideas. I admire, for example, both Zurbarán and Goya, even if ideologically they are completely apart; or say, Buñuel and Miguel de Unamuno (sic). I admire all of them. And when I was asked by the *Times Literary Supplement* to name the “Book of the Millennium”, without any hesitation —without any hesitation— I wrote, “Don Quijote”. I feel there is an ineradicable passion in the Spanish culture other than elsewhere, which is —completely apart from ideas— what I admire.

PS We are not good at ideas then? (He laughs at the pun). I know you know our country because of what you retorted to Thompson in the 1970's: you visited Spain then, Franco was alive...²³

LK I was there several times, and I traveled a little bit. I have been in Madrid, Barcelona, Gerona; I gave some lectures in Gerona. I have even been in El Toboso. There was at the time a severe drought in the whole of Spain. I wanted to visit the town of Dulcinea; but I only found a few peasants playing cards in the shade...

(The three of us laugh with a good heart).

PS We appreciate so much, Professor, that you received us.

LK It was a pleasure to see you.

...Is it cold outside? Are you going to walk to the hotel?

²³ ...and “the regime, oppressive and undemocratic though it is, gives its citizens more freedom than any socialist country (except, perhaps, Yugoslavia)”.

I refer to the exchange Thompson-Kolakowski in the biographical note below.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Born in Radom, Poland, in 1927, Leszek Kolakowski²⁴ is a distinguished philosopher and historian of ideas well known worldwide for his criticisms of Marxian and Marxist thought and, particularly, his monumental work *Main Currents of Marxism*. The work was first published in Paris, in Polish, in 1976-1978 (*Polish Literary Institute*) and London, in English, in 1978 (*Oxford University Press*). In Spain, it was published, in its *complete* version, in 1980-83 (*Alianza*). In France, the first 2 volumes of *Main Currents* were published in 1987 by *Fayard*. The 3rd volume has never been published in that country, “for reasons never explained to the author.”

As a youth and due to the Nazi occupation, Kolakowski was educated in his country's underground school system. After World War II, he studied philosophy at the University of Lodz and joined the Communist party. In 1953 he received a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Warsaw with a thesis on Spinoza. From 1947 to 1949 he worked as an Assistant at Lodz University, and from 1950 to 1968 he was an Assistant and later a Professor at Warsaw University.

Sent to Moscow by the party, in 1950, to take a course for young and gifted Communist intellectuals, he found the experience unsettling. With the 1956 “Polish October” or “Polish revolution” and Gomulka's accession to power, Kolakowski became one of the principal voices for the democratisation of Polish life and one of the most prominent “revisionist” Marxists in his country. As a “revisionist” Marxist he wrote “What Is Socialism?” (1956), “The Priest and the Jester” (1959), “Responsibility and History” (1960), and the collection of essays *Towards a Marxist Humanism* (which appeared in 1967 and was titled in the UK as *Marxism and Beyond*), all of them increasingly critical with dogmatism and dogmatic belief in deterministic historical progress.

He became more and more outspoken against the basics of Marxist doctrine even as he was made, in 1959, Chair of the section of the history of philosophy at the

²⁴ I extract this information from the source which, in the net, I have found the most reliable:

Author unknown, “Leszek Kolakowski”, *The John Templeton Foundation* (op. cit. 2007). I also base myself on Kolakowski himself, “Developments in Marxism Since Stalin's death”, in *Main Currents*, (op. cit. 2005, p. 1148 on), and “My Correct Views on Everything”. For the latter article, see below.

University of Warsaw. In 1966, after a Conference he delivered at the 10th anniversary of the 1956 Polish revolution –“revolution” which in fact, and according to his own words, “ushered in a gradual extinction of the social, economic and cultural liberation that had taken place since Stalin’s death” —, he was expelled from the party. In 1968 he was dismissed from his Chair at the University for “forming the views of the youth in a manner contrary to the official tendency of the country”, and left Poland with his wife, Tamara, as governmental anti-Semitism and students protests against the government broke out.

No official references to his works were made in Poland in twenty years although, in underground editions, they were known in the country. Thus, Kolakowski’s writings shaped the views of the Polish intellectual opposition to Communism, inspired the activities of the *Committee for the Defence of Workers* (KOR), of which he was a foreign member, and those of the *Flying University*, an underground educational venture. As an active supporter, from abroad, of *Solidarity*, he stimulated the movement that challenged and ultimately began dismantling the Soviet system in Eastern Europe.

In 1968, Kolakowski became a visiting professor of philosophy at McGill University, Montreal and, in 1969, at the University of California at Berkeley. From 1970 until his retirement in 1995 he was a Research Fellow at *All Souls College*, Oxford. From 1981 to 1994 he also served on the Committee of Social Thought and as a professor in the department of philosophy at the University of Chicago.

Around the time of his exile, Kolakowski stopped considering himself a Marxist, even a “revisionist” one (for, as he once said, “there are better arguments in favour of democracy and freedom than the fact that Marx is not quite so hostile to them as he at first appears”). Well-known became his 1974 “Rejoinder” –“My Correct Views on Everything”— to an “Open Letter” in the journal *The Socialist Register* addressed to him by the British Marxist historian Edward Thompson.²⁵

²⁵ Both the “Letter” and the Rejoinder are in the web (and the Rejoinder is included, as well, in Kolakowski’s 2005 book of the same title). See in the web, http://socialistregister.com/socialistregister.com/files/SR_1973_Thompson.pdf. http://socialistregister.com/socialistregister.com/files/SR_1974_Kolakowski.pdf.

Kolakowski was a Fellow of the British Academy, the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Académie Universelle des Cultures, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His numerous prizes include the Peace Prize of the German Booksellers' Association, the Erasmus Prize, the Vellion Foundation European Prize for the Essay, the Jefferson Award, the MacArthur Prize, the Jerusalem Prize, the University of Chicago Laing Award, the Tocqueville Prize, the Jurzykowski Prize, and the Kluge Prize of the US Library of Congress.

The author of more than thirty books and about four hundred essays, he is one of the few contemporary philosophers who is thoroughly familiar with both the analytical and the continental varieties of Western philosophy. We can highlight here the following works, with the dates of their first publication, most often in Polish:

The “Open Letter” is mixture of appeals to old comradeship, patronising instruction on Socialism, and allegations of “opportunism” against Kolakowski. The Rejoinder, a very clear statement of the author's thought at the time and his stance in life.

After “reminding” Kolakowski of his own and other Western intellectuals' support to the cause of revisionism in Eastern Europe, Thompson implies that Kolakowski has become a “traitor” due to his disavowal of every sort of Marxism ...and his newly-found “comfort” in the West. (Thompson's accusations remind the author of these lines of the charges some Spanish “intellectuals” levied against Solzhenitsyn when the writer visited Spain, back in 1976). The rest of the “Letter” –it has 100 pages!– is an attempt to “explain” to Kolakowski all the merits in Marxism which the latter has, supposedly, “overlooked”, such as its doctrine of “social systems”.

Kolakowski's answer –20 pages– is severe: 1. Thompson and other Western Marxists, with their “Leftist clichés” and “double standards of evaluation” simply “refuse to accept historical facts as they are”: Communism never had a human face, neither in 1917-20 nor in 1942-46, as Thompson ignorantly claims. 2. Both Thomson and Kolakowski himself “were active in our respective Communist Parties in the 1940's and 50's, which means that whatever our noble intentions and our charming ignorance (or refusal to get rid of our ignorance) were, we both supported, within our modest means, a regime based on mass slave labour and police terror of the worst kind in human history”. And 3. “You say that to think in terms of “systems” yields excellent results. I am quite sure it does, not only excellent, but miraculous”; ...for to believe that “whatever bad happens within the “capitalist system” is by definition the product of capitalism, and whatever bad happens within the “socialist system” is by the same definition the product of the same capitalism (socialism being “essentially” a superior though unfinished stage in mankind's development)”, ...“simply solves all problems of mankind at one stroke”. Kolakowski says to Thompson, “I am not interested at all in being “a Marxist” or in being called so”.

The Individual and Infinity (1958), on Spinoza;
Tales from the Kingdom of Lailonia (1963)
Religious Consciousness and Church Allegiance: Studies in 17th Century Non-denominational Christianity (1965);
Positivist Philosophy from Hume to the Vienna Circle (1966);
Towards a Marxist Humanism (1967);
The Socialist Idea: A Reappraisal (1974; edited with Stuart Hampshire);
Husserl and the Search for Certitude (1975),
Main Currents of Marxism (1976-1978);
Religion: If There Is No God (1982);
Metaphysical Horror (1988);
Modernity on Endless Trial (1990);
God Owes Us Nothing: A Brief Remark on Pascal's Religion and the Spirit of Jansenism (1995);
The Two Eyes of Spinoza and Other Essays on Philosophers (2002)
My Correct Views on Everything (2005)
The Questions of the Great Philosophers (2007)

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