

Book Review

Magala, Sławomir. 2021. *The Third Enlightenment (or Globalizing Meritocracies)*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Jakub Isański 
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.17.3.08>

The book consists of three parts, preceded by an introduction. Their titles are “Let’s Move,” “Let Us Know,” and “Let’s Do It.” Its subject matter concerns the issues of contemporary changes in social life. Although these changes occur globally, their local variations allow for the observation of differences in understanding issues such as the role of universal education systems, the future of democracy, or the importance of international migration for economic or social development. In the following chapters, one can find a wide range of issues covered, for example, the discussion on the tasks of universities in a world where, in addition

to the many years’ unsolved dilemmas regarding truth, peace, or responsibility for educating future elites, there are also challenges resulting from the development of Internet technologies, artificial intelligence, or the emergence of humanoid robots. The author supports these discussions with numerous examples, quotations from the classics of social thought, and compelling neologisms, such as in the chapter “Eco-Evo-Devo-Robotevo.” It seems that the common thread running through the pages of the book is the search for some ideal model of social life, in paradise, utopia, or the “Artificial Intelligence Society” (p. 90). However, reflection on these searches is increasingly interrupted by warnings against the dystopian, historical nightmares of totalitarianism,

genocide, and crimes committed in the name of human progress.

The content is presented in a colorful erudite manner, which allows reading it with interest and pleasure. The book is written from the perspective of an author who knows the academic realities of Western Europe and the broader context of social and economic changes in the eastern part of the continent in the last half-century. Hence, in the book, we can find references to university examples from Rotterdam (the Netherlands) or Poznan (Poland). As the author points out, the performative turn has made us communicate through an immediate and intimate exchange of thoughts and impressions, constantly comparing ourselves with other social media users. In a sense, this book refers to such mechanisms of perception and description of reality, repeatedly transporting the reader through time and space, recalling dates, facts, or names of prominent intellectuals, and remarks about their influence on recent history. Numerous references to literary works, films, and events of our continent make us return to these issues many times when reading the content, which, in turn, enables us to confront the author's interpretations with our own. On the one hand, this may constitute a barrier for a less careful observer of social life, who may feel like a student at a lecture for which they are not properly prepared. However, the book prepares for the exam—even if it were a conversation with an interlocutor who employs commonly used terms such as “political correctness,” “troll farms,” or “temporary nomadism” of modern people and the ways they communicate. It is, therefore, a pleasurable reading—offering an intellectual journey through the achievements of European authors, which allows the recalling of their thoughts. In this context, the editor's note on the last page of the cover—concerning other publi-

cations by this author—is of great importance here. Especially Magala's previous piece, *Walka klas w bezklasowej Polsce* [*Class Struggle in Classless Poland*], can be seen as a prologue to many of the issues raised in the book. The book cites several times the most famous mistake of the American sociologist, Francis Fukuyama, who predicted the end of history a few decades ago. Magala, on the other hand, returns several times to his question about the class struggle, inquiring if we are witnesses, participants, or rather victims. Considering these dilemmas, the author briefly analyzes the contemporary class structure, referring to the middle-class—the “underdog” of successive totalitarian and authoritarian systems of 20th-century history. Today, belonging to the middle-class or social promotion therein is one factor that prompts people to act. As we read in the book: “The dream class of humankind” is understood as “US-like consumers” (p. 97). However, they do not necessarily retain their charm for the millennial generation. Is living in harmony with nature, caring for the climate and endangered species part of the charm for them?

It seems that changes within the class structure concern not only the proportions between its segments but also its openness to subsequent generations aspiring to privileged positions and posts. Therefore, on the one hand, there are questions about the uberization of the labor market and the middle-class, whose members can be identified more by their on-credit lifestyles than by the wealthy account balance and propensity to invest capital. On the other hand, there is an increasingly affluent and more effectively isolated-from-society upper-class, who accumulates its resources and effectively defends access to its ranks against economic upstarts. Will the global meritocracies that the author describes ultimately consolidate the existing lines of inter-class

divisions? In one of the recent issues of the *New York Times*, one can read about the scale of debt of university graduates, or their parents, in the US. Yet, when one reviews the history of this topic, it is visible that this problem has been discussed for decades. There, and in many other places on earth, the promise of entering a privileged part of society requires years of paying off debts. One may also wonder if a similar situation does not happen to entire national economies that are constantly indebted beyond the limits foreseen by the Bible, Hayek, or just common sense, in exchange for the promise of development and prosperity.

Among the warnings the author gives us, political correctness deserves particular emphasis. It is crucial to draw attention to its Marxist roots and its oppressive nature, inconsistent with the requirements of democracy. As the author notes, the phenomenon of political correctness has been “rediscovered many times in history” (p. 111) as a tool of totalitarian control. Is it also visible today? If so, should the author of the book be treated as a whistleblower and his arguments not only as a diagnosis, a warning but also a commitment to action? The author guides the reader through his elucidation, posing numerous queries, but not always answering those. We cannot be sure if this is because some of them are rhetorical questions or because the answer to some of them would also seem too confusing. This is so not only due to the matter itself but also because of the social context, such as the aforementioned political correctness. Or perhaps because, as the author writes, “asking questions without fear of authoritarianism and arbitrary punishment requires democracy” (p. 106). And what about freedom? The pursuit of obtaining it, regaining it, or securing it seems to be one of the most important drivers of social changes in our times. Will artificial intelligence algorithms

soon become its guardians? Or maybe they will be clones of the robot Sophia, which recently obtained civil rights in Saudi Arabia (the author writes about it on page 85)? As we are warned elsewhere, “the dream of total control did not die” (p. 12). One of the mythological Hydra heads here is the Chinese “Social Credit System.” Will we find the strength and ways to fight it as soon as the dust falls after dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic?

If we should use the results of the disputes of the most powerful intellectuals in this struggle, then we should know their achievements. However, as the author regrets, the Popper-Kuhn debate in the 1970s ended the time of great public intellectual debates. Still, let me recall at this point one of the online debates of two contemporary intellectuals—Jordan Peterson and Slavoj Žižek, which took place in 2019 (at the beginning of 2021, its official version available on YouTube had over 3 million views, it was also viewed countless times on other Internet channels). As I learn from my students from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, it is also one of the most popular online academic lectures, eagerly watched by the generation of today’s twenty year olds and, most importantly, discussed by them over coffee. Perhaps, this form of thought exchange has not ended, but rather the channels of its distribution have changed? Thus, maybe the titular third enlightenment is broadcast in digital cathedrals and transmitted from there to the whole world? What is worse, the vitality of our thoughts and their emanation do not exceed not only 15 minutes, as Warhol predicted years ago about popularity, but even 15 seconds (the author mentions this on page 74). Let us add—luckily for us, one of the most popular social networks gives us a chance to share our stories as part of the so-called “insta-stories” for 24 hours.

The paraphrase of von Clausewitz's sentence about war as a policy conducted by other means is used in the book in another military dogma, "no one left behind," but in a version elevating education to the rank of a weapon for a better future. The author writes, "Not only should no child be left behind and denied an education, but also no hard-working citizen should be left behind and denied a mortgage loan" (p. 93), expanding its semantic capacity also to the hard-working parents of studying children. However, he sneered elsewhere in his book the provocative question of whether universities are becoming "centers of ignorance for new generations before they hit the labor market" (p. 17). What is essential here is that the author writes about the resources of the knowledge to be passed on to talented and hard-working representatives of the next generations. On this occasion, accusations of corrupt development, resulting from the work of people who misunderstand democracy and disregarding its inclusiveness, are recalled. Therefore, there is room for the NIMBY syndrome (the acronym of the phrase "not in my backyard"), widely discussed in sociology, which defines persistent regional and national strategies, but also individual ones, in the face of emerging development challenges and the need to participate not only in its profits but also costs. And again, after the author, one can ask—Where will it lead us?

Sporadic references to the situation regarding the Covid-19 pandemic—and, above all, to its consequences—leave us with a hunger for more concerning this book's contents. Social isolation and the breakdown of social ties (mentioned on p. 109) are all too visible. But, how will the social world look in the coming months and years? Will we appreciate the lack of direct contacts, or will we hide permanently behind our digital avatars, avoiding, under

any pretext, even turning on our webcams? What will social life, stratification, and social divisions be like then? What will the conflicts and methods of solving them be?

The greatest value of this book, I believe, is the author's incredible skill in asking questions. Many of them are very uncomfortable, embarrassing, and shaming, but they all force us to self-reflect. As long as we take the trouble to answer them, they can lead us to question existing paradigms, narratives, and well-known versions of history (and the social memory of it). That is the case when the author draws attention to the political provenance of environmental movements. Or, when he describes the little-known in Europe significance of the Polish trade union, or rather of the huge social movement *Solidarność* [Solidarity], referring to the influence it had on political changes in Poland and throughout Europe. Let us recall only one of the 37 idealistic theses adopted by the 1st National Congress of *Solidarność* Delegates: "The Union will fight against hypocrisy in all areas of life, because society wants and has the right to live in the truth" (Cywiński 1984:110 [trans. JI]). Polish heirs of *Solidarność* still argue about the importance of individual factions and coterie in their impact on the history of Poland. The undoubted advantage of this book is also several important observations about the recent history of our continent, the selective amnesia of the apologists of communist social experiments, and the cry from "graves that do not exist"—of victims from Cambodian death pits, Ukrainians who died during the Great Famine provoked by Stalin, or people murdered during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the number of victims of which exceeded the expectations of European intellectuals (and, for many, it exceeds these images to this day). Let us also add one more inconvenient fact—many dictators are graduates of renowned Eu-

ropean universities, which again forces us to think embarrassingly about the responsibility of intellectuals for the development of our world.

In one of the articles in the last issue of the Paris-based *Kultura*—an important journal for political refugees under the communist regime—we read a student’s account: “Frankfurt is a terribly ugly city, it lacks something. I don’t like it there” (Stach 2000:201 [trans. JI]). Can it be the disapproval of the

reality surrounding us that can drive change? It remains to be asked if the author is an optimist. An active participant in the turn of the century, a veteran of social protests in Poland under communist rule, a political refugee, and a professor at one of the best Dutch and Polish universities. The book’s ending allows an affirmative answer to such a question; still, it leaves us with a disturbing “but.” A commitment to answer that question may be one of the benefits of reading this book.

References

Cywiński, Bohdan. 1984. *Doświadczenie polskie [Polish Experience]*. Paris: Editions Spotkania.

Stach, Andrzej. 2000. “Dalekie drogi zbliżenia – polscy i niemieccy studenci ‘Viadriny’ [Distant Roads of Rapprochement—Polish and German Students of ‘Viadrina’].” *Kultura* 10(637):199-206.

Citation

Isański, Jakub. 2021. “Book Review: Magala, Sławomir. 2021. *The Third Enlightenment (or Globalizing Meritocracies)*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.” *Qualitative Sociology Review* 17(3):136-140. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.17.3.08>