LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI AND EUROPE AS A QUESTION

Stefan Auer

Formát článku Štefana Auera je iný ako ostatné príspevky. Radi ho však uverejňujeme, pretože je to výborný text a Štefan po prvýkrát vydáva text na svojom rodnom Slovensku. Pochádza totiž z Košíc, momentálne je profesorom a riaditeľom Centra európskych štúdií na univerzite v Hong Kongu, predtým však študoval v Nemecku a svoju akademickú kariéru začal v Írsku a v Austrálii. Ponúkame pár riadkov z korešpondencie o genéze textu:

... Navrhujem Kołakowského essay published in New Criterion in May 2003 „Can Europe happen?"

... Tak ja na tom článku pracujem... Mám takú predstavu, že by som ten Kołakowského článok skrátil tak, že ho podelím do častí, ktoré okomentujem. Po tom ešte pridám trochu viac o ňom a o mne aj z iných článkov, ako napríklad jeho myšlienku o 'How to be a Conservative-Liberal-Socialist'.

... Tak Ti to tu posielam.... Je to tak trochu mix aj osobných aj politických postrehov, a dal som tam aj zopár vlastných citátov, keďže mi vlastne na Slovensku ešte nikdy nič nevyšlo...

Philosophers and politics produce a volatile mix. Some of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century made appalling political judgments whether they were on the right, or on the left. Think of Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt and their dalliance with Nazism, or Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty supporting the Soviet Union.[1] I believe that Albert Camus, with his passionate resistance against *both* Nazism and Communism, was a far better thinker and writer than Sartre, and so was Hannah Arendt. In fact, Arendt was so troubled by the political position of her once-lover Heidegger, that she refused to be descri-

---

1   The list could be easily extended. For a more thorough (though not less polemical) discussion of philosophers in politics see, Stefan Auer, 'Public Intellectuals, East and West: Jan Patočka and Václav Havel in Contention with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Slavoj Žižek', pp. 89-105 in *Intellectuals and their Publics: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, edited by Christian Fleck, Andreas Hess, and E. Stina Lyon. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, or an earlier German version, 'Aussichten auf die Revolution: Politisches Denken in West und Ost im 20. Jahrhundert,' *Osteuropa*, BWV Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, Vol. 58, No. 2, 2008, pp. 81-90.

bed as a philosopher. As she put it in a TV interview with Günter Gaus: 'I am afraid I have to protest. I don't belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if one can speak of it at all, is political theory. I neither feel like a philosopher, nor do I believe I have been accepted in the circles of philosophers.'[2] Yet, in my view Arendt has always been a philosopher, albeit one distinguished by sound political judgment. She is an excellent proof, if any is needed, that a politically astute philosopher is not a contradiction in terms.

In fact, I would argue that philosophers may have more to offer in reflecting on the political challenges of our times than a number of data-crunching political scientists who believe that a problem that cannot be addressed through regression analysis is not a problem worth their study. This is not an argument against the aspiration of political scientists at large to think of their discipline as a science, but a plea for taking ideas in politics seriously. This makes for a more modest, but a far more prudent approach to politics. And who is better suited to the tricky task of interrogating ideas and their impact on our lives than philosophers? Leszek Kołakowski is exemplary of such an approach. His writings about Europe proved far more astute than most mainstream studies produced by an army of specialists studying European integration. You do not find Kołakowski pondering the virtues and limitations of 'multilevel governance', 'demoicracy' (a democracy of democracies), or celebrating the EU as a 'postmodern', 'post-territorial' political project reflecting 'postnational constellations', to mention just a few trendy terms dominating contemporary EU scholarship. His language is as simple as his insights are profound; and exceedingly timely, particularly when it comes to Europe and its many crises.

Leszek Kołakowski was a Central European through and through, living locally and thinking globally before such terms became clichés of the largely non-existent 'glocal' imagination. When asked where he would like to live, the Polish philosopher replied in a lecture at the Australian National University in 1982: 'deep in the virgin mountain forest on a lake shore at the corner of Madison Avenue in Manhattan and Champs Elysees, in a small tidy town'.[3] As somebody who has chosen to live in five different countries for extended periods of time, I can well relate to Kołakowski's desire. I will always miss the best aspects of my many (adopted) homes: Košice and Slovakia will remain close, because it is my homeland; Cologne and Germany, because it gave me the first taste of Western-style liberty after I escaped from communist Czechoslovakia; Melbourne and Australia, because I was made to feel even more European and happy in an expansive 'country girt by sea'; Dublin and Ireland, because of its amazing literature, theatre and beer; and finally Hong Kong, because of its maddening intensity, complexity and the relentless thirst after democracy. But Kołakowski's point was more serious than this. To be sure, he too lived in many different places to which he must have developed various degrees of attachment – Poland, Canada, the US and the UK – but the image of his favourite abode is about the impossibility of fulfilling our many conflicting desires. As he put it, 'thus I am a utopian, and not because a place of my dream happens not to exist but because it is self-contradictory.' Yet, Kołakowski was that rare species, a great philosopher and a brilliant political thinker precisely because he was *not* a utopian.

One of my recent preoccupations has been the question of whether the European project is on the whole a self-contradictory (or even utopian?) project. In fact, not so long ago, Europe was meant to have provided the 'best vision of the future'.[4] Not surprisingly though, very few

---

2   This remarkable interview, recorded on 28 October 1964 for the German TV station ZDF, is available on YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dsoImQfVsO4

3   Leszek Kołakowski, 'The Death of Utopia Reconsidered', The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at The Australian National University, Canberra, June 22,1982. Available on http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/k/kolakowski83.pdf

supporters of Europe's federalist project think of it as utopian,[5] but they do have the tendency to project their vision ever further into the future. To cite but one prominent example: asked whether the numerous crises that the EU has been going through over the last couple of years have not invalidated his normative ideas about Europe, Habermas was adamant that a project that hasn't even started cannot be declared to have failed.[6] Yet, a number of crucial aspects of a Europe without borders have become a reality over the last couple of decades, delivering quite the opposite of what was intended. The single European currency was a high-minded political project that badly backfired, as a number of economists and more skeptical political figures had predicted. And what of the idea of open borders within Europe and between the EU and the outside world? For decades Germans struggled to accept that they lived in a country of migration, and then the very same Angela Merkel who argued that multiculturalism in Western Europe had failed, embarked on the biggest migration experiment in postwar history. Whether one supports the policy or not, its result will be a deep transformation of German and European societies. My concern is that the policy will backfire even more than the idea of unifying Europe through the euro. Once again, European political elites seem to be pushing ahead with a vision of Europe that does not enjoy sufficient popular support; a Europe that appears to pursue (far too many) contradictory aims.

'The European dream', I wrote some time ago, 'was to combine the supreme efficiency of capitalist, market-based economies with social justice; it was meant to bring about endless increases in material wealth while stringently upholding environmental protection; and it was to deliver these goods via an apolitical, technocratic rule, which would also be democratically legitimate.'[7] As I argued in a short, polemic book: "Europe was going to 'run the twenty-first century', as Mark Leonard argues, having created 'an entirely new species of human organization, the likes of which the world has never seen'. If the West—and most of the world—was American in the twentieth century, the twenty-first was going to be European. But not in any crude, old-fashioned, imperial, my-values-are-better-than-yours kind of way; rather, in an open and open-ended, reflexive, self-critical, you-are-as-good-as-or-better-than-me way. Europe was going to lead the world by example—but gently. 'Soft power Europe' would rule without anyone noticing but everyone benefitting. All these assumptions proved hubristic: Europe's turn of fortune is humbling, humiliating and, perhaps, irreversible."[8]

To be sure, however skeptical one may be about the virtues of European integration and the current design of EU institutions, it is not comparable with the disastrous experiment that was Soviet-style communism in Eastern Europe, the ideological fallacies of which

---

4   Jeremy Rifkin, <u>The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream</u> (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

5   The German political scientist and public intellectual, Ulrike Guérot, is exceptional in this respect by explicitly calling for a 'political utopia'. As she has argued, Europe needs a radically new beginning to create a novel polity no longer dependent on its member states, but derived instead directly from Europe's citizens. Only a European republic that does away with nation states can revive democracy in Europe, she believes. See Ulrike Guérot, <u>Warum Europa eine Republik werden muss! Eine politische Utopie</u>, Bonn: J. H. W. Dietz, 2016.

6   Jürgen Habermas, 'Die Spieler treten ab. Kerneuropa als Rettung: Ein Gespräch mit Jürgen Habermas über den Brexit und die EU-Krise', in *Die Zeit*, 9 July 2016.

7   Stefan Auer, 'Das Ende des Europäischen Traumes und die Zukunft der begrenzten Demokratie in Europa', *Transit: Europäische Revue*, Verlag Neue Kritik, No 44, pp. 122-141, 2013 (the article was re-published in Bulgarian, Russian and Slovenian; the English version is available on *Eurozine:* http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2013-02-22-auer-en.html)

8   Stefan Auer, <u>Whose Liberty is it Anyway? Europe at the Crossroads</u> (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2012; distributed by the University of Chicago Press).

Kołakowski exposed in his <u>Main Currents of Marxism</u>.[9] Yet Kołakowski rightly cautioned 'against the idea of the perfect and everlasting fraternity'. What he identified as 'a constitutional framework of human existence' – 'that, by the very fact of being creative and free, people are bound to strive after goals which collide with each other and to be driven by conflicting desires' – is as true of individuals as it is true of human collectives, including nations. The world we live in cannot be freed from intractable conflicts between individuals, communities, states. All we can hope for is to moderate between them, not resolve them once and for all.

> The utopians, nevertheless, keep promising us that they are going to educate the human race to fraternity, whereupon the unfortunate passions which tear societies asunder – greed, aggressiveness, power lust – will vanish. However, since Christianity has been trying to carry out this educational task for two millennia and the results are not quite encouraging, the utopians, once they attempt to convert their visions into practical proposals, come up with the most malignant project ever devised: they want to institutionalize fraternity, which is the surest way to totalitarian despotism.[10]

Once again, Europe is not marching towards 'totalitarian despotism' but attempts at institutionalising fraternity – however well intentioned they may be and whether they come from Brussels, or Berlin – are bound to backfire. This is not an argument against fraternity, let alone an argument against the European project as such. It is just a cautionary note that there are limits to what can be achieved politically. As Kołakowski put it,

> The general conclusion of these remarks might sound somewhat banal but, not unlike many banalities, worth pondering. It says that the idea of human fraternity is disastrous as a political program but is indispensable as a guiding sign. We need it, to use the same Kantian idiom again, as a regulative, rather than a constitutive, idea.[11]

Europe too, I believe, should be a regulative idea: guiding towards co-operation rather than enforcing fraternity.

'Can Europe happen?' Kołakowski asked in early 2003, anticipating a number of key challenges that we still struggle to comprehend.[12] After a short sketch of the historical origins of integration, invoking the idea of Franco-German co-operation postulated by the likes of Winston Churchill, Kołakowski identified the basic tension between the aims and the means of European integration: 'we like to believe that a United Europe, if it can be brought about, will permanently remove the specter of war from our horizon. But we do not know whether it can succeed; we do not yet know what kind of Europe it will be nor how—in what sense—it will be united'. What follows goes to the heart of the EU's current predicament:

---

9   An excellent discussion of this *magnum opus* is offered by the editor and publisher of *The New Criterion*, Roger Kimball: 'Leszek Kolakowski & the anatomy of totalitarianism. On the life and work of the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, who is "well-known without being known well."' *New Criterion*, June 2005, pp. 4-11.

10 Leszek Kołakowski, 'The Death of Utopia Reconsidered', The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at The Australian National University, Canberra, June 22, 1982. Available on http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/k/kolakowski83.pdf

11 Ibid.

12 Leszek Kolakowski, 'Can Europe happen?', *New Criterion*, May 2003, pp. 19-27.

The arguments put forward by many economists against a common currency seem convincing: it would entail the imposition of a uniform tax system and interest rate in all the member states, and the central bank, whose decisions would be independent of governments, would play the decisive role. Thus the two basic mechanisms of regulating the economy—the tax system and the interest rate—would, critics say, be taken out of the hands of particular states. States would also forfeit the possibility of manipulating their own inflation and debt. At the same time, given that the economic cycles of the various countries are not synchronized, the imposition of rigid rules by international institutions could harm parts of the Union. Britain's forced exit from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism was perhaps an unpleasant shock, but in the end, these critics say, it was beneficial, bringing a lower inflation rate and lower unemployment; it did nothing to strengthen the argument for a common currency. And the argument that a common currency will put a stop to currency speculation seems weak, since there will always be a sufficient number of other currencies to speculate with.

I am reluctant to discuss these issues further, because—like the great majority of Europe's citizens—I am not competent to do so. Even those who are competent often differ in their analyses; sometimes (rarely) they even admit that their past diagnosis may have been wrong. We have no reliable authority to which we could turn. But the situation has become worrying: a crisis of the common currency would now be a crisis for Europe as a whole, and in all respects. So if the common currency does not succeed, everyone will have to pretend otherwise. If there is a referendum in Britain about joining the Euro, its outcome, given the inevitable and incurable incompetence of the voters, will be an act of uninformed will, not of reason, and a positive outcome will not mean that joining the Euro will be beneficial, either for Britain or for Europe as a whole. The majority need not be right; witchhunts and the death penalty were abolished by parliaments against the will of the majority.

Moreover, there is a peculiar asymmetry to a referendum on the issue: if the majority vote is against a common currency, after a while there will be a second referendum, and then a third, until finally, one day, the majority votes in favor. But it will not be given the opportunity to revoke or modify its decision; there will be no going back, no new referendum. The decision to join will be a one-way street: once we enter the cage, we cannot leave, except perhaps in the event of some unimaginable catastrophe. So although, as I say, I am not competent to pronounce on these matters, I am inclined to side with those who say: yes to a common market, no to a common currency. (And in this, in England, I am in good company.) And I would be in favor of such an arrangement for Poland, which—again, barring some cataclysmic event—will soon be joining the European Union.[13]

More than a decade later it is clear that the common currency has not succeeded and that many people still pretend otherwise. And while both Britain and Poland have managed to remain outside of the eurozone, for countries like Greece, Portugal, Spain, Italy or even France, the euro is increasingly seen as 'the cage', which these nations cannot leave 'except in the event of some unimaginable catastrophe'. What would constitute such a catastrophe?

---

13   Ibid.

Not 50% and more youth unemployment, sluggish growth and staggeringly high levels of public debt? What of a very real threat of a populist rebellion sweeping to power anti-establishment parties such as *Cinque Stelle* in Italy and *Front National* in France? Their support may well be fuelled by economic challenges, but it is primarily driven by more basic political concerns with sovereignty (as was the Brexit referendum in the UK). On this topic too, Kołakowski was remarkably prescient:

> Objections to the European Union as a whole, and to a common currency in particular, arise not out of rational calculation but from fears about the loss of sovereignty. Another factor is the irritation felt at the often onerous and humiliating rules and restrictions imposed on particular states by the Brussels bureaucracy. People think: here we've been producing this cheese for a thousand years, everyone perfectly happy, and suddenly Brussels comes along with an order to change the way it's produced, allegedly for reasons of "health safety."

> It sometimes seems as if thousands of bureaucrats, richly paid by Europe and dispensed from paying taxes, sit around thinking up more and more utterly useless but extremely irksome rules and regulations about cucumbers, jams, or carrots. This naturally leads to the suspicion that, first, no harm would be done if most of them were got rid of, and, second, that they are people of a totalitarian mentality, their ideal a world where everything is identical, all historically evolved diversity eradicated and everyone forced into an identical way of life. Objections against this are understandable and right.

> It is equally understandable that people should object to the discarding of certain political institutions and traditions because they do not fit well into the proposed European scheme of things. Take, for example, the British House of Lords. Its members are not democratically elected; it could be perceived, like the monarchy, as an anachronism. But it has been around for centuries, and although it is not elected by universal ballot and enjoys very limited legislative powers, it has, on the whole, played a very positive role in reforms; one cannot say that it has exercised despotic rule over the people against their will. True, it does not fit well with modern democracy, but neither do the processes that lead to the emergence of cultural, financial, or industrial elites—elites on which the stability and flourishing of the country ultimately depend. The point of democratic institutions is to ensure that the significance and influence of political elites more or less correspond to the degree of trust society places in them; they are not meant to produce those elites themselves. Democratic elections will not pick out the best footballers, the most illustrious scholars or poets, the most efficient managers.

> What about sovereignty? It is no good saying that the process of European unification does not infringe on state sovereignty, for patently it does. Sovereignty is being gradually eroded and will go on being eroded even more. To say that a state is sovereign, however, does not mean that it can simply ignore the existence, interests, and aspirations of other states. Not even the United States is sovereign in this sense. A state is sovereign not by virtue of the fact that no restrictions are placed upon it by other states, nor by virtue of its (unrealizable in practice) economic autarchy, but by virtue of the fact that it makes its own decisions, for good

or for ill, and those decisions are still its decisions even when they are dictated by circumstances or by the actions of other states. A state that makes a decision because of a threat from its neighbors has not thereby forfeited its sovereignty, for it is free to decide otherwise, even if such a decision is against its interests.

A state does forfeit it sovereignty, however, if there is a mechanism that invests other states with the power to make decisions in its name or without its agreement. The countries of the Soviet bloc were not sovereign because the central authorities in Moscow had the power, in important matters, to make decisions which were binding on the formally independent states of the bloc. When decisions on important issues are voted through by a majority of the European Union's members, with no right of veto, the member states have forfeited their sovereignty, for they are forced to implement those decisions whether they like it or not. Admittedly, in the case of the European Union the member states—unlike the countries of the Soviet bloc—made a sovereign decision to join; thus one can say that they freely forfeited their sovereignty. But one cannot say that they did not forfeit it. It is only in matters where a right to veto applies that sovereignty remains intact.

But the question needs to be asked whether these (considerable) restrictions on sovereignty should be viewed as genuinely disastrous. In a country like Britain, very strongly attached to its fully sovereign parliament, many people do indeed react with horror to the prospect of a federal Europe—a "superstate," as they call it. For them this is a natural, instinctive reaction, but the same is not necessarily true of other countries, which tend rather to weigh up the benefits and risks—although their calculations often turn out to have been wrong.

These too are far-reaching insights directly relevant to the conundrum created by Brexit. Its aim is to restore the UK's *parliamentary* sovereignty. Yet despite this centuries old feature of the British political system, the role of the parliament in the actual Brexit negotiations is being hotly contested. In fact, resorting to a referendum was an odd tool to use to reclaim the supremacy of the House of Commons, and the result produced dilemmas that will pre-occupy both UK and EU leaders for years to come: is losing access to the Common Market a price worth paying? And what of Scotland? If the people of Scotland wish to share their sovereignty with the EU rather than the UK, should they be allowed to do so? As Kołakowski observed:

We have become accustomed to thinking of sovereignty as the attribute of a nation state. But the nation state is a relatively recent invention and is rarely encountered in its ideal form. It is by no means obvious that only a nation can be a sovereign subject. Part of a nation, or a group of nations, can equally well be sovereign. Indeed, what is there to prevent me declaring that I am a separate nation, and demanding that my territory be recognized as sovereign?

Nor is it possible to construct a definition of nationhood that would fit every nation smoothly and provide an infallible criterion for deciding who may claim sovereignty and who may not. If a nation genuinely desires sovereignty and is willing to pay the price circumstances demand (for instance, by refusing to join the Common Market, which is a condition for membership in the European Union), it has the right to do so. But if part of a nation declares itself to be a nation, it, too, has that right.

Language creates difficulties. There is an independence movement in Corsica, where some locals claim that their language is not a French dialect but a proper language, with distinct historical roots (a question on which I do not have an opinion). There is also a Basque independence movement. The Ukrainians, the Croats, the Slovenians, the Slovaks—all have established their own national statehood for the first time. Soon the Palestinians may follow suit. Nations can die, but they can also come into being. And as we progress along the road to European unification, separatist and nationalist movements come out of the woodwork, gaining in strength and support, and invasive intentions against neighboring territories flourish—as if we need more border guards and customs officers. More and more voices, sinister and ominous, are heard demanding ethnic purity for this or that state. And we all know how such ethnic purity can be accomplished: we know that ethnic cleansing means genocide.

It is not surprising that Kołakowski, a worldly philosopher successful far beyond his native Poland, was appalled by demands for ethnic purity. Regrettably, his fear of 'invasive intentions against neighbouring territories' proved justified by Russia's take-over of Crimea. But Kołakowski also cautioned against the idea of borderless Europe:

Yet European states cannot be expected to open their territory without restrictions to anyone who wishes to settle there. True, migrations and ethnic intermixing have been going on since the beginnings of time, but in our day at least three new circumstances have changed the situation. First, migrations used to take centuries, but today we can jet from one end of the world to another with lightning speed. Second, immigrants avail themselves of the services of the welfare state in the country to which they have come, and once they are here we cannot let them starve, but no country has unlimited resources. Finally, there is the purely demographic question of population density. It is true that ethnic diversity is a source of cultural richness. But it is also, inevitably, a source of conflict.

The question of national identity is endlessly complex. Given the extent to which progress towards unification has been accompanied by a rise in separatist and xenophobic tendencies, it is too soon to talk about the end of the nation state. And modern attempts—made by Napoleon, by Hitler, by Moscow—to unify Europe by force have made the various peoples of the continent wary. But assuming that national identities will persist, can a European identity be built alongside them or over them? Is there such an identity, and if not, is it desirable? Is there, or can there be, such a thing as European patriotism?
…
Thus when we speak of European civilization, we have in mind not territorial criteria, which are impossible to establish, but rather Europe's spiritual constitution. How is this constitution bearing up in the process of unification? Fairly feebly. Admittedly, the European Union requires all its member states to fulfill certain specific conditions: to guarantee civic freedoms and the good functioning of democratic institutions. This is quite a lot, but it may not be enough.

There are also, of course, economic criteria. Cultural criteria are too elusive to be expressed as clear requirements and implemented in practice. And the question to answer is not whether such- and-such country does or does not have the right to seek membership in the Union, but whether it can contribute to preserving and

cultivating that spiritual constitution which is the foundation of our culture: to keeping it vital and flourishing.

Can we do this? Surely not by strutting around boasting about our illustrious ancestors in Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem. Besides, who exactly, one wonders, are these ancestors supposed to be? Socrates, or those who sentenced him to death for godlessness? The great Roman emperors, like Augustus or Marcus Aurelius, or Caligula, Nero, and Tiberius (at least as they are presented by Suetonius)? The great and venerable Fathers and saints of the Church, or rather those popes who sent out crusades, massacred Cathars, and organized ballets of courtesans at the Vatican?

The history of Europe had its admirable episodes and its moments of glory, but they were only moments. It was European civilization that created the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century: Nazism, communism, fascism. These were not the crazed fantasies of a few fanatics but bold, powerful, and well-organized mass movements with a strong ideological base. Communism was the degenerate bastard-child of the Enlightenment, Nazism the degenerate bastard-child of Romanticism. Our heritage abounds equally in masterpieces, great monuments to the spirit, and in monstrous crimes. The first were mostly the work of individuals of genius, the second of mass upheavals.

If we want Europe to be more than just a place of imposing temples to Mammon—insurance companies, stock exchanges, banks; more than a place where, in comparison to Asia, Africa, and South America, the standard of living is high; more, even, than a place that guarantees freedom of speech and the rule of law, those marvellous inventions without which life is unbearable; if we also want our riches to bear fruit, to bring forth art that will delight and uplift us, to alleviate poverty and to help those in need; and if we want freedom of speech, which by nature must also give rise to falsehood, baseness, and evil, to produce ideas that are enlightening, uplifting, and amusing—if we want all this, what can we do to further it?

It is no use artificially cooking up a "European" ideology or philosophy. If we want an ideology, a religion, or an official philosophy, we must construct a tyranny —in radical contradiction to the spiritual constitution of Europe, with its stubborn (though so often threatened and attacked) affirmation of freedom. Otherwise we can only have what we have now: a variety of conflicting ideologies, religions, and philosophies, and constant uncertainty about what they could lead to: whether and how one of them, even the most innocent-looking, might spark off a destructive explosion. The German-American historian Holborn has suggested that the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union could be seen as a conflict between right-wing Hegelianism and left- wing Hegelianism—dubious homage to philosophy and the power of ideas.

Nor can we hope artificially to create a European patriotism (a phenomenon that has never really existed) which would coexist in blissful harmony with local and tribal patriotisms—for these must not be destroyed, denigrated, or attacked. There is something, however, we can do.
Europe as a distinct cultural phenomenon began to emerge in the sixteenth century, partly in response to the Turkish threat. Erasmus, that wanderer without a tribe, was

a European par excellence: he wanted to be, and was, a citizen of the world, like the ancient Stoics. It was his century that saw the emergence of the spiritual territory which proudly called itself the Republic of Letters— Res Publica Litterarum: that circle of scholars, lovers of ancient literature, who knew each other and corresponded with each other, and wrote in classical, not scholastic, Latin. It was a small group, but an extraordinarily important one; they formed Europe's intellectual elite. And they were conscious of belonging to something that was supra-national, wherever they happened to live. This Republic lived on through the seventeenth century, but later died, as if somehow paralyzed by the creation of modern nations.

Is there anything like it today, with our modern ease of movement and communication? Not really. Of course those of us who toil in the world of academia have all been to countless conferences, congresses, and colloquia, in countless countries and cities; we know hundreds of academic colleagues throughout the globe; we have travelled and published in international journals. And yet, in spite of all this, there is not really anything that deserves the name of a humanist republic.

Why not? Perhaps because that old Republic had certain well-defined cultural tasks to perform: to reform religion and the Church in the spirit of the traditional virtues, to combat prejudice, superstition, and fanaticism, and to do all this by appealing to ancient ideals of wisdom and beauty. Perhaps it was to this—its specific cultural role—that it owed its existence. We, too, have our equivalent of Latin: English. But it is a poor substitute, and we do not love it. We do not really love any language, including our own mother tongues. The scholars of that old Republic loved the ancient languages; for us, English is merely a means of communication.

Like a number of Central European intellectuals before him, spanning the likes of Edmund Husserl, Jan Patočka, Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera and Václav Havel, Kołakowski considered Europe not just as a political, but a civilisational project. Its political success is thus intimately linked with its cultural self-understanding:

We do not know whether the unification of Europe will succeed; we cannot be sure that the wars and the slaughter we have recently seen, and continue to see, in the former Yugoslavia cannot be repeated in other parts of Europe. Nor can we entirely exclude the possibility that new imperialisms will emerge (or old ones reemerge), with new dreams of subjection and conquest. The European consciousness, or European patriotism, is stagnant and feeble, often powerless in the face of local interests. Nevertheless, a united Europe, though not yet a superstate, is in the interests of all its members and does not pose a threat to their ethnic identities, insofar as those identities are important to them.

And there are (non-bureaucratic) things we can do to support Europe as a cultural realm. We can return to the idea of education not as a way of developing professional skills, but as a way of inculcating the (essential) ability to communicate in a friendly way above and beyond national and financial interests, on the basis of a great common tradition. We need schools that will teach Latin and Greek, schools that will allow us to rediscover the joy of immersing ourselves in our common cultural past. We need to teach history with the aim of getting young people to understand who they are— who they themselves are as the heirs to a past both glorious and disgraceful.

If we lose our history, the sense of our past as something that belongs to us, is a part of us, and together with it the ability to answer the question "Who are we?," we shall also lose the ability to discern a non-utilitarian meaning to life, to find non-utilitarian justifications for what we do; and without this ability we will be faced with spiritual emptiness and chaos. It is heartening to hear that in some Central and East European countries, but also in the United States, new centers for the liberal arts are springing up, preserving and promoting the spirit of the European cultural community. For this is a form of support for Europe: this traditional, disinterested teaching and inquiry— disinterested in the sense that it is concerned with the acquisition and passing on of knowledge for its own sake, not with a view to developing specific professional skills. It is enormously important and beneficial, for it allows us to rediscover the still living and breathing, but now hidden, overgrown and largely forgotten, foundation on which Europe rests.

Isn't this what the *Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts* is all about? And the journal *Kritika & Kontext* which invited me to re-read and discuss one of my all time favourite philosophers? It is thanks to liberal arts that we learn to appreciate the virtues of *political* liberalism that ought not to be reduced to economic liberalism, as Kołakowski reminds us in his closing paragraph:

Human interests conflict by nature, not by accident. In this sense war, pillage, and persecution are natural. The market by itself does not create human solidarity; it encourages us to look after our own private interests. But the advantages of the market economy over the planned one are so obvious and well-proven that they cannot be rationally denied. And sometimes—as the eighteenth century already knew—private vices can become public virtues, and the private interests of each can end up working for the good of all. They can, but they need not—especially when we are faced with so many public issues which demand huge resources and which the market cannot settle by itself. Ethnic solidarity very often turns out to be hatred towards other tribes, but it need not be so. The European community, if it is possible at all, does not require hatred of other continents. And a European community is possible; but the market itself cannot create it. We should not rely on the benevolence of the market when things get dangerous. And things sometimes get dangerous quite suddenly, by accident. Culture also means taming fate; and fate is neither benevolent nor guided by compassion.

Can Europe happen? More than a decade after Kołakowski's essay was published I am inclined to say no; to be more specific, not the way it is happening now: "Europe is failing and has no need for radically new beginnings and further experiments with supranational democracy. It must accept its limitations. It could do worse than learn from a great Irish European, Samuel Beckett, writing in English and French about the perennial problem of our fragile predicament: 'Fail, fail again, fail better.'"[14]

---

14   Stefan Auer, <u>Whose Liberty is it Anyway? Europe at the Crossroads</u> (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2012; distributed by the University of Chicago Press).