

Interview with Prof. Andrzej Walicki

Our Own Tyranny

Academia: A debate is currently raging on the role played by liberalism in Poland's transformation. Do you think that in 1989 it was inevitable that we would follow the road of neoliberalism, as set out by Friedrich Hayek?

Prof. Andrzej Walicki: Liberalism is a diverse current of thought, with numerous representatives. Economic, free-market liberalism is quite different to more broadly understood liberalism. John Stuart Mill, undoubtedly a major figure in liberalism, said that it doesn't need to be a representation of the free market ideology; it doesn't have to always side with the stronger side or employers, because its central tenet is the freedom of the individual. Around the mid-19th century, liberalism became an ideology of compromise between the world of labor and the world of employers, capital and the reform movement. Nowadays, no encyclopedia definitions or general texts state that the free market is central to liberalism. In contemporary liberalism, the key concept is the freedom of the individual. Sometimes this is convergent with the free markets, and other times it is not. For example, when we talk about liberating individuals from the constraints of guilds, the free market supports liberty. However, when the free market prohibits individuals comprising the workforce from forming any associations or unions, the free market is the enemy. Vulnerable workers faced with wealthier, more privileged individuals who hold the power to employ them on their own terms and even forbid them from consulting with others in a similar position is certainly not an ideology of individual liberty.

This individual liberty also accounts for a certain basic security to make sure that no one is left at the mercy of fate, to make sure they have a right to dignity. Security is not the opposite of liberty, but rather its basic precondition. When someone knows that by taking a risk they hazard losing absolutely everything, they won't dare act. They will only act in innovative ways when they are certain that even if they lose, someone will help them out. The concept that society is responsible for each and every one of its members, and must provide them with a basic minimum, also has its origins in liberalism, and it is behind the idea of the welfare state.

There is also the question of justice. In 1973, John Rawls formulated a principle stating that the only justification of inequality is that it must improve the position of the least privileged. Here, the criterion is to maximize the social minimum; we must not demand that people who are already at the lowest rungs of social standing are further impoverished in the name of modernization and maximizing profits. However, Hayek - another ideologist of liberalism - regarded justice as an anachronistic concept leading to totalitarianism. This brought about a shift away from liberal traditions, in their reformist sense, towards neoliberalism. However, in the West this was not regarded as a liberal revolution. No one regarded Margaret Thatcher as a liberal, and even she saw herself as an ultra-conservative. No one regarded Reagan as a liberal, since he saw himself as a conservative.





In your descriptions of the situation in Poland, you use the term “warped liberalism.” Why is that?

Because we have a tendency to regard all liberalism as strictly economic in nature. It is simply believed to involve the autocracy of the market. This is because our transformations have coincided, on one hand, with a general shift in liberalism, and on the other with the collapse of the alternative system as exemplified by the Soviet Union’s version of socialism. In turn, this brought about a weakening of the political left, going as far as actually discrediting it. Even though Prof. Tadeusz Kowalik stressed that we could have opted for the Scandinavian model of a social democracy, something happened in Poland which was a revolt against reformist liberalism, under the pretext of returning to its genuine version. This was unfounded, since the main trends of liberalism remained rooted in the theories of compromise between labor and capital. This is why no self-described liberals in the US accept the views of Leszek Balcerowicz. He and his ilk are described as libertarians, not liberals.

So we have fallen into a rut of right-wing liberalism.

That’s right; one fetishizing the free market, which – after all – doesn’t even exist anymore. Under the conditions of globalization and the supremacy of financial capital, it’s difficult to talk about a free market as it once existed. It is no longer spontaneous; it is manipulated and driven. By setting, even fixing various factors and by playing certain stock market games it’s possible to interfere with any given country and even bring it to bankruptcy. “The markets have decided,” “the markets are nervous.” What does that even mean? The markets are people, actual people.

The spontaneity of the market was something Hayek praised, because it led to a confluence of interests. The Manchesterists, supporters of the free market in the 19th century, went as far as to say that markets are a secular providence; that God Himself drives them. It’s hard to agree with this now. Spontaneity is just

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a cover, albeit a very effective one. For example, if a government were to decide to increase prices, people would doubtless protest against the prime minister. But when the same decision is taken by people hiding behind "the markets," it's impossible to know who to get angry with. In any case, there are two forms of liberalism in Poland. The first is a social liberalism whose main enemy is traditionalism, in particular its Catholic variety. Its tenets include liberalization of access to abortion, the right to alternative sexual lifestyles, and so on. The second is this market fundamentalism, used – and even abused – for very conservative ends: when someone wants to downsize state pensions or says that they are an unnecessary privilege, they immediately point at the markets.

Prime Minister Tusk claims to be a social democrat.

Really? I would like this to be the case, but everything he does contradicts it. For example, his educational reforms: they are not social-democratic, but bureaucratic and market-driven. The new Labor Code has been in place since August. It talks about flexible working hours, calculated on an annual rather than daily basis. This means that an employee will work, say, 12 hours per day over a week or two, and then supposedly they will be off for the rest of the month. I say supposedly, because they are likely to spend that time working on the side. In 1918, Poland adopted the 8-hour working day. It meant we could plan some sort of family life, for example, rather than waiting by the phone all day, not knowing if and when we might get a call. But that's where we are now. And we no longer have Jacek Kuroń to stand up for workers' rights.

In this context, can we say that left-wing liberalism is even possible?

Growing numbers of people think so. Left-wing liberalism has positive connotations, because it includes resistance against collectivism, which in turn has very negative associations. It's a liberalism which supports the welfare state, and not necessarily in a format we

remember from People's Poland. We do need to be careful, though. For example, in multiracial societies, state intervention can cause problems. In the US, there is a system of financing and subsidizing the African-American minority, which means that for many people it doesn't make sense to find work; in turn, this exacerbates problems rather than solving them, for example by creating ghettos. In this case, the concept of a welfare state has been partially discredited. But in other societies, for example Sweden, it works extremely well. And so I believe that everyone claiming that market forces inevitably lead to the reduction of state pensions to breadline levels, or inevitably to healthcare being changed from a constitutional right to a system only serving individuals who can afford it, is incorrect. Poland is a long way from this model, although it is being pushed in its direction; this trend needs to be opposed by wielding arguments harking back to the traditions of socialized liberalism.

You mean the original leftist concept that individuals should be free. And yet in Poland we are seeing the strengthening of right-wing views, extreme ones at that.

Let's get one thing clear: it is said that conservatism is rife on the right, that the right is radical. And yet modern conservatism cannot be radical; it includes traditional wisdom and a resistance against radicalism. The truth remains, though, that the right does vary. For example, Stanisław Stomma undoubtedly represented the right while having nothing to do with radicalism. I am terrified of right-wing radicalism. It is downright dangerous, and – curiously – in Poland it only really came about after the system transformations. Before that, Poland's right was quite different. For example, there was the Kraków Industrial Society, founded in 1985 by the philosopher, writer and oppositionist Dr. Mirosław Dzielski. This was a right wing describing itself as Christian-liberal; it did not talk about fighting against someone, but fighting for something. It proposed a program of working constructively with the authorities, with

people like Mieczysław Rakowski, prime minister of People's Poland, who were introducing reforms to the existing system. And it did not seek power. These people believed that introducing democracy too fast would bring with it a power struggle among the elites – a political battle among everyone, in which the most important issue would be who will dominate, who will grab others by the throat and discredit them. According to this group, what was needed first was economic, social, and legal reform which would lay the foundations for a civilized transformation of the system towards democracy. Unfortunately, once the system was reformed and we had the free elections won by Lech Wałęsa, questions immediately arose about who should claim credit for what. And, first and foremost, there was the problem of the Balcerowicz reforms. It was clear that they would entail a massive social cost. Then we had the Kaczyński brothers come up with their brilliant idea that everything should just be blamed on the Communists, on former officials who had amassed personal wealth. They directed the anger of the electorate, which was already feeling cheated and disappointed, in a direction which would gain them further support and allow them to perform a reshuffle according to "genealogical" criteria. We saw the start of a quarrel over who deserves more credit, who was on the correct side, who was a more fervent opponent of Communism. And, unfortunately, it has turned into a caricature of itself. I also don't understand some of Tusk's actions. For example, the construction of a museum in Gdańsk to show that Poland only regained her freedom after the 1989 elections, or celebrating the anniversary of these elections without inviting anyone from the other side, anyone who might have been in power at the time. It's all going too far, and yet it's still much better than the Kaczyńskis' advocacy of wide "lustration."

You say that democracy has been brought down to a level of competition among elites.

That's right; MPs don't feel bound by any promises they give to the electorate.



In Poland, groups which defend their own interests are accused of being excessively claim-oriented. The concept of simply demanding our social rights has been almost eliminated

In turn, the electorate has no influence over them; worse, whenever the electorate speaks up, we immediately hear arguments about populism or a sense of entitlement. Meanwhile, back in the days of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, elected representatives were bound by certain orders which they were not permitted to abandon. While archaic, it was certainly a democracy.

So would this be a useful system now?

In some ways, certainly. However, our current democracy started from the fact that representatives of the post-Solidarity movement made decisions they realized would be rejected by the electorate – an ostentatious indifference to public opinion.

Was that a founding sin of the new order?

It was the founders' disregard: "we know better, the Polish nation isn't as smart as us." Someone once even described Polish society as being "incidental." There was no room for consensus-building when Poland's route was being set following the transformations. Kuroń, who supported Balcerowicz at the time, later repeated many times that he'd made a great mistake. That his job was to make sure that workers'

rights would be adequately protected, but that he thought that after a few years everyone would simply rediscover this need. Unfortunately that wasn't the case. Democracy is, of course, something much greater. It means participation – allowing referenda on certain issues. It means decisions being made through debate. It means the autonomy of different circles. And yet what did Balcerowicz write in his anthology "Discovering Freedom"? That in a democracy, certain interest groups act to extort privileges for themselves, which is a violation of market rules and the supremacy of the right of private property. This is how the concept of a civil society, once so popular and exploited by representatives of the opposition against the "real socialist" system, became discredited. No one thinks this way in the US. For example, they have several associations protecting pensioners' rights. They compete with one another, ask for donations in exchange for opposing all attempts to lower pensions. That's straightforward lobbying. In Poland, such an association would be dismissed as corrupt; it would be accused of attempting to sway legislation, to pervert democracy. This would simply not happen in the US.

In Poland, such people would be accused of being excessively "claim-oriented."

Yes, rather than just "demanding their rights." The expression "social rights" has been almost eliminated, even though even Pope John Paul II frequently stressed that economic, social and cultural rights are as important as political and civic rights. And that they apply under all conditions. But the way this now gets interpreted is these are not rights but good intentions, which people in power may choose to recognize, but they don't have to.

What should sensible patriotism look like in Poland?

Patriotism is a territorial concept. It simply means the love for one's land. For example, we can talk about patriotism among inhabitants of Eastern Galicia, including all Poles and Ukrainians who live there. But once we introduce the category of a nation, then surely we won't find Ukrainians who identify as Poles or vice versa. And yet they can both feel patriotic towards the same land.

I prefer the term "nationalism". It covers so many positives: on a horizontal, that is social level, and a vertical, historical one, covering common history, ease of communication, and so on. But we tend to

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avoid it. For example, when people hear that Mickiewicz was a nationalist, they take offence. And yet it's true: he believed in a brotherhood of the people; he represented romantic nationalism. Today there is a tendency to use this term purely to describe tribalism. It's a dreadful trend; this reduction to some sort of tribe with its own ideology, God forbid with political leanings, will not end well. It is being stretched to its extreme. There is talk of embryos as being Poles: "so-and-so many millions of Poles have been murdered through abortion." But how can an embryo be a Pole? After all, nationality is a process of socialization. And Kaczyński's idea that some people are "genetically" patriotic? Or the talk about "genetic" Communists, such as in the book "Resortowe dzieci"? It's some sort of horrific, ridiculous aberration. We could ask whether the concept of a nation is important in the first place. I believe it is, because it draws people together into

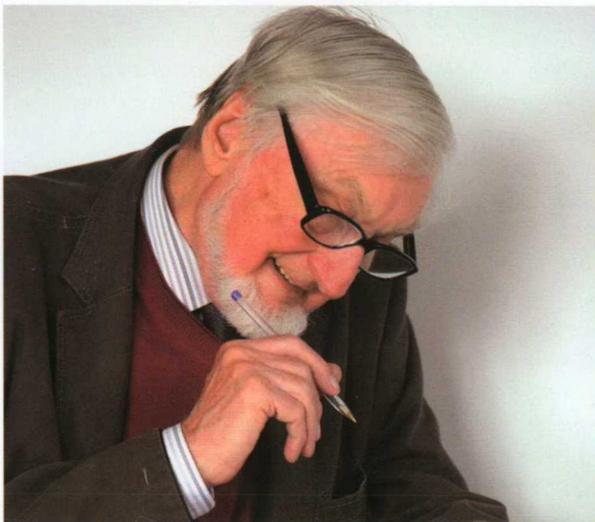
a certain community. But it cannot be excluding, based on a single ethnicity and a single identity; then it turns nightmarish. A well-defined concept of a nation is one of a multicultural community, in the sense that it brings together different traditions. You can't blame someone if the ideas of the far-left speak to them, rather than clerical traditions. That's simply absurd. If a single option is imposed upon people as the dominant one within a nation, the concept of nation becomes a caricature.

So you believe that Polish nationalism excludes people?

Unfortunately, yes. Russia is our officially sanctioned external enemy. We can't really say whatever we like about Germans or Czechs, but we are positively encouraged to find fault with Russians. The other enemies are minorities within our own country. We attack the Roma to some extent, we (indirectly, as a rule) attack Jews.

We try to hide it, because there are certain European, constitutional standards. But, more than anything, we attack ourselves. I call this inner-directed nationalism. We are categorized into those who are true Poles, in other words those who absolutely must vote for Kaczyński's party, vs. everyone else. One group believes itself to represent "the entire nation" and tries to force the rest to comply. And those who don't comply aren't seen as true Poles; they are semi-Poles, nominal Poles as the latest saying goes. So we bully ourselves. Mill said that the fact that people elect their own parliament doesn't protect them against despotism. They can impose a tyranny upon themselves, and even say, "this is our own tyranny, we don't mind it." If someone else were to impose it, we would be kicking and screaming. As it is, we just sit quietly. ■

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Prof. Andrzej Walicki

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