Leszek Kołakowski’s political path

Andrzej Friszke, Tadeusz Koczanowicz
23 April 2018

Leszek Kołakowski was Poland’s foremost twentieth century philosopher. Fifty years ago, he left communist Poland, to confront Marxism from abroad in a series of magisterial works. Historian Andrzej Friszke, in conversation with ‘Res Publica Nowa’s’ Tadeusz Koczanowicz, traces his intellectual and spiritual journey.

Tadeusz Koczanowicz: In the early 50s, a group of students wrote a letter condemning Professor of Philosophy Władysław Tatarkiewicz for allowing non-Marxist stances during his seminars. Among the signatories were the names of people who were later engaged in the democratic opposition in Poland, including Leszek Kołakowski. Who were those people? What was their intellectual background, and the experience of their generation?

Andrzej Friszke: To answer this question one would need to go back to 1945 or even earlier than that. Kołakowski was brought up in a secular, lay, anti-clerical family. That was his foundation. Considering this, it seems to me that it is not accidental that after the war, many people coming from a similar background got engaged in the movement which was perceived to be radically secular, anti-nationalist and enlightened. Such a stance led to endorsing communism, as at the time it seemed to be a revolutionary and decisive response to what was prevalent in Poland.

What was it exactly that they were opposing?

It was this national clerical tendency which was very strongly present in the popular consciousness, in patterns of patriotism, in the way the tradition was referenced, in behaviours, in patterns of culture. All this was radically off-putting for Kołakowski’s camp and this was what caused them to join Polish Workers’ Party (PWP) soon. Kołakowski himself joined the Association of Fighting Youth in 1945 and the PWP a year after that. Those people were joining communist organisations because of their deep conviction, they were joining as revolutionaries, not as political players.

This is a fundamental thing, and everything else is a consequence. I mean, endorsing the system on the level of ideological content; embracing a style of thought that was closely related to Marxism. It was also taking a stand against academic and scientific traditions. These were elements of revolutionary thinking and stances, a struggle for a monopoly on a new kind of truth. This is why, when the Stalinist transformation of culture and science took hold after 1949, a conflict with Tatarkiewicz emerged, as he was a symbol of the
‘old’ way of thinking and academic practice. It might have been a strong and brutal stance to take, but it was in line with the intellectual climate of the time and the ethics of revolutionary upheaval.

Kołakowski entered the path of revisionism quite early. Was October 1956 a sort of catalyst? Or had it begun before that?

To answer this question you would need an expert more versed than I am, probably one who has read all of Kolakowski’s philosophical writings. Political statements that could be classified as revisionist show in his publications in cultural magazines in the summer of 1956, but I think that if somebody was to delve deeper into analysis of Kołakowski’s philosophical texts, the signs of this kind of thinking would appear as early as in 1955, for instance in his *Determinism and Responsibility*. For people of his intellectual profile, this was a popular path to take.

Anyway, he fully embarked on the revisionist ship in 1956. A decisive indication of this is an article, ‘Intellectuals and the Communist Movement’, published during the most heated days of October 1956 in the party-led *Nowe Drogi*. Soon after, in 1957, texts addressed to broad intellectual circles were published: *Aktualne i nieaktualne pojęcie marksizmu* [The Current and the Outdated Concept of Marxism], *Sens ideowy pojęcia lewica* [The Concept of the Left]. An article published in the journal *Życie Warszawy* journal at the beginning of 1957 was basically an open call for a deep de-Stalinization. For this particular text, Kolakowski was condemned by Gomułka at a party Central Committee session. Also in 1957, a very important, intellectually transformative book was published, *Ideology and Everyday Life*. And for the record, one should mention the essay ’In Praise of Inconsistency’ published in 1958 as well as ‘The Priest and the Jester’ in 1959. All of those publications were deeply thought-through and can be called revisionist.

One question needs to be asked: what does revisionism even mean? If you look for the answer in Kołakowski’s writings, it would mean introducing new questions and creating space for individual decisions in a hitherto rigid and codified doctrine. This is an important characteristic change: if you support and accept the doctrine, you cannot just embrace that it is the party, the bureaucracy or some other kind of community delimiting and defining what is true, what is right, and what is moral. As an individual, you are obliged to think for yourself and look for those answers. Another important element is opening up to other currents of thought. There is also drawing from promises of communism, and hopes from the times preceding the seizure of power.

To put it succinctly, the doctrine ceased to deliver certainty and ‘ethical redemption’. Revisionism meant that the doctrine could be officially faced with questions of morality as well as interrogated about paths to a social order where values like morality, responsibility for one’s thoughts and interactions with society and other people count. These were the intellectual signposts on Kołakowski’s route of early revisionism.

How did this stance relate to questions posed by other communist circles in the Eastern bloc?

Changes in the awareness of Polish communists coincided with big questions posed during the 20th Congress of the CPSU, where Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s crimes. It
then became clear that the system that Stalin has built was burdened with atrocious crimes. It was the first time when this was uttered, and questions followed: were those crimes possible because Stalin was evil? Or was it because the system created conditions for an evil individual to commit those crimes in an atmosphere of public approval? This was also a question about the responsibility of communism. If you want to build communism, and you do not want it to be evil, what kind of safety valves does the system need? What needs to be implemented in the modes of thinking, in the ways the party apparatus operates, in the rules of social interactions, so that we can prevent the crimes? Those are the central questions for communists of the time in general, and for revisionists they were particularly vital.

Could one say that this was the time when the intellectual opposition was coming of age?

Revisionism was an inherent part of the intellectual opposition. October 1956 brought about such changes in the discussion of culture and ideology that it became possible to speak of a restructuring of the communist system. Nevertheless, censorship was still in place and fenced off strictly political topics.

There had been different ways of thinking popping up and of course, Leszek Kołakowski was the most important character of the current that came to be known as revisionism. What was revisionism at this very moment, though?

Firstly, it was the people who self-identified themselves as Marxists. They were still attached to the party, considered themselves to be communists and as such, they asked themselves questions that I have mentioned before. Secondly, they were not satisfied with Władysław Gomułka’s post-October strategy. He introduced some corrections and then announced that there would be no further changes. Revisionists did not accept stopping mid-way. They wanted a consistent and in-depth consideration of the mistakes and modes of thinking that led to the affirmation of evil and crimes. For this reason, they were ready to open themselves up to the external intellectual world, to contemporary Western thought. Kołakowski visited the West [for the first time] in 1958. In short, it was an attempt to incorporate different philosophical currents into the Marxist framework, and to specify the role of the intelligentsia.

Another characteristic feature of revisionism at the time was the rejection of the idea that the USSR is the desired template and the central authority delimiting the scope of political thought and actions. Revisionists got interested in other currents of Marxism, including the very important Italian communist and Gramscian tradition. They opened up to the intellectual influences of the left more broadly. They investigated the fundamentals of their ideological footing, coming back to Marx but also earlier thinkers who laid the basis for envisioning communism. Revisionists were anti-dogmatic, they were looking for sources of thoughts, fallacies and their consequences. Some of them sourced ideas from enlightenment, some came back to the traditions of utopian socialism. In essence, they were scrutinising ideological values which became the basis for the communist doctrine.

Leszek Kołakowski. Photo: Wiki Commons

How did revisionist thinking change in the early 60s?
At this point, revisionists had been rejecting communists dogmas one by one. By 1963, Kołakowski did not identify himself as a communist, but even though he was repetitively called a revisionist by Gomułka, he did not use this expression to describe his stand.

More and more elements of the doctrine had been rejected, including the key conviction that it was the only true philosophy. You can hardly be a true Marxist if you do not think that Marxism is the only true philosophy. This is why I think that a symbolic ideological turn is Kołakowski’s 1965 text, *Jesus Christ – a Prophet and a Reformer*. In this article, he points towards Christian values presented in the Gospels and Christ’s teachings as fundamental for European civilisation. It was not easy to reconcile it with materialism and the Marxist critique of religious tradition.

In terms of political engagement, the moment of radical disobedience also occurred in 1965 when Kołakowski decided to support [student dissidents Jacek] Kuroń and [Karol] Modzelewski in their court trial, even though the party authorities perceived them as plotters who aimed to overturn the social order and radical revisionists dismounting the doctrine. Kołakowski was their spokesperson during the trial and he proceeded to write a text about understanding false values which, signed by professors Ossowska and Kotarbiński, was to serve as an expert opinion in the Supreme Court. In the end, the text was not presented in court, but Kołakowski crossed the line and from then on he was treated as a dissident.

Also in 1965, Kołakowski met with Zbigniew Brzeziński who came to visit Poland. Brzeziński was then a very well-known American political scientist; he coined the definition of totalitarianism and he wrote *Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict*, where he elaborated on the connections between the Soviet bloc and the USSR as well as relations between the countries belonging to the bloc, he discussed the mechanisms of submission and differentiation among the satellite states. It was a very important political piece of writing at the time, and in fact is still quite valuable today, definitely worth a read. From the perspective of the authorities, Brzeziński was a bourgeois state ideologist. Kołakowski not only met with him. He met with him in a way that left the authorities helpless: wiretapping could hardly work in the parks. The Security Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs [SB] later summoned Kołakowski to interrogate him in connection with those meetings.

In 1963 the SB wiretapped Kołakowski’s apartment: he might not have been an enemy as such but it was obvious that he was engaged in discussions and actions that could be disruptive to the system.

The reason I mention this is to give an outline of Kołakowski’s position in autumn 1966, when he famously addressed his university audience with a speech about October 1956 and disappointed hopes. At this time, he essentially excluded himself from the party and the system. He was extremely critical towards the dictatorship and its various elements, he was very disappointed there were no structural changes after the events of 1956. In this speech, Kołakowski voices a very characteristic thesis: he says it might not be as bad as it was before 1956, but, at the same time, he makes the point that it is not as bad only because the authorities do not want it as bad – not because there are some kind of institutional safety valves put in place. It seems to me this is a very important thought to keep in mind. Especially today, when some of the mechanisms that are in place to put
limits of law and institutional control on the will of those in power are being dismounted.

*Between March 1968 and Kolakowski’s decision to leave the country there is quite a gap. What was going on in the lives of the expelled professors during this time?*

That is true, some of the people who were expelled in March left Poland in the early seventies, which is indeed quite a gap. While we are on the subject of March 1968, one needs to make a note of the fact that during the famous Warsaw writers’ meeting that took place after *Forefathers’ Eve* was censored and banned, Kolakowski was one of the most important speakers. He fiercely critiqued cultural politics of the party. Something that the authorities did not know was that he was also a co-author of Andrzej Kijowski’s resolution which contained the writers’ opposition towards the party’s decision.

With the wiretap recordings being my only source, I would not be able to tell if Kołakowski was in any way particularly active during the students’ protests. Of course, his friends would come over and discuss and analyse the situation with him, but it seems to me that he did not take any political actions related to the protests. Kolakowski and other professors were expelled from the university for their overall merits and performance.

An expelling decree published by the Ministry on the 15 March 1968 was a big event. Professors Kołakowski, Brus, Morawski, Bauman, and Hirszowicz were banned from the university. It was truly unusual because after 1956 nothing similar had happened. It was seen as altering the university’s autonomy. The rule that one cannot expel a professor who holds a lifelong position was being blatantly broken.

The authorities did not really want to leave those who had been expelled without means of subsistence. They could still find another job, but they were absolutely banned from publishing. Andrzej Werblan, the head of the Department of Science in the Central Committee, predicted that they would join the Polish Academy of Sciences, where they could still work in academia but would not be in touch with students. This was a general strategy with all those people who were fired from universities. Kolakowski, however, got invited to some western universities, which was, of course, problematic for the authorities. There was some opposition from the party apparatus as well as from the Interior Ministry, which refused to issue a passport. In the end, maybe as a way to get rid of the problem, the Department of Science and Gomułka agreed to let Kołakowski go.

*At this time Kołakowski had been writing his Main Currents of Marxism.*

In fact, I think he must have started earlier than that. This is a massive volume and he could not possibly have finished it in the course of a couple of months. I think I have read somewhere that he actually finished it when he was still in Poland. This book essentially marks the end of Marxism being a centre of intellectual interest in Poland. In the 60s Kołakowski had written some other important books. His *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna* [Religious Awareness and the Church], published in 1965, was a monograph on Church dissidents and on disagreements with the official doctrine. It is a book about the 15th and 16th century and it discusses different ways of disagreeing with the doctrine and the resulting reaction of the system, in this case, the Church. This problem is obviously in some ways similar to contemporary disagreements with the doctrine...
Kolakowski had this tendency to speak about Marxism as if it was a kind of religion, as for instance in the famous essay 'The Priest and the Jester'. It was and still is a very important essay. It was about a codified, ordered system and the attitudes that arise in it. There is a priest who serves the system by following his bureaucratic responsibilities, and there is a jester who asks difficult questions which destabilise the internal coherence of the doctrine. The tradition of Christian theology still struggles with this problem, and Kolakowski saw it inside the party, inside the community of Marxists, and he pointed to the mechanisms of thinking about the doctrine. When you look at it this way, it was a vital element of him departing from Marxism.

What was Kolakowski’s influence on the members of the Polish democratic opposition in the 70s?

His influence was absolutely fundamental...

Was it mainly exercised through Paris Kultura or was it broader than that?

It was mainly through Kultura. Kolakowski was away from Poland for many years and other than meeting with people who came to visit him, he could only have an influence as a writer for Paris Kultura. Some of the texts published in the 70s were extremely important. Every single intellectually active member of the opposition read Theses on Hope and Hopelessness published in 1971. I remember when Jan Dworak told me that his first act of political opposition was to take pictures of this text and disseminate it.

In this text, Kolakowski shows what is inherent and what is potentially subject to change in communism seen as a system of power, not as an ideology. He analyses why some of the characteristics of the system are necessarily unchangeable and why is it that the regime defends itself from the changes that could alter its consistency. At the same time, he shows that there are gaps and cracks in this monolith. This is an immensely important text because it discusses action points that can help with the cracking of the system. It also brought some hope in the gloomy aftermath of the invasion of Czechoslovakia which left many with a feeling that there was nothing that could be done. Kolakowski seemed to be showing that there was plenty.

In another crucial article, ‘Sprawa Polska’ [Polish Matter], Kolakowski argued for the importance of culture. It touched on the issue of the struggle for culture, language, and tradition as vital elements of the struggle for independence, freedom and democracy.

These texts were extremely important and influential in forming the intellectual horizons of democratic stances. Those two were probably the most important ones but of course, there was more. He was quite prolific and published a lot both in Kultura and in Aneks.

Was Kolakowski and his writings in any way present in Solidarity, or was he rather forgotten by then?

He was not forgotten, he was a symbol. Especially so for the students and people in some way related to academia. First and foremost, he was a symbol of the events in 1968. He was one of the expelled professors in 1968 and his name remained present in the public debate because he remained engaged.
There is one more thing that needs to be highlighted. He was the only émigré living outside Poland (and I use the word émigré, as he never formally left for good – he kept his Polish passport and he kept renewing it, and he kept his apartment) who joined Workers’ Defence Committee. He participated in opposition’s initiatives, he was on the side of the struggle for democracy and the rule of law. He was also one of the members of Polskie Porozumienie Niepodległościowe [Polish Independence Pact] in the West. This was a completely different group of people: there were no revisionists among them. People like Najder, Kijowski, Olszewski, Jan Józef Szczepański, were among the members, and Herling Grudziński, Jerzy Lerski, Maria Winowska were PPN’s spokespeople. All of them were anti-communists. Kołakowski was the first spokesperson of the PPN in the West, and he was the only one coming from a different background, which only shows you how respected and popular he was. Kołakowski and Włodzimierz Brus were also leading fundraising for the Polish opposition.

Kołakowski continued to be present. It would not be accurate to say that he was not here, that he did not take part in the debates that took place in Poland. He did participate through his writing and moral engagement, even if he was not physically present to take stances in some of the current discussions. I am trying to think of some of the texts from the period that you specified. I can only think of this extensive interview for Der Spiegel which was then translated and the typescript disseminated. Kołakowski was still banned from being published in the official press.

Of course, his presence in the 80s was very different from 1956 or 1968. An exchange of letters between Kołakowski and Walicki is about to be published. In there, they keep coming back to the issue of engaging with Polish affairs: what is there that can be done? And the ethical aspect of it: should we oppose or should we play along with the authorities? This is important because this is how Kołakowski influenced some of his friends. He supported the will to protest and oppose and he offered an ethical basis for it. It was more than just an appeal to get politically engaged. Kołakowski offered the moral imperative of resisting the lawlessness of the dictatorship. He propagated this message, and strengthened the will and power of the people who decided to oppose, often against their personal or institutional interest.

In a way, in the 90s Kołakowski came back into the public sphere as an authority. He became a patron of the circle of Gazeta Wyborcza and I guess his views were somehow liberal-conservative.

The 80s are really important for his biography as it was when he made another step towards Christianity. He met Pope John Paul II at Castel Gandolfo. He deeply revised his stance, which we discussed at the beginning. He seemed to come to the conclusion that unless we positively and carefully reconsider the issue of timeless values coming from the godly absolute, our civilisation will be doomed. He wanted to come back to analysing God in a deep, philosophical sense.

All this was related to the conviction that one cannot arrive at truth drawing only from the Enlightenment. One has to come back to the idea of God, the absolute, as it is a root of our civilisation.
In some ways, this is a refinement of the thesis from the aforementioned *Jesus Christ – a Prophet and a Reformer*. It seems to me that in the 80s those ideas were deeper and more far-reaching but I do not have the authority of a philosopher to judge this. *Religion* was published in 1982 in England, and in 1988 it was published in Poland after the ban on Kołakowski’s writings was lifted.

This opening up to religion was parallel to a similar change among the Polish intellectual left. The signs of revisionist sentiments disappeared even though the root of the Enlightenment was still there. It became possible to open up to Catholics, to the message of the pope, to accepting Catholicism as an inherent element of European civilisation. A natural consequence of all this was his getting closer to religious circles.

In the 80s, people would meet in churches. Quite often, secular people would give talks, and issues of culture, history, social attitudes were being discussed. When Kołakowski came to Poland in December 1988 (it was his first visit since 1968), the only big lectures were organised at the university and in the Church of the Holy Cross.

It was in alignment with his intellectual development. He was against any radical tendencies. His article ‘How to Be a Conservative-Liberal Socialist’, published in the late 70s, was somehow humorous but shaped the way of thinking of my generation. This is more or less how we all thought at the time. Those three components of our views were kept in balance, none of them had a priority. I mean, of course, there were people who were more liberal and those who were more socialist, but this balance was somehow present. Kołakowski has shown that those views and values are not mutually exclusive. He also advocated that recognising all of those elements can prevent us from treating any one of them as an absolute, as a dogma. This text speaks for the dominant intellectual current of the 70s, the 80s and the 90s, and *Gazeta Wyborcza* was one of the mediums for those ideas. In fact, Kołakowski often featured in *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

Kołakowski avoided direct engagement in current politics, and I believe he was right in doing so. For instance, he clearly had his own views when Kaczyński entered the struggle with the Democratic Union, but he did not take an official stance. He recognised a need to keep his distance from political rows. He also refrained from commenting on key issues like the economic transformation, and it seems natural to me that a philosopher would not elaborate on economic reforms.

He did have quite a lot to say about European and democratic values. He would address the Enlightenment often but with a full awareness that it was not a redemption project. He would participate in discussions on culture, but he was not so keen on participating in politics, which is increasingly understood as simply finishing off your competitors and proving them wrong.

**Published 23 April 2018**

Original in Polish
Translation by Kornelia Korneluk
First published in *Res Publica Nowa 4/2017*
Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/leszek-kolakowskis-political-path/)
© Andrzej Friszke, Tadeusz Koczanowicz / Res Publica Nowa / Eurozine