

Leszek Kolakowski

Modernity on Endless Trial

If I could have chosen a presiding spirit for my *Language of Liberty* project, a presence watching over my shoulder to shake his head when I needed correcting or who might nod with approval when I did well, it would have been Leszek Kolakowski.

In a sense, he was there all along and I credit a particular essay of his as being an inspiration for my whole book—more on that in a moment. But first some biographical information. Kolakowski was born in Poland in the year 1927 and died in the United Kingdom in 2007. Given the time and place of his birth, one can safely say that Kolakowski was directly affected by some of the worst political catastrophes in human history, including the German invasion of his homeland and the destruction wrought by the Second World War, as well as the seizure of power in Poland by Soviet-allied communists in its wake and their decades of misrule there.

Despite these disasters, Kolakowski managed to get an education, studying philosophy and making a name for himself as one of the best minds of his generation. When done as a student, he launched his academic career. He also aligned himself with the communist Polish United Workers' Party early in his adulthood. This would eventually lead to trouble, as his commitment to the party and his commitment to basic intellectual honesty increasingly diverged. By the late 1960s, his dissident views were such that he was kicked off the team and barred from teaching anywhere in Poland. He would soon head west and spent much of the rest of his life on the faculty of Oxford's All Souls College.

I count myself very lucky to have come across his work starting in the early 1990s. Especially important to me and my book was an essay titled "How to Be a Conservative-Liberal-Socialist: *A Credo*." (It should be noted here that *liberal* here

means liberal in the Continental sense, and is close in meaning to our *libertarian*.) In this barely two-page piece, Kolakowski sets down in exceptionally distilled and rather humorous terms the essential beliefs of each political orientation. His definitions are remarkably precise, but also expressed in such sympathetic, winsome, commonsensical terms that one comes away thinking: “Of course that’s right! I’m conservative too,” or “That’s exactly what I think—I’m a liberal!” And he ends the essay by emphasizing that it states, indeed, his own credo. There is no reason to commit exclusively to one orientation or another, and it is perfectly logical to apply the differing beliefs as prudently as one can when facing particular issues. It’s refreshing in our time to hear such an open-minded voice when we are so used to the denunciations and anathemas common in current political discourse.

“How to Be a Conservative . . .” comes from a marvelous book of Kolakowski’s essays, titled *Modernity on Endless Trial*. As titles go, this is a favorite of mine. It captures beautifully that quality of modernity which is so given to interrogating accepted beliefs but at the same time so unable to settling on answers.

Kolakowski’s willingness to criticize this treadmill-effect of modern thought points to a deep tension in his work. He was, on the one hand, a model Enlightenment figure himself: tolerant, curious, cosmopolitan, and un-dogmatic; on the other, he saw dangers in the Enlightenment, not least in its tendency to undermine, through its interrogations, what he called “historical consciousness.” This consciousness was, essentially, the sense of living within a particular, rooted society with an ongoing cultural life composed of shared myths, arts, civic celebrations, taboos and more.

This sort of traditional consciousness is naturally threatened by the full exercise of modern freedoms, whether cultural, economic, or scientific. And this concerned Kolakowski, since even an enlightened society must still be a society. That is, it must hold together and offer its members a home, as it were, in which they can live with some measure of spiritual comfort, continuity, and hope in the future.

Kolakowski understood that there was nothing new in criticizing modernity as corrosive of these qualities. German and British Romantics were doing 200 years ago. But he did see modernity playing out in such a way as to leave us moderns

prone to a shaky sense of self and of place. In the essay “The Idolatry of Politics,” he noted that historical traditions, whatever their material accuracy, generally gave people a “feeling of life” and provided them with a kind of “identity that made life ordered (or ‘meaningful’).” As a void grows where an earlier order had been, people lose some of the solidity of their identity. Moreover, some will seek a remedy in politics. Hence the “idolatry” of the essay’s title: we make idols of politics and in politics, searching to fulfill needs best met elsewhere.

In the years since Kolakowski published *Modernity on Endless Trial*, this search seems to have become increasingly frantic. I believe, at any rate, that at least some of our current political strife is directly related to the difficulties of finding purpose and place in the midst of our modern, and faltering, cultural order. Nor is it coincidental that some of our most contentious issues are related to questions of identity, including the familiar current ones surrounding race, gender and sexual orientation, but including other aspects of identity as well. When even monuments to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are torn down by protesters or preemptively removed by the authorities, we might well worry that too many people are failing to find a comfortable home within the broader society—or even worry that the society as a whole is losing a sense of itself and is verging toward decomposition.

A couple of final notes about Leszek Kolakowski. He was prolific and his whole body of work is worth reading, not just “*Modernity . . .*” His excellent *The Main Currents of Marxism*, for example, is a remarkable, and very detailed, exploration of Marx’s legacy, theoretical and practical. There are plenty of other highly valuable books in his *oeuvre*, as well.

Finally, along with his extraordinary mind and learning, Kolakowski had a marvelous sensibility and a great sense of humor. He was one of the more quotable writers I encountered in my research for *The Language of Liberty*, and I draw directly on his words a number of times. Here is the Kolakowski quote I use to open my entry on Utopianism:

“When I am asked where I would like to live, my standard answer is: deep in the virgin mountain forest on a lake shore at the corner of Madison Avenue and Champs Elysees, in a small tidy town. Thus I am a utopian, and not because my dream happens not to exist but because it is self-contradictory.” RIP, Leszek Kolakowski.

© 2021 Edwin C. Hagenstein