

# THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SOVIETISATION.

LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI AND CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ ABOUT THE  
ROADS TO MENTAL CAPTIVITY

Alain Besançon wrote in his article *Adieu à Kołakowski*, published in the “Commentaire” directly after death of Polish thinker and historian of ideas, that if it is necessary to place Leszek Kołakowski in some philosophical tradition, it seems to be the skeptical one.<sup>1</sup> As the author of *Main Currents of Marxism*, everything but a scientifically oriented philosopher or philosophizing scientist, Kołakowski didn't leave any complete anthropological theory behind. Most of his historical writings, as noticed Besançon in the over mentioned article, deal with the problem of religion and its relationships with the ideologies of the twentieth century, hence »the philosophical anthropology of Leszek Kołakowski« has first to be reconstructed on the basis of critical reading of his texts.

In the paper presented here I will interpret the anthropology of Kołakowski as at the same time philosophical and political one. Like Helmuth Plessner, who wrote his book *The Levels of the Organic and Man* to some extent as an answer to the naturalist as well as racist tendencies in the German anthropology

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1 Alain Besançon, »Adieu a Kołakowski«, *Commentaire* 127 (2009), p. 760.

of his time,<sup>2</sup> Kołakowski developed his implicit philosophy of man in a specific historical and political context. As the most important factor, that determined the main directions of his philosophical reflection, I will point out in my paper, on the one hand, his initial engagement in the communist movement, followed by his active participation in installing system of »real socialism« in Poland. On the other hand, I will regard as such a determining factor the final abandonment by Kołakowski of Marxist ideology, that enabled him – in the words of Besançon – to »analyse retrospectively its perversion«.<sup>3</sup>

The central anthropological problem, faced by Kołakowski in result of those experiences, was – according to the subtitle of his dissertation *Individuum and Infinity* from 1959 about the philosophy of Spinoza – the antinomies of human freedom.<sup>4</sup> As I will argue below, it became for him such a problem the willingness of man to what the French philosopher of sixteen century, Étienne la Boétie called »voluntary servitude«<sup>5</sup> or, speaking with Erich Fromm, to »escape from freedom«.<sup>6</sup> In reference to Czesław Miłosz, who analyzed few years earlier in his book *The Captive Mind* both moral and socio-psychological premises of the identification of Polish intellectuals with communist state and described them from his part by using the metaphor of »Hegelian bite«,<sup>7</sup> I will attempt in my paper to reconstruct the answer given by Kołakowski to that question. Today, while facing contemporary national and social populism, being rampant on both sides of Atlantic, his anthropology of mental captivity seems to me by no means out of date.

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2 Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch. Einleitung in die philosophische Anthropologie*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin und Leipzig 1928; cf. Sebastian Edinger, *Das Politische in der Ontologie der Person. Helmuth Plessners Philosophische Anthropologie im Verhältnis zu den Substanzontologien von Aristoteles und Edith Stein*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2017, S. 326–391.

3 Besançon, op. cit., p. 760.

4 Leszek Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność. Wolność i antynomie wolności w filozofii Spinozy (The Individual and Infinity: Freedom and Antinomies of Freedom in the Philosophy of Spinoza)*, PWN, Warsaw 1959.

5 Etienne de La Boétie, *Discours de la servitude volontiere*, Petite Bibliothèque Payot, Paris 2002.

6 Erich Fromm, *Escape from freedom*, Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., New York 1941.

7 Czesław Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, transl. by Jane Zielonko, Vintage Books, New York 1955.

## *Homo Sovieticus*: How One Becomes What One Is

That the human willingness to be submissive and to obey can be regarded as not just moral or psychological, but also anthropological problem, must not be obvious to someone, who identifies himself with a skeptical tradition. The well-known expression »homo sovieticus«, adopted by Alexandre Zinoviev as a title of his novel,<sup>8</sup> referred to the Soviet attempt to create a new man, a loyal to the communist state human identity, that had to be constructed, and not identified as some characteristic of human nature. As wrote Czesław Miłosz in his book from 1953, »The 'new man' is not merely a postulate. He is beginning to become a reality«.<sup>9</sup> Popularized in Poland by the religious and philosophical celebrity, the priest Józef Tischner,<sup>10</sup> the term »homo sovieticus« referred also in the Polish context rather to the historically shaped social and political attitude than to a human constant, some metaphysical or at least psycho-physical essence of that specific being. The referring by Tischner to that term aimed at explaining the unwillingness of the significant part of Polish population to accept the liberal-democratic change after 1989 by pointing out its socio-historical, and not natural or metaphysical determination.

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In so far as the liberal oriented, so called open priest Józef Tischner focused by using the term »homo sovieticus« on the problem of liberating the Polish society from the historically determined, ideological captivity, Czesław Miłosz analyzed in his *Captive Mind* the reverse problem: he attempted to explain the possibility of sovietisation of man. As Polish poet and descendant of Lithuanian gentry, who served voluntary for several years directly after war as a cultural attaché the Polish state of workers and peasants, Miłosz made of his book a kind of political confession or political lyric. Besides confiding the reasons, why he himself, in his own words, »in spite of being distant from the Marxist orthodoxy, agreed to be a part of the administrative and propaganda

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8 Alexandre Zinoviev, *Homo Sovieticus*, trans. par Jacques Michaut, Iulliard/L'Age d'Homme, Paris 1982.

9 Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, p. 73.

10 Józef Tischner, *Etyka solidarności oraz Homo sovieticus (Ethics of Solidarity and Homo sovieticus)*, Znak, Kraków 1992.

machine»,<sup>11</sup> he tried to explain how the human mind functions in the people's democracies, while portraying four other Polish poets and writers, who also had capitulated, in some fashions, to the demands of the Communist state. Even though Miłosz didn't portray among them the political attitude taken by Leszek Kołakowski, at that time student of the Warsaw University,<sup>12</sup> his confessions seem to be not irrelevant also in regard to him, i.e. in regard to the motifs of both, captivating him and liberating him from the ideology of the so called Polish Workers Party. As Miłosz wrote in the preface to his book, he sought »to create afresh the stages by which the mind gives way to compulsion from without, and to trace the road along which men in people's democracies are led on to orthodoxy.«<sup>13</sup>

### The Captivating of the Polish Mind

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Like Étienne la Boétie, who four hundred years earlier pointed out in his *Discours sur la servitude volontier*, that every tyranny must necessarily be grounded upon general popular acceptance,<sup>14</sup> Czesław Miłosz noticed in his book: »people in the West are often inclined to consider the lot of converted countries in terms of might and coercion. That is wrong. There is an internal longing for harmony and happiness that lies deeper than ordinary fear or the desire to escape misery or physical destruction.«<sup>15</sup> He stated about himself: »I agreed to serve, not for material reasons, but through conviction.«<sup>16</sup> While trying to grasp those profound human longings, that have enabled Polish intellectuals to adapt themselves and to convert not only to Marxist, but also Stalinist orthodoxy, Miłosz mentioned four key words, which should have shed at the

11 Czesław Miłosz, „Od autora”, in: *Zniewolony umysł*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2011.

12 Cf. W. Chudoba, *Leszek Kołakowski. Kronika życia i dzieła* (*Leszek Kołakowski. A Chronicle of His Life and Work*), Warsaw 2014, IFiS PAN Publishers, p. 37 ff.

13 Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, p. XI.

14 Cf. Murray N. Rothbard, *The Political Thought of Étienne de La Boétie*, in: É. de La Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience, The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. by Harry Kurz, Ludwig von Mises Institute, Auburn/Alabama 2008, p. 12.

15 Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, p. 5–6.

16 Ibid., p. VII.

same time some light on the stages of the process of their acceptance and even approval of what he perceived as a modern form of tyranny.

The first such a key word was »the void«, an ideological emptiness, that arose in the Polish society after both moral and political bankruptcy of the Polish inter-war state, in Miłosz opinion, only completed by the outbreak of World War Two. He meant by that the lack of not only political religion, but also religion as such, understood as »the way of thinking of the whole social organism«.<sup>17</sup> The second key word mentioned by Miłosz was »the absurd«, the metaphysical feeling of the meaninglessness and inauthenticity of human existence prevailing at the postwar time. It resulted, as he wrote, in »an aversion to an atomized vision of life, to the mentality that isolates every phenomenon, such as eating, drinking, dressing, earning money, fornicating«, an aversion almost synonymous, as he noticed, »with what is known as hatred of the bourgeoisie«.<sup>18</sup> The third key word, aimed at explaining the conditions, that prepared Polish intellectuals to the voluntary servitude the communist state, was »the necessity«. As its chief characteristics Miłosz presented the fear of thinking for himself in the face of what Marx called »misery of philosophy«. It was the fear, wrote Miłosz, of sterility of thinking and writing »outside that one real stream whose vitality springs from its harmony with historical laws and the dynamics of reality«, the fear of disregarding the fact, presented by the Party orthodoxy as obvious, that »a man is no more than an instrument in an orchestra directed by the muse of History.«<sup>19</sup> As the fourth such a key word Miłosz presented the »success« and meant by that the growing conviction, that the whole world will be conquered by the communism in the role of New Faith. It resulted in historical fatalism, best expressed by Hegel in his dialectical statement on the rationality of all what is real.<sup>20</sup>

### Hegelian Bite

After 1989 Czesław Miłosz reduced all those four key words to the one and wrote, that the subject of his *Captive Mind* was »Hegelian bite, that the human

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17 Ibid., p. 7.

18 Ibid, p. 10.

19 Ibid., p. 11.

20 Ibid., p. 16.

minds in our century are exposed to, as soon as they elevate themselves above the level of blessed naivety.«<sup>21</sup> He meant by that, that the philosophy of History emanating from Moscow was in the Polish context not just an abstract theory. As he wrote in the chapter of his book, entitled *Man, this enemy*, »it is a material force that uses guns, tanks, planes, and all the machines of war and oppression. All the crushing might of an armed state is hurled against any man who refuses to accept the New Faith. At the same time, Stalinism attacks him from within, saying his opposition is caused by his 'class consciousness', just as psychoanalysts accuse their foes of wanting to preserve their complexes.«<sup>22</sup>

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Even if Miłosz didn't use the expression of so understood »Hegelian bite« in his book explicitly, the metaphorical meaning of the »bite« he exploited there to the full extent. The process of captivating of minds by the new faith and their subordinating to orthodoxy Miłosz described as follows: »there is a species of insect which injects its venom into a caterpillar; thus inoculated, the caterpillar lives on though it is paralyzed. The poisonous insect then lays its eggs in it, and the body of the caterpillar serves as a living larder for the young brood. Just so (though Marx and Engels never foresaw this use for their doctrine), the anaesthetic of dialectical materialism is injected into the mind of a man in the people's democracies. When his brain is duly paralyzed, the eggs of Stalinism are laid in it. As soon as you are a Marxist, the Party says to the patient, you must be a Stalinist, for there is no Marxism outside of Stalinism.«<sup>23</sup>

It is worth to notice, that the both components of the expression mentioned above, not only »bite«, but also »Hegelianism«, were understood by Miłosz metaphorically. »It has been said, he wrote in his book, that the twentieth century is notable for its synthetic products – synthetic rubber, synthetic gasoline, etc. Not to be outdone, the Party has processed an artificial dialectic whose only resemblance to Hegel's philosophy is purely superficial.«<sup>24</sup> Miłosz didn't hesitate to re-write that sentence and to refer it to the Marxism itself: »let us not forget, he wrote, that the connection between the New Faith and Marx is rather superficial.«<sup>25</sup>

21 Czesław Miłosz, „Biesy”, in: *Ogród nauk, Norbertinum*, Lublin 1991, s. 120.

22 Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, p. 211.

23 Ibid., p. 210.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p. 70.

In so far as he regarded dialectical materialism, Russian-style, as nothing more than »nineteenth-century science vulgarized to the second power«,<sup>26</sup> Miłosz presented the voluntary servitude of the Polish intellectuals caused by such a bite as also something artificial, synthesized in the process of social conditioning, rather than rooted in the human nature. Even if he tried to grasp those »profound human longings« for harmony and happiness, which made the captivity of mind possible, even if he attempted to speak about them »as if one really could analyze what is the warm blood and the flesh, itself, of man«, he considered the functioning of human mind in the people's democracies to be everything but human. As he wrote, »the inhabitants of Western countries little realize that millions of their fellow-men, who seem superficially more or less similar to them, live in a world as fantastic as that of the men from Mars.«<sup>27</sup>

### **The Social Monkey**

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There is no doubt, that both, the diagnosis of captivity of mind and the metaphor of »Hegelian bite« presuppose a kind of »philosophical anthropology«. Nevertheless, like in the writings of Leszek Kołakowski, it remains in the book of Czesław Miłosz rather implicit. He agrees ironically, that »the life in constant internal tension develops talents which are latent in man«, as well as that »the survival of those best adapted to mental acrobatics creates a human type that has been rare until now.«<sup>28</sup> The anthropology presupposed in *The Captive Mind* became not much more explicit when Miłosz attempts to describe the motifs of his decision to break up with the Party orthodoxy. »From outside, he wrote, it is easy to think of such a decision as an elementary consequence of one's hatred of tyranny. But in fact, it may spring from a number of motives, not all of them equally high-minded. My own decision, Miłosz confessed, proceeded not from the functioning of the reasoning mind, but from a revolt of the stomach. A man may persuade himself, by the most logical reasoning, that he will greatly benefit his health by swallowing live frogs; and, thus rationally

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26 Ibid., p. 192.

27 Ibid., p. 74.

28 Ibid.

convinced, he may swallow a first frog, then the second; but at the third his stomach will revolt. In the same way, the growing influence of the doctrine on my way of thinking came up against the resistance of my whole nature.«<sup>29</sup>

The implicit anthropology of Czesław Miłosz, which his revolt against »Hegelian bite« resulted from, even though by no means synonym with that of the »natural human rights«, deeply contrasts with Kołakowski position. While trying to reconstruct the philosophy of man, that stood behind the retrospective analysis of the »perversity« of Marxist ideology delivered by him, one has to remember, that unlike Czesław Miłosz, who published *The Captive Mind* as a Polish refugee in America, Kołakowski wrote his *Individuum and Infinity* under censorship in Warsaw. It explains to some extent, why his main field of research became history of ideas and why his philosophical anthropology has to be first reconstructed. The Party, as Miłosz informed his reader from the West, fought in the early fifties in Poland »any tendency to delve into the depths of a human being, especially in literature and art. Whoever reflects on «man» in general, on his inner needs and longings, he wrote, is accused of bourgeois sentimentality.«<sup>30</sup> The censorship against any anthropology, that gone beyond the description of man's behavior as a member of a social group, Miłosz explained by pointing out, that the Party, treating man exclusively as the by-product of social forces, believed that he becomes the type of being he pictures himself to be, that he is nothing but a »social monkey«.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, in the opinion of Party's authorities, reported Miłosz, »if one forbids men to explore the depths of human nature, one destroys in them the urge to make such explorations; and the depths in themselves slowly become unreal.«<sup>32</sup>

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### The History of Ideas as a Political Anthropology

The methodological standpoint, taken by Kołakowski in his book on the antinomies of freedom in the philosophy of Spinoza, turns out to be in that context not only philosophical, but also political declaration. He described it as an at-

29 Ibid., p. 10.

30 Ibid., p. 206.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.



tempt to present philosophy as a »science of man« and defined its ends as follows: »To interpret classical problems of philosophy as problems of moral nature, to translate metaphysical, anthropological and epistemological questions into the language suitable for expressing moral problems, to reveal their hidden human content; in other words, to present the problem of God as a problem of man, the problem of heaven and earth as a problem of human freedom, the problem of nature as a problem concerning the value of human life, and the problem of human nature as the problem of inter-human relationships.«<sup>33</sup>

As opposed to Czesław Miłosz, Kołakowski's decision to break up with the Stalinist orthodoxy thus didn't proceed from a revolt of stomach. As an insider of the Party, he attempted to overcome dialectical materialism Russian style in the process of reasoning, to defeat it on its own field, so to say from within, by the means of its immanent critique. What Kołakowski aimed at, was to create afresh an old opposition of *fides et ratio* and to set against the New Faith what could be called the New Reason. Especially in his 1950s articles he countered the party's, as he called it, »obsolete« Marxism with its »valid« version.<sup>34</sup> In the article *Intellectuals and the Communist Movement* he pointed out, that the ideology of the Party, that he belonged to, had taken on religious forms, complete with »revelation in the sphere of cognition, a system of magic and taboos, the existence of a caste of priests who monopolise the right to proclaim truths, a desire to absorb absolutely all forms of human life by ideology.«<sup>35</sup> Considered by the party's authorities as a »revisionist«, Kołakowski presented his revolted philosophical standpoint at that time rather in terms of »Marxist Protestantism«. He concluded his critique of party dogmatism by stating that, »in the currently prevailing situation in Marxist theory, one could truly wish for Karl Marx's resurrection«.<sup>36</sup>

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33 Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność*, p. 7.

34 Leszek Kołakowski, *Aktualne i nieaktualne pojęcie marksizmu (The Valid and Obsolete Conception of Marxism)*, in: *idem, Pochwała niekonsekwencji. Pisma rozproszone z lat 1955–1968*, t. 2, NOWA, Warszawa 1989, pp. 5–14.

35 Leszek Kołakowski, »Intelektualiści a ruch komunistyczny» (*Intellectuals and the communist movement*), in: *idem, Pochwała niekonsekwencji, op. cit.*, p. 95.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

It is hard to say, to what extent the philosophical standpoint of »Marxist humanism« held by Leszek Kołakowski in the fifties as well as his attempt to overcome Marxist determinist approach to man as a »social monkey« on the way of history of ideas, has been taken by him so to say *bona fide*. On the one hand, one could try to understand his standpoint rather as a kind of political mimicry, that what Czesław Miłosz called in *The Captive Mind* »ketman«. <sup>37</sup> In so far as Miłosz defined ketman, in short, as self-realization against something, that in the people's democracies couldn't occur otherwise as by becoming an »actor«, the Marxism humanism of Kołakowski, from multiple points of view an oxymoron, one can interpret as a kind of masked philosophical anthropology, that to reconstruct would mean to break through to its esoteric »core«. On the other hand, in so far as for Marx the whole what is called the world history is nothing but the creation of man, it is nothing but history of ideas that has to be interpreted as *the* philosophical anthropology of Leszek Kołakowski in the proper sense. As he wrote in his essay *Karl Marx and the Classical Definition of Truth*, »there is in the entire universe no well so deep that a man could not, leaning over it, find his own face in the bottom«. <sup>38</sup>

37 "What is Ketman? I found its description in a book by Gobineau entitled *Religions and Philosophies of Central Asia*. (...) In trying to describe these new mores, we happen across a striking analogy in the Islamic civilization of the Middle East. Not only was the game played in defense of one's thoughts and feelings well-known there, but indeed it was transformed into a permanent institution and graced with the name of Ketman", Miłosz, *The Captive Mind*, p. 54.

38 Leszek Kołakowski, *Kultura i fetysze (Culture and Fetishes)*, PWN, Warszawa, 1967.

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