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"Światła utopii", Bronisław Baczko, Warszawa 2016 : [recenzja]

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Bronisław Baczko, *Światła utopii*, Warszawa 2016, pp. 481

Światła utopii (Lights of Utopia) by Bronisław Baczko, an eminent philosopher, a historian of social thought, a creator of, among other things, such works as *Rousseau: samotność i wspólnota* (1964), *Człowiek i światopoglądy* (1965) and many other texts of utopian thought as a part of human consciousness, is a nearly five-hundred-page study of utopia understood in a broader sense. It is comprised of seven chapters which broach the issue of correlating different aspects of utopianism with the real world and daily life, a preface to the French edition from 2001, a preface to the present edition and an afterword written by Jerzy Szacki and complete with a persons index. However, a bibliography is not included.

The theme of the book seems to be a presentation of Enlightenment visions of an ideal world inspired by different utopias which invariably strove to create an ideal man who was made happy by an equally ideal reality, where a person is boundlessly committed to the notions of internal and external freedom, equality spanning over

the entire humankind, solidarity and the sense of belonging to a community, pompously referred to as the Nation or the State. In each chapter the author touches upon the immemorial longing of a human being for the beautiful, the good, the true and the eternal, which could be guaranteed by nostalgic visions of the world by assorted utopians, and for the materialisation of which their creators and their disciples were ready to sacrifice anything, from themselves to the annihilation of thousands of lives. Each chapter constitutes a thorough analysis of a selected aspect of utopia and its correlates, demonstrating complex relationships between the past, present and future; a fantasy that came to be in the mind of an individual, and the reality of a given epoch.

The author himself does not glorify utopia, which comes as a great asset of the book. At the same time, he leaves the readers with a possibility to make their own judgement of the purposes of the utopians, particularly when they aspired to materialise that which should remain solely in the theoretical sphere. By raising difficult ques-

tions which elude unambiguous and final judgements, Baczko persuades the readers to re-evaluate their attitudes towards utopia, which are only seemingly built upon positive values. Wasn't the grand design of a classless society, a sheer "heaven on earth", an idea of an outstanding philosopher cherishing an equally outstanding social sensitivity? Wasn't this design creatively developed by Lenin, a person of exceptional intellect, giving rise to Marxism-Leninism, and didn't a utopia, which came to life out of noble intentions and altruism that verged on madness, become an anticipation of cross-national tragedies that changed the face of the world? Whereabouts, if at all, is the border between utopia and anti-utopia? To what extent can human beings, in their own nature, accept the idea of equality between all people, which is central to most utopias? Doesn't the essence of humanity consist in self-perfection, multiplying one's talents and surpassing the ordinary? These and many more questions on the purpose and meaningfulness of utopia have to be asked when reading *Lights of Utopia*, a book whose selection of issues, motifs and links of utopian visions of the world with the most meaningful aspects of human existence entices to ask oneself these questions on an ongoing basis, as they will appear unwittingly with each verse anyhow.

What is typical for Bronisław Baczko's book is an original narrative. By making an arbitrary choice of the content, which reflects the author's own interest in linking all loose threads of the vast intellectual substance of utopia, the reader is not presented with an overview of philosophers' and theoreticians' outlooks which are commonly associated with utopia in a synthetic and chronological manner. They are consciously ushered into the complexity of

utopian designs in which all that was clear and obvious becomes blurred and obscure, which makes them generate further doubts and questions about the sense of creating utopias, and their axiological undertone. The vastness of sources cited by Baczko, which testifies to the multiplicity of outlooks, makes *Lights of Utopia* a challenging read, gripping and providing satisfaction that it contains something we are familiar with, like the social and political ideas of Plato, Thomas More, or Jean Jacques Rousseau. This by no means puts the book at a disadvantage. Quite the contrary. It provokes a thought whether the notion of utopia, as a certain phenomenon of collective consciousness from the border of culture, art, philosophy, politics, history and many other fields, will ever be exhausted. Baczko is off the beaten track and his reasoning is not a mere reconstruction of what has already been established in other publications on utopia.

The unquestionable asset to the book is the fact that although the author highlights his own interest in particular areas of the utopian world, he does not offer ready-to-use interpretations, thereby inducing the reader to come up with their own personal reflection of the essence of the modern world that is lit with obsolete utopias which, however, draw upon universal desires, and which are now consigned to oblivion of political discourse. In this context, the question whether in today's pragmatic and rational world there is still room for the metaphysical and the longing for idealism, is self-evident. Similarly, in the age of progress, modernity and all-encompassing consumption, is there still a shred of possibility to materialise but the substitute of utopian visions proclaimed by all the over-sensitive individuals who, against all odds, believed that a human be-

ing is good in nature, ready to make sacrifices, magnanimous and altruistic, and who outlined the visions of the world that were so beautiful that they verged on totalitarianism? Reading Bronisław Baczko's

book might become for many a form of spiritual escapism into a dream of a better world and a better human being, a dream where the most beautiful is what remains immaterialised.