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A CHANGE OF HEART OR DODGING RESPONSIBILITY?

The question of academics who as young people in post-war years professed their allegiance to Stalinism and later parted with those views often to turn into fierce critics of Marxism has circulated in academic journals and communities for some time now, also in Poland. The issue also keeps cropping up when individuals who only a few years back extolled socialist economy's superiority over capitalism, praised Poland's „friendship” (dependence) with the Soviet Union as the foundation of its home and external policies, or joined massive press assaults on patriotic oppositionists in and around Solidarity, show up prominently on the public or academic scene in Poland now.

Those people, the old hands as well as the new acolytes of Soviet-style Marxist orthodoxy, have been finding numerous advocates who say anyone has a right to change their minds, that it is a noble thing to drop mistaken ideas, and that reminding them of they once declared should never happen for that is an unfair or indeed wicked thing to do.

Now, that is a twisted argument indeed for it relies on a selective use of facts. First, it should be pointed out this is a repeat of a situation Poland experienced previously. Especially in 1956 to 1957, in the wake of a big „thaw,” some of the champions and even perpetrators of Stalinist crimes suddenly showed up among the most vocal denouncers of those crimes. However commendable that turnabout may have been, in the eyes of the victims of those crimes that change of mind seemed a spurious act, not only because of its suddenness. What really hurt was that the turnabout as a rule had not been accompanied by a candid avowal of mistakes one had done, a confession of one's sins, and an attempt to atone for them before the victims. Loud professions of new views gave the victims a feeling the dramatic change of views was an attempt to make people forget the novices' not-so-remote protestations and the related deeds. Those people at the same

time derided not only the personal merits but any moral reason of those who out of patriotism and integrity had all along denounced those crimes and refused to take part in them and were victimised on account of that; for the neophytes had lent their hands to the crimes lauding them as acts of „historic justice.” As one apt pundit put it then, „We were right even when we made mistakes; they erred even when they were right.”

I am using the terms „crimes” in a wide sense, to denote – in colloquial rather than legal language, of course – more than only murder, torture or imprisonment of people on account of their „wrong” class origin or holding „hostile” political, social or religious views. It was a crime against society to sterilise its cultural tradition, to stamp out its natural diversity, to gag authors and academics by censorship, to shut down independent social institutions, to destroy the economy, to waste the fruits of work of millions of people who worked hard to bring the war-ravaged nation back to life, to subjugate the nation to a foreign power’s supremacy. The strange thing about it is that all that is so easily being ignored, indeed forgotten.

Yet a look back to those past years does seem necessary, for a very similar process is probably under way now as the one that took place then, even though then the thousands of fresh graves cast a harsher glare on those times. The real dispute is actually not over views or anyone’s self-evident right to change them, and so over anyone’s intellectual responsibility for preaching a truth or a comfortable (if sometimes criminal) untruth, but perhaps primarily over the deeds committed then for which the views provided an intellectual vindication and moral foundation. Often enough those who uttered those views were at the same time the immediate perpetrators of the resulting acts, often also had a part in such actions.

As at an early stage of my law studies at Warsaw University the teaching staff were „reinforced” with young able employees of the people’s judiciary, that fact produced more than just the lecturing of new ideas. It was not only what a popular saying had it among students then, namely that the difference between a Marxist scholar and a „bourgeois” scholar was that while the former one understood all yet knew nothing, the latter knew all yet understood nothing. The more important thing was that „bourgeois” professors got the number of lectures allowed for them drastically cut, that their assistants were sacked, that students were asked to give their professors „marks” which were subsequently used to justify their dismissals.

Open massive repression, terror and killings stopped in 1955 as the Stalinist era of building socialism in Poland on the bones of the „people’s enemies” had ended. Yet the old style of governing stayed on in one feature: at times of social or political unrest the authorities resorted to pure force using persecution by police, shooting on unarmed demonstrations, or proclaiming martial law. Political murders also belonged to the language in which the authorities addressed society, a truth occasional court trials bring

back to mind of late, but more often such cases are discontinued because sloppy investigations fail to identify the culprits. Now there is nothing strange about those involved in crimes committed by the regime trying to cover up traces of their deeds, for that can save them from being prosecuted. Nor is it difficult to understand the desire of those who served the regime with the pen rather than the baton to see sink into oblivion what they only recently wrote about human rights, the human face of the socialism built in this Poland, about war-mongering American imperialists or West Germany's menacing revanchists, or about internal enemies putting stokes into the wheels of the politically united Polish people in its march towards a bright future. What I fail to see is why should people with clean hands help in that endeavour to pervert the truth about the past? I say clean hands, rather than clean consciences, because people like A. Humer, a torturer with the political police in 1944 to 1955 now under trial for his old deeds, insists on having a clean conscience, while Professor Longin Pastusiak, until recently keenly sleuthing American imperialists' criminal plots, seems not to see why anything of what he has written should impede his current or future career, academic or political.

These are all well-known facts which should be remembered for two reasons.

First, a mention of such facts more and more often is seen as something tactless behaviour, as something in bad taste, as proof of the speaker's sick obsession, even though an overwhelming majority of the victims of the old and more recent regime are still waiting to get at least moral satisfaction. Even worse, it is becoming fashionable now to put the executioners on a par with the victims, to argue that anyone might have been among the ones or the others, even though graves of murdered patriots who had refused to renounce their beliefs are proof the opposite is true. This kind of thinking is being flaunted as a wise attitude of looking to the future. I think this is totally wrong, and I feel it is my duty to stand up against such a perception.

Second, I suppose people working in exact sciences may tend to view this issue from a different angle than those working in social science. I a scientist declared himself in favour of such or other physical or chemical theory, such a declaration did not necessarily do serious damage to their academic development or careers; if it did, then usually for political or religious beliefs the persons held, and not to punish them for their scientific affiliation. Again, I say not necessarily, because that just might happen, as it did, for example, to geneticists.

Social science was a different case. Those working in social science and putting themselves behind the authorities were no academic staff in the strict sense but rather individuals who considered themselves as soldiers or the Party assigned to fight on important posts on the ideological front. The „scientific discussions” they engaged in, rather than allowing for exchanges

of ideas, were designed to put down the adversary and to preach the „truths” held as binding at any given stage. Stages kept closing and beginning, so changing their views accordingly was only natural to those people. The soldiers of the ideological front dispatched to work in the research sector had their frame of reference not so much in seeking the truth as in meeting what was called social demand which was each time defined by the Party and police „leadership body.” If someone charged them now with distorting the truth they would probably be surprised and might reply, „But that was being the position at that time, so what’s the problem?”

Yet even this is not the most important thing though. The most important point is that when the „bourgeois scientists” were criticised that was not a scholarly exercise: it was a political denunciation that could get the attacked persons banned from teaching (as happened to Maria and Stanisław Ossowski, the historians of ideas, or philosopher Władysław Tatarkiewicz); force them to deal with issues of marginal importance (philosopher T. Kotarbiński); dismiss their assistants from university posts (D. Malewska, J. Krajewski); sack students from colleges (A. Rudzińska); or subject to other kinds of repression or restriction (e.g., forbidding authors to publish).¹ So, engaging in that kind of criticism was tantamount to fighting Polish research and culture. As time went by that criticism did not produce such drastic consequences, with a few exceptions, to name but the repression following anti-Semitic incidents of March 1968. Delayed academic careers, bans on publications, impeding international contacts, forcing independent researchers to the fringes of academic life, were the more usual penalties. Once again, it should be very clear that the real problem was not anyone held as their views but the disgraceful deeds they themselves committed or their active support and participation in such deeds committed by others.

Five years ago *Przegląd Filozoficzny* (philosophical journal, No. 2 of 1995) published a 1950 letter by „members of the Polish United Workers’ Party” attending a philosophical seminar led by Professor Władysław Tatarkiewicz, the world-famous historians of philosophy and aesthetician. They accused him of allowing students to criticise the „materialist ethics of Marxism-Leninism” during the seminar. That particular letter gave the authorities a pretext to ban Professor Tatarkiewicz from teaching at Warsaw University. Along with the letter the editors published several comments on that incident written today by participants in the seminar. Two authors were among the signatories of the 1950 protest letter. Both men have meanwhile earned international fame, and both have been working outside Poland for many years now.

One of them, Professor Bronisław Baczko, described the 1950 letter in his comments as containing „dreadful and dangerous nonsense” saying its publication now will be a „warning for the future.” Reading those words you could not guess they had come from a co-author of that old letter. The

other man, Professor Leszek Kołakowski, made a few gibes about Professor Tatarkiewicz's son who released the letter for publication, describing the letter itself as an „idiotic statement.” Kołakowski in his comments mentioned his „ideological commitment” at the time he signed the letter, remarking that „already as a reactionary, bourgeois etc. professor” he himself came under „similar attacks” at „American universities and elsewhere,” and saying he had never treated seriously such attacks (you bet he did not, for nobody would have banned him from college). In conclusion he conceded that „a few years later he [Professor Tatarkiewicz] should no doubt have been given an apology for that extravagance, which I think I never did.” What these two statements have in common is the One cannot help feeling that a person's involvement in Stalinism leaves a permanent moral blemish on those concerned.

Some defenders of the converts are arguing that those are old sins that took place a long time ago. That is indeed the case with many. This truth is evident especially to a lawyer whose education gives him an early understanding of the institution of statute of limitations. Such statute precludes, under certain conditions, prosecution and punishment of certain deeds, but it never rescinds any facts as non-existent nor does it change their moral assessment. Pardoning someone for their evil deeds is possible and, probably, a noble thing to do. Yet nobody has a right to do that for anyone else, especially not for victims of crimes. Indeed, any pardon must be preceded by liars' confessing to their lies, wrongdoers giving satisfaction to those they harmed, and criminals being at least branded as such. As long as that has not happened, in particular as long as culprits have not clearly confessed their guilt and voiced regret, it is better not to put up with their wrongdoings as though nothing had happened.

So, if anyone deserves praise and gratitude for what they have done now, let this be said very clearly. But nobody should pretend that any such action automatically cancels wrongs committed in the past. For this to happen we should insist on bad deeds being confessed, and repented, and that those concerned should at least try to make good whatever wrongs they had committed. Unless that is done, we are slipping dangerously close towards moral indifference. Moral indifference, when it holds on for some time, has a pernicious effect on society, and a truly deleterious one on science, for it vindicates scientists who adopt time-serving attitudes instead of enjoining them to keep to their basic duty of seeking the truth.

Notes

¹ I am mentioning great men of small names, as Kipling put it, deliberately here. I am sure anyone of my age could name many such cases among their college mates.