

Dialogue between Leszek Kolakowski & Danny Postel

On exile, philosophy & tottering insecurely on the edge of an unknown abyss

DANNY POSTEL: You've been living outside of Poland since 1968. Two decades ago you wrote an essay titled "In Praise of Exile," though in it you don't discuss your own exile. Do you feel that

A Fellow of the American Academy since 1970, Leszek Kolakowski is Senior Research Fellow Emeritus at All Souls College, Oxford. In 2003, the Library of Congress awarded him the first John W. Kluge Prize for Lifetime Achievement in the Human Sciences. His books include "The Individual and Infinity" (1958), "The Philosophy of Existence, the Defeat of Existence" (1965), "Husserl and the Search for Certitude" (1975), "If There is no God" (1982), "Metaphysical Horror" (1988), "The Two Eyes of Spinoza and Other Essays on Philosophers" (2004), and "My Correct Views on Everything" (2005). In October, W. W. Norton will publish his celebrated three-volume "Main Currents of Marxism" (1976 – 1978) in a single-volume edition.

Danny Postel is contributing editor of openDemocracy.net and a member of the editorial board of "The Common Review." His work has appeared in "Philosophy and Social Criticism," "The Chronicle of Higher Education," "The Washington Post World," "The Nation," "The American Prospect," and "Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture."

© 2005 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

your exile has shaped the way you think about and relate to the world?

LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI: Yes. Yes, I think so. I love the British, of course. But I don't feel British. I'm not an Oxonian. Britain is an island. Oxford is an island in Britain. All Souls is an island in Oxford. And I am an island in All Souls. I'm a quadruple island. But I don't complain. Only I don't feel that I belong to it. In fact, when I go to Paris, I feel more at home than in London, even though I've never lived there for more than six months at one time.

DP: Why do you think that is?

LK: Well, probably because I know French literature and poetry better. I learned French early. I would say French is my best second language. And I think that you really feel another culture when you read its poetry, in the original. The languages in which I could read poetry in the original when I was young were French and German and Russian – not to speak of Polish. But not English, of which I was ignorant.

DP: Speaking of poetry, do you have any thoughts on the death of your countryman Czeslaw Milosz?

LK: I met him on my first trip to Paris, at the end of 1956. Later on, I saw him on various occasions here and there. I have a very, very high opinion of his poetry. He was a great writer. He was overwhelmed by sadness, sadness about the world around him. Not political, but cultural. He had no feeling of belonging. Although he was Polish, he had no motherland. He was homeless in some way. Perhaps it was the memory of his young days in Vilnius, where he was brought up, which had been Polish between the wars but then became Lithuanian. And I liked his book *The Captive Mind* very, very much. He speaks about people whom I knew – but without mentioning their names. He was, during his lifetime, strongly attacked from various sides. He had worked for some years in Polish diplomacy, in Paris and in Washington. He knew what Communism was about. At a certain point, he decided to defect. He stayed in Paris. Then he was terribly attacked by Polish journalists and the Polish government – writers and apparatchiks. But he was never accepted by Polish exiles – first of all, because he had been in Polish diplomacy, so they regarded him as an agent of the Communists. But also because he was very critical of prewar Poland.

DP: You mean the right-wing culture of prewar Poland?

LK: Yes, the right-wing culture of Polish Catholicism – a special kind of Catholicism, full of bigotry, anti-Semitism, nationalism. Of course, not everything in Polish Catholicism was like that. But the general atmosphere in the Church was very distasteful to him, as was Polish political culture in general in those years.

DP: This is an outlook you shared with Milosz.

LK: Yes, except that we weren't quite from the same generation. He was a young writer before the war, whereas I was a boy, not even twelve. But yes, I had this feeling. I strongly disliked a certain current in Polish culture – the nationalism, bigotry, anti-Semitism. And yet I've always been Polish.

DP: Your less than euphoric feelings about the Western Left were strongly colored by your year in Berkeley in 1969 – 1970. Tzvetan Todorov describes a similar experience, of fleeing a Communist country – in his case, Bulgaria – only to find himself in a heavily Communist intellectual milieu in Paris. What was Berkeley like for you?

LK: I found the so-called student movement simply barbaric. There are of course ignorant young people at all times and in all places. But in Berkeley their ignorance was elevated to the level of the highest wisdom. They wanted to 'revolutionize' the university in such a way that they wouldn't have to learn anything. They had all sorts of silly proposals. For instance, they wanted professors to be appointed by students, and students to be examined by other students. I remember one leaflet issued by the black student movement asserting that the libraries contained nothing but "irrelevant white knowledge."

DP: What about the student movement's opposition to the Vietnam War?

LK: I believed there were several good reasons for America to withdraw from Vietnam. But one reason which was nonsense was the claim of many opponents of the war that once America withdrew, South Vietnam would be liberated. Everybody even minimally acquainted with Communist politics knew that

*Exile,
philosophy
& tottering
insecurely
on the
edge of an
unknown
abyss*

when the Viet Cong took over South Vietnam it would be a disaster – oppression, despotism, massacres – as it was, of course. It was bound to be. Everybody should have expected that.

DP: As you know, Theodor Adorno's encounter with the New Left was similar to yours. He was horrified by the behavior of the radical students in Frankfurt. Did you ever meet him?

LK: Once. It was 1958. I was allowed to go for one year to Holland and to France, and I was also in Germany for a short time. So I met Adorno. I didn't know his work then. I remember him taking a manuscript from his desk and waving it furiously – a Lukács manuscript, as it happened.

DP: Why were you expelled from the Polish Communist Party in 1966?

LK: For many years my Party membership had been a joke really. But I believed, and so did many friends – probably wrongly – that there were reasons to stay in the Party, as it gave us more opportunity to express unorthodox views. A number of my friends, most of them writers, left the Party in protest against my expulsion. But even then I could teach whatever I wanted at the university. Nobody interfered with my teaching. But in 1968, I was expelled from the university, as were a few of my friends. There was a slander campaign against us in the press and so on. Nothing pleasant. Nevertheless, I should always remember it could have been much worse.

DP: What was it like to watch one Communist regime after another come tumbling down in 1989 and after?

LK: Very gratifying, of course. I was in Poland at the end of 1988, on a British passport. This was my first visit after twenty years. But I knew what was going on inside the country, since I was a member of this committee which was formed in the 1970s, after the riots – the Committee in Defense of Workers. I gave many interviews in support of this movement.

DP: Were they published in Poland?

LK: No, no. It was forbidden to mention my name in the Polish press, unless it was to attack me. I couldn't publish. I was an 'unperson.'

DP: When you went to Poland in 1988, why did the Polish authorities let you in?

LK: Because the regime was crumbling. It was very weak. But I was still interrogated by the secret police.

DP: On what grounds?

LK: Because on the visa application for myself and my wife, I wrote that I was going for private reasons. And then I took part in a meeting in which the Citizens Committee was formed, with Lech Walesa. And I had lectured at a philosophical society in the university as well. There were many people in attendance. And so I was accused of lying by an officer who interrogated me: I had said I was in the country for private reasons, but then my interrogator said, referring to the meeting with the Citizens Committee, "You participated in a secret meeting." I said, "What secret meeting? Everybody heard about it. Nothing was secret." My meeting with Walesa was discussed in the press. In Poland during that period, the distinction between le-

gal and illegal was unclear. I asked him, “Why do you have people follow me all the time? Wherever I go, they follow me in a car.” I went to the cemetery, for instance, to the graves of relatives. And then I went to visit my very old aunt, and everywhere they followed me. But why? He said, “They’re protecting you.” Protecting me from whom? It was ridiculous.

DP: You’ve made the point that liberalization and openness are not necessarily an effective way of preserving a totalitarian regime; on the contrary, they often lead to revolutionary upheaval and the complete dismantling of regimes.

LK: Think of Gorbachev’s *glasnost* – it was supposed to make Communism better but instead it ruined it.

DP: Do you think that having to resort to a certain kind of Delphic or esoteric idiom of writing under Stalinist rule added a dimension to the style of writers like yourself that might never have been developed in a free society?

LK: When I was in Poland, all of us who were intellectuals were compelled to use a certain code language, a language that would be acceptable in the established framework. So we had an acute sense of the limits of what could be said, of censorship. Of course. Occasionally our works were confiscated. But we tried to be intelligible without being transparent. In this period there were only a few cases of people publishing in émigré journals. There was a journal in Paris, *Kultura* – a very good and very important journal; obviously it was prohibited in Poland. Nevertheless, a few copies always circulated. The members of the Writers’ Association were even able to read it in the library, legally. And occa-

sionally, people brought it in from abroad. But people were afraid to publish. There were people arrested for publishing in such journals. But later on, at the very end of the 1960s, some people published books in Paris under their own names.

DP: The opening line of *Metaphysical Horror* reads: “A modern philosopher who has never once suspected himself of being a charlatan must be such a shallow mind that his work is probably not worth reading.” Have you ever suspected yourself of being a charlatan?

LK: Certainly. Many times.

DP: Did you see Roman Polanski’s film *The Pianist*?

LK: Yes. It was very well done. I was in Poland [when the film is set, during World War II], though not in the ghetto, of course. But I lived among people who helped the Jews and who lived with the Jews in hiding. I remember Warsaw during the ghetto uprising. I lived for some time in a flat which was a hiding place for Jews who were saved from the ghetto. Not long ago I learned that once the Gestapo came to search all the flats, one after another. There were two groups of Gestapo people searching. And they failed to visit this very flat where I was because one group believed that it was already searched by another group, and vice versa. So my flat was spared. Had it not been, we wouldn’t be talking today; I would be a crumbling skeleton. A friend of mine, Marek Edelman, was one of the very few survivors of the ghetto uprising, and one of the leaders, actually, of the uprising. He’s still in Poland. He saw the film and said that it was true.

*Exile,
philosophy
& tottering
insecurely
on the
edge of an
unknown
abyss*

DP: Do you think that the experience you were just describing – living as a young man amongst Jews in hiding, people fearing for their lives – do you think that influenced you and your worldview?

LK: Probably, but I cannot say exactly in what way. It was, as you can imagine, a very bad experience. I was this young boy. I knew many people, of course, of various persuasions. My strong feeling was that the most dedicated and the most courageous were on the left.

DP: Is this what attracted you to the Left as a young man?

LK: Among other things, yes. And as I said, my strong negative feelings against a certain current in Polish culture – the chauvinism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, clericalism. I disliked it very strongly.

DP: In the title essay of your collection *Modernity on Endless Trial*, you describe the orthodoxy of our age as a kind of “patching up.” “We try to assert our modernity,” you write, “but escape from its effects by various intellectual devices, in order to convince ourselves that meaning can be restored or recovered apart from the traditional legacy of mankind and in spite of the destruction brought about by modernity.” Do you view the revival of humanism going on today – I’m thinking of Todorov’s recent work, for example – as an attempt at this kind of patchwork?

LK: I think so. There are attempts to restore humanism very simply through intellectual efforts. You can always repeat some old slogans, but I don’t expect them to have a big impact. At the same time, there is a revival of religious sentiments and ideas going on as well. There

is a feeling that we lack something important. I had many discussions with American students who had this feeling, even if they were not brought up in a religious tradition. They were attracted to this tradition quite independently of their upbringing. They felt they lacked something in life. Not necessarily the Church. But the need for something spiritual goes beyond our consumerist society. I think it’s widespread, all over the world. So I don’t expect, as many people did expect in the eighteenth century and beyond, that religion will vanish. I don’t believe it will vanish. And I hope it will not.

DP: You also wrote, in that same essay, that “[t]here is something alarmingly desperate in intellectuals who have no religious attachment, faith or loyalty proper and who insist on the irreplaceable educational and moral role of religion in our world and deplore its fragility, to which they themselves eminently bear witness . . . I do not blame them . . . either for being irreligious or for asserting the crucial value of religious experience; I simply cannot persuade myself that their work might produce changes they believe desirable, because to spread faith, faith is needed and not an intellectual assertion of the social utility of faith.” I suppose we can surmise from this that you yourself are a man of faith.

LK: This I don’t want to discuss.

DP: May I ask why?

LK: I could say why I do not want to answer this question only by actually answering it.

DP: You’ve long defended European civilization and the European “project” against its anti-imperialist and Third

Worldist critics. But today Europe is being attacked by the American nationalist Right. American conservatives rail against European sensibilities about global power; American religious conservatives attack Western European secularism; and so on. As a Europeanist, how does it make you feel to see these attacks on Europe coming from America?

LK: I feel uneasy about it. This is to say, I believe the European tendency toward unification is a good thing – to a point. I don't believe that it will forge a super-state. France especially would support this only on the condition that it would be the dominant power in such a formation, but I don't find this desirable. National feelings are there. You cannot destroy them. I'm against the new European Constitution, but not the European Union. One of the reasons – though not the only one – is Russia. The Roman Empire, Byzantine Empire, Ottoman Empire, British Empire – they all fell. So did the Soviet Empire. Nevertheless, Russia today is awash in strong imperialist nostalgia. It is a Great Power. It can use its resources to blackmail its neighbors. And I think that for Poland and other countries previously in the Soviet Bloc, it is important for this reason to belong to the European Union. But this is not the only reason; it is one of several. So yes, I support the European Union. But I don't support its tendency to act as one state – one European state. You can see how furious, for example, Chirac was about Poland supporting the Iraq War. Apart from the question of whether it was a good idea or not, he was furious that Poland dared to do that. He preferred to make the target of his fury a weaker country like Poland, and not the United States.

DP: Did you think it was a mistake then for the Polish government to line up with the United States?

LK: No, I don't think so. Just days before the war started I was asked by a newspaper what I thought about the war. I said I was very happy that I'm not an American president and I don't need to decide anything. Because I've got ambivalent feelings about it.

DP: Would you share your thoughts on the state of philosophy today?

LK: I don't follow what's going on in today's philosophy. I have been reading very little. Unfortunately, my eyes are very bad. If something very important appeared, perhaps I would know, but I don't believe there are any great philosophers alive.

DP: None?

LK: Well, there are intelligent people, of course, very clever, full of intellectual vigor. But not a great philosopher.

DP: Are there any philosophers writing today whom you read with interest?

LK: I read Rorty with interest, though I don't share his views.

DP: In *Metaphysical Horror* you conjured an image that I found arresting: "It is perhaps better for us to totter insecurely on the edge of an unknown abyss than simply to close our eyes and deny its existence." Not merely to totter insecurely on the edge of an abyss, but an *unknown* abyss at that.

LK: *Metaphysical Horror* was an attempt to show that metaphysical ambitions,

*Exile,
philosophy
& tottering
insecurely
on the
edge of an
unknown
abyss*

*Dialogue
between
Leszek
Kolakowski
& Danny
Postel*

metaphysical yearnings, metaphysical needs are still with us, and whenever we try to formulate them, they either fall apart or we run into contradictions. There is no good solution. That's our predicament.

DP: Do you see any way out of that predicament?

LK: No. We're living in a world which is, after all, ruled by Manichaeism, hostile gods.