

Ambiguity of the West and contemporary challenges for politics and education

Andrzej Maciej KANIOWSKI

The West: Concept, Narrative and Politics
December 8–9, 2016, University of Jyväskylä

Ways of looking for an identity of the West

A prior question which have to be responded before we start to discuss the question of ambiguity of the West is the question about a possible identity of the West. But one can legitimately ask if looking for an identity of the West is an at all reasonable and justified tusk? Joseph de Maistre is famous among other for his apparently brilliant phrase: “In my lifetime I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc.; thanks to Montesquieu, I even know that *one can be a Persian*. But, as for *man*, I declare that I have never in my life met him; If he exists, he is unknown to me”.¹ If the only form of identity is a national one and the West consists of many different nations then there couldn't be any identity of the West; for identity, according to this approach, is anchored in belonging to an organic community – to a community bound by organic social bonds. Since there are no social ties uniting people of the West into an organic community, there couldn't be any identity of the West.

Such a conclusion is not agreeable to everyone. There still exist, of course, many different ways and there are many attempts to fix the identity of the West. It is made by scientists and intellectuals who identified themselves with the western tradition (there usually refer to the Christian or the logocentric tradition); but it is also made by average people participating in actual political quarrels and debates (like for example the opponents of allowing the immigrants to settle in their country); an interesting way or perspective of fixing the identity of the West is opened by the critics of the West and thinkers perceiving the West from an external position, from the position which is critical towards the West (on the one hand it is a position of the “Russian soul” criticising the rationality destroying Christian spirituality and on the other hand it

¹ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, translated by Richard A. Lebrun, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and London 1974, p. 97..

is the position an internal critics, for example a critics of the European metaphysic delivered by Martin Heidegger).

An alternative way

An alternative way of looking for the Identity of the West was offered by Tadeusz Kroński (1907–1958). He elaborated it in the time of Nazi-German occupation of Poland (1942–1943). Kroński accepts the plurality of tradition and plurality of worldviews: “Europe and the quality of being European (*europajskość*) is not [...] connected with any one determined worldview and contains a huge plurality of extremely contradictory streams which does not show any «common feature» which could be fixed by a concept analysis. And if they does have any basic *commune* than it is not any «common feature» but a basic intention which we will fix only then when we grasp what is the fascism and what is its aim”.²

Fascism is a quite special world view which differs from anyone other world view and any other political, philosophical or social theory. A crucial, a constitutive role for this worldview does not have any content, any concept or any idea; the constitutive feature consists in the way of putting any “truth” or “idea” chosen by the fascist. Fascism eliminates according to Kroński a human being, a human individual and raises an over-humane abstract (for instance *raison d’etat* or nation) to an absolute.

Upon a detailed analysis of the fascism as a product of European tradition (which for this tradition is more danger than any attack on Europe by an outer enemy of this tradition) gives Kroński an exhaustive account of European tradition and of the quality of being European. A special relevance is attached to the consciousness of a great variety of this tradition and of its

² Tadeusz Kroński, *Faszyzm a tradycja europejska* (Facism and the European tradition), in: Tadeusz Kroński, *Rozważania wokół Hegla*, Warszawa 1958, p. 293.

fateful history. A distinguishing mark of this quality of being European is also the orientation on human being and human life (not on a value raised to an absolute). Indirectly Kroński indicates also on rationality, on looking for truth and looking for arguments as fundamental characteristics of European tradition and the quality of being European.

The conclusions which have to be drawn from the presented analysis are clear and simple. Preservation of European tradition demands (1) a sensibility for attempts to raise any value to an absolute, (2) an education which gives a sense for fatefulness and diversity of European history and (3) politics which weakens and debilitates movements attempting to grant to a certain value an absolute stance.