

ACADEMIA

DIFFERENCES ARE INEVITABLE



BRIEFLY SPEAKING

PROF. JERZY SZACKI

“We can see that all the recent predictions of a better future for the world are largely misguided. It is no longer certain even that the Cold War is definitively a thing of the past,” says **Jerzy Szacki**, a historian of ideas and sociologist, a professor emeritus of the University of Warsaw, and an ordinary member of the Polish Academy of Sciences.



ACADEMIA: You are a Varsovian, born and bred.

Where did you go to high school?

JERZY SZACKI: My biography has been educationally very diverse. Indeed, I attended an unbelievable number of schools.

Why was that?

It so happened that I went to about four or five high schools. Right after the war, there were only two. One for adults, on Polna Street, the other on Hoża Street, known as the Stefan Żeromski Secondary School for Working-Class Youth. I had started working when I was 15 years old. That was more or less when the uprising broke out.

Were you in Warsaw during the uprising?

Yes, in the Old Town. I didn't fight. I extinguished fires and buried the dead. I did what needed to be done.

Did you use the sewers to get out of the Old Town?

No. When the Old Town fell, we civilians were hurried to Pruszków. After several kilometers, several other people and I were made to carry the injured to the hospital on Płocka Street. After that, we were locked in a church in the Wola district. Three or four days later, I was taken into a roving labor camp together with several dozen randomly gathered people. The camp was located in various places in Warsaw for longer or shorter periods of time: in the courts in Leszno, in the Palladium movie theater, in the barracks at the corner of Rakowiecka and Puławska Streets, and later in the Społem warehouses on Wolska Street. I watched Warsaw being decimated and destroyed. When the city was set free, I found, though not without difficulty, the relatives I still had. Also, I started working full time, because I had gotten used to being an adult and I wanted to have my own money. Things stayed that way; I only changed jobs. At first, I was a locksmith and then I got a desk job. My first employment was at a workshop on Nowogrodzka Street, where we used the remnants of old telephones to make ones that were almost new. I worked there for nearly two years. After that, I worked in the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in the Construction Materials Trading Company, and elsewhere. After that, when I was finishing my degree, I got a job as an assistant at the university. So I went through a long line of jobs before I could finally retire.

You went to study sociology in 1948. Why did you choose that field?

In a sense, that was a coincidence. For many years, I didn't even think about studying anywhere else than the university of technology. I went to a high school with an extended curriculum in mathematics and physics and I was preparing to study architecture. But it turned out that it was impossible to combine study at the university of technology and gainful employment. So I started to look for less challenging studies. I ultimately chose sociology, although I didn't know much about it, maybe slightly more than today's candidates for students, because I was reading an awful lot of books, although there was not so much to read back then. I found sociology interesting.

What was the topic of your doctoral dissertation?

In a sense, the same as that of my master's thesis, because it included a large chapter on Mochnacki. In addition, several other chapters on what was referred to as the romantic turn. After alterations, the dissertation was published as *Ojczyzna, naród, rewolucja* ["Country, Nation, Revolution"] in 1962.

As young students of sociology, we learned from your book "History of Sociological Thought." Did the English version come out first?

Yes, but that was a mad idea.

Why?

For many reasons. Finding a good translator was actually not the most difficult thing. First, sending any typescript abroad required the censorship authority's permission, which was something you could obtain on the basis of relevant permissions from the university. No one caused trouble, but I had to write many applications and go to different places, because the book was thick and I gave it to the publisher in installments. I discovered, though not immediately, that I could easily sidestep that ordeal by simply going to the post office without any official stamps. Secondly, I needed a lot of typing paper but it was constantly in short supply in communist-era Poland. Still worse, the paper size had to comply with American standards, so I had to go to a bookbinder to have the sheets properly cut down. Third, I had to do my fair share of tracking down English quotes and obtaining permissions to use them, which was not easy in Warsaw. Clearly, I also needed a good English-savvy typist, and so on. There were a lot more problems of this sort. If I had known, I would not have started that project.

What is your take on what is happening in Poland these days? Can we use the old categories to analyze ongoing changes in Poland and in the world?

Quite often, the old concepts and categories people are accustomed to have become quite useless and inadequate. However, I have the impression that this process has recently gathered pace very rapidly, both in Poland and worldwide. We still use the same words that came into use in the 19th and 20th century, but we're less certain that we are still talking about the same things. Even if Poland has not changed as much as it sometimes seems to have, the present-day world is undergoing fundamental and increasingly unpredictable changes.

What do you mean?

Above all, a disruption of the balanced stability that emerged during the Cold War and afterwards, when we seemed to be witnessing the alleged "end of history," encouraging us to anticipate successive phases of democratization, benefits brought by the market economy, efforts to resolve conflicts, international cooper-

” It would be nonsensical to say that nationalism has ended; it is the only ideology that truly remains alive.

So much so that you are now considered one of the people who influenced the Warsaw school of the history of ideas.

That's a different story, to some extent. I would probably not have become a historian of ideas, if it had not been for the fact that sociology was discontinued as a "bourgeois discipline" back when I started studying it. So my wife and I were the last year of students of sociology. I was allowed to complete my studies according to the pre-war curriculum and get a degree in a non-existent profession, but I had to do something else later on. That something turned out to be the history of philosophy and sociological thought. That's what it was called back then. For that matter, I focused more on the history of sociological thought than on sociology per se, although I had already some experience in field research. My sociology teachers appreciated those interests.

What faculty did you graduate from?

The newly-established Faculty of Philosophy. Incidentally, when I was a university student, sociology, just like philosophy and history, was merely one of the programs of study offered by the huge Faculty of Humanities; it was not a separate faculty or institute. It was reestablished at the University of Warsaw in 1957 as a result of the October "thaw." It so happened that Prof. Nina Assorodobraj-Kula, who was one of its main initiators of its reestablishment, concluded that I would make a good research assistant. I made my debut at her side as a deputy assistant and I wrote my master's thesis on Maurycy Mochnacki. She was in charge of the Section for the History of Sociological Thought. In time, I became her successor.

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ation, and many other good things that seemed likely. Indeed, a lot has changed for the better in certain fields. However, that optimism proved largely exaggerated, both because communism was not the only source of all evil in the world and because what replaced it was not necessarily good and permanent in a dependable way. Of course, another thing that proved extremely illusory was the conviction that market development would be inevitably followed by political change in the spirit of liberal democracy and that capitalism had the miraculous ability, if not to avoid crises, then at least to self-correct. Either way, wherever you look, you can see that all the recent forecasts of a fundamentally better future for the world are largely misguided and it is no longer certain even that the Cold War is definitively a thing of the past.

Before the Polish presidential election of 2015, we seemed to be living in a stable country, one that had chosen the path of democracy and liberal development. But it turned out that we were in a completely different place.

Yes, a major change is taking place in this respect. It was probably inevitable to some degree, but it surely didn't have to, and still doesn't have to, look the way it looks. Liberal democracy seemed to have taken root in our country to a lesser or greater degree. I thought this would last until it fell apart on some general European scale. I guess I was wrong.

What is it that we have, then? Still a democracy?

Democracy has multiple meanings. There are different types and degrees of democracy. Wherever elections are held, civil liberties exist, people can express criticism without risking punishment, we can maintain this is a democracy. In this sense, for example, Putin's Russia is by all means a democracy. Elections are held, certain freedoms exist, the government has substantial support from the sovereign nation, and so on. We don't have to like Russia's "sovereign democracy," but this is after all something different from the former Soviet-style oppression, perversely referred to as a "socialist democracy." In Poland, we certainly have incomparably more democracy than in Russia. I'd even say we have quite a lot of it. However, we are quickly losing the certainty that things will stay so, based on a conviction that democratization is an irreversible process and even a natural, inescapable, and worldwide phenomenon.

Nevertheless, we have the sense that this democracy is not a Western democracy.

That's because it's not a Western democracy. We have just started to learn Western democracy. I don't know what grade we are in, but we have a long way to go before we can graduate from this school. Also, we are less willing to learn and it's increasingly difficult to find good teachers.

What are the reasons why the situation is so shaky?

Please don't demand too much of me. To answer that, we'd need too much time to talk not only about what we lack and what we've done wrong but also about what is happening in the world, possibly also about human nature. Today's anxiety doesn't have a single cause and doesn't affect just us. Western democracies, which we admire so much, are no longer so safe from political madness as they recently appeared to be. Who knows what surprising things will happen to them? This holds true even for the American democracy, with its great institutions and much richer experience.

Should we begin to fear for Poland's future?

Certainly, we have reasons to be afraid. These especially include the victory of the belief that the ruling majority can do anything, because "the will of the people" is above the law. Such belief is extremely dangerous in practice – sooner or later it leads to society being divided into "the people" and "the enemies of the people," who only deserve to be punished, because they advocate foreign interests. Of course, I'm not saying we are just one step away from Jacobin democracy, but I'm afraid that we've been headed in a certain direction for some time, thus drifting further and further away from Western liberal democracy.

” Since there is now a notion that if someone wins elections he can do anything, **things in Poland are as they are.**

We are faced with one-man rule and the feigned distribution of other roles. There are tendencies to control the system of propaganda, at least in the state-owned media. We can see a return to statism and the emergence of various characteristics of classic ideologies, including fascism.

I'm very reluctant to invoke such general concepts, because they usually cause strong emotional reactions, rarely sparking off any serious considerations of what they pertain to. I'm afraid of easy associations, although they do come to my mind and they are not always completely senseless.

Have old definitions lost their meaning?

They have lost their meaning or they are losing it, because they were largely formed a long time ago, so they take no account of how often traditional divisions become blurred or overlap and new divisions emerge. For example, the concepts of the "right" and "left" wing once indeed organized social imagination. Today, however, it is easier to find someone cursing the former or the latter than someone who can easily explain what the terms

mean. Epithets, platitudes, and insinuations are enough. For that matter, the language of politics is generally used very carelessly, with barely anyone thinking about what they are saying. I know I'm exaggerating, because if we listen carefully, we will hear also other voices, but they're not the ones that are setting the tone. Usually, the short-term objective is to win votes, not to say something wise and truly persuade someone to back a major long-term project. In fact, we usually know who will say what or even what phrases they will use.

Nevertheless, reducing social inequality remains one of the agenda objectives of the left wing, too.

Of course, we can list many issues without which we can't imagine the left wing, but many of them ceased to be its distinguishing features as the right wing became adapted to the modern era. We can also list changes that the left wing underwent when it rose to power in a particular country. Egalitarianism is a very important and inalienable component of good left-wing traditions, but first of all the left wing doesn't have any monopoly on this slogan. Secondly, it has often compromised the ideals of equality by creating new systems of inequality and murky oligarchies, which were effectively brought to light by the right wing, which no longer praised such hierarchies and was increasingly skilled at using social slogans. That is one of the many reasons why our pre-conceived ideological patterns prove unreliable.

Does the outcome of Poland's last election prove that there is less and less tolerance for inequality?

I think it above all proves that there are more and more people who see their situation as hopeless, although this is generally not pre-war poverty or the poverty that affects many inhabitants of the modern world, who are in fact in a lot worse situation. Such people had the right to demand more and to hope for the "good change" that had been promised to them. In particular, young people probably didn't have much to lose or at least didn't have to know how many things could be spoiled or how easily this could be done.

Young people have chosen Jarosław Kaczyński and Kukiz's party.

Well, yes, they have fallen for what are often empty words, national and social platitudes, which often disguise a rather anachronistic view of the world that is completely at odds with the modern-day reality. Unfortunately, these words appeal to the souls of the Poles who are unhappy and, in the opinion of many people, disadvantaged.

There are more and more stances invoking the national identity on both sides of the barricade. Both camps, supporters of the party Law and Justice (PiS) and those who support the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD), are eager to use flags and national symbols and to accuse each other of betraying the nation. Why is that?

Nationalism in the broad sense covers something more than what we usually stigmatize as nationalism, when we mean what is referred to as integral nationalism.



Prof. Jerzy Szacki (born in 1929) is a sociologist and a scholar of the history of ideas. For over 30 years, he headed the Section of the History of Sociological Thought at the Institute of Sociology, University of Warsaw. He was a member of the Board of the Polish Sociological Association (PTS) for many years and served as its president in the years 1972–1976. He is a member of the Warsaw Scientific Society (TNW) and a founding member of the Society for the Advancement and Promotion of Science. He has lectured at various universities worldwide, including the University of Minnesota, the University of Oxford, and the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. His numerous scientific publications include *Ojczyzna, naród, rewolucja: problematyka narodowa w polskiej myśli szlacheckorewolucyjnej* ["Country, Nation, Revolution: National Questions in the Thought of Polish Revolutionary Nobility"] (1962), *Durkheim* (1964), *Utopie* ["Utopias"] (1968), *Kontrewolucyjne paradoksy* ["Counter-Revolutionary Paradoxes"] (1965, 2nd edition: 2012), *Tradycja. Przegląd problematyki* ["Tradition: An Overview of Questions"] (1971, 2nd corrected edition: 2011), *Spotkania z utopią* ["Encounters With Utopia"] (1980, 2nd edition: 2000), *Znaniecki* (1986), *Liberalizm po komunizmie* ["Liberalism After Communism"] (1994). His *History of Sociological Thought*, a book of fundamental importance, was published first in English by Greenwood Press (1979) then in Polish by PWN (1981, 1983); a new edition that includes the most recent concepts was published in 2003 (winning the Prize of the Foundation for Polish Science in social sciences and humanities). Together with his mother Barbara, he received the award "Righteous Among the Nations" for hiding Irena Holender and her two children in the years 1942–1944. He was awarded the Commander's Cross With Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta in 2008. He received an honorary doctorate from the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in 2009, and the University of Warsaw celebrated the 50th-anniversary republication of his doctorate thesis in 2010.

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Even so, nationalism is the only great ideology of the 20th century that remains alive on an enormous scale. Any politician who has ever tried to fight against nationalism or persistently ignored it sooner or later came to realize this. One's nation is a very important dimension of human identity and potentially the focus of very strong emotions, both good and bad.

But why are witnessing a return to nationalism as something that binds together members of a group?

Human beings are herd animals, so they can't live without a sense of belonging to something greater than family, friends, and neighbors, a sense of being part of a large community. Especially if there is nothing else, no other large community that plays a comparable role. That won't change any time soon. Clearly, this doesn't mean that a nation should be closed off and isolated, like a tribe.

It seemed that the European Union, the freedom of movement, and the example set by multicultural countries, would lead to a decline in nationalism and xenophobia in Poland.

There are not necessarily any indications this will happen, although it is increasingly difficult to imagine a society that is perfectly homogenous in every respect, a cultural or moral and political monolith, something that both the left and the right have often dreamed about. People and cultures have mixed since the beginning of the world, so multiculturalism, in some sense or another, has largely become a fact in our globalizing world and it can't be reversed, just because it has certain alarming consequences. We must get used to this fact, although it may be indeed difficult.

We must also get used to the world being...

...chaotic, unstable, and divided.

But are these developments not shaking the belief that every change should be for the better?

It has often seemed to us, or at least to me, that something is changing for the better. That was how I experienced October 1956, then the year 1980, and 1989.

What about Poland's accession to the EU in 2004?

I of course thought we were entering a new era! That was, and still is, a great opportunity. Even if we had many illusions back then, the fundamental direction was chosen well. But things look very bad now.

Is that because of the wave of refugees in Europe?

The refugee issue, something we in Poland have mainly just heard about, has surely been blown out of proportion. That's because major human migrations fit into what is historically normal and because the general anxiety we currently feel started to grow even earlier for

many other reasons. The financial crisis upset the world order even before masses of people from the Middle East started migrating north and northwest.

Let's get back to the situation in Poland. What scenario is possible? We have had several peaceful demonstrations organized by the Committee for the Defense of Democracy, but there are fears that another march may meet with aggression on the part of its opponents.

Unfortunately, everything has become possible in Poland, because there is mounting anger and no willingness to engage in dialog. I don't think this will change anytime soon, because no one has to talk yet.

A friend recently told me that things now feel like the political crisis back in March 1968. Do you feel that, too?

Indeed, the year 1968 sometimes comes to my mind as the best example of a "cultural revolution" I know, not only because of growing hostility but also because of rhetorical similarities in the ways of dealing with opponents, even certain surprising similarities to arguments against the Targowica Confederation. The kind of "March chatter" Głowiński so excellently analyzed in one his books is indeed very audible now. But nothing essentially results from the way I or others "feel," because history is filled with similar analogies and propaganda clichés that go beyond divisions.

We recently commemorated another anniversary of the March events. How do you remember that period? Where were you back then?

On Krakowskie Przedmieście Street in Warsaw. My situation was good, because I was vice dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and the dean was absent for the first days.

On the corner of Traugutta Street?

Yes, an excellent observation point, because the window overlooked the street. It was an unpleasant view, and unpleasant, absolute helplessness in a situation in which something needed to be done immediately. I think I did everything I could and should do, but that is not a period I like to recall, because my efforts were usually unsuccessful. I prefer to recall the years 1980 and 1989, for example.

Will we witness another autumn of the nations, new revolutions, new eruptions, changes in this part of the world?

I wouldn't dare to predict anything, aside from the fact that many things will be happening here and elsewhere. Our future largely depends on how the global situation develops and we have limited influence over that.

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