

Reviews. Reports

Recenzje. Sprawozdania

Kamil Aksiuto, review of: *Ideologie, doktryny, ruchy społeczne i polityczne: wybrane problemy* [Ideologies, Doctrines, Social and Political Movements: Selected Issues], eds. Maria Marczewska-Rytko, Wojciech Ziętara, UMCS Press, Lublin 2015, p. 579

Our times are often said to be post-ideological. As with most words which begin with a prefix “post-” we are not entirely sure what this is supposed to mean. But it is of the utmost importance to persist in asking questions regarding the ideology and its current condition. What is to be understood by this term? What, if anything, distinguishes ideology from political doctrine? Is the ideological bias a distorting but ultimately contingent feature of our thinking or is it a necessary and irrevocable aspect of the latter? What is the difference between ideological and scientific claims? What is the role of ideological phenomena in the activities of social and political movements? These and similar questions are vital not only to any serious political science but have much broader implications. The articles collected in the volume edited by Professor Maria Marczewska-Rytko and Professor Wojciech Ziętara bear testimony to this in more than one way.

What is immediately noticeable about the book is its sheer scope. Not only did the scholars from quite an impressive number of scientific establishments contribute to the volume, but they also analyzed a wide variety of ideologies, doctrines as well as social and political movements. Yet the book is clearly structured, divided into three parts: 1) devoted to the theoretical issues in this field of study; 2) dealing with political ideologies and doctrines; 3) focusing mainly on social and political movements as well as political parties. As it is often the case with publications of this kind, the quality of individual articles can vary significantly. Moreover, due to the ambitious scope of the volume, I must be very selective and restrict myself to a few seemingly scattered remarks provoked by some of the contributions. This does not do justice to many other articles collected here, but I trust that an attentive reader will discover them on his/her own.

Let us go back to the question of the allegedly post-ideological character of the contemporary politics. The best known and the most influential variant of the “end of ideology” thesis

has been repeatedly advanced at the very least since the middle of the 20th century. The crux of the argument seems to be a fairly simple one: major ideologies which were written on the banners of the great social and political movements in the period between (roughly) 1800 and 1950 have completely exhausted themselves. And, admittedly, there is something which rings true about this diagnosis. There can be no doubt that great traditional ideologies like: conservatism, liberalism and socialism have found it very difficult to adapt to the needs of the changing contemporary societies. It is often argued that they can no longer compete for the hearts and minds of individuals and social groups in quite the same way they used to (and in some cases at all). Professor Krzysztof Zuba, in the opening chapter of the volume, rightly points out that this exhaustion is reflected in the recent phenomenon of “march towards the centre” exhibited by the parties which not so far ago occupied positions on the opposing poles of the political spectrum [pp. 23–24]. To this one might add a familiar thought concerning an intimate relation between ideology and violence. After the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps and Soviet gulags it is hardly possible not to become distrustful of ideologies in general. Even liberalism, despite not being stained by similar crimes to the ones committed by Nazism or communism, did not emerge unscathed from the alleged “post-ideological turn”. After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc it indeed enjoyed a relatively short period of triumph and seemed like the only strong ideological competitor left in the field. However, liberalism soon found itself simultaneously under attack on multiple fronts, both in the countries from which it originated and in those which have only recently undergone a wholesale transition towards liberal democracy. What is even more striking is an often tacit loss of confidence in liberal institutions and the principles which they are supposed to embody, dissatisfaction felt by the common citizens in their everyday life. And this is also unsurprising given that several decades ago Jean-François Lyotard defined post-modernity as “incredulity towards meta-narratives”. In so far as we still want to think about ourselves as postmodernist *bourgeois* we will be inclined to be incredulous about all the great stories, even those which promise us emancipation and progress.

The fate of Polish liberalism, or rather of liberalism in Poland – as Professor Danuta Plecka would have it – merits particular attention. I must note a methodological difference. According to Professor Plecka, liberalism is an inherently diverse branch of political thought, yet one distinguished from others by the paramount importance it gives to certain set of values, especially to individual liberty [pp. 186–187]. I have no quarrel with stressing the diversity of liberalism, I would go further than that. First of all, treating all different kinds and strands of liberalism as variations of some unchanging liberal ideal (however open to contending interpretations this ideal might be) seems rather unhistorical to me. I remain skeptical about this approach which, in my opinion, amounts to watered down essentialism. Furthermore, it is not enough to note that there are various interpretations of individual liberty, those differences are quite often so great that one might wonder whether their proponents are talking about the same thing. Few concepts are as malleable as liberty and thus I see all attempts to define liberalism as assigning special priority to it as doomed to fail. In my view, an approach drawing on the Wittgensteinian *family resemblance* concept would be more advisable, in liberalism’s case at any rate. But there is also a more substantial contention at stake here. Professor Plecka rightly stresses that in the early years of the democratic transition, Polish liberals concentrated on the economic aspects of what they thought to be quintessential to liberalism. They were guilty of dogmatically and naively assuming that once the foundations of the capitalist economy were in place, Polish society will almost automatically learn to appreciate political freedom and cultural diversity – “the rest will

take care of itself". This exclusive focus on the economic liberty was not only to the detriment of political and cultural aspects of liberalism. Polish liberals also neglected the value of solidarity and orchestrated the economic reforms which proved to be very costly for certain social groups. This, in turn, led to the reintroduction of "we-them" division in the society which was easy to exploit by opponents of liberalism. I agree that these two processes are closely connected, yet I am not sure whether I share the view of this connection. Professor Plecka claims that the emergence of Civic Platform was followed by a significant shift in the rhetoric of Polish liberals, as they learned to appreciate categories such as solidarity and common good [pp. 192–193]. This is contestable in itself, but even granted that this is true, I still have some doubts whether this account adequately captures the dynamics of the political process. Even if the proponents of liberalism in Poland had been more courageous in advancing the value of individual freedom not only in the sphere of economics, they would have still been fairly easily outbid in the field of social solidarity by their opponents. This is unsurprising given many factors, including the influence of Catholic Church in the Polish society. The outcome of the last parliamentary and presidential elections in retrospect also seems to provide some ground for this suspicion. That we would have a higher quality, more self-aware and mature liberalism is however something we can happily agree on.

Nevertheless, I need to stress that the reviewed publication is by no means exclusively or even primarily devoted to liberalism. It includes valuable articles which deal with social democracy, contemporary *green utopianism*, neopaganism to name just a few. Trusting that the book will receive appropriate attention I would like to conclude by going back to the beginning. "The end of ideology" thesis might seem *prima facie* plausible. Yet there is no need to try to prove something which everyone thinks obvious. The very fact that this thesis is being repeatedly advanced, defended and reformulated obviously does not make it false. Yet it suggests that we inhabit a world which is a good deal less post-ideological than some of us would like to think. Furthermore, in my opinion, there are good reasons to assume that this thesis is itself an ideological phenomenon, at least in the sense of precluding certain questions from being asked. The lesson to be drawn from the reviewed volume is therefore a familiar one – to remain cautious not only of what is being said, but also who says it and in what circumstances.