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Society open to values. A proposition of a modification of Karl Popper’s social theory in the spirit of Isaiah Berlin’s ethical pluralism

The aim of the present article is to present a proposition of enriching the axiological aspect of Karl Popper’s political thought¹ in the spirit of Isaiah Berlin’s ethical pluralism² for it seems that the greatest weakness of Popper’s theory of an open society is not the obsolete nature of the postulated solutions, their impracticality or else the excessively theoretical nature of the conducted analyses, which their author had often been blamed for. The afore-mentioned frailty reveals itself in Popper’s adoption of scientific optics which had led him to the construction of a strictly procedural political theory that had almost dogmatically ignored values. In my opinion, it is excessive formalism that turns the above conception into a potential object of a number of serious objections. Therefore the proposition of introducing modifications into Popper’s political theory, particularly as regards its “deformalization” and an “opening-up” to a certain axiological minimum, should significantly strengthen this idea, making it more impervious to various voices of criticism.

Moreover, I am of the opinion that the only ethical perspective which seems to correspond well with Karl Popper’s social thought is that of the pluralism of

¹ See: K. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1: *The Spell of Plato*, vol. 2: *The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath*, London 1945.

² See: I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, London 1990; *idem*, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford 1969; *idem*, *The Roots of Romanticism*, London 1999; I. Berlin, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Unfinished Dialogue*, Amherst 2006.

values; it had been initiated by Isaiah Berlin and was subsequently developed, among others by Joseph Raz and John Gray. It is precisely in this “spirit” that the axiologization of Popper’s political philosophy will be conducted.

What served as the source of inspiration for the present article were the words of John Gray, one of the most outstanding political philosophers of the 20th century, who in an interview with Beata Polanowska-Sygulska had stated: “I think that in Poland and in Eastern Europe you will need a “berlinized” Popperism”³.

Furthermore, it is worth emphasizing that while presenting a proposition of axiologization of Karl Popper’s political theory, I shall rely not only on the works and life achievement of Isaiah Berlin, but will refer to the reflection of two other, outstanding thinkers, namely Zygmunt Bauman and Leszek Kołakowski. For it seems that despite the fact that all of them present radically different optics and often conduct their analyses on starkly different planes, one may identify a certain common dimension of their reflections. Namely, they are all antimonists and anti-relativists, which is of fundamental importance from the point of view of the studies conducted by me.

The eponymous intention of strengthening and reinvigorating Popper’s political theory through inscribing it into the pluralist ethical perspective may be realized on two separate planes – an individual and an institutional one.

Let us start with the former. On the pages of *The Open Society*, the Viennese scholar paints an image of a free people, whose future is undetermined, as they shape it thanks to the strength of their autonomous decisions. What unites them is a common institutional framework. The attitude of the above-mentioned free subjects is characterized by criticism towards all authorities (including the moral ones), taboos, prejudices, myths or beliefs. In an open society there are no “sanctities” – every belief which is based on rational foundations may be questioned; every dogma can be undermined. For as the philosopher maintains, “All human knowledge is fallible and therefore uncertain”⁴. Therefore, people should doubt everything they encounter along their intellectual life path, for as the philosopher says: “even when we have taken the greatest care, we cannot be

³ B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Koniec ery liberalizmu?*, [in:] *idem, Rozmowy z oksfordzkimi filozofami*, Kraków 2011, p. 87. Referring to Gray’s words, Berlin stated: “I have nothing against it. I think that social engineering is an excellent piece of advice”. Yet, at the same time, he expressed a conviction that “sometimes the method of trials and errors is not a good way out”. See: *idem, Nihil desperandum*, [in:] *Rozmowy...*, p. 46.

⁴ K. Popper, *Knowledge and the shaping of reality: the search for a better world*, [in:] *idem, In search of a better world: lectures and essays from thirty years*, London and New York 2000, p. 4.

completely certain that we have not made a mistake”⁵. Therefore questioning the existing order appears to us as desirable for it is conducive to growth – to the creation of better rules, models or institutions.

What is important, on the basis of Popper’s conception, is that members of the society do not constitute a uniform monolith, but to paraphrase Bauman – are immersed in a polytheistic world”⁶, in which there predominates an attitude of tolerance towards different values and life goals. In this way, differences of opinion, contentions and conflicts are unavoidable in it. The Viennese thinker fully accepts this fact claiming that a critical debate constitutes an immanent feature of openness, not only without standing in opposition to it, but in fact reinforcing it. All progress is possible exclusively thanks to the critical exchange of rational arguments.

At this point, it is worth making a certain digression and shed light, even in the briefest possible way, on Isaiah Berlin’s ethical perspective, popularly known as pluralism of values which arose, as it were, in opposition to two trends in ethics which stood in opposition to it, namely monism and relativism.

The common stem of monistic optics consists of Plato’s idealism (according to the philosopher, it was Plato who was the first systematic ethical monist⁷) and three hypotheses which follow directly from it, in accordance with which:

1. To each question – both as regards the sphere of natural sciences and ethical issues – there exists only one true answer;
2. It is possible to discover “a path which leads (...) to the correct answers”⁸. In other words, the truth is within the scope of human cognitive abilities;
3. All true answers to the properly posed questions are consistent with one another and either form a coherent system of logical inferences or at least a non-contradictory and hierarchical entity, at the top of which one finds a certain supreme value.

The philosopher adds that the supporters of monism are of the opinion that by applying the guidelines contained in the ethical norms, one may lead a perfect life from the moral point of view⁹. As Beata Polanowska-Sygulska emphasizes in

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ See: Z. Bauman, S. Obirek, *O Bogu i człowieku. Rozmowy*, Kraków 2013, p. 10.

⁷ See: R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, London 1993, p. 56–57.

⁸ I. Berlin, *The First and the Last*, “The New York Review of Books”, vol. XLV, 1998, 14 May, no 8, p. 54.

⁹ “Plato, Aristotle, the Bible, the Talmud, Maimonides, perhaps Aquinas, and other Scholastics of the Middle Ages, knew what was the best life of men. (...) I am not so privileged.” R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, p. 32.

this context “as soon as the answers to the deepest human dilemmas are puttogether to form a harmonious whole (...), the obtained result will provide a harmonious solution to all problems of human existence”¹⁰.

Whereas according to Berlin, relativism is a doctrine in the light of which ethics constitutes an expression of conventional, purely subjective preferences and “the judgment of a man or a group (...) is simply what it is, with no objective correlate which determines its truth or falsehood”¹¹. Therefore, in the light of this perspective, one cannot speak of true or false moral convictions. What is more, as Berlin adds, on the basis of this perspective, there is no common plane which would enable mutual understanding. Everything is a matter of social conventions and individual preferences or tastes, whereas as the popular saying declares, tastes are not to be disputed. Berlin definitely rejects this perspective, in the light of which, as Leszek Kołakowski colorfully illustrates in one of his essays, “the difference between a vegetarian and a cannibal is only a matter of taste”¹².

Pluralism constitutes a specific attempt to come out of the two aforementioned trends. A supporter of this perspective assumes that “there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathizing and deriving light from each other”¹³. In the light of this perspective, ultimate values have an objective character and are *quasi-universal*¹⁴ and cognizable. Therefore, they are not a matter of convention or an expression of purely subjective feelings. Importantly, the very concept of “ultimate goals” is understood very broadly by Berlin¹⁵ who includes among the latter not only those valuable ones, but also the undesirable, or even the harmful options. Moreover, he maintains that sometimes the goals are

¹⁰ B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Pluralizm wartości i jego implikacje w filozofii prawa*, Kraków 2008, p. 56.

¹¹ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, p. 80.

¹² L. Kołakowski, *Bałochwalstwo polityki*, [in:] *idem, Cywilizacja na ławie oskarżonych*, Warszawa 1990, p. 245.

¹³ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, p. 11.

¹⁴ Such is also the opinion of Beata Polanowska-Sygulska who expresses a conviction that “(...) the most adequate definition of Berlin’s viewpoint as regards the issue of the universal dimension of a moral minimum seems to be “*quasi-universalism*”, the term which the philosopher himself uses at times. On the grounds of the philosopher’s reflection (...) the universal dimension of the common canon of values (...) does not have an *a priori* but by its very nature a contingent character”, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Pluralizm wartości*, p. 69.

¹⁵ Which seems to constitute the biggest difference between this vision and the perfectionist conception of Joseph Raz who narrows down the pluralist choice exclusively to the so called goods, that is valuable options.

disproportionate¹⁶; some cannot be reconciled with one another, some are non-reducible to others, they do not form a hierarchically ordered structure or a coherent system of inferences. Yet their number is finite, as it is limited by human constitution¹⁷. In this way, by observing their variety, people are able to understand them all¹⁸, whereas this enables them to reach mutual understanding. Berlin sums up this fragment of his reflections with the words: “Pluralism entails that, since it is possible that no final answers can be given to moral and political questions, or indeed any questions about value, (...) room must be made for a life in which some values may turn out to be incompatible”¹⁹. It seems therefore that thanks to the empathic ability inscribed in the pluralist perspective, the latter is well harmonized with values such as tolerance²⁰ and respect for being different.

In my opinion, neither monism nor ethical relativism is reconcilable with the above-described idea of openness. I also think that monism particularly stands in clear opposition to the ideas that lie at the foundation of openness – that is, freedom, autonomy or responsibility for one’s own choices. One may even state that the above perspective belongs rather to the conception of a *closed society*. For monism is by its very nature exclusivist. In the light of the above ethical perspective, one cannot rationally argue for approximations to the truth – as the latter is accessible to human cognition and can only be accepted or rejected.

I am also of the opinion that it is impossible to reconcile a vision of “one truth” with the pacifistic appeal of the Viennese philosopher to exclude violence. For, as is emphasized by both Berlin and Popper, when the goal of human strivings is the “holy truth” – everything else loses its significance and no price

¹⁶ In Berlin’s writings, one may only come across a very general notion of disproportionateness. Whereas the above concept is more fully developed by another pluralist, Raz who in *The Morality of Freedom* presents a conception of disproportionateness as a notion of incomparability of values. “According to his conception values A and B are disproportionate if neither of them is better than the other, nor are they equal to one another”, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Pluralizm wartości*, p. 103.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

¹⁸ “Incompatible these ends may be; but their variety cannot be unlimited, for the nature of men, however various and subject to change, must possess some generic character if it is to be called human at all”, I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, p. 80.

¹⁹ R. Jahanbegloo, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, London, p. 44.

²⁰ In this context Polanowska-Sygulska states that although in the light of Berlin’s philosophy “no direct conclusions can be reached from the pluralism of values as such (...), [yet – K. S.] a convinced pluralist will have a natural predilection to practice tolerance”, B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Pluralizm wartości*, p. 217. Whereas according to Berlin, this leads “in the direction of loosely understood liberal values (...)”, *ibidem*.

seems too high to pay. The attainment of the ideal recompenses all the costs that have to be paid along the way. It also seems that ethical relativism in no way fits the vision of Popper's openness. In his writings the Viennese thinker emphasizes his aversion to this perspective on numerous occasions, among others by stressing that *The Open society* had been devised by him as a weapon in the struggle against ethical relativism.

In my view, it is only the ethical pluralism of human goals and values that harmonizes with the social theory of the Viennese philosopher. Characteristically, it seems that the liberal views of both Popper and Berlin correspond to one other quite well. The convergence of the two perspectives has been observed, among others, by Phil Parvin²¹, who mentions in this context that: "Berlin in particular shared Popper's concerns about the encroaching threat of totalitarianism and identified the same enemies to democracy as Popper; his inaugural lecture (and most famous essay) "Two Concepts of Liberty" traced the philosophical roots of totalitarianism to those thinkers like Hegel, Marx, and Rousseau (...), and other essays including "Historical Inevitability" bore all the hallmarks of Popper's work"²².

What is therefore a "berlinized" theory of an open society? It is worth emphasizing that the very isolation of a pluralist perspective constitutes an important value whose significance should not be underestimated for Berlin points to a specifically understood third way which people can follow while searching for ethical sign-posts. In this way, he gives a certain hope to all those who think that one's reaction to the inadequacy of monism and relativism should be a reduction of all axiology.

What is important is that one cannot ignore the issue of the costs which freedom, as it were inscribed in the idea of openness, carries with it. This is drawn attention to, among others, by Zygmunt Bauman in his in-depth diagnosis of contemporary times (referred to by him as the era of liquid modernity)²³. The sociologist emphasizes that the highest price to be paid for freedom is the loss of the sense of security – for in a free world, it is difficult to find authorities which will prompt one whether the decisions one has taken were truly the best possible options; there are no safe models to imitate and no safe rules to be observed which will ensure harmony in one's life. Among the other, equally high costs to be paid, he mentions the all-engulfing fear or a sense of isolation. All authorities

²¹ See: P. Parvin, *Karl Popper*, London 2010.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 111.

²³ See particularly: Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge 2013; *idem*, *Liquid Life*, Cambridge-Malden 2005; *idem*, *Freedom*, Milton Keynes 1988.

(including the moral ones) are undermined, becoming, as Bauman puts it, only “advisors”²⁴, whereas free people face the difficult task of having to make choices and taking full responsibility for their erroneous decisions. People today are free – as Bauman puts it – and no one will take pity on them²⁵.

In my opinion, the pluralist ethical perspective carries with it a spark of hope for the above somber picture of reality. In the light of the “berlinized” version of Popper’s philosophy, there still remains a conviction that it is freedom which constitutes the foundation of this ideology, yet people are assured of a certain degree of support in the shape of the hypothesis that certain objective values do exist. For it seems that Popper had made rationality the only criterion of solving all dilemmas. Yet as Leszek Kołakowski maintains, rationality lets one down as a criterion of differentiating between good and evil in the moral sense²⁶. In my view, ethical pluralism offers a certain solution to the above-mentioned weakness. For although the individual members of society do not receive a ready-made recipe in the shape of a clear and lucid monistic vision of happiness (which would be irreconcilable with openness), they gain an important assurance that objectively there exists “something more” than only rationality, which is of fundamental importance to them, whenever they come across ethical dilemmas. This, in my opinion, allows one, at least to some extent, to diminish the above-mentioned costs. Consequently, I am of the opinion that in a society which is “open to values”, a lack of security, fear, uncertainty or a sense of being lost, which are rather typical elements of Popper’s world deprived of moral road-signs, become to a large extent pushed to the margin.

What is also important is that the support which people derive from the conviction about the existence of a horizon of objective values, also means that they will not experience so strongly the typical human need to “escape into

²⁴ “Authorities no longer command; they ingratiate themselves with the chooser; they tempt and seduce.” Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 64.

²⁵ As he puts it: with every “new portion of freedom, there comes a new portion of uncertainty. I have no (...) good news, as mercy is nowhere to be found”. J. Dąbrowska, Z. Bauman, [interview] *Grzędawiska paradoksów*, “Tygodnik Powszechny”, [on-line] <http://tygodnik.onet.pl/33,0,63171,4,artykul.html>, access: 31.10.2013.

²⁶ “In the moral sense, there are no rational criteria of good and evil which would be sufficiently supported by experience and logic. Rationalists (...) are inclined to think that all people are ready to accept various fundamental values; therefore, practically what is important is the debate regarding measures and not ultimate goals (...). Yet it is nothing but an intellectual delusion.” L. Kołakowski, *Samozatrucie otwartego społeczeństwa*, [in:] *idem, Cywilizacja na ławie oskarżonych*, p. 171.

ethnicity”²⁷. What is also important and what both Popper and Bauman strongly emphasize in their reflection is that there exists a natural need for a renewal and strengthening of community bonds, which in open and liquid societies become somewhat frayed. This is stressed particularly strongly by the author of *Liquid Modernity*, who says that the feeling of isolation pushes people to adopt exclusivist models – making them close themselves off towards others and embrace nationalism, xenophobia or racism. According to Bauman, there exists a natural inclination which directs people towards communal life and when they are deprived of certain forms of this life – they assiduously strive to revitalize others. Thus, paradoxically, consistency in the sphere of granting people freedom, leads to its negation – it leads towards closing oneself to others.

What is equally characteristic is that the axiologization of the theory of an open society in the pluralistic spirit is not associated with the monistic concept of “making people happy whether they want it or not” or of imposing on them a definite constellation of values through pointing to the only just and true way which they should follow, in search of their own goal in life. In my view, it would be impossible to reconcile such a vision with the conception of the Viennese thinker. Yet ethical pluralism offers an entirely different vision; for in its light, there exist many alternative and equally valuable life paths and every man has a right to choose his own. Berlin points out that the multiplicity of sometimes mutually contradictory life options leads to the necessity of making a conscious choice which is associated with the need to forgo certain options. There is no room here for an ideal model of life which would be perfect in respect of its ethical dimension, as ethical values themselves are incommensurate and one cannot speak of some universal common denominator. This vision seems to fit in very well with Popper’s view of the human condition. For the quintessential element of openness is freedom as regards the choice of one’s goals in life. History, chance or fate, do not determine the future of free people, as this future depends exclusively on them. In my opinion, the axiologization of the theory of an open society in the pluralist spirit allows one to maintain that in the light of this whole approach, a special place is reserved for the freedom of choice, at the same time bringing out the role of objective axiology which clearly contributes to limiting the above-mentioned costs of openness.

²⁷ In this context, Bauman states that: “Sociologically speaking, communitarianism is an all-too-expected reaction to the accelerating »liquefaction« of modern life, a reaction first and foremost to the one aspect of life felt perhaps as the most vexing and annoying among its numerous painful consequences – the deepening imbalance between individual freedom and security. Supplies of security provisions shrink fast, while the volume of individual responsibilities (...) grows on a scale unprecedented for the post-war generations” Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 170.

The issue of the axiologization of Popper's political theory also seems to be of key importance from the point of view of the strengthening of the institutional aspect of the functioning of societies. When suggesting at the beginning of the nineties that Poland and the other countries of Eastern Europe should adopt "berlinized Popperism", John Gray had in mind this particular aspect. For, on the one hand, he emphasized the fact that "The task which you confront is absolutely exceptional. You have to achieve it by adopting the method of trials and errors"²⁸. According to Gray, Popper's method of "small steps" and of fragmentary reform of institutions seemed to him as much more effective than simple negation of everything that is old and of substituting it with the new. As he adds: "You must (...) construct new institutions. And you cannot expect that they will automatically flourish, once you get rid of the old ones"²⁹. The philosopher recommends a specific type of evolution in place of revolution and it is in this very aspect that he perceives a fundamental merit of Popper's conception.

On the other hand, in my opinion, Popper's political conception in its "pure" form, appears to Gray as quite shallow and naïve. Therefore, he expands on the idea of "berlinization" of the theory of an open society. The philosopher illustrates this thought with the following example:

You will say to yourselves: "We want to design such and such institutions. We shall make use of social engineering. Here are the costs which we shall have to take into consideration. We'll have to decide that this and that expense will have to be scrapped. Yet the latter decision will have to be reached after a wide democratic debate. For what else can we do if we are not satisfied with the solution a la Pinochet"³⁰

Thus, according to Gray, Popper's partial social engineer has to be fully aware of all that Isaiah Berlin teaches us about, namely the possibility of an inevitable conflict of ultimate values which people strive for while remaining fully rational, the incommensurateness of conflicting values, the necessity of sacrificing some of them in the name of the realization of others, and finally the need to make fragile and imperfect compromises, as sometimes it is the only way of mitigating conflicts and of "coming out of oppression". In other words, as Berlin himself puts it: "one cannot have everything in principle as well as in

²⁸ B. Polanowska-Sygulska, *Koniec ery liberalizmu?*, [in:] *idem, Rozmowy z oksfordzkimi filozofami*, p. 87.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

practice”³¹, whereas according to Gray, Popper seems not to notice all of these sensitive issues. For the Viennese thinker is of the opinion that it is possible to reach a good solution in every situation and that walking along the path of progress constitutes the only goal of the work of social engineers, while the specifically understood compromise comes across to him as a kind of *ultima ratio*. What is more, it seems that while Popper states only as it were incidentally that a perfect society as such is a delusion, Berlin presents a multilayered and convincing argumentation in favor of the hypothesis that “the old perennial belief in the possibility of realizing ultimate harmony is a fallacy”³².

Gray’s above-quoted remark seems to sound quite convincing. Particularly that compared to Berlin’s vision of reality, in accordance with which the world seems to one as a field of inevitable conflict between ultimate values, Popper’s optimism and uncritical faith in the future appear quite naïve, constituting a symptom of the philosopher’s specific type of *wishful thinking*. From this perspective, Berlin’s diagnosis which is summed up below, sounds much more mature:

Of course social and political collisions will take place; the mere conflict of positive values alone makes this unavoidable. Yet they can, I believe, be minimized by promoting and preserving an uneasy equilibrium, which is constantly threatened and in constant need of repair – that alone, I repeat, is the precondition for decent societies and morally acceptable behavior, otherwise we are bound to lose our way.³³

What is more, it seems that Popper’s partial method of trials and errors – of reforms which can be easily controlled and whose undesirable consequences can be rectified, cannot be implemented “in a vacuum”. On the contrary, its implementation requires a certain axiological minimum. For if this idea is perceived in purely procedural categories, one may easily accept values that are unequivocally reprehensible from the moral point of view.

A more in-depth analysis of this issue is presented by Zygmunt Bauman, who in his book entitled *Modernity and the Holocaust* analyzes the theoretical principles of the model of civilizing processes. In his book, the sociologist comes to the conclusion that it was the trend to regard rationality as the exclusive criterion of human decisions that constituted one of the main causes of the Holocaust³⁴. According to Bauman, the lesson which one should learn from

³¹ I. Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, p. 17.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

³⁴ See: Z. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge 2013, p. 27 and subs.

the drama of the Holocaust boils down to supplementing this, as he states, unilateral model “so as to include the (...) tendency to demote, exprobate and delegitimize the ethical motivations of social action”³⁵. For the sociologist is of the opinion that modernity “*is a process of divesting the use and deployment of violence from moral calculus, and of emancipating the desiderata of rationality from interference of ethical norms or moral inhibitions*”³⁶. In other words, according to Bauman, the contemporary times are characterized by a tendency to grant a specific kind of autonomy to rationality; the latter has currently become the exclusive criterion for making all kinds of decisions. In the light of this argumentation, the Holocaust is to some extent the effect of this state of things. According to the author of *Modernity and the Holocaust*, “As the promotion of rationality to the exclusion of alternative criteria of action (...) has been long ago acknowledged as a constitutive feature of modern civilization – the Holocaust-style phenomena must be recognized as legitimate outcomes of civilizing tendency, and its constant potential”³⁷. It seems that a more powerful example of the negative consequences of turning rationality into a specific meta-criterion of all human choices would be difficult to find.

Bauman also criticizes rationality from a slightly different perspective. For as he declares, the: “general accomplishment of rationalizing tendency has been codified (...) in modern bureaucracy. (...) it reveals the silencing of morality (...). And it also reveals its capacity of generating the Holocaust-like solution while pursuing, in impeccably rational fashion, its daily problem-solving activity”³⁸. What is important and what according to the sociologist is associated with Popper’s model of the work of social engineers: “Use of violence is most efficient and cost-effective when the means are subjected to solely instrumental-rational criteria, and thus dissociated from moral evaluation of the ends”³⁹.

What seems to be very poignant here are also the words of Leszek Kołakowski⁴⁰ who is of the opinion that all those who wish to change the world in the spirit of values such as kindness, disinterestedness or assistance to others, should not limit themselves to the too narrow criteria of rationalist discourse,

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ *Ibidem*. As he adds when writing about the specific defeat of the contemporary learning and scientists, “Science wanted to be value-free and took pride in being such”, *ibidem*, p. 108.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 29. In another place Bauman expands on the problem of the types of violence used during the Holocaust: “Violence has been turned into a technique. Like all techniques it is free from emotions and purely rational”, *ibidem*, p. 98.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ See: L. Kołakowski, *Samozatrucie*, [in:] *Cywilizacja na ławie oskarżonych*, p. 171.

but should accept a certain vision of morality. In other words, in the light of the philosopher's analyses, scientific faith that critical rationalism applied to the sphere of politics guarantees effective protection against morally reprehensible content, looms as naïve.

In connection with the above, there arises a question why it is that out of a number of various ethical perspectives it is precisely pluralism that corresponds so well with Popper's conception. I think that at this point it is worth making a certain digression, by returning once again to the remarks of Zygmunt Bauman. For when commenting on the thought of Maciej Zięba OP⁴¹, the latter makes use of the term "verity society" (from the Latin word *veritas* i.e. truth). Bauman explains that "All "verity societies" declare war on the diversity of life principles and authorities; all of them demand a monopoly on charting out a line between good and evil, virtue and frailty, merit and offense, orthodoxy and heresy, faith and paganism, truth and falsehood"⁴². He compares the thus delineated vision to monotheism adding that from the very idea of "the only God", one can infer that one cannot contemplate placing such a god "in the company of other gods who due to their very otherness could exclusively be regarded as false pretenders to the divine throne"⁴³. The sociologist finds an alternative to the above monotheistic image of the world in the specifically conceived polytheism, a concept "associated by him (...) with the peaceful coexistence of various ways of being human"⁴⁴. Bauman himself clearly opts out for the latter vision, saying that: "Agnosticism (...) which in my case I can only imagine – is not an anti-thesis of religion, or even of the Church. It is an anti-thesis of monotheism"⁴⁵.

It is not difficult to observe that the distinction made by Bauman is strikingly similar to Popper's juxtaposition of open and closed societies. Moreover the above distinctions bring to mind the differences between ethical monism and the pluralism of values, which are described by Berlin. In other words, it seems to me that despite many differences which characterize the above-mentioned thinkers, all of them opt for a similar vision of reality. At the basis of this reality one finds a conception which assumes that man is well aware of his own limitations. Hence, he assumes the attitude which is full of Socratic modesty and opts for values such as tolerance, respect for others and for openness to dialogue.

⁴¹ See: Z. Bauman, S. Obirek, *O Bogu...*, *op. cit.*, p. 8 and subs.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

In my opinion, the image of the world which emerges from the above-presented conceptions (regardless of whether one refers to it as liquid, polytheistic or open), stands in opposition to all ideas at the basis of which one finds “sacred truths” and the “only just notions” which instead of uniting people and making them open to dialogue, tend to divide and exclude them; the “prophets” of the latter, endowed with a monopoly for truth and cognition ensure that they can provide infallible answers to all human doubts.

The above vision is undoubtedly a tempting one and that is why it has numerous supporters. Yet the problem is that it is illusory and the human plight is not always painted in glowing colors. Life experiences people in radically different ways; consequently, each and every day, instead of facing the Truth, people have to struggle with uncertainty and doubt. The tree of humanity is much more twisted and crooked than the supporters of this smooth and polished picture, the protagonists of “sacred Truths and “only just notions” might wish. Consequently, as Bauman teaches us:

(...) we are doomed to compromise. And it is not because our opponents undermine the absolute value of our truths – but because absolute truth inhabits a world which is different from ours. In its absence (or unattainability – which comes down to the same thing), we are also doomed – each and every one of us – to struggle with partial truths, in the conditions of continual uncertainty as to the righteousness of our virtues and our choices. Uncertainty is a natural ecotop of our moral self.⁴⁶

The sociologist extols the chronic and incurable uncertainty, as he is of the opinion that morality can develop exclusively in such uncertain and unequivocal territory.

Everything seems to indicate that pluralism of values constitutes a perspective which harmonizes with the above-described vision of inaccessible truths and incomplete knowledge. For an ethical pluralist does not claim to have an exclusive right to the Truth; he does not rule out dialogue and does not polarize the parties taking part in the discourse. On the contrary, he declares that there are many values which people can strive for. These values may be incommensurate and sometimes it is impossible to prioritize them.

What is also important is that when this concept is applied to the model of institutional changes, it is difficult to find in it any utopian references. Thus axiologization does not constitute a step in the direction of closeness for partial

⁴⁶ Z. Bauman, *Nowoczesna obietnica wygody*, “Znak”, 2012, April, no 683, p. 35.

engineers who have adopted this perspective are aware of the fact that one cannot devise universal and long-term plans for a reconstruction of society, precisely due to the fact that Plato's Truth lies outside the scope of human cognitive capacity. Being fully aware of the fact that one cannot create a "heaven on earth", the engineers will therefore strive to solve the most urgent social problems, continually meandering and looking for fragile and impermanent solutions to the dilemmas which by their very nature are irreconcilable. In this way, it is my firm belief that a consequence of these activities and strivings will be a reinforcement of the foundations of a pluralist society, in which a polyphony of voices will oust monologue; what's more, this society will remain open to many visions of happiness and to diverse horizons of values.

Although undoubtedly engineers will not satisfy all members of the reformed societies with their activities, and, in all probability, they will not manage to fully please everyone, the monistic attitude which boils down to trying to please people against their will does not constitute an alternative which would be worthy of recommendation. Therefore the Austrian philosopher goes in the direction of negative utilitarianism, while Bauman emphasizes that the contemporary reality is polytheistic and that is why on principle it does not fit the framework of any monotheism. The only truth (a term which according to Bauman is equivalent to tautology) can hardly survive in the contemporary world. The sociologist adds that one should even consider whether not to reject using the term "truth" in the singular form altogether. He expresses this thought by what in my opinion is an extremely poignant metaphor when he says that:

Indeed, using the word "truth" in the singular in a polyphonic world looks a bit as if someone demanded that we should clap using a single hand. (...) With one hand one can slap someone in the face but not applaud. One can also smack someone with the only truth (that is what it was invented for...), but one cannot go about exploring the shape of the human condition (the latter activity may and must be exclusively the effect of a dialogue, assuming the explicit or implicit, but always axiomatic presence of an alternative).⁴⁷

To use Bauman's parallel the contemporary world appears to one as polytheistic. It seems therefore that in order to try and find oneself in it, and all the more so change it, one should abandon all monotheistic (or, to use Berlin's language, monistic) models and strivings, and particularly the vision of the ultimate, unique and sacred Truth. It seems that what corresponds well with

⁴⁷ Z. Bauman, S. Obirek, *O Bogu...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

this vision of the reality is ethical pluralism. In my opinion, ethical pluralism also goes hand in hand with Popper's theory of an open society, although the philosopher recalls this optic only on the margin⁴⁸, on principle distancing himself from axiology. What is more, due to the opening of his reflection to the problems of values, Popper's method of trials and errors turns out to be much less naïve, and at the same time, more harmonized with the world as it is in reality (and not as it emerges from the excessively optimistic vision of the Viennese thinker). In this way, the "berlinized Popperism" suggested by John Gray seems to be a method which is well suited to the non-ideal and chaotic world that is full of internal contradictions and forces which pull the people living in it in the opposite directions. Popper would no doubt wish to convince us all (by presenting rational arguments in a substantive discussion) that among all the available paths, there is one which is definitely the best. Yet reality seems to contradict such a view. In conclusion, it is worth adding that the conviction about the existence of an inherent contradiction which is, as it were, permanently inscribed in the world is by no means pessimistic. For as Zygmunt Bauman stated in a conversation with me: "The fact that nothing like a perfect society is possible does not automatically mean that we should not undertake efforts to try and improve this world"⁴⁹.

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⁴⁸ See: K. Popper, *Autobiography of Karl Popper*, [in:] P. Schlipp, *The philosophy of Karl Popper*, Illinois 1974.

⁴⁹ Record of an interview conducted in Leeds on 5 April 2014 (quoted with the Author's approval).

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Summary

Society open to values. A suggested modification of Karl Popper's social theory in the spirit of Isaiah Berlin's ethical pluralism

The aim of the article is to present a suggestion for enriching the axiological aspect of Karl Popper's political thought in the spirit of Isaiah Berlin's ethical pluralism. For it seems that the greatest weakness of Popper's theory of an open society is not the obsolete nature of the postulated solutions, their impracticality or else the excessively theoretical nature of the conducted analyses, which their author had often been blamed for. The afore-mentioned frailty reveals itself in Popper's adoption of scientific optics which had led him to the construction of a strictly procedural political theory that had almost dogmatically ignored values. Therefore, the proposition of introducing modifications into Popper's political theory, particularly as regards its "de-formalization" and an "opening-up" to a certain axiological minimum, should significantly strengthen this idea making it more impervious to various voices of criticism.

Keywords: Karl Popper, the open society, value pluralism, Isaiah Berlin, Zygmunt Bauman.

Streszczenie

Spółeczeństwo otwarte na wartości. Propozycja modyfikacji teorii politycznej Karla Poppera w duchu pluralizmu etycznego Isaiaha Berlina

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie propozycji wzbogacenia aksjologicznego aspektu myśli politycznej Karla Poppera w duchu pluralizmu etycznego Isaiaha Berlina. Wydaje się bowiem, iż największą słabością Popperowskiej teorii społeczeństwa otwartego nie jest ani nieaktualność postulowanych rozwiązań, ani niepraktyczność czy nadmierne uteoretyzowanie prowadzonych rozważań, które mu często zarzucano. Wspomniana ułomność przejawia się w przyjęciu przez Poppera scjentystycznej optyki, która doprowadziła go do budowy ściśle proceduralnej teorii politycznej, niemal dogmatycznie abstrahującej od wartości. Twierdzę, iż formalizm czyni rozważaną koncepcję potencjalnym przedmiotem istotnych zarzutów. Propozycja modyfikacji teorii politycznej Poppera w zakresie jej „odformalizowania” i „otwarcia” na pewne aksjologiczne minimum winna zatem wydatnie wzmocnić tę ideę, uodparniając ją na rozmaite głosy krytyki.

Słowa kluczowe: Karl Popper, społeczeństwo otwarte, pluralizm wartości, Isaiah Berlin, Zygmunt Bauman.

