REVIEW

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On Leszek Koczanowicz (2020): Anxiety and Lucidity. Reflections on Culture in Times of Unrest

In his book *Anxiety and Lucidity. Reflections on Culture in Times of Unrest*, Routledge 2020 Leszek Koczanowicz explores and depicts the phenomenon of anxiety from an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on philosophy, psychology, cultural research, and even literature. Anxiety, he claims, is so deeply inherent in the contemporary world that it is becoming imperceptible. In order to notice it, one has to purposefully look for gaps or openings where it reveals itself, which requires scrutinizing multiple sources. This approach undoubtedly makes for a demanding read. At times, the author's erudition is indeed challenging to follow; however, it is more than worth the effort, as readers are offered an in-depth glimpse into fields that they did not know existed.

Throughout history, times of pandemic, including the current Covid-19 outbreak, have sparked fear and 'defamiliarized' everyday reality. The coronavirus-enforced lockdown has led not only to a global economic crunch, but also, perhaps even more importantly, to an individual and collective mental/emotional crisis. These experiences encourage reflection on the fragility of the social and cultural order of everyday life. The pandemic has prompted the discovery of layers of anxiety which are endemically embedded

in the very essence of modernity. Modern anxiety, with a particular emphasis on its emblems, is the main theme of Leszek Koczanowicz's recent book. Although written back in what we now consider as peaceful, pre-pandemic times, the central thesis of the book is that fear actually permeates the whole of modern culture, and that it is becoming normalized and eludes reflection as a result of its ubiquity.

When reading Koczanowicz's book, it is worth asking oneself the following questions: Is it possible to return to the pre-pandemic world? Is a world without fear possible at all? What will the world emerging from the crisis look like? Are we able to imagine it? What will humans be after the pandemic?

In the first essay, *Angor Animi. Or, On the Culture of Anxiety*, Koczanowicz problematizes the perception of anxiety in the face of illness or death. He resorts to some medical representations of the anxiety experience. Recontextualized by Koczanowicz, *angor animi* is manifest in and entangled with daily routines, as well as the (in)authenticity of one's existence or reality and interpersonal relations. One of the questions stirred by Kocznowicz's work is: "Where does the culture of fear lead to?" In his analyses of this phenomenon, the author refers both to Agamben's catastrophic vision and to Beck's and Giddens's optimism regarding human emancipatory potential. Koczanowicz wonders whether living in constant fear, in invariable anxiety, in the "normality" of a state of emergency or catastrophe may still create conditions for "pure relationships" based on affections. At this point, his pertinent question is: Does living in permanent tension, in a continually altering context, in fear of what may happen or in a crisis, lead to authenticity or rather to its denial?

Hamartia as alienation or *hamartia* as a virtue? The next essay, *Identity as a Nuisance. Two Genealogies of Modern Hamartia*, revolves around Koczanowicz's considerations of the feeling of being out of place. To ponder this phenomenon, Koczanowicz relies on the notion of the "tragic flaw" derived from Aristotle's Poetics, which depicts a situation in which one fails because of finding oneself in the wrong place and being unable to appropriately recognize one's own circumstances. Koczanowicz concludes that modern *hamartia* has become democratized, and that the experience of feeling misplaced is now shared by millions of people. *Hamartia* as alienation and *hamartia* as a virtue are the two genealogies of modern *hamartia*. Is it altogether possible for an individual to be in their proper place? Arguably,

autonomy, self-efficacy, and freedom are essential features of an individual today. However, does one truly possess them? Can human beings genuinely create their own lives? Joining Koczanowicz in exploring examples from the works of Hobbes, Machiavelli, Hegel, Marx, Nietsche, Durkheim or Rousseau, we discover that the individual, instead of living their own lives, lives the lives of others. By living others' views and judgements, they remain alien to themselves.

Taking the role of the Other and being an external observer may be interpreted as a virtue, as Koczanowicz insists, by drawing on Kant, Smith, James, Mead, and Rorty. The possibility to adopt the Other's role, viewpoint, and/or position is a precondition of humanity. Seeing oneself through the eyes of the Other, taking the perspective of the Other, and being an external observer represent the ability to decenter, which proves crucial for the development of democracy. According to Rorty, feeling out of place underlies the lack of a specific view of the world, and prevents the exclusion of those who have a different vision of the world. Private life is the site where Rorty's ironist operates: her world is her very own intimate world, and she does not impose her reality and principles on others, who possess their own realities and worlds. However, is the existence of a society of ironists possible?

Koczanowicz creates a unique narrative of communication by analyzing the content of a postcard in his subsequent essay, *A Gladioli Postcard: Memory and Communication*. As his starting point is a glance at a postcard he received from his mother in 1982, the essay has a personal ring to it, with intimate memories combining with an analysis to produce a unique narrative, underpinned by the views of Derrida, for whom the postcard exemplifies the paradoxes of language and communication. The elusiveness of a postcard message is compared here to equally elusive philosophical concepts. However, it can also trigger an avalanche of recollections, summoning seemingly unrelated events from the darkness of memory, and thus becoming an external memory trace.

The Memories of Childhood in a Spectral World is an essay in which the theme of taking another person's place or being out of place reappears in The Memories of Childhood in a Spectral World, yet in this chapter, it is addressed from an autobiographical perspective. With this essay, Koczanowicz joins the philosophical discourse on otherness and alienation. The concepts of otherness, alienation, and diversity are prevalent today, forming the object of study in several social and humanistic disciplines.

The meanings of these concepts are broad: Is the Other Alien or Different? Is dialogue with the Other possible? Is dialogue with a Stranger possible?

Koczanowicz draws attention to the state of uncertainty that was the common, albeit enforced, experience of settlers arriving in the world of ghosts, as he characterizes Legnica, the city of his childhood. In our times, this state of uncertainty accompanies all 'others' and 'strangers': migrants, the elderly, the disabled, ethnic minorities, people of color, and those who choose to define themselves as LGBTQIA. A game is being played in politics with the crises of migrant, economic, social, and/or demographic natures. Politics controls the layers of fear concealed beneath the surface of the social order, taking advantage of the insecurities and fears of social groups. This approach has resulted in the exclusion of Others from many communities. Do pedagogy or sociology have an answer to this state of affairs? Do we find an answer in the book? Sadly, no. We all, in fact, contribute to perpetuating the culture of fear.

Post-Communism and Culture Wars is the next essay, in which the author asks what culture wars are and who is waging them. Today, the crossing of cultures, multiculturalism within one state, and the coexistence of culturally different communities are widespread, fraught issues in social discourse. In the wake of the democratic transition in Poland, divisions resulting from cultural differences became visible and translated into political divisions. In this context, Koczanowicz talks not so much of the opposition of two cultures within one nation, as rather of the coexistence of two nations with different values and goals in one state. Which of them is authentic? The authenticity of the nation is pitted against the inauthenticity of its existence, and this contrast is framed in the dichotomies of native vs. foreign, normal vs. unique, and the authentic existence of the nation vs. a nation stripped of its character.

Wolff (1994) does not render Poland as in any sense unique. In his account, Poland is a country that is neither particularly persecuted nor elect, a country that, in fact, does not stand out among other Eastern European countries in any way. Janowski concedes: "The fortunes of Poland are fairly typical of a normal peripheral country, with an average, primitive economy, and a normal, unexceptional imitative culture, adopting foreign ideas rather than producing its own" (Janowski, 2008, p. 234). Are Poles capable of abandoning the vision of the uniqueness of the Polish nation and joining an honest discussion on our country's standing in both European

and global cultures? Are we able to capitalize on the emancipatory dimension of postcolonial theory for Polish history, free ourselves from the myths imposed by the colonizers and our own national myths, overcome cultural limitations, and shake off the fears of domination and the loss of identity? Following the discursive concept of politics proposed by Laclau and Mouffe, will applying the concept of the nation as an "empty signifier" to Polish history and uniqueness not provide a "hegemonic advantage" in the political struggle? At the end of this essay, Koczanowicz points out the doubtfulness of the unauthorized assumption that culture continues unchanged beyond economic, political, and social transformations. One can assume that there will be many critics of this view. The essay concludes with the statement that the liberal arts must be confronted with the illusion of the continuity of culture.

To what extent do social media transform relationships with Others? Is there a shared virtual reality? Does the world of social media create a different reality for each user? These are the questions that Koczanowicz asks the reader. In the next essay, *The Anxiety of Intimacy: Or, On Telling the Truth in the Age of the Internet*, Koczanowicz examines the role of intimacy, understood as *parrhesia*, and juxtaposes traditional expositions of this issue with contemporary developments precipitated by social media. He compares the famous *Confessions* by Rousseau to the content shared on Facebook. From this perspective, Rousseau appears as a proto-blogger who is keen to share as much as possible about himself. Both Rousseau and contemporary social media users are faced with the dilemma of what information, events, or news to disclose and what experiences to omit. Of course, meaningful differences ensue from the very notions and forms of identity as created by Rousseau, social identity as perceived by Goffman, and the identity assumed on Facebook. There is also a significant difference between real and virtual identity management. This essay is particularly recommended for contemporary readers, as prominent critics of culture do not often direct their attention towards this area of cultural studies, at least in a historical and cultural context.

Koczanowicz points out the ambiguity of the term *politics* in his essay *The Anxiety of Politics*. However, he does not specify it himself either. Is it impossible because of that ambiguity? Koczanowicz evokes political concepts and the understandings of politics proposed by Wittgenstein, Fondane, Habermas, Kant, Agamben, Laclau and Mouffe, Boltanski, Levinas, and

Ricoeur. Among this wealth of references, I find Laclau and Mouffe's concept of hegemony particularly compelling and illuminating. Laclau describes hegemony in terms of the social production of empty signifiers, as hegemonic actions consist in presenting the particularity of a certain group as an incarnation of an empty signifier, which refers to the community order as the absence, or unfulfilled reality (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The political consequences of hegemony include the idea of the arbitrary construction of the subject of politics and the makeshift nature of the social order. In this model, politics is a fight among political groups that vie to impose their own interpretation of "empty signifiers". With politics defying any straightforward conceptualization, the absence of a clear-cut definition of politics, combined with its randomness and the unpredictability of social life, breeds fear. As Koczanowicz emphasizes, "what we cannot name is particularly disturbing and, even, terrifying to us. Unable to give politics 'a local habitation and a name,' we must yet talk about it, because politics is impossible to ignore as one of the fundamental properties of human existence" (p. 93).

In his reflections on modernity in the essay *Anxieties of Community*, Koczanowicz traces the phenomenon of fear in this area of human activity. He analyzes a range of crucial contemporary issues, such as the relationship between the individual and the community, freedom and lack thereof, me vs. us, uniqueness and typicality, all of which reflect the conflict between liberalism and communitarianism. In doing so, he seeks to answer the question he posed in his earlier work, *Community and Emancipation* (2005), specifically: What is community and what can it be? He lists examples from the works of Kant, Burke, and Herder, as well as from Nietzsche's understanding of human being and community. However, particularly noteworthy is the variety of perceptions of community in contemporary philosophy. Therein, Koczanowicz mainly attends to the visions of community set out by Taylor and Nancy. Community, according to Taylor, is based on values and goals, but without threatening the individuality of a person. Individuals' identities are shaped in relation to their community. As Taylor emphasizes, these are not necessarily national communities. People can build their identities in relation to various communities, e.g., those based on dialogue, on the experience of crisis, or a state of emergency (bound up with gender, language, and/or disability), or communities that define "horizons of meanings" or "conceptual frames" for the narrative of an individual (Taylor, 1992). As far as Nancy's understanding of a community is concerned, its main tenet is

about being-together, being-with, which provides a fragile connection. An individual human being exhibits a certain commonality with other beings. It is a kind of a separated community because this being-together must tie in with a certain division that prevents homogenization or totalization. This community is the foundation of human existence, the experience of a world in which death is a shared phenomenon (Nancy, 1991). Koczanowicz examines many contradictions and fears which both the individual and the community inevitably confront.

The questions of whether happiness is possible and what it actually means in the culture of anxiety is the pivot the following essay, *Please Don't Be Angry, Happiness, That I Take You as My Due: Happiness in the Age of Democratization*. Koczanowicz tackles the problem of how the concept of happiness can be related to psychology, which describes the uniqueness of human existential situation in everyday reality. Happiness as a product or happiness as harmony? This is a dilemma that Koczanowicz leaves the reader with.

The fear of old age is yet another area explored by Koczanowicz in the essay *Mortal Generations: On Two Phenomenologies of Aging – Cicero and Améry*. Koczanowicz's reflections on old age open with Yeats's poem *Sailing to Byzantium, Body and Eternity*, which encapsulates transience and eternity, fear and certainty as the antinomies of the modern world. Contemporary humans lack reflection, and in particular, reflection on passing and dying. Old age in modernity is not only a state accompanying human existence; it is also a certain stage of life, a stage for which individuals should prepare. While in pedagogy the twentieth century was defined as the age of the child, the twenty-first century may be the age of the elderly. Hence the importance of contemporary trends in pedagogy, such as the pedagogy of old age or education for old age (Lejzerowicz, 2019, 2020). Koczanowicz does not relate reflections on age with aging studies. In aging studies, similarly to gender studies or disability studies, age, gender, or disability are not only biological factors, but most importantly an interwoven set of cultural, social, and psychological factors. Just as people assume gender- and/or disability-related roles, they take on roles associated with their age.

Since the aging process is a social phenomenon and an existential experience, an interdisciplinary approach offered by aging studies is both exigent and expedient. Describing the existential experience of aging requires objectifying the individual experience by appointing a narrator. The "impartial"

observer, the Other, is a crucial figure in Cicero, as well as in Amery and Koczanowicz. Exploring his own age-related experiences and reflections, Koczanowicz relies on the figure of K., who asks the following questions: Can philosophy offer consolation, especially at the last stage of one's life? Is despair without hope the only thing left to people? Whose perspective should one adopt, Cicero's or Amery's? Which of them is more grounded? K. ends his narrative in *Mortal Generations: On Two Phenomenologies of Aging – Cicero and Améry* with a quotation from Szymborska: "I prefer not to ask how much longer and when" (1998, p. 215).

Predicting the future is another area of anxiety analyzed in the essay *The Anxiety of Clairvoyance: Terminal Lucidity and the End of Culture*. Koczanowicz introduces the notion of *terminal lucidity,* adopted from medicine, to describe the state of affairs in culture. Individual terminal lucidity may be understood as a moment of enlightenment before death. Transposed onto culture, it refers to an enlightenment before a crisis or the end of existence. Will culture be revived? Will the world re-emerge after the crisis, and, if so, what kind of world will it be? Terminal lucidity offers neither the possibility of change nor an escape from the impending end of the world. It leaves people terrified and helpless.

Building on Hegel's philosophy of history, Koczanowicz identifies characteristic features of retrospective clairvoyance, and to describe the crises of culture/examples of the end of culture, he evokes a panorama of works by historians and philosophers, including Gibbon, Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, Fukuyama, and Laclau and Mouffe. The concept of terminal lucidity corresponds to Hegel's statement on clairvoyance: "A further word on the subject of issuing instructions on how the world ought to be: philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late to perform this function. As the thought of the world, it appears only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its complete state. (…) The owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk" (Hegel, 2008, p. 23).

Anxiety is the narrative leitmotif in Koczanowicz's book, which takes readers on a journey across the manifestation of fear in various areas: politics, community, old age, intimacy, the future, etc. What will the world that is emerging from technological change, from social media, and from the crisis be like? Can we possibly imagine it? Is a return to the pre-catastrophe world – or to the pre-pandemic world – at all feasible? The pandemic has become a magnifying glass for contemporary struggles, and as such it has made

people more aware of what global challenges are. In his analyzes of anxiety, Koczanowicz refers to the problems raised in his earlier works, including *Community and Emancipation. A Dispute over a Post-conventional Society* (2005); *Politics of Time: Dynamics of Identity in Post-Communist Poland* (2008); *Modern Anxiety. Essays on Democracy and Its Adversaries* (2011); *Politics of Dialogue: Non-Consensual Democracy and Critical Community* (2015).

The book *Anxiety and Lucidity* brings together reflective essays in which Koczanowicz revisits and reappraises the most significant problems of modernity. It is recommended, especially today in times of the ubiquitous fear of the multitude of catastrophes that accompany humans, existing in a shaky reality in which they seek rules yet end up with randomness or exceptions. It is an interesting springboard for a discussion on the future of democracy.

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