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Philosophical Foundations of Worldview Conflict within Western Thought in the Conservative Perspective

Abstract:

In the face of growing conflicts in Western societies and the formation of deep political, ideological and worldview divisions within Western civilisation, it becomes legitimate to ask whether we are not witnessing ongoing culture wars? The observed intensifying social dichotomies do not touch only the issue of political sympathies or antipathies, but concern almost all aspects of human life: the concept of nation, attitude to religion, family model, approach to sexuality and even the existence of gender. The purpose of this article is to trace the conservative style of thinking in the context of the culture war, to distinguish the elements of common concepts within this philosophical tradition, as well as the peculiarities of each of the selected authors. The paper has the following order: an introduction devoted to the origins of modern conservatism, allowing to outline the conceptual framework of this style of thinking. It is hypothesized that modern British conservatism arose in response to events associated with the collapse of socialism in Poland and Czechoslovakia, while the philosophical development of Polish conservative thought is inspired by Anglo-Saxon publications. In the first part, the thought of British conservative philosophy on the phenomenon of culture war is described on the example of Roger Scruton's philosophy, and then compared with American authors Allan Bloom and Gertrude Himmelfarb. The second part of the article is devoted to two Polish authors who have dealt extensively with the subject of culture war – Agnieszka Kołakowska and Anna Pawełczyńska. Finally, the conservative interpretation of the culture war is compared with the liberal and left-wing interpretations in order to point out the links, connections, as well as differences between them.

Keywords: culture wars, Western civilisation, conservatism, liberalism, Roger Scruton, Allan Bloom



Introduction

Since the publication of Samuel Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilisations* in 1993, the discourse of the philosophy of politics has made his notion of conflict and war one of the basic categories when attempting to analyse and diagnose contemporary times. Huntington moved these concepts from the military, militaristic or even religious (religious wars) to the area of culture and civilisation. The latter, according to the American author, marks the highest level of human grouping and the widest plane of cultural identity; more generally, we can only use the term "humanity", which allows us to distinguish humans from other species of living beings. Huntington divides the world into nine civilisations and then points to the inevitable conflict between them, which will not be based on economic or political differences, but on cultural differences – on the struggle for moral order and the ideological sphere of social life. The momentous analysis presented in *The Clash of Civilisations* becomes the starting point for the entire contemporary debate on culture wars.

In the face of growing conflicts in Western societies and deep political, ideological and world-view divisions forming within the Western civilisation, it is reasonable to ask whether we are not witnessing ongoing culture wars? This conflict would not be, as Huntington postulates, a clash of civilisations, but a clash of two cultures within one civilisation. The American thinker Allan Bloom was the first to draw attention to this phenomenon in his work *The Closed Mind*, and with him other representatives of the Chicago School. At the time, he saw the formation of these two warring intellectual camps primarily in academic circles and in the field of education. As the divisions have only intensified since Bloom's book was published and the phenomenon has also become firmly established in Europe, other conservative thinkers have also described this issue. Among them, the analysis by the British philosopher Roger Scruton seems to me the most interesting, and it is to this analysis that I will devote most attention. For the purpose of this paper, I would like to narrow the field of analysis to three intellectual centres – American (Allan Bloom, Gertrude Himmelfarb), British (Roger Scruton) and Polish (Agnieszka Kołakowska, Anna Pawełczyńska), in order to point out, by means of the comparative method, the elements common for these concepts, but also those that result from the specificity of particular states. If we were to point to a common thesis that links all these authors, it would be the description of the emergence within Western civilisation of a culture of rejection, otherwise known as narcissistic culture, which enters into conflict with the most fundamental assumptions of Western civilisation, trying to present them as relative, racist, ethnocentric or patriarchal. Each of these philosophers sees this new intellectual attitude as such a threat that it could lead to war.



In contemporary philosophical discourse, the issue of culture war is most often considered from the perspective of the concept of populism and based on a dichotomy – rationalists and populists. Liberal thinkers describe this phenomenon in political terms as wars waged within liberal democracies and aimed at seizing power. Chantal Mouffe, for example, writes about the use of value-laden slogans by right-wing political parties in order to deprive opposition groups of moral legitimacy. She believes that the main tool used for this purpose is populism – playing on the emotions of the masses. Mouffe reduces the culture war to a political division that will deliberately divide society into two opposing groups: the people and the establishment, in order to gain and maintain power, *de facto* bursting liberal democracy from within:

I asserted that, despite the announced disappearance of collective identities and the victory of individualism, the collective dimension could not be eliminated from politics. If they were not available through traditional parties, collective identities were likely to be provided in other forms. This is clearly what is happening in right-wing populist discourse, which is replacing the weakened left/right opposition by a new type of we/they constructed around the opposition between ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment’. Contrary to those who believe that politics can be reduced to individual motivations, the new populists are well aware that politics always consists in the creation of a ‘we’ versus a ‘they’ and that it requires the creation of collective identities. Hence the powerful appeal of their discourse which offers collective forms of identification around ‘the people’. (Mouffe, 2005, pp. 69–70)

The same conceptual framework is used to analyse this issue by authors such as Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in their recently popular book *How democracies die* (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), or Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart in *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Academic discourse in Western universities is overwhelmingly dominated by similar analyses. They attempt to find a theoretical basis for the phenomenon of right-wing political parties taking power in many of the Western countries. They argue for waves of change, such as Donald Trump’s rise to power or the British vote for Brexit, as the triumph of populism over rational debate.

In the understanding of the more radical leftist authors, the culture war is a war between the supporters of progress and its opponents. They will proclaim that certain social, intellectual or moral changes must take place in order to build a new order on their ruins. As the British neo-Marxist philosopher Terry Eagleton writes:

The phrase ‘culture wars’ suggests pitched battles between populists and elitists, custodians of the canon and devotees of difference, dead white males and the unjustly marginalized. The clash between Culture and culture, however, is no longer simply a battle of definitions, but a global conflict. It is a matter of actual politics, not just academic ones. It is not just



a tussle between Stendhal and Seinfeld, or between those churls on the English department corridor who study line-endings in Milton and the bright young things who write books on masturbation. It is part of the shape of the world politics of the new millennium. (Eagleton, 2000, p. 52)

According to Eagleton, culture wars are based on the dichotomy of dominant and oppressed. Western culture with its universalism and objectivity comes into conflict with other cultures. He advocates a reevaluation of the radical extension of the vitality of the universalist idea of Enlightenment culture. He argues that what belongs to the canon is a dead set of values and beliefs that claim universalist positions at the expense of less dominant cultures. In the culture war, the Other claims to be given a voice and space in Western public debate. However, according to Eagleton, these changes are inevitable, as only the voices of marginalised minorities bring the nourishing new values that the dead canon needs. He emphasises the ideological function of Western culture as a way of thinking whose aim is not truth but power (Eagleton, 1990). The same stream of analysis based on a critique of Western culture as dominant and the result of an equally dominant capitalism, includes: Pierre Bourdieu (1979), Slavoj Žižek (1997) and Edward Said (1993). Similar debate and line of argumentation is followed by feminist thought, which describes the culture war as a fight against the domination of Western culture created mainly by men at the expense of women and against women. In this approach, the authors place women under the category of the Other, fighting for their perspective and voice in culture; the culture war in this interpretation is therefore also a struggle for power.

Deeply rooted in the contemporary political situation of Western countries, these philosophical works do not, in my opinion, provide a satisfactory answer to the increasingly growing social dichotomies, which do not just concern the issue of political sympathies or antipathies, but concern almost all aspects of human life: the concept of nation, attitude to religion, family model, approach to sexuality, and even the existence of gender. Leaving aside the accuracy of these analyses, the question arises as to whether the very phenomenon of culture wars is not much older and whether its origins should not be sought in the philosophy of values or anthropology? In view of this fact, while remaining in a neutral position, I would like in this analysis to look at the other side of the debate – the conservative philosophers. This seems intellectually interesting to me, given that only recently, mainly due to Roger Scruton's journalistic and lecturing activities, has there been a kind of rehabilitation of conservative thought in philosophy, making it once again a field of thought and an academic discipline, and giving it a voice in lectures to students at many universities, including Birkbeck College, Oxford, Boston, the Institute of Psychological Sciences in Arlington, and



the University of St. Andrews. Also, at the home university of Warsaw, which I know, the reflection on conservative philosophy is much less widespread than on liberal or left-wing philosophy, and, therefore, perhaps intellectually inspiring.

For methodological reasons, I would like to refer in this paper to the category of “style of thought” proposed by Karl Mannheim, precisely in the context of conservatism (Mannheim, 1993). According to Mannheim, human thought develops in a way that can be compared to styles in art. This makes it possible, to connect different intellectual formations with a historical and sociological context. According to him, the analysis of different styles of thinking should consist in a study:

At the heart of this method is a concept of *a style of thought*. The history of thought from this point of view is no mere history of ideas, but an analysis of different *style of thought* as they grow and develop, fuse and disappear; and the key to the understanding of changes in ideas is to be found in the changing social background, mainly in the faith of the social groups or classes which are ‘carriers’ of these style of thought. (Mannheim, 1993)

Mannheim, like Ludwig Fleck or Thomas Kuhn later, recognises that thinking acquires specificity, becomes recognisable, when it forms according to the style developed within a given school of thought. They differ from each other in the way they use different patterns (schemes) of thinking, discourse structure and categories. This does not mean that every work of thinkers from a given school is identical, but they use similar techniques and often start from common assumptions, just as artists from a given school of painting did. This is particularly true of conservatism. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to trace the conservative style of thinking in the context of the culture war, to distinguish the common elements of these concepts, as well as the peculiarities of each author. The paper is structured as follows: an introduction on the origins of contemporary conservatism, allowing to outline the conceptual framework of this style of thinking. I hypothesise that contemporary British conservatism arose in response to events connected with the fall of socialism in Poland and Czechoslovakia, while the philosophical development of Polish conservative thought is inspired by Anglo-Saxon publications. In the first part, on the example of Roger Scruton’s philosophy, I will describe the reflection of British conservative philosophy on the phenomenon of culture war. Then, I will compare it with American authors – Allan Bloom and Gertrud Himmelfarb. In the second part, I will present two Polish authors who have extensively dealt with the subject of culture war – Agnieszka Kołakowska and Anna Pawełczyńska, which may prove most interesting for English-speaking readers, as the works of the latter philosopher have not been translated into English. Finally, I will



compare the conservative interpretation of the culture war with the liberal and leftist one, trying to point out the links and connections between them.

Sources of British Conservatism

In order to trace the conservative style of thinking in relation to the contemporary phenomenon of culture war, it is useful to go back to the sources of this reflection. This will help us to delineate the conceptual framework of the current of thought under discussion. The father of Anglo-Saxon conservatism and the founder of this style of thinking, who gave it its mature form, was the Irish philosopher and politician, a fierce critic of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke. His treatise *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which was in the form of a letter, elevated the conservative stance already formulated by authors such as: Henry Bolingbroke, Samuel Johnson, and Richard Hooker, to the level of a political position discussed by many thinkers and politicians in Europe in the late 18th century. Edmund Burke, however, was not only a theorist, but, above all, a practitioner, which seems to be characteristic of Conservative thinkers. He was an active publicist throughout his life, contributing for thirty years to *The Annual Register*, an annual review of British, European and world events observed from an English perspective. He had a long parliamentary career and became one of the leading politicians of the Wig party. It was the problems he faced in his daily parliamentary work that drove him to seek concrete solutions, rather than building an abstract philosophical system. Moreover, he was a great enemy of “theorising”, which he expressed on many occasions, for example, by criticising the work of the French National Assembly. At home, he advocated, among other things, greater discipline in the work of the Cabinet, was a fierce opponent of the abuses of the East India Campaign and a defender of the rights of the American colonies, and was famous for his criticism of atheism, while, at the same time, defending dissidents and Catholics in the United Kingdom (Burke, 1790).

This Irish thinker singled out freedom as one of the highest values, stressing, however, that unfettered freedom turns into tyranny; he therefore fought despotism. In his theoretical thought he referred to the achievements of the representatives of the Scottish Enlightenment. He referred to the achievements of the representatives of the Scottish Enlightenment: Adam Smith, Joseph Butler, and David Hume. From the first of these he adopted, above all, economic liberalism and the theory of the free market, which has become an integral part of the conservative worldview to this day. Following Butler, on the other hand, he emphasised respect for the heritage of the past, especially when creating new political reforms. He criticised Locke’s proposed theory of the social



contract and his abstract theory of government. The central issue considered by Burke was the British constitution and the system of government based on it. Throughout his years as a parliamentarian, he made sure that new decisions taken by the authorities remained in accordance with the principles of the constitution and thus with the spirit of the laws of previous generations. As he wrote:

You will observe that from Magna Charta to the Declaration of Right it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties as an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity – as an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom, without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right. By this means our constitution preserves a unity in so great a diversity of its parts. (Burke, 1790, p. 28)

It seems that this quotation encapsulates the whole spirit of conservative thought, which is still relevant today, i.e., respect for tradition and institutions created by previous generations, while being open to thoughtful change and evolving solutions. It was Edmund Burke who created the guiding principles of modern conservatism.

An important element of the conservative style of thinking, is also its saturation with emotion. Burke's conservatism was imbued with the horror of the events of the French Revolution and the fear of the ideals espoused by its adherents. It grew out of a clear practical need to defend constitutionalism and to immunise Britain against the anarchist sentiment that was reaching it across the Channel. For Burke, the distinction between 'false freedom' and 'true freedom' remained clear. The French Revolution was the embodiment of the former – bringing all-encompassing anarchy, leading to the breakdown of social bonds, and ultimately to tyrannical slavery under majority rule. The philosopher proposed an alternative in the form of setting a framework for freedom, which would be the result of the historical evolution of societies. His position was adequately captured by the American political theorist and historian, Russell Kirk:

Throughout his life, Burke's main interests were justice and liberty – liberty associated with law, the limits of which were defined by prescriptivism. That is why he fought for the civil liberties of the English with the king, for the liberties of the Americans with the king and parliament, and for the liberties of the Indians with the Europeans. He defended all these civil liberties not because they were innovations discovered in the age of reason, but because they were ancient privileges guaranteed by age-old customs. (Quote after: Rydz, 2005, p. 17, author's translation)



These privileges and the basic principle of freedom guaranteed by Western culture were threatened again in the 20th century by the developing totalitarian systems in the name of the promise to create paradise on earth. In response to the growing power of communist and socialist ideology, another phase of conservative thought and politics was born. It was a response to the loss of freedom by the citizens of almost half of Europe and was an attempt to defend freedom in the Western world. This also applies to contemporary conservatism. For example, the impetus for Roger Scruton to start thinking about philosophy of politics was not only theoretical reflection but also participation in concrete events. It was the personal experience of living in the countries of “real socialism” that ultimately formed the author’s conservative worldview and attitude. Criticism of communism is the starting point for all his work. For this reason, it can be considered, I believe, which is also one of the basic theses of my work, that Roger Scruton’s contemporary conservatism is a direct response to the communist worldview. As the author himself professed:

A visit to Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1979 awoke me to the reality. I encountered first-hand the thing that Orwell perceived fighting alongside the communists in the Spanish Civil War and which he expressed in telling images in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I saw the translation into facts of the fictions that swam in the brains of my Marxist colleagues. I entered Hobsbawmia, and felt the malign enchantment of a wholly disenchantment world. (Scruton, 2014, p. 24)

In his book *How to be a Conservative*, Roger Scruton distinguishes between empirical conservatism (which opposes violent reformation and enlightenment because of their negative consequences for society) and metaphysical conservatism (which defends the *sacred* and its values). He himself is in favour of the first of these, although in his conception religion plays an important role. It is important both in man’s personal dimension and as a source of tradition and culture. In the chapter “My Journey”, the philosopher clearly writes that what he saw in the countries of people’s democracy – the Czech Republic and Poland – and his direct contacts with opposition movements in these countries crystallised his views. The philosopher wants to show by his own example how a conservative is formed.

Contemporary British conservatism develops in confrontation with real socialism, but, at the same time, Polish conservative philosophers are emboldened only when confronted with Anglo-Saxon publications. This is also due to the historical context, since until ‘89 Poland had censorship of publications, which also included the content of lectures at universities. Thus, conservative thinking is a reaction against socialist and communist ideology – as an external and internal threat. This is also reflected in the analysis of the culture war.



Culture of rejection

One of the main contemporary conservative authors who writes about the phenomenon of culture war within Western civilisation is Roger Scruton (Scruton, 2010). In order to fully trace the course of this philosopher's argument, it is necessary to start from his definition of culture. In the conservative style of thinking, the nature of our cognition, its sources and origins, remains a rather questionable element. On the one hand, many of the representatives of conservatism emphasise the rational character of knowledge; on the other hand, mystery, intuition, and the practical aspect of cognition are important to them. What distinguishes Roger Scruton's style of thinking in this respect is his attempt to find a new formula of cognition, which he presents as emotional knowledge and links to culture. As he states:

Unlike science, culture is not a repository of factual information or theoretical truth, nor is it a kind of training in skills, whether rhetorical or practical. Yet it is a source of knowledge, concerning what to do and what to feel. We transmit this knowledge through ideals and examples, through images, narrative and symbols. We transmit it through the forms and rhythms of music, and through the orders and patterns of our build environment. Such cultural expressions came about as a response to the perceived fragility of human life and embody the collective recognition that we depend on things outside our control. (Scruton, 2016, p. X)

Culture is therefore a source of moral knowledge and defends civilisation against decline. Civilisation is not a given, fixed, and unchangeable value, something that cannot be lost and cannot be destroyed. It is based on the continuous work of whole societies that, sharing common principles, values, and duties, keep it in existence. The two pillars of Western civilisation are the Judeo-Christian religion and culture, which is based on ideas derived from the Hebrew Pentateuch and the Greek New Testament, as well as Greek and Roman mythology. Scruton thus links culture and religion, writing about how the former grows out of the latter and becomes a transmitter of moral knowledge. But he makes an even more radical claim, pointing out that culture is not only a valuable repository of knowledge, but also a weapon in the struggle to preserve our heritage of identity, morality and our purpose for existence. Without culture, Western civilisation will collapse, just as happened to the Roman Empire before. The barbarians who invaded Rome were unable to take advantage of the technological advances left by the Romans because they had neither their knowledge growing out of culture nor their understanding of the world. As Scruton notes, technology enables people to act more efficiently, but it is culture that gives us the knowledge of how to



act and what to do, and teaches us the meaning of our actions. For this reason, it is an integral part of civilisation.

In diagnosing the state of contemporary culture, Roger Scruton points to the symptoms of a deep identity crisis in Western civilisation, attacked from the outside by radical Islam and from the inside by multiculturalism, a false notion of tolerance, feminism, and a culture of rejection. In his book *Culture Matters*, the British philosopher opposes the nihilism of Western intellectuals and the rejection of high culture in Europe and the United States; he also defends aesthetic experience and the duty to teach culture and art, which shape us into “human beings”:

While maintaining that all cultures are equal and comparative, their valuing is absurd, the new culture secretly appeals to the opposite view. It is engaged in convincing us that Western culture and the traditional curriculum are racist, ethnocentric and patriarchal, and therefore politically unacceptable. Leaving aside the falsity of these accusations, they presuppose the same universalist vision that they deem impossible. This universalist vision is the heritage of Western culture and the reason why we should cherish this culture and pass on its great teachings to our youth. (Scruton, 2016, pp. 105–106)

The greatest threat to Western civilisation, according to Scruton, lies within. It lies in the attitudes of scepticism and relativism that dominate scientific and academic circles. Allan Bloom was the first to analyse this phenomenon in depth in his work *The closing of the American mind* (Bloom, 1987). In Scruton’s work, we can find many continuations of the considerations first raised by the Chicago philosopher, so it is worth following his arguments. The starting point for Bloom’s critique of American intellectual circles were the reforms in higher education, which resulted in a retreat from the traditional model of education. The lowering of educational standards has led, according to Bloom, to a crisis of intellectual elites in the United States. This, in turn, translates into a social and political crisis. As the source of the problem, he mainly pointed to the decline of American universities. Bloom’s argumentation is not merely theoretical speculation, but is based on his extensive academic practice as a long-time lecturer, primarily at the University of Chicago and the universities of Cornell, Yale, Tel Aviv, Toronto, and Paris.

Bloom’s main thesis is that the university, which is an integral component of democracy and is supposed to transmit the community spirit and teach all the virtues and values needed for a functioning republic, is beginning to destroy its own foundations and thus renounce its function. The philosopher exposes the nihilism, paralysing relativism and empty political correctness that impose fetters on free academic thought. In a situation where society is ruled by public opinion created by the media, the university has a great responsibility to create an enclave of intellectual freedom, where the most



diverse points of view can be voiced without any restrictions. Bloom points out that the academic world has failed to live up to this responsibility and, on the contrary, has allowed for its own politicisation, a departure from the old models of teaching and the abandonment of the classics.¹ New topics have emerged as research topics, facilitating academic careers such as gender, race, sexuality, or education towards ‘openness’ and tolerance. As Bloom writes:

The recent education of openness has rejected all that. It pays no attention to natural rights or the historical origins of our regime, which are now thought to have been essentially flawed and regressive. It is progressive and forward-looking. It does not demand fundamental agreement or the abandonment of old or new beliefs in favour of the natural ones. It is open to all kinds of men, all kinds of life-styles, all ideologies. There is no enemy other than the man who is not open to everything. But when there are no shared goals or vision of the public good, is the social contract any longer possible? (Bloom, 1987, p. 27)

The author of *The closing of the American mind* titles one of his chapters “Nihilism, American style”, in which he argues that moral and political transformations are rooted in the language of value relativism. It is a new vocabulary that redefines the concept of right and wrong. To consider something morally wrong is, in this system, to deny dignity to other patterns of life and an attitude of arrogant cultural supremacy. Values are thus something ephemeral, characteristic of a given culture, or a matter of habit that can be changed. Such an assumption has epistemological implications: it is not reason that provides the tool for knowing values, and thus, it is futile to search for them. The new dictionary realises in this way the Nietzschean claim of the death of God. For the German philosopher, however, this was one of the greatest disasters, leading to the decay of culture and art, stripping people of their aspirations. In the American interpretation, by contrast, it is presented as the greatest achievement – breaking out of the illusion of objectivity and the limits of traditional morality. Suddenly, man can do anything because he is not limited by notions of right and wrong. Bloom asks, however, what *de facto* can he do if he believes in nothing and professes no values?

¹ Scruton, too, defends the traditional system of education based on learning by heart, reading aloud epic works, or performing Shakespeare’s plays on stage. Like Bloom, he also writes about the need to learn the canon, works that have been read by successive generations and thus provide a comparative measure for other works and allow us to understand successive aesthetic references. “The child will learn in time that the works of *Beowulf* and *The Seafarer* are remembered in the words of modern poetry, and this discovery will enrich the reading of all later literature” (cf. Scruton...). He applies the same correlations to the teaching of music and the visual arts. The philosopher stresses that this pedagogical order is important insofar as it makes it possible to gain a full perspective on the understanding of contemporary works, and thus also enhances the aesthetic pleasure of communing with culture.



Nietzsche aimed his criticism at modern democracy, which, by considering rationalism and egalitarianism to be the most important, became a threat to the creative power of life. However, the 'American nihilism' described by Bloom, conversely, was to form the basis of democracy, allowing for the absolute equality of all value systems.

The work of the author of *Shakespeare and Politics* is extremely comprehensive, going far beyond the issues of education, making an in-depth analysis of human relations, the two concepts of revolution and states of nature, culture, values, the development of social thought in the 20th century, the influence of the Frankfurt School on American philosophy, and finally liberal education. Its analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, for the issues of which it remains significant that a reading of Bloom's work has entered the classics of conservative thought and has proved to be a precedent in the dispute between right-wing thinkers and radical liberalism. Despite support from the writer Saul Bellow, whose introduction opens *The Closed Mind*, the book was almost entirely rejected by academia in the 1980s. Martha Nussbaum publicly declared that Bloom should not be considered a philosopher at all. In a review for the Polish edition, Leszek Kołakowski predicted a similar reaction, writing:

I predict that Allan Bloom's book will be met with violent attacks. Then, again, it deserves it, because that is the fate of all important books. *The Closed Mind* is a fascinating, sharp and passionate diagnosis of the cultural changes that have taken place within civilisation in recent decades, particularly in the fields of politics and morality. (Review on the cover of the Polish issue: Bloom, 2012)

Contrary to these fears, however, it passed almost unnoticed in the Polish scientific community. This may have been due to the lower incidence of the processes described by Bloom at Polish universities, which for many reasons are characterised by greater freedom than their Western counterparts. In Anglo-Saxon political thought, the theses contained therein were only rehabilitated by Roger Scruton in his essay "Culture Matters". The British philosopher has a broader perspective, as he had the opportunity to observe the development of the processes described by Bloom. He goes one step further and puts forward a thesis on culture wars, which radical relativism inevitably led to. He points to the existence of the institution of new censorship and touches on the contemporary problem of the clash between Western civilisation and Islam.

The starting point for Scruton's reflections, as was the case with Bloom, is also his many years of academic practice, gained both in the UK and the US. He observes the transformation of teaching methods for students in the 21st century, of the way knowledge is transmitted to them, and of approaches to teaching culture. He makes a critique of the currents surrounding him in academic life which proclaim that in



a canon of classics filled with the prejudices of past eras, there is nothing worth passing on. He exposes the position of sceptics who assume that there is actually no such thing as authority in culture, because every assessment remains subjective and thus equivalent. He shows how the mechanism of using the tool of censorship eradicates the classics from the curriculum. Scruton opposes such practices. He argues that culture is a product of judgement and evaluation, and it is only from such a process of constant comparison and choice that a set of masterpieces emerges. He takes as his goal the defence of culture as a legitimate object of study and a tool for assessing reality – the feelings and aspirations of people in the modern era, and a way of protecting a shared model of life and values.

Scruton formulates his own definition of culture. As he states: “It is a sphere of intrinsically interesting artefacts, linked by the faculty of judgment to our aspirations and ideals” (Scruton, 2016, p. 13). The task of creativity, then, will be to explore the meaning of the world and of social life, while the aim of communing with culture should be to be able to produce in its recipients the ability to judge themselves and other people. Thus, in a way, we see ourselves in culture as in a mirror, which enables us to better understand ourselves and the people around us. It is one of the paths to truth in the Aristotelian sense. However, Scruton warns against equating cultural education with morality. It is an oversimplification, he believes, to assume that people educated in culture are automatically characterised by a high ethical level. He points out that although culture is a source of moral knowledge and has the ability to develop empathy in its recipients, it is not a guarantee of making people good. A glaring example of this dependence is the behaviour of SS men working in concentration camps, described by Isaac Bashevis Singer, among others, who spent their days murdering Jews and their evenings listening to classical music and discussing philosophy. In their case, high culture did not moderate customs. The philosopher notes this disturbing paradox, pointing to the phenomenon of the distance that occurs between a wide familiarity with high culture and the moral qualifications of individuals. This problem was illustrated in some respects by the dispute between artists and philistines in the 19th century.

As a condition for the emergence of culture, understood as high art, the British philosopher mentions free time, indicating that our culture has historically been the work of a non-working class. Behind this correlation lies also the observation that the fruits of culture are not practical products, their primary objective is not to bring financial profit. They are created at moments when human minds can detach themselves from the duties of practical life. This distinction has its roots in the Greek tradition. For Aristotle, the performance of work was a negatively charged necessity, connected, as Hanna Arendt emphasised, with the sphere of the *oikos* (household), also constituting a necessary condition for the release of time for the owner, i.e. the



master of the house. The Greek *scholē* is precisely the state of being free from work, which can be devoted to contemplation, to activities which are not means to another end, but constitute an end in themselves. In the ancient tradition, sport also counted among such activities. Scruton points out that contemporary Western societies find themselves in an unprecedented situation, where ever-larger segments of society have an enormous amount of free time at their disposal. This inevitably creates the need to manage it. Alongside forms of mental life such as contemplation, or active engagement in practices such as play or sports training, passive reception has emerged, in which the mind involuntarily receives external stimuli without actively responding to them. Scruton also places mass culture in this context. According to him:

The distinction between distraction and interest is hard to draw exactly. After all, you cannot be distracted by something without also being interested in it. But the interest stops with a next distraction. The mind does not keep hold of the first object of attention, since it is incapable of pursuing its interest if the stimulus is not renewed. (Scruton, 2016, p. 20)

In response to the need for such a way of spending leisure time, mass culture was created, of which television is a paradigm. It attracts the attention of the audience in a short time, paralysing thinking. Scruton calls this process passivation, which has the effect of keeping the mind in a state of emptiness. Of popular entertainment, as befits an English gentleman, he accepts only sport, considering it active contemplation. According to him, it also fully engages the mental authorities, while its participants are part of a ritual, uniting and creating a common identity.

According to Scruton, sporting events today are often elevated to the level of quasi-religious spectacles and rituals, thus linking them to the tradition of Greek culture. Originally, all such spectacles, affirming the community, had a religious character. In ancient Greece, both sports Olympiads and theatrical performances (Dionysia) were connected with the cult of gods and heroes. This is also documented by the oldest literary testimonies, i.e. biblical texts and Greek and Roman mythology. In this way, Scruton finds arguments that allow him to consider that the source of high culture is religion. As he argues, it is religious worship that gives rise to the need for its expression in words, sculpture, music, dance, and song. The original purpose of any kind of traditional arts was faith. It is therefore reasonable, Scruton believes, to conclude that originally people combined religious adoration with a search for beauty and sublimity, thus what we today call high culture. With that said, of course, culture takes on different functions than religion and also has different meanings. According to him: "Culture grows from religion, and religion from a species-need. But the culture engendered by a religion may also turn upon its parent with a sceptical eye" (Scruton, 2016, p. 40).



Scruton thus analyses the process of a culture's detachment from its religious roots. Already in ancient Greece, both in Greek tragedy and in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, a distance from traditional beliefs is visible, and the weight of considerations is shifted towards the theme of the allegory of human destiny, capturing and illustrating the sense of knowing the world. A similar mechanism, according to Scruton, can be observed in the works of the great Roman poets of the age of Emperor Augustus, or among the Sufi Persian poets (Hafiz, Rumi, and Omar Khayyam). Nevertheless, the greatest literary or musical works often deal with man's relationship with his Creator. I believe that the example of the works of the European Romantics can also be referred to here. Without a doubt, man's struggle with God is the axis of Mickiewicz's *Dziady*, considered by critics of literature to be a masterpiece. Also in the Russian literature so beloved by Americans, among such authors as Dostoyevsky or Bulhakov, metaphysical themes prevail. As Scruton argues, man has, on the one hand, autotomised the products of culture in relation to religious worship, while, on the other, he has made the search for God, inevitably linked to the human condition, the central theme of many works of high art.

What, then, are the causes of the crisis of Western civilisation as diagnosed by Scruton? He sees its sources primarily in the abandonment of teaching the classical model of high culture, considered by modern educational systems to be useless and impractical, and thus of no measurable benefit to the student. As the British philosopher points out, this is due to an erroneous definition of the purpose of knowledge. Knowledge is treated as a commodity, and yet, as Scruton believes: "True teachers do not provide knowledge as a benefit to their pupils; they treat their pupils as a benefit to knowledge" (Scruton, 2016, p. 46). Scruton turns the perspective of the learning order from an individual position to a community perspective. He points out that the primary purpose of transmitting knowledge to succeeding minds is to develop it and save it from oblivion, rather than to have a measurable utilitarian effect on a particular individual. We teach successive generations what we know, so that this knowledge and skills are not irretrievably lost. Therefore, not all knowledge has to be of immediate benefit to the pupil, but each new pupil will always be a benefit to the knowledge, as he or she will become another transmitter of it.

In his view, this reversal of perspective should apply to all kinds of knowledge, so not only theoretical knowledge and culture, but also practical knowledge. Scruton thus cites as an example the knowledge of how to build the pyramids with the means available to the ancient Egyptians. This knowledge has been irretrievably lost, like the knowledge contained in the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics*, because it has not reached us in written form, and also the people who knew what it contained are long dead. Perhaps, Scruton suggests, if Aristotle's *lykeion* had survived to our time,



systematically recruiting new students, this knowledge could have been preserved. This seems to be the principle of the temples in ancient Egypt, where priests for 3,000 years passed on to their disciples the knowledge of the movements of the stars, or the ability to mummify corpses, and thus kept a great civilisation alive.

For Scruton, however, it is not only the persistence of a given civilisation that provides a compelling argument for the need to teach high culture or aesthetic education. For even if there is no direct translation of cultural knowledge into moral conduct, as I have written before, it is cultural knowledge that also includes knowledge of moral values. Scruton distinguishes three types of knowledge: “knowing that”, e.g. the distance from the centre of the Earth to the centre of the Moon is 384,399 km; “knowing how”, e.g. to build the Golden Gate Bridge; and “knowing what”, e.g. to do when a friend’s husband dies. It is this last type of knowledge that education in culture is responsible for. It allows us to adapt our behaviour to the situation:

The inappropriate action is marked by a certain kind of failure: it peters out, stumbles into confusion, makes the situation worse than it might have been. Conversely, the appropriate action is the one that rescues what can be rescued, which brings success where success is feasible, leads on from one affirmative to another, so that the agent is never nonplussed or thwarted in his aims. In short, this kind of ‘knowing what’ has to do with success in action. The one who ‘knows what to do’ is the one on whom you can rely to make the best shot at success, whenever success is possible. (Scruton, 2016, pp. 52–53)

According to Aristotle, we learn virtue through imitation, which was also the basis of his aesthetics. It is, therefore, aesthetic education that enables us to empathise with the fates, emotions and decisions of characters and, by means of the imagination, shows us different models of life. In this way, together with literary characters, learning about their motives and facing their problems, we are able to look at our own experiences from a distance. According to the author of *How to be a conservative*, culture teaches its recipients, above all, compassion towards other people and how to transcend the first-person perspective and look at the world through another person’s eyes. Culture thus imparts “knowledge of the human heart”. It teaches us not only who we are, but what we are potentially capable of, because culture contains a record of human values. Scruton points out that no human being will be given the opportunity in real life to experience all the situations of emotion and elation that are witnessed in culture. However, we can get to know them indirectly by travelling their various paths together with the literary characters. This kind of experience also creates a sense of community between people who are strangers to each other, who have experienced together the struggles of Ulysses, the dilemmas of Hamlet, the dreams of Madame Bovary, or the fears of Frodo Baggins. They share the common feelings of the literary heroes, and



thus can better understand each other. This creates a frame of reference that helps even unknown people to communicate the states of their own minds. Scruton refers to Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, considering culture as a treasury of emotional knowledge that enables man to understand the meaning of life. Of course, life without high culture is imaginable, but it would be very poor – full of theoretical knowledge, but devoid of meaning.

Scruton describes modern culture, based on the negation of the values and patterns of high culture, as a “culture of rejection”. He considers its founders to be representatives of the Frankfurt School, mainly Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas. According to him, by aiming to expose the ideological assumptions and simplifications of the works of high culture, exposing its naivety and dead value system, they mainly demonstrated its uselessness in our times. Scruton agrees with Adorno's critique of mass culture, but he does not accept Adorno's attempt to discredit high culture and his aim to reject all its emotional and spiritual knowledge. For, according to him, we are dealing with the destruction of some intellectuals by other intellectuals on the basis of discrediting the basis of their beliefs and knowledge. In passing, Scruton wonders if the process of self-destruction is not characteristic of every civilisation that reaches a certain level of development:

A culture perpetuates the memory of a form of social membership and exalts it into something natural, unchangeable, and serene. When religious faith declines, it becomes difficult for intellectuals to believe that they really belong to the same community as ordinary people. Their claims to priesthood have been exploded, and their isolation in academies sets them at an impassable distance from those whose idea of adventure is to go out and mow the lawn. [...] The emergence of a culture of repudiation might therefore be a normal result of the breakdown of an old religion. What is new, however, is that the repudiation is directed not against the common people, as with Adorno, but against the very elite to which the unbelieving priest belongs. (Scruton, 2016, pp. 94–95)

Another aspect of Western civilisation that Scruton makes responsible for leading to a crisis of culture is rationalism and its associated openness to criticism. As he argues, it has always been embedded in the intellectual life of Europe that rational inquiry leads to objective truth, and that reason retains the position of arbiter in matters of dispute. The contemporary culture of rejection, however, criticises the appeal to reason as a symptom of European cultural imperialism and the adoption of Western ways of thinking as universal. If there are many equivalent worldviews, none of which we should favour, including our own, then we are thereby rejecting Western thinking practices. However, as Scruton notes, there is a certain inconsistency in such a postulate, as it forces us to judge other cultures according to their categories, and



only Western culture from an external point of view. Representatives of the culture of rejection, as well as supporters of absolute relativism, while remaining critical of Western civilisation, *de facto* demand much more from it than from others. If only to adopt an attitude of distance towards itself, which, according to Scruton, proves its very superiority.

The inevitable consequence of subjectivism in philosophy and culture, and thus of regarding truths, meanings, facts, and values as negotiable, is that all philosophical debate and disputes lose their meaning. Since every truth is equivalent and there is universal consensus, there is no point in asserting one's rights, so philosophical disputes also lose their meaning. In addition, it is difficult not to appreciate the argument that the proponents of subjectivism, relativism, and irrationalism themselves consider their positions to be objectively and universally valid. There is, therefore, no objective truth other than the truth that everything is relative. Scruton notes that these attitudes are, in principle, very critical and hostile to other ways of thinking. The effect of their influence is, as already mentioned here, a new form of censorship. "When everything is permitted, it is vital to forbid the forbidding" (Scruton, 2016, p. 104). Systems that distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, knowledge and ignorance are therefore not allowed. The same mechanism was already described by Allan Bloom.

The threats to Western culture that Scruton has discussed as internal threats need to be supplemented by pointing to those factors that, according to him, constitute an external threat to Western culture. In his view, the collapse of nation-states in Europe and the nihilism and deepening secularisation of societies opens a space for attack from other cultures, which is why he sees radical Islam as the main threat to Western culture. This threat stems mainly, Scruton argues, from the current condition of the Islamic world, which is an example of a civilisation in which culture is disappearing:

Consider Islam which, in the great days of Avicenna, al-Ghazali, and Averroës, rose to a self-consciousness and a self-mastery that filled the Islamic world with meanings and with a knowledge of the heart. What has happened to that great and disputatious culture? Where, for example, will you find printed copies of the philosophers? In American university libraries, certainly. But not in any ordinary bookshop in the Middle East. (Scruton, 2016, p. 124)

He points out that a certain political and religious fanaticism has taken over the public space in the Muslim world to such an extent that it has almost completely paralysed culture. In Iran, the works of Hafiz and Rumi are available only in censored versions, and even the case of the *Tale of the Thousand and One Nights* is similar. When you drive through the streets of Cairo, there are practically no advertisements for



theatre performances, concerts, or other artistic events. One comes into contact with high culture in modern Egypt only by visiting the surviving ancient culture, which, incidentally, was not Islamic culture. Scruton points out that scholars of Persian and Arab culture at home live on the margins of society, and many emigrate to Western universities. He calls this process “a kind of mass act of cultural suicide” (Scruton, 2016, p. 124). One of the effects of globalisation, according to Scruton, has been a deepening identity crisis in the Islamic world, which has been confronted with the image of a secular society, based on the existence of legislated rather than revealed laws. For radical groups, terrorism becomes a desperate attempt to protect their own world of values and traditions by destroying a rival vision. As he writes:

The resulting psychological mixture is explosive, and is bound to prompt young Muslims to express their discontent with the regimes that govern them, with the global economy that finances those regimes, and with the impious way of life that is intruding everywhere into the dar al-islam. (Scruton, 2010, p. 145)

The philosopher observes that a civilisation which is entirely based on revealed law and religious order, and which limits the development of secular culture, is not prepared for social change. The results are rebellions, violent attempts to protect the old order of values, and finally, terrorism, so vividly observed in Europe. Western culture, on the other hand, has enabled the societies of Europe and the United States to preserve their heritage of moral knowledge, despite their separation from religion and life in secular states. Its development prepares societies for the most diverse transformations, while allowing them not to lose the values on which they were founded. For this reason, according to Scruton, it is a protective shield for our civilisation.

In conclusion, it is worth noting the way in which the author of *How to be a conservative* defends Western high culture. Although in the conservative way of thinking cultural values have always had a big role to play, as they are the product of different traditions, including the religious one, with Scruton this element takes on a special dimension. Above all, he tries at all costs to find a link between ethical and aesthetic values. Even if it is not possible, based on experience and practice, to defend the thesis that art is conducive to moral improvement, Scruton recognises that its function is to perpetuate the idea of moral values, revealing their objective existence. Culture is thus an attempt to build a kingdom of intrinsic values. For Scruton, aesthetic values are immanent and play an extremely important role in the life of societies. In defence of these values, he again reaches into the realm of emotion, and this time, it is the feeling of disgust. It is aesthetic disgust, he believes, that is able to stop the movement of nihilism in the universities and the nihilism of the market. The feeling of disgust



or revulsion are very strong emotions that have been historically shaped and have a cultural underpinning (on this topic see: Menninghaus, 2003). Scruton wants to use these emotions as weapons in the battle for Western civilisation. Perhaps, it is the ultimate weapon because disgust can easily turn into aggression, which Scruton believes is necessary to realise the need to save high culture, the basis of Western civilisation – its values, its ways of thinking, its social organisation.

A society of narcissists

The phenomenon identified as “culture war” has become an important research topic in the work of another representative of the new conservatism, Gertrude Himmelfarb. In part, her argumentation overlaps with Scruton’s, but she goes a step further and divides Western societies into two separate groups that inevitably begin to wage a culture war against each other. In the book *One Nation, Two Cultures*, the American researcher notes the existence of a division in contemporary society, which she calls an “ethical divide”, between those who accept the existence of objective values and moral principles and who want to apply them to themselves and others, and those who preach absolute relativism. According to Himmelfarb, this introduces a new dividing line, distinct from traditional economic distinctions or educational levels. This new division runs across the others because it is based on differences in moral and cultural values. At the same time, this division is so great that within one society it creates two separate cultures, separated by an “ethical gap”. As Himmelfarb states:

There is more in common between two church-going families; or between two two-parent families one of which is black, than between two black families only one of which has two parents. It is because their identity is defined primarily by moral and cultural values that many inner-city black parents send their children to Catholic schools, not because they themselves are Catholic (they often are not) but because they want their children to have more rigorous education in more disciplined environment than is available in the public schools. (Himmelfarb, 2001, pp. 116–117)

The American researcher divides society into narcissists and dissidents. The former postulate abstention from moral judgements, consider religion and patriotism to be distortions and a social disease, and sexual morality to be an absolutely private matter. The others manifest attachment to family values, appreciate the social role of religion (although many of them do not practise it), make moral judgements, considering the concepts of good and evil as objective and valid. Himmelfarb calls them representatives of a dissident (formerly dominant) culture, i.e. one which, by its very name, signals that



it is somehow “in private”. Its representatives engage in social life, but, at the same time, disagree with many aspects of it. For example, the dissident culture includes certain elements of mass culture: television programmes or certain models of behaviour. The author also uses the term “selective separatists”: people who are active in local communities, take part in elections, but, for example, opt out of public schools. She writes about differences in minor and major issues, which are not based on wealth differences but on lifestyle choices.

Himmelfarb argues that the dissident attitude refers to the old model of the American immigrant – a person travelling on the Mayflower ship who arrives in the New World ready to accept and share the virtues specified by the Founding Fathers, above all the values of the Protestant work culture. These people therefore value freedom, temperance, sound judgement (*common sense*), postulate a model of self-improvement and the fullest realisation of their potential, and, above all, realise the need to work with other people to create a political community. This code of values united the first Americans despite the difference in origin or even in the language they spoke. It is worth noting that, although the United States is a country of diversity, all of its presidents were Protestants, except for Kennedy, who was Catholic. It is therefore a country governed by a very coherent value system despite the fact that it was created by immigrants. The dissident values described are the tenets of republican philosophy, which additionally finds its ally in the idea of natural law and the concept of justice that evolves from it.

According to the American historian, next to this traditional culture, a critical culture has developed in the USA, as well as an opposition to it – a narcissistic attitude. It is characterised by different ontological and epistemological assumptions: human nature has no permanent features, the world is not cognisable, and there are no unchangeable values in it, while moral judgements are not different from emotional judgements (liking and disliking). This attitude is also characterised by profound criticism of the United States itself, which even turns into a desire to destroy it (for example, declarations made by Noam Chomsky). The author recognises that the clash of these two cultures is inevitable. At the same time, she herself sides with the dissident attitude and is optimistic about the return to the traditional code of morality. She also argues that the national unity of Americans is stronger than this cultural disintegration, and thus, they are able to fend off the newly created crisis.

Americans can justly pride themselves on surviving both the cultural revolution and the culture war without paroxysm or persecution or bloodshed, without, indeed, serious social strife. For all their differences, the ‘two cultures’ remain firmly fixed within ‘one nation.’ (Himmelfarb, 2001, p. 14)



The phenomenon of the conflict of cultures is isolated and analysed by Himmelfarb, referring to the social reality of the United States, and he acknowledges that the described division was created as a result of the moral revolution of the 1960s. The course of the same cultural confrontation in relation to Western Europe is described by both Roger Scruton and Agnieszka Kołakowska, who supplements it with the Polish context. In both cases, the attitudes and behaviour of citizens, as well as models of education or legal solutions from England and France, serve as empirical research material. For the Polish reader, they may even come as a shock, as for the most part they do not yet exist in Poland. For example, a wave of indignation swept through Polish public opinion at the announcement of the removal of the suggestive Katyń Monument in New Jersey, which had been deemed too violent and intolerant by the authorities of that city. When the Speaker of the Polish Senate came to its defence, he was described by the Mayor of Jersey City on social media as a “white nationalist, homophobe and anti-Semite”. Polish columnists and political commentators have mostly acknowledged that this is a manifestation of a kind of terrorism of newspeak that is unacceptable in political disputes (especially at the international level). However, it would be naive to assume that a culture war does not exist in Poland.

Culture war in Poland

I will try to show what form this process takes in Poland and what its background is by referring to the works of two writers who belong to the circle of the new style of conservative thought, namely Agnieszka Kołakowska and Anna Pawełczyńska. Both of them take up the issue of political, social, and ethical changes in the second half of the 20th century in the West and in Poland, in a way creating our national school of modern conservative thought. Using philosophical tools, similar issues to Scruton’s are analysed by Kołakowska in her books *Culture Wars and Other Wars* and *Plague of Nightingales*, and by Pawełczyńska in her publication *Heads of the Hydra*. Before discussing them, I would like to make an important distinction between conservatism in the Anglo-Saxon sense and the meaning of the term in my own native tradition. In Poland, conservatism has traditionally been associated primarily with patriotism in general, traditionalism, and respect for the moral code of the Catholic religion. In contrast, Anglo-Saxon conservatism does not focus on social or moral issues, but mainly on economic and political considerations. It also appears in a secularised version, though of course with respect for Christian morality and the institution of the family. It seems that both Polish authors refer to this Anglo-Saxon understanding of conservatism and in such a spirit they examine and analyse Polish problems.



Kołodowska observes changes in society, politics and culture from the Polish and French perspectives, analysing them in the same spirit as Roger Scruton does (often in blunt language). In *Culture Wars and Other Wars*, she addresses the issue of political correctness and its intellectual sources, and the question of its legitimacy in the debate and in European Union law. She touches upon the subject of creating an industry of fear, exposing the intellectual dishonesty of many famous “eco-ideologies”, writes about the essence of tolerance, the clash between Islamic and Christian culture, which takes the form of the intifada near Paris, criticises Edward Said’s Orientalism and describes the process of relativising the notions of good and evil or the secularisation of society. These are therefore issues which are pressing problems for British conservatism as well. In his essay on political correctness, he starts from cultural changes using the example of John Lennon’s song “Imagine”. This popular musical hit makes listeners imagine a world without states, religion, values, without hell and heaven. She is horrified by two aspects that she finds in this text. Firstly, what repression would be required to enact and maintain such a hypothetical state of affairs, and that this is paradoxically a widely shared aspiration of many people in the 21st century. Kołodowska recognises that a similar imaginative idealism underlies both the vision of political correctness and such movements as feminism, anti-globalism, environmentalism and *New Age* philosophy. This idealism, in turn, involves a belief in the possibility of a revolution that can bring universal happiness, equality, and prosperity to humanity. As she writes:

Liberals, as it were, by definition imagine everyone together, whereas conservatives, whose vision of the world and human nature is historical, tend to shy away from this. [...] liberal thought is abstract and universal, while conservative thought is practical and individual. Liberalism can easily turn into an ideology; conservatism with difficulty, because ideology is by definition alien to it. (Kołodowska, 2015, pp. 18–19, author’s translation)

The phenomenon of political correctness is of particular interest to Kołodowska. The Polish thinker notes that political correctness is characterised by contempt for facts, egalitarianism, the creation of all-embracing theories and generalisation. It also shows a tendency to use newspeak, centralisation, censorship, the dictate of orders and bans and homogenisation. She supports these observations with a number of examples from various areas of life in France, England, and the USA. She also points out that the basis of these phenomena is the conviction that the only true authority is the state, which should regulate through law all areas of life, including the family. According to her, political correctness assumes that everything people are and do is related to gender, race, sexual orientation, and belonging to some ethnic group. This exemplifies the mechanism of dividing society into groups and minorities, with the



effect of destroying national loyalties and replacing them with racial, ethnic, and minority loyalties. As she writes: “A member of such a group ceases to be himself, an individual; he is identified with the group to which he belongs” (Kołakowska, 2015, p. 34, author’s translation).

* * *

In a number of texts that are primarily essayistic in nature, Kołakowska demonstrates the relationship between the politics of multiculturalism and the rise of Islam in Europe, which, according to her, is in clear conflict with the demand for respect for diversity. She goes even further than Scruton, arguing that there is no such thing as a moderate and modern Islam and that it cannot be combined with the democratic order, but instead stands in opposition to everything on which Western civilisation has been built. It is mainly the ideology of political correctness that legitimises the separateness of Muslims in Europe, that regards criticism of Islam as racism (even though the religion is not a race) and that thus allows democracy to be used against it. To justify these claims, Kołakowska cites such absurd examples as the censorship of Marlowe’s 400-year-old play about Tamerlane, which was on display in London, because it expressed anti-Islamic content, or the removal of a historic hog statue from a national park in England so that it would not offend Muslim passers-by. And yet, as Kołakowska points out, Sharia law does not allow any anti-discrimination laws, because it is revealed law and there is no room for compromise. It will not show the tolerance towards Western democracies that is required of it. Examples of this are the burning of churches in Iran, the regular attacks on Copts in Egypt, or the ban on wearing a crucifix in public places in Saudi Arabia.

In her discussion of the crisis of European civilisation, the Polish author points to three factors that are largely responsible for it: the destruction of European identity, the unprecedented number of Muslims living permanently in Western countries, and the ongoing conflict in Europe and the USA between those who believe in traditional morality and values and those who reject them. She puts forward a similarly radical thesis to that of Roger Scruton, that the Western world has been overtaken by “culture wars”, but in her view, they are a conflict between conservative and liberal worldviews in general. As she claims, referring directly to Himmelfarb’s concept:

The culture war [...] is a conflict between different visions of almost all spheres of life: politics, economics, the concept of democracy, morality, the role of religion in the public



sphere, the shape of the ideal society, the role of government, individual rights, group interests, education, science, family, values. (Kořakowska, 2015, p. 157, author's translation)

Anna Pawełczyńska takes up this topic in her book *Heads of the Hydra*, subtitled *On the perversity of contemporary evil* (Pawełczyńska, 2014, author's translation). She starts from very similar premises as Himmelfarb, but analyses this phenomenon on the specific Polish ground, which, as has already been mentioned, is significantly different from the Anglo-Saxon one, especially in its approach to the citizen. The moral revolution of the mid-twentieth century that swept through Western Europe had much less impact in Poland, mainly due to the existence of the Iron Curtain and the propagated hostility to American culture. By highlighting these differences, Pawełczyńska brings out the historical difference of Poland, which, unlike Great Britain or the United States, is a country that has had its statehood repeatedly broken. This can also explain the Polish lack of respect towards state institutions and the absence of a firmly anchored sense of co-responsibility for the development of the republic. For years, Poles did not identify with the law imposed on them, seeing it as a tool of hostile political forces. Pawełczyńska points out that Poland, weakened by the actions of Nazism and then by the influence of the Soviet Union, moved very quickly from a pseudo-protective state to immature democratic rule. This did not allow it to develop the full capacity to think in terms of its own statehood, nor to rebuild fully from the moral and material devastation. According to her, in such a weakened state, the elites allowed liberalism to grow spontaneously. She claims, like Scruton and Kořakowska, that the ideology of liberalism bears surprising similarities to totalitarian communism, and is, in fact, its continuation. Although there are differences in methods between them, one can point to the identity of the goal, which is to gain power with an international reach. According to this approach, the theory of moral relativism, which characterises liberalism, fulfils the same function as the former communist ideology, and, at the same time, becomes a tool of mental violence. As Pawełczyńska writes:

The fact that in my reflections I expose the totalitarian features specific to liberalism and the dangers accompanying democratic ideology does not mean that I treat fascism, communism, liberalism, and democracy in the same way. I assume that the evils contained in fascism and the evils specific to communism have been recognised, and that knowledge about them has a wide social reach. In contrast, the processes of degeneration of liberalism and democracy have not yet been diagnosed. They are 'in statu nascendi', ongoing at present. (Pawełczyńska, 2014, p. 27, author's translation)



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Pawełczyńska, similarly to Himmelfarb, focuses mainly on the phenomenon of moral relativism, the effect of which is the destruction of social bonds. According to her, a democratic system is based on universal moral norms and correlated with them moral and legal norms. As she tries to show, the overthrow of unchangeable moral values leads to the breaking of the cohesion of human communities and to the introduction of a system in which the atomised communities become powerless and incapable of organised opposition. This goal, according to Pawełczyńska, is achieved by liberalism through newspeak, disinformation and the destruction of all methods of valuation. As far as the methods of achieving these goals are concerned, they can, in her opinion, be compared to the murder on the Orient Express designed by Agatha Christie: it is carried out by a group of co-operating people, each of whom deals a blow, but it is not known which of them is fatal. The perpetrator therefore remains anonymous and cannot be held responsible. According to Pawełczyńska, this is the principle on which the doctrine of disinformation and the creation of newspeak operates. Like Scruton, she emphasises the dramatic dimension of this conflict, since at stake is the survival of European civilisation, understood as a set of values, a cultural heritage and a way of organising societies. The alternative is their collapse: “Without adopting the criteria of goodness and truth, which are the pillars of European culture, the call for democracy becomes just another empty platitude” (Pawełczyńska, 2014, p. 219, author’s translation).

A thinker associated with the Public Opinion Research Centre points out that the Polish culture war manifests itself primarily in the attitude towards the previous political system, the interest groups it created and the solutions concerning the organisation of power. According to her view, the Polish culture war consists in a different interpretation of our history and evaluation of tradition. One side of the conflict tends towards a one-sided way of describing history, exposing the faults of our ancestors and the mistakes they made. They blame them absolutely for the loss of independence and all conflict situations in which different nations and social strata were involved. At the same time, the main enemy of this group has become the Catholic Church, whose mistakes are mainly exposed, to the exclusion of efforts to preserve moral values and national traditions. Pawełczyńska assesses that such actions serve to destroy the support that every nation has: its common history and the moral authorities of people who have distinguished themselves in a special way in building a common heritage. In Poland various political parties are trying hard to discredit all authorities: “To survive periods of danger, a nation must believe in its own strength. In a situation where the mass media are used as a weapon against self-esteem, it is necessary to protect people’s



consciousness against the danger of effective manipulation” (Pawełczyńska, 2014, p. 124, author’s translation).

In searching for the causes of this conflict, she points, first of all, to the existence of very many links between the contemporary Polish state and the previous system. According to her, the former Polish intelligentsia, which despite its faults was guided by a specific system of values, has been replaced by a social stratum, the membership of which is ennobled by participation in power, access to money and the ability to acquire it. In such a system, power and money are treated as exchangeable goods. Similar distribution of access to positions, privileges and material goods inevitably leads to stratification, and consequently to social discontent, lack of trust and respect for elites and breakdown of social bonds.

Pawełczyńska makes a thorough analysis of these phenomena, starting from the strategy of personnel policy, through lumpenelit, to the phenomenon of poverty in Poland. These issues, however, do not directly constitute the subject of this work. Quoting the publication of *Heads of the Hydra* was intended to show the parallel between the recognition and diagnosis of the phenomenon of culture war in Western Europe, the USA, and Poland. I believe I succeeded in showing that despite different historical and social conditions, this is a conflict that establishes a new dividing line that can be recognised in all societies of Western civilisation. It has not escaped Poland either, despite the fact that it is taking different forms here.

Conclusion

Trying to extract a general thesis from all the voices mentioned, one can conclude that the war of cultures, as understood by conservative thinkers, is a war between objectivism and relativism. Some advocate the recognition of the existence of God, truth, good and evil, and an objective system of values, while others postulate a complete relativisation of these notions, reducing them to the role of the private opinion of an individual, which does not and should not have any bearing on social life. This relativism, in turn, is to become a guarantee of freedom that will liberate Western societies from xenophobia, intolerance, all inequalities, from racism, anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, and the bondage of patriarchy. If we were to point out, following Karl Mannheim, the common features of conservative thinking, it would be emotionality. All the authors described remain not only observers of the culture war they believe is taking place, but also active participants in it. This is evident in the style they use in their publications, as well as in their conclusions, most of which foretell the demise of Western culture. These authors also feel very much alone by the intellectual community in the struggle they are waging. A peculiar feature of Allan Bloom’s conservatism is



that, above all, he makes the universities the battlefield, which, in his view, have become the main proponents of relativism. Bloom was the first to openly oppose intellectual censorship at universities and other authors after him analyse this problem in its new forms – political correctness or language censorship. In his vision, in the name of openness, universities try to strip students of all value systems, trying to show their cultural or linguistic dependence. Students are supposed to become a homogeneous mass that is open to all views and all cultures, an atheistic mass, with unfettered sexual freedom, not identifying with any national or economic group. This position leads to Western culture ceasing to believe in itself. Since there is no objective truth and no value judgements are allowed, everything that has been written, painted or sculpted loses its meaning. If we cannot consider one cultural product better than another, why create something new at all? A common thesis of the conservative style of thinking will be the criticism of relativism, which leads to the destruction of Western culture from within, because it has no positive message but only a negative one, based on rejection and negation. A similar attitude on the part of intellectuals must inevitably arouse resistance from the middle and lower classes who, being much more conservative in their views, defend the practices of life that are familiar to them. This inevitably becomes the basis of a culture war.

Roger Scruton's argument is the least emotional and the most scientifically structured; he does not try to make conservatism the only correct intellectual position, but to place it in context with other positions. He devotes the lion's share of the book *How to be a conservative* to chapters entitled: "the truth of socialism", "the truth of capitalism", "the truth of liberalism", "the truth of multiculturalism", "the truth of ecology", or "the truth of internationalism". His main thesis is that alongside these truths, there should be an equivalent place in public debate as well as in scientific debate for conservatism, which also has its truths. In this context, he finds that the position of conservatives regarding the culture war is at least partly reconcilable with that of liberal philosophers. They recognise, as do conservatives, the need for a return to traditional values that is emerging in the societies of Western liberal democracies. Chantal Moffuee, for example, shows how this need is exploited by right-wing political parties and how slogans belonging to the sphere of patriotic or moral values can be manipulated by the tool of populism. Roger Scruton, on the other hand, tries to show what is the source of these needs and sentiments in Western societies, and how to realise them. I see no contradiction in these positions.

Regarding the leftist and neo-Marxist interpretation, conservatism will agree with the doctrine of social justice contained in this attitude, as well as the need to give voice to: the weak, the sick, or the oppressed. As Scruton notes: "The idea of social justice is incoherent, but it appeals to emotions we all share. [...] A credible conservatism



must propose ways of extending the benefits of social belonging to those who have failed to obtain them themselves” (Scruton, 2014, p. 80). However, conservatism will strongly oppose the leftist claim that Western culture is to blame for the existence of these social inequalities, and that the destruction of its foundations and canon will provide a remedy to these problems. The biggest point of contention between leftist and conservative thinking is the approach to power. Conservatives will vehemently reject the thesis that the purpose of the products of Western culture is solely to acquire and maintain power, and that relations of power rather than competence build hierarchies in Western societies, and that the destruction of these structures will ensure social equality. Scruton’s attitude to this thesis places him at the complete opposite pole to Bourdieu or Žižek.

Of all the authors discussed in this paper, the book *One Nation, Two Cultures* was most favourably received by the public. Above all, its publication in 1999 was not ignored, and it received reviews in liberal and left-wing titles as well, although it received the widest echo among Republican circles, with favourable reviews in such magazines as *The Weekly Standard* and *National Review*. Himmelfarb was even praised as a competent historian by the *New York Times*, although her analysis and interpretation of the culture war phenomenon was criticised as unconvincing: “Its major shortcoming is its uncritical conflation of social phenomena that have different causes, are differently amenable to correction and differ in gravity; they are thrown together, and the resulting stew is labelled a morally sick society”, assessed Richard A. Posner, Chief Judge of the United States Court of Appeals (1999). The main accusation against the author was moralising and idealising the United States from the time of the Founding Fathers. Posner, however, does not deny the existence of social problems described in the book *One Nation, Two Cultures*, but recognises that they are the lesser evil and the price to be paid for modernity and progress. Interestingly, Himmelfarb places herself in the middle of the controversy – as someone who finds herself caught between liberalism and conservatism. In the afterword to the Vintage Edition she writes:

Walter Bagehot, the long-time editor of *The Economist* and one of the wisest of the eminent Victorians, once described himself as ‘between sizes in politics’ – neither liberal by Liberal standards nor conservative by Conservative standards. A century and half later, one might well find oneself between sizes, not only in politics but in social, cultural, and moral affairs as well. That at any rate I have had writing this book. (Himmelfarb, 2001, p. 147)

A similar sense of suspension between two worldviews seems to be a general characteristic of philosophical thinking, whose task is to break out of patterns, ideologisation, or politicking. The central conclusion Himmelfarb posits is the unbreakable unity of



the nation, in which although two cultures manifest themselves, the unifying force of the bond prevails. In my view, this is an interesting and compelling diagnosis that can be addressed generally to the phenomenon of culture war within Western civilization; after all, despite the differences that cause disputes in parliaments, lecture halls, or around family tables, the unity of nations invariably proves stronger. It seems that this thesis can unite both conservatives and liberals, as well as being part and parcel of a healthy democratic system in which these two attitudes are meant to constantly argue in order to find the best solution, but without blowing the whole state organism apart from within.

Agnieszka Kołakowska's book, *Culture Wars and Other Wars*, has the most journalistic character of all those discussed in this work. The author herself notes in the introduction that it is a collection of articles published over nine years in various Polish weeklies. Kołakowska focuses primarily on social phenomena and, having grown up in the milieu of the intellectual elite herself (daughter of a well-known philosopher²), dissects the myths and superstitions that have been clothed in the myths of scientific theory. Her most distinctive individual feature is her sharp and blunt criticism of Islamic terrorism, as well as European tolerance of Islam, which could not be expressed in any Western university. In this conflict, she sees the main space for a war of cultures. The author writes explicitly:

These terrorists, like all terrorists, have an unattainable goal: to transform the world into a paradise according to their model – in this case an Islamic paradise. Since this goal is unattainable, the terrorists will continue until we destroy them; nothing we do or do not do, no concessions, no compromises, will help. (Kołakowska, 2015, p. 188, author's translation)

Kołakowska is therefore closest to Samuel Huntington's initial thesis in *The Clash of Civilisations*, and her publication stems from her direct opposition to the theses contained in Edward Said's *Orientalism*. It is therefore impossible to reconcile her analysis with the ideas of left-wing philosophers. Liberals will probably agree with her diagnosis of the problem of Islamic terrorism in Europe, but will see its solution in completely different measures. The publication *Culture Wars and Other Wars* certainly does not meet the requirements of a scholarly book, and the author becomes an active and emotionally charged participant in this conflict. Its strongest point is the wealth of collected examples and events from the first decade of the 21st century, especially from

² Leszek Kołakowski was a Polish philosopher and historian of ideas. He is best known for his critical analyses of Marxist thought, especially his three-volume history, *Main Currents of Marxism* (1976).



France and Great Britain, which illuminate the scale of the phenomenon of culture wars, even if the reader does not agree with the presented interpretation.

The purpose of citing Anna Pawełczyńska's publication was to show the intellectual discontent with the injustices accompanying the change of systems in Poland – from real socialism to liberal democracy and capitalism. The author is an example of a thinker who experienced the horror of two totalitarian systems – she was a prisoner of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, and after the war she lived in socialist Poland. She lived to see the fall of communist Poland and remained intellectually active, analysing the present. Her book *Heads of the Hydra. On the perversity of contemporary evil* could not have been published under the previous system, and it lived to see public interest in 2014, only nine years after its first publication. The author herself admits in her introduction:

Immediately after the book was first published, I had only a few very good, even enthusiastic, reactions that resulted in lasting friendships. In other, quite numerous evaluations, the book was devoid of much meaning. It was accused of an inaccurate diagnosis of the situation, gloom and doom, promoting conspiracy theories and erroneous conclusions. It was only in the last few years that it turned out that the present day is worse than my diagnoses and predictions at the time. (Pawełczyńska, 2014, p. 12, author's translation)

Pawełczyńska's publication expresses disappointment with two phenomena – firstly, the failure to hold the previous system to account for its crimes and its acceptance of the *status quo*; secondly, the reproduction of the mistakes and myths of the previous systems in the present day. It expresses its intellectual disagreement with the smooth transition between one system and another with almost no accountability of the ruling class or people associated with the terror apparatus. This sense of indignation divides society in two – between those who are in favour of the “thick line” and those who want to open the files of the past. This division defies categorisation into conservatives and liberals. Among the theoretically conservative Polish “Solidarity”, there were many supporters of such a solution, while the young Polish “Left” expresses deep disagreement with the veil of silence, questioning above all the legitimacy of the assets of the financial elite, built on the reprivatisation for priceless state assets. This division, as well as the problems of such a social solution, remain alive to this day, resulting in scandals over files being found, protests over pensions being taken away, or a deep rejection of any personal authority by the younger generations of Poles:

The cliques of the PRL period, constructed on ideological and political principles, were replaced by new ‘sofa’ arrangements linking post-communist and post-solidarity, as well as newly rich pseudo-elites. This has led to the strengthening of branched interest groups with



mafia-like features and a growing range of influence. [...] There has been a fatal distortion of the concept of ‘tolerance’, damaging the moral and legal sense. It has replaced the notion of ‘impunity’. (Pawelczyńska, 2014, p. 126)

A similar kind of culture war remains unknown to the English-speaking reader, who could not experience life under the occupation of totalitarian systems, nor face the difficulties of accounting for them. For Pawelczyńska, it would probably be difficult to take seriously American or British intellectuals who identify themselves as communists. At the same time, in the book *Heads of the Hydra*, one can find features characteristic for the leftist point of view – showing unjust redistribution of wealth, close connections of financial elites with political elites, or mafia-like features of wild capitalism, which was not limited by state instruments, and which Poland experienced in the 1990s. Again, as with Himmelfarb, we can speak of the phenomenon of being in between. Her conservatism is primarily an anti-communist stance, and the culture wars she describes are wars against Russian communism in the literal sense, as well as the remnants of this ideological stance in the present day.

I have come to believe that many contemporary readers and observers of the culture war debate experience a similar feeling of being “in between”. They are in favour of change, giving a voice to minority perspectives in culture, or searching for new means of expression, while, at the same time, not being willing to negate the canon, seeing the value and importance of works that have shaped Western civilisation for centuries. It seems absurd to reject the writings of St. Thomas because he promoted misogynistic attitudes towards women, or to delete Aristotle from academic reading because he accepted slavery. Similar attempts to censor Western culture of anything politically incorrect or harmful to minorities of any kind seem an insult to modern man, who is deemed incapable of making his own judgements. After all, our culture, too, should show the degree of tolerance and openness that we advocate towards other cultures. This widespread feeling of aversion to revolutionary action, which demands the destruction of the entire legacy of previous generations and the building of a world of values from scratch, is precisely the conservative intuition which characterises the authors analysed in this work. Conservatism in this view will not be identified with traditionalism, but with anti-revolutionism in the broadest sense. In my view, such voices remain extremely important not only in public debate, but also in academic debate.

Finally, the question inevitably arises whether the phenomenon of culture war is not a necessary stage in the development of Western civilisation, which, detached from its religious roots, is simply destroying itself. We know that civilisations have specific stages of development and that many of them, such as the Egyptian or Roman civilisations in their declining phase, were weakened by internal decay: loss of faith in



gods, reduction of religious practices to rituals only, demoralisation of elites, breakdown of family institutions. Does a similar fate await the Western world? The authors I have discussed take a more positive stance, placing their hopes in the strength of the internal renewal of our culture. They see this change in the emerging schools of conservative thought. There is no doubt that in the academic discourse to date, conservatism has been stripped of its legitimacy as an anachronistic and unmodern attitude, resulting from a difference in the level of knowledge rather than a difference in opinion. Above all, Roger Scruton opposed such treatments, trying to show the broad scientific horizon of this formation of thought. Every eruption of conservative attitudes and views has been, since the beginning of the 19th century, a response to the crisis of the political and social order, and, above all, to all forms of totalitarianism, which were treated as an attack on the freedom guaranteed by Western culture. The contemporary return to a conservative style of thinking can also, I believe, be seen as a response to the deep crisis of Western societies that we are currently witnessing. If we accept that the phenomenon of culture war has its real reflection, then by examining its dynamics we can conclude that Western culture and civilisation are increasingly under threat, and a new style of conservative thinking is being formed in the face of this threat out of the need to diagnose and overcome it.

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