

BOOK REVIEWS

Andrzej Szahaj, *E Pluribus Unum? Dilemmas of Multiculturalism and Political Correctness*, Universitas, Kraków 2004.

The Andrzej Szahaj's book is concerned with American multiculturalism and political correctness seen from the perspective of the contemporary political philosophy (Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, Iris Marion Young, Yael Tamir, John Gray, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, Nancy Fraser). The book constitutes perfect introduction to political-philosophical dilemmas of multiculturalism – issues nowadays animatedly discussed all over the world which are poorly present in Polish literature. Admittedly, the postwar Poland is a markedly monocultural country [minorities constitute ca 3%] but presence in the European Union structures can gradually introduce changes within cultural landscape of our society too. Western Europe (France and Holland in particular) has already faced the problem of culturally different minorities integration, desperately looking for a binding agent suitable for society as a whole. American experience, described by Szahaj, notwithstanding certain peculiarity [uniqueness of American experiment] are valuable for us because Europe, similarly to America in previous times, became not only multicultural but also multicivilizational. As a famous thesis of Samuel Huntington says, that world policy in the future will be dominated by clashes between civilizations. According to the American political scientist's point of view, neither ideologies nor economy will be anymore the only reasons of international conflicts – cultural differences, mainly arising out of the religious divisions, will be the reasons.

Multiculturalism ideology was born in the eighties of the XX century, partly as a recovery from lasting for decades process of assimilation to American culture – oppressive process, in a course of which many ethnic groups suffered serious traumas. In short, multiculturalism requires the right to public identification with the own ethnic group for all those who want it, without any fear that it could be unfavorable for them or could stigmatize them. This on the surface justified ideology created a base for American social policy and brought about a debate on the possibilities of freedom and equality principles harmonization in social life.

Analyzing opinions of the consecutive thinkers Szahaj indicates that the controversy over multiculturalism can be faced from different points of

view, and he also indicates its internal antinomies. Following the idea, from one point of view value of multicultural ideology could be found in the fact that it allows noticing weaknesses of a traditional assimilative strategy and it exposes economic and political interests connected with it, oppression and constraint mechanism (Young), but from the other side the value can be found in demonstrating value of communitarian affiliations, sense of solidarity with a fate of bigger entirety where there is an individual feeling to be a part of it (Taylor, Kymlicka). Finally, in societies as the American one, the main contribution of multiculturalism can be found elimination of possible injustice that could be faced by respective minorities groups, and in consequence preventing uncontrolled social dissatisfaction from outbreaking, including bloody confrontation.

From the other point of view, in multiculturalists' way of thinking (e.g.: Taylor) clearly conservative culture comprehension can be observed. Conservative culture comprehension according to which an individual is able to be a member of only one culture where he or she grew up. For this reason a silent but controversial assumption appears that the only one true culture is a culture of origin. In so far nobody doubts the socializational meaning of the culture of origin and the value of having own culture [a possibility of living according to its rules] but it is difficult to agree with the assumption that secondary, valuable acculturation is impossible.

Anyway the main, controversial assumption of multiculturalism is conviction referring to the equality of cultures. The said conviction is correct from the anthropological point of view – Malinowski and Levi-Strauss pointed out the value of each culture as an efficient tool used in order to handle problems of the world which let us survive but also as a communication system ensuring integration. Anyway, it is only one of the equality senses. When we refer to ethics, the conviction of cultures equality makes serious objections. When multiculturalism turns into an extremely relativist form according to the rule: everything is so good as all the other things [all the cultures are of the equal value], it loses its credibility. It is impossible to remain faithful to rules and principles of the European culture and in the same time treat as equal from the axiological point of view the cultures allowing the following practices: honor killings, practice of genital mutilation, arranged marriages of children. We must honestly acknowledge that not every foreign culture [not every aspect of any foreign culture] is worth acceptance and respect from the European culture point of view.

American educational efforts, aiming at making equal European culture with other cultures, seem to be hypocritical on the axiological level and naive on the epistemological level. The naivety comes from the conviction that it is possible to create a point of view from nowhere.

Other troubles connected with multiculturalism refer to its coherence with the western political system: liberal democracy. A question appears: how is it possible that multiculturalism can be harmonized with liberalism, if the first one postulates abandoning of the preferences for individual powers and moving towards group powers. Admittedly the right to group identification constitutes another right of an individual, but differentiation policy deprives respective minority group members of the protection guaranteed by liberal state, enabling communities themselves to have an unrestricted power over them. If we accept very deep differences between groups it will lead to restraining diversity within any group. In the event of non-democratic groups it means handing over full control over the group to the elders and men. Moreover, these who try to impose conservative way of thinking and acting, are presented as loyal group defenders, and those who aim at social transformation and culture reformers are perceived as assimilation supporters betraying the group and its traditions. As Tamir notices, the western attitude towards foreign cultures, assuming the necessity of keeping it in an intact form, protection of their integrality and traditional form, constitutes an expression of a certain paternalism – deciding on behalf of specific members of a given culture to establish what should be its future form like. In western culture we allow change as something natural, but when we talk about other cultures we would like them keeping their unchanged form.

According to Szahaj it is impossible to harmonize precious cultural heritage, contradictory to liberalism principles, with individual's liberal rights protection. In such a situation, feeling sorry or not, we should aim at liberalization of cultures that are not liberal. The process mentioned must obviously lead to very serious tensions. Supporters of multiculturalism who think that the mentioned tensions can be avoided delude themselves. The question "is it possible to liberalize traditional cultures without destroying them?" is answered by Szahaj in a reasonable way: it is impossible to have two things in the same time. Traditional cultures breakdown is inevitable by-product of an attempt to liberalize them, because it is outlook of antiliberalism that distinguish them. Sometimes the game between identities is a game of a zero sum: someone must loose identity [its part?] to enable someone else to keep it (Raz).

In result, multiculturalism is for cultures, which are known from the beginning to be liberal in their nature [they allow possibility of choosing an individual way of life, from an outlook and axiological point of view].

Privilege of liberalism constitutes according to Szahaj an expression of political sense in a presence of many mutually contradictory visions of the world. The requirement that liberalism does not privilege itself, does not make any sense because all the outlooks are ethnocentric in their nature and a phenomenon of neutral state from the outlook point of view does not simply exist.

It is important whereas, that culture which reserves the right to establish “in the last instance” the rules of the political game in democratic countries, guarantees the state of at least uncertain peace. According to Szahaj only the western culture guarantees peaceful coexistence of different cultures because only the western culture invented individual’s autonomy, cognitive skepticism, relativism, autocriticism, pluralism and tolerance.

Finally, Szahaj summarizes its own attitude towards multiculturalism in four items:

1) foreign cultures can not be treated in a way that is not conditioned by our cultural beliefs, in other words: it is impossible to have another attitude;

2) identification of our criticism on the foreign cultures could be only faithfulness towards our own culture;

3) its principles are singled out for us and we can not agree that, without denying our cultural identity, they have the same axiological status as principles of any other culture;

4) demanding changes in foreign culture is justified if it becomes a part of multicultural society that lives, anyway, in liberal democracy conditions and in western culture. In other circumstances it can be justified also when the range of violence made by the foreign culture of what we define as human rights is beyond our tolerance. It is always determined historically and by the situation.

Very often typical contradiction of principles appears in our attitude towards foreign cultures. The principles we try to declare in the same time: respect towards cultural distinctness perceptible as a principle itself and human rights referring to an individual. According to Szahaj if such a conflict of principles appears we should opt for human rights sacrificing respect towards foreign cultures. We should choose this way of behaving as a rule regarding liberal democracy area and we should do it on second thoughts and always as a last resort regarding other political – legal solutions area. The acceptance criterion by foreign culture representatives of its indications cannot be a decisive justification in order to leave it in peace. Every culture acts in a way that it forces thoughtless respecting of certain beliefs or puts significant pressure to deliberately accept some of them.

It is difficult not to agree with Szahaj that ideology of multiculturalism is reasonable only in a moderate version where there are attempts made to agree it with liberal democracy principles western political culture principles. It becomes unreasonable in its extreme version where the above principles are rejected as unfairly particular. There is a mistaken conviction that parliamentary democracy should be changed into a political system satisfying needs and interests of everybody – there is no such a system. Szahaj suggest us a common sense perspective that is so precious when we refer to

ideological dispute. The said perspective is very often different from the dictate of political correctness. Common sense seems to say that sometimes we must choose between human being [whose rights are defended by liberalism] and his culture [which is defended by multiculturalism]. I agree with Szahaj that it is safer to opt for human being in this dispute.

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