Roots and Resilience in Weil, Kołakowski, Todorov, and Finkielkraut

Matthew Motyka, University of San Francisco, United States

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
This paper studies selected writings of prominent European intellectuals regarding the matter of cultural roots and uprootedness. Simone Weil attributes to uprootedness many ills of the twentieth century induced by the dominant State culture that tends to uproot a subject from their intimate environment. The ultimate results are alienation and violence. Leszek Kołakowski and Tzvetan Todorov, two thinkers who lived the experience of uprootedness caused by their immigrant status, reflected on the directions the world might take after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Alain Finkielkraut argues for the preservation of a genuine pluralism of ideas in our contemporary multicultural democratic society. The underlying common concern of these authors is the modern world at a crossroads, lost in its ideological entanglements, far from fulfilling the promise of a better, more open, and inclusive democratic reality. Kołakowski refers to this crisis as a spiritual recession—and the other three would very likely agree with this assessment.

Keywords: Simone Weil, Kołakowski, Todorov, Finkielkraut, Marxism, Ideologies, Democracy in Crisis, Uprootedness, History

iafor
The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to compare the ideas of four major thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries regarding roots and uprootedness. All of them are European intellectuals, belonging to the category of thinkers, and free from the pressures of their cultural and political contexts. They all have risked, or are risking, being unpopular by confronting, with an open visor, the ideological reality of their time, and the political reality characterized by ideological infatuation with comfortable semi-truths. By dissecting the reality of the times in which they write, they transcend the politically or socially attractive and tear the ideological veil that camouflages the truth through the recourse to ideologies in vogue. For them, ideologies flourish when communities lose their sense of historical continuity and roots.

Simone Weil, the earliest writer of the four, inspired the remaining three, who refer to her in their analyses. She writes, "To desire truth is to desire direct contact with a piece of reality" (1952, p. 242). Certainly, in Western cultures, the truth has suffered deformations from various ideological misconceptions. Leszek Kołakowski and Tzvetan Todorov, both immigrants, share their experiences of uprootedness as outsiders to both their cultures of origin and to the reality of Western democracies, their new homes, where the truth should have shown by its own light, but has not been able to. The fourth thinker, Alain Finkielkraut, remains active in the public arena of mass media and sparks frequent controversies by criticizing French cultural policies and seeing in them the grave danger of losing the universal appeal of France because of its particular way of thinking.

Simone Weil

Simone Weil (1909–1943) was a French philosopher and political activist who wrote on behalf of the working class and became an engaged supporter of the French Resistance Movement in London during World War II. She is the author of *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind (1949)* [*L'Enracinement, prélude à une déclaration des devoirs envers l'être humain*], which was intended as a draft of the vision for France after the liberation. In this work, Weil challenges the way history had been taught in schools. She sees the study of history as an essential component of one's sense of rootedness. Her statement about writing history, as it was practiced in France, seems to reflect the reality of today's poststructuralist, postcolonial era: conquerors impose their historical perspective on facts and interpret them accordingly to justify the political status quo that serves their interests. History as a discipline has become the casualty of the conquerors' political pressures and subjected to the supreme rule of force in the world: "No attention is paid to the defeated. [History] is a scene of a Darwinian process more pitiless still than that which governs animal and vegetable life" (1952, p. 212). Raising the question about the historical method, Weil provocatively asks whether history should be taught at all or selectively by placing wars in the background. To dismiss any doubt about her stance on the issue, she discusses the example of the United States, the country which, in her view, epitomizes a lack of a historical perspective: "We have only to look at the United States to see what it is to have people deprived of the time dimension" (1952, p. 221).

Weil associates the surrender of historiography to the political agenda of the governing body with the rise of the State as a political entity in the second-half of the Renaissance, and its subsequent evolution under the auspices of absolutist ideology. In the seventeenth century, at the court of Versailles, absolutism reached its apogee in surrendering culture (including the

view of history) to the service of the absolutist monarchy. History as a handmaid of political power became a vehicle of the ideology of conquest and served the propagandist apparatus of the body politic. Its ideological framework became a source of theories that attempted to focus on the unstoppable social evolution and were used as ideological warrants for various political regimes. For Weil the Marxist theory is a fruit of this development of historiography. She purports, "Marxism is nothing else than a belief in a mechanism of this sort. There the force is given the name of history; it takes the form of the class struggle; justice is relegated to some future time which has to be preceded by a sort of apocalyptic cataclysm" (1952, p. 231).

As an ideological instrument of a governing class, Marxism uproots individuality from its historical context and drives its ideological engine to an imaginary future at the expense of spiritual fulfillment in the present. Weil's *The Need for Roots* deplores the loss of roots in her contemporary France. She writes, "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul (1952, p. 41) …Whoever is uprooted himself uproots others. Whoever is rooted doesn't uproot others" (1952, p. 45). The ills of the world of her time spring from the condition of uprootedness. The cultures of the West are fruits of that deviation, which has led the political development to obfuscate their connections with truth. They were deceitful ideologies building their self-confidence in self-referential idols in order to camouflage the truth about the human condition: "Idolatry is an armour, prevents pain from entering the soul" (1952, p. 217).

Leszek Kołakowski

The Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009), an expert on Marxism both in theory and from a personal experience of living within a system that claimed to be based on Marx's "scientific" theory, wrote a monumental study of Marxism, entitled *Main Currents of Marxism* (1976–78). His views of Marxism echo Weil's mistrust. His publication, as well as his sympathy toward the student rebellion in 1968, ultimately cost him his academic position at the University of Warsaw, leading to an exile in the West. On the occasion of his acceptance of the first Kluge Prize from the Library of Congress in 2003, Kołakowski states in his speech entitled "What the past is for?":

Human history is a collection of unpredictable accidents, and we can easily cite any number of instances where an event that was clearly decisive in shaping the destiny of mankind for subsequent decades or centuries could have gone a different way than it did; there was nothing necessary in its happening or in its results. […] Alas, all the predictions made by Marx or later by Marxists, were demonstrably false; social development went in an entirely different direction.

In the text, "Can Humankind Still Save its Humanity?,"[1] written at the time of the unraveling of the Communist systems in Central Europe, Kołakowski queries the extent to which and the manner in which the existence of nations and ethnic communities be defended. Marxism claimed that nationalism and cultural particularisms were meant to disappear from the surface of the Earth, but they did not. He points out the existence of two groups of truths or positions regarding the question of the national and ethnic survival, and both positions have valid justifications. The first acknowledges the natural need to belong to a cultural, historical, and

[1] Quotes from Kołakowski's text in Polish as well as Todorov's and Finkielkraut's French texts are my translations.

linguistic community. This sense of belonging implies the necessity of territory and historical continuity.

The second position embraces the argument claiming that a purely ethnic Statehood is a call for genocide; therefore, there ought to be openness to external influences to fertilize its monocultural outlook. Unfortunately, one can find a plethora of examples in the twentieth century that confirm the thesis of danger from a monocultural and monoethnic Statehood. However, history provides examples of possible coexistence, without the bloodshed of nations and ethnic groups. It shows that diverse cultures and civilizations enrich each other, stimulating their individual and independent growths. A nation operating in isolation runs the risk of facing cultural drought and may find itself on the way to totalitarian despotism.

Both positions are problematic in terms of practical application. The liberal attitude calling for the suppression of borders ignores the political and social consequences of migration today. It does not consider the biological and physical limitations of human existence. It assumes the existence of a world where all people live under similar economic, demographic, and cultural situations. This is not the case obviously, and today, the rapidity of people's movement, the aspirations for equality of citizens' welfare in a given territory, the density of the population, and its social and ecological consequences call for some migratory regulations to avert social unrests because resources are limited.

Confronting these two attitudes, Kołakowski concludes that humanity ought to have recourse to a moral grounding that could mediate between those two tendencies. Religions can and should play a role in helping societies remain open, while preserving their sense of cultural belonging. When secular ideologies lose their appeal as a result of the verification process of the economic and social realities they have produced, religions often feel a gap. However, a religion that adheres to political conflicts actively or tacitly, rather than arbitrating for the defense of the values of universal humanity, degrades itself to the level of political entity. This is a great danger of our time.

Tzvetan Todorov

In the same way as Kołakowski, his contemporary Tzvetan Todorov, a Bulgarian dissident who became a prominent French philosopher and literary theorist, knew life in the totalitarian system in his country of origin. For him, the process of uprootedness and alienation occurs gradually in response to a certain appeal of totalitarianism for an individual psyche (1996, pp. 36–37). In Bulgaria, totalitarian ideology propagated the image of a better society and incited its citizens to aspire to it. This attraction meant to respond to the universal human aspiration, "Isn't the desire to transform the world in the name of an ideal an integral part of human identity?" (1996, p. 36). Many adhered to the propaganda image and helped enforce the construction of a totalitarian system. This social engineering fostered the pleasure of having power over others. As the outcome, totalitarian society, contrary to its egalitarian claims, was divided into several groups in a hierarchical arrangement: on the top the party, the State, the police, and the army; in the middle, the masses suffering the inconveniences of the system (provoked by its economic flaws that eventually helped its demise); and at the bottom, the enemies of the State, real or only suspected of insubordination. Paradoxically, this society, like any free democratic society, encouraged personal ambitions and competition. The game's rules were radically different, nonetheless. Two guiding principles dominated the ascent: the degree of servility toward hierarchical superiors, and denunciation toward others. Thus, the entire society was under control.

In this context, the ethical dimension of human conduct is undermined severely. Communist societies deprive individuals of their responsibilities. The decision belongs to the vague pronoun "they," as Todorov explains (1996, p. 36). Thus, the individual citizens felt numbed in their ethical behavior: they were not responsible for their own actions, which were coerced by the indefinite but all-powerful agency of "they." There was a certain comfort in not having to make any decision or taking any initiative. This system of rewards and punishment progressively led to the creation of the collective psyche labeled as "homo sovieticus," a term coined by the Soviet sociologist Alexandr Zinoviev, to express the impact of the Soviet indoctrination on the psyche of the citizens of the Soviet empire. Todorov claims that an attraction to the totalitarian system, felt unconsciously by a considerable number of people who might have feared freedom and responsibility, accounts for a relative initial popularity of totalitarian regimes. The Communist system's primary task was to build a collective consciousness whose moral code would identify automaticity with the authority's thinking and serve it voluntarily, having lost any sense of roots.

Strangely enough, Todorov notices that while Western countries have been engaged in building democracy for more than two hundred years, intellectuals of these countries have supported violent and tyrannical regimes elsewhere. One possible explanation for this is the lure of power. Democracy makes it more difficult to arrive at an influential position, whereas tyranny invites an intelligent person more readily to become a close adviser of the despotic master. According to Todorov, Jean-Paul Sartre, a popular intellectual in postwar France, was guilty of this use of intellect to advocate false hopes on the Soviet model that were eventually discredited by the fall of Communism. In a free body politic, intellectuals must embrace a universal morality as a consensus resulting from a dialog having in mind the common good. In contrast, totalitarian societies are uprooted in the sense of being severed from any moral grounding and surrendered to the ideological pressures imposed on them from the dictatorial top.

Alain Finkielkraut

The contemporary philosopher and a media polemist, and now also a member of French Academy, Alain Finkielkraut, wrote his most controversial book in 1986, entitled *La Défaite de la pensée* [The Defeat of Thought]. He approaches France's identity issues in the face of mass immigration by asking, "how did we get there?" In his answer, he builds his argument by evoking two founding poles in the contemporary ideological culture wars: Enlightenment and German Romanticism. According to Finkielkraut (1987, pp. 14–19), the German philosopher Herder (1744–1803) introduced the concept of *Volksgeist*, a national spirit that he opposed to the rising spirit of Enlightenment with its universalist claim regarding human reason. For Herder nothing can transcend the pluralism of human experience in each historical and geographic context. Enlightenment thinkers combatted this attitude by replacing it with the notion of universal reason and ideal law. The leaders of the French Revolution attempted to implement the ideas of Enlightenment by fighting national particularisms, defined as prejudice and ignorance. They advocated uprootedness from any particular cultural belonging to adhere to the universal human identity. After the revolutionary period and Napoleon's First Empire, the ideology of Romanticism coming from Germany took the stage in France's cultural life.

Finkielkraut points out that ultimately, it is this heritage of Romanticism that revived in the sixties of the twentieth century and ideologically nourished the process of decolonization. It rehabilitates particular national cultures, as opposed to the universalist civilization proposed

by Enlightenment. Marxist thinkers of the sixties and seventies will add to this idea, born in the Romantic period, the concept of class struggle. For thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu, the predominance of a culture over others is explained by the dominant position of a class that formed it. Postcolonial thought will thus argue that dominant culture has created the system of education that uproots and ridicules the dominated classes. It has two major phases: first, uprooting, then, dressage. In other words, it proceeds by tearing human beings from their habits and attitudes that constitute their collective identity, then inculcates in them dominant values raised to the status of universality (1987, p. 77). Finkielkraut tries to discredit postcolonial theories by associating them with a return to revolutionary upheavals sprung by the Romantic wave of ethnic revivals in the nineteenth century. He sees in them the danger for the unity and universality of French culture today. These theories, by claiming a return to ethnic roots, create an artifice of rootedness that has little to do with an authentic continuity of tradition. For France, the organic development of thought from the Middle Ages onward has sought to valorize human intelligence and sensitivity, winning a universal appeal beyond the confines of its territory. He describes the international appeal of French culture as follows:

France is not reduced to Frenchness, its heritage is not made up, for the most part, of unconscious determinations or of typical and hereditary modes of being but of values offered to the intelligence of men, [French letters] which do not bear witness to any picturesque [reality], but which, taking into consideration something other than France, are original contributions to universal literature or philosophy (1987, p. 125).

Conclusion

To conclude, we may venture saying that the intellectuals introduced in this presentation, defend the need for cultural continuity. Revolutionary movements such as the French Revolution, built on the ideals of Enlightenment, proposing the equality of human beings in their constitution, had certainly very progressive impact on the subsequent social development. Nevertheless, revolutionary movements rupture the continuity of the tradition, causing uprootedness of the population. Their ideological enthusiasm causes violence to the tradition and tends to obliterate or manipulate the past in a way that is disconnected from human reality and needs. Simone Weil reminds us that,

The destruction of the past is perhaps the greatest of all crimes. […] We must put an end to the terrible uprootedness which European colonial methods always produce, even under their least cruel aspects. We must also keep […] some arrangement whereby human beings may once more be able to recover their roots. (1952, p. 49).

Kołakowski and Todorov have shown how Communist governments used the Marxist ideology to build their States that were meant to become class- and ethnicity-free societies, but ultimately led to oppressive political entities that the world saw collapsing at the end of the twentieth century. Finkielkraut fears that the rise of a political importance of ethnic groups within a State such as France, with their postcolonial claims to their own cultures and their rejection of the traditional culture of the French State, poses questions about the future of the national character of that country. Those claims are certainly generated by the remnants of Marxism that, in its revolutionary appeal, which revives and electrifies the uprooted masses promising anew a better tomorrow until the next time. Ideology has been a rival of the truth throughout history; the four thinkers call for our vigilance.

References

---. (2014). Czy ludzkość może jeszcze ocalić swoje człowieczeństwo? [Can humankind still save its humanity?]. In *Niepewność epoki demokracji* [The Incertitude of the Epoch of Democracy]. Znak.

Finkielkraut, A. (1987). *La Défaite de la pensée* [The Defeat of Thought]. Gallimard.

Kołakowski, L. (2003). "What the Past Is for?" The Reception Speech of the First Kluge Prize for Lifetime Achievement in the Human Sciences at the Library of Congress. https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0312/kluge3.html

Todorov, T. (1996). *L'Homme dépaysé* [The Man without a Homeland]. Éditions du Seuil.

Trans. A.F. Wills. Routledge & Kegan.

Weil, S. (1952). *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a declaration of duties towards mankind*.