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FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF RELATIONS BETWEEN FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY: CRISIS OR EVOLUTION?

Summary: At the beginning of the twenty first century, Chantal Delsol wrote that the man of late modernity is characterized by his attempt to regress to a period in history before his attainment of autonomy and subjectivity, both of which Delsol associates, among other things, with the essential and formative role of the family. Turning to a society or a group with which he could identify, man – in her opinion – takes a step back towards a tribal form of existence, which deprives him of the right to self-government. Demographic data seem to confirm the tendencies which Delsol has described: the rising number of divorces, the dropping number of marriages, and the increasing presence of the welfare state in the life of an individual. We might tend to think that reality bears out the pessimistic vision of the man of late modernity Delsol puts forth.

Yet it is the role of philosophy to call into doubt all that seems obvious and to ask questions where to all appearances there is no room for doubt. This article proposes this kind of undertaking as an attempt to examine Delsol's diagnosis through the lens of Kołakowski's philosophy. With the help of Kołakowski's treatment of the relationship between freedom and responsibility, and by applying his thoughts on the irremovable tension between the individual and the collective man, a motif distinctly present in his considerations, this article poses anew the question of whether we indeed are facing a crisis or an evolution of the family. Are the changes which we are observing a threat to our culture and civilization, or evidence of progress?

Keywords: philosophy of culture, patriarchy, philosophical anthropology, Delsol, Kolakowski.

At the threshold of a new millennium, Chantal Delsol published a book entitled *The Unlearned Lessons of the Twentieth Century: An Essay on Late Modernity*.¹ (Delsol, 2006) The book offers an insightful study of the changes taking place in Western culture and a reflection on the condition of the contemporary Occidental man.

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¹ The original French text *Éloge de la singularité. Essai sur la modernité tardive* appeared in the year 2000 in Paris.

I assume here that the term “late modernity,” which Delsol defines by analogy to late antiquity, can still be used to refer to our times. This assumption implies that the changes taking place – the subject of my considerations in this article – are not evidence of a rejection, an overcoming, or a death of Western culture, but, rather, of its profound transformation. This transformation, I hope, is self-reflexive in the sense in which Ágnes Heller has proposed to understand this idea in her essay *Modernity from a Postmodern Perspective: The Philosophical Presuppositions*. (Heller, 1999) Another assumption – one about our belonging to this culture – is significant due to the fact that in her reflections on the causes of cultural transformations, Delsol has devoted ample space to Communism and Central-European dissidents, pointing out differences in attitudes and looking for hope for the man of the West. Regardless of this aspect, and wishing to focus exclusively on one problem – that of the role and place of the family – I propose that social changes have allowed us to identify with the Western man and the Western man’s condition as described by Delsol.

This statement seems to be borne out by the data supplied by Statistics Poland and Eurostat. They show that the tendencies described by Delsol are becoming more and more prominent also in Poland; both the number of divorces and of children raised in not-legally-formalized relationships are on the increase. In this article, however, it is not my aim to present statistical data; nor is it to undertake an estimate of the dynamics of these changes. I undertake a philosophical reflection on the analysis of the phenomenon of the transition from the patriarchal model of family towards matriarchy in Chantal’s *specific* understanding of it. The question formulated in the title: “Crisis or evolution?” is not a rhetorical one. Without calling in doubt the insightful cultural diagnoses of the French philosopher, I want to ask if it is possible rationally to justify an examination of these facts from a different perspective. With this goal in view, I want to use Leszek Kołakowski’s philosophical considerations, where – similarly – man occupies the central position. This, however, is not to imply that the critique of Delsol’s conception which I advance in this article can be directly deduced from Kołakowski’s reflection on the state of our civilization. Rather, we will be much closer to the truth by noting that the anthropological reflections of both the thinkers share many points in common.

Despite all the similarities, I believe that Kołakowski’s reflections on man and culture allow us to ask whether the phenomena analysed by Delsol supply actual evidence of the crisis of the subject or rather of the changes that testify to the subject’s development.

As declared at the outset, it is my goal in this article to undertake a critical reflection by directly addressing the patriarchy/matriarchy opposition and its role in the shaping of both the individual human subject and culture. However,

due to their mutual dependence (after all, it is the individual person who shapes the family, as well as simultaneously being shaped by it; the individual's problems influence the family's condition and simultaneously the condition of the family can cause problems in the life of each member) it seems necessary to have an overview of the main ideas of Delsol's position as found in her *Essay*. I shall be very brief about this task, fully aware of the risk of simplification and generalization. Still, some kind of summary is needed to provide the necessary background for a plausible examination of the problem under consideration in this article.

Chantal Delsol's position as described in *An Essay on Late Modernity* can be summarized in the following way: the uniqueness of our culture is a consequence of the belief in "the dignity of the individual man." (Delsol, 2006, p. 12) We owe to Christianity the emergence in our culture of the individual subject, with his autonomy, dignity, and responsibility. Now, contemporary social changes are aimed at negating the subject as we know it. Moreover, both the emergence and the further existence of the individual subject depends, in Delsol's view, on the sense of the uniqueness of the human species (man being distinguished from the rest of Creation by Christianity). Currently, as a Nature-transcending and self-shaping project, assuming the right to decide what is good and what evil, man has taken the place of God, and an attempt to restore him to a place in the world of nature by making him equal to all the other beings runs the risk of depriving him of subjectivity. Anthropocentrism is the only doctrine that enables and protects individual dignity. The dignity of the individual human being is not a scientific fact; it is an object of faith. Without the belief in human dignity and in an individual's irreplaceability, human rights become either an empty slogan or – at best – the rights of "the human understood as a biological entity desirous of well-being but stripped of ideals and spiritual certitudes." (Delsol, 2006, p. 159) Scientism and the failures of social utopias (i.e. those based on progress and Communism) are to be held responsible for the fact that the man of late modernity is forced and – in consequence – attempts to live without hope and with an unfulfilled need for meaning.

Cultural relativism and the catastrophes of the 20th century have caused us to give up on grand projects. Aware of the enormity of human misery and destruction they have precipitated, we avoid creating "grand narratives". In this way, the individual subject is left alone with his freedom and responsibility, forced to be his own demiurge; as such, "[he] wishes to bind himself to others only through a voluntary contract, a contract he can nullify if he no longer wishes to be party to it." (Delsol, 2006, p. 60) Thus understood, "[c]ontemporary individualism represents the continuation, in solitary form, of the utopian dream," (Delsol, 2006, p. 61) transferring onto the individual the duty of self-

-shaping and the responsibility for oneself as one's own project. However, Delsol argues: "Man is too insufficient to exist by himself; he must *identify* with a culture in order to express his humanity." (Delsol, 2006, p. 78) The conclusion she draws is this: humanism is an invention of the "»white male«" (Delsol, 2006, p. 199) and maintaining it is only possible on the condition of preserving the patriarchal family model, which is foundational to our culture. According to the French philosopher, the authority of the father might be the only way to preserve and educate a free individual subject endowed with dignity.

Delsol contrasts patriarchy with matriarchy as – respectively – an individualist and a collectivist way for an individual to participate in the social realm. According to this understanding, matriarchy does not simply signify power in the hands of women, but the vesting of power in the collective as an attempt to overcome the supremacy of the white male as foundational for our culture. As she puts it, ironically: "Like the passage from individual property ownership under communism, the present eradication of fatherhood to make way for a modern form of matriarchy is happening in the name of progress." (Delsol, 2006, p. 73) On the one side then, we find patriarchy, and the responsible individual, raised on the basis of authority, the market, and private property; on the other – matriarchy, associated with Communism, the welfare state that fulfils needs and in this way "gently reduces its subjects to the level of children," (Delsol, 2006, p. 75) and with groups with which a person can identify through dissolving his or her autonomy. The thus-conceived matriarchy represents, according to Delsol, "a tremendous regression to a phase of civilization in which personal autonomy and individual freedom to act and think did not yet exist." (Delsol, 2006, p. 74)

It is this specific understanding of patriarchy and matriarchy that gives me grounds to use Leszek Kołakowski's reflections with the aim of pursuing some of the consequences flowing from Delsol's diagnosis of the condition of our civilization. First, Kołakowski's writings teach us how important it is to be mindful of a number of perspectives when discussing a problem; second – as I pointed out at the outset – there are many points that the philosophical reflections of these two authors have in common.

Both Delsol and Kołakowski emphasize the Christian origin of our culture, and in particular the emergence of the individual subject with its inherent dignity and the development of the idea of human rights as its consequence. They both note that, in the process of transcending both himself as a physical entity and the world as his habitat, man has become aware of the indifference of the world, which has created in him a need for meaning and enduring values. Delsol and Kołakowski share the belief that, in view of these needs, we cannot give up one myth except by replacing it with another myth, in the sense in which the idea

was defined by Kołakowski in *The Presence of Myth* (Kołakowski, 1989); they both agree that Scientism currently pretends to the role of the contemporary myth in this very sense. They share the conviction that evil cannot be removed from the human world. They recognize the fact that individuals readily give up their freedom and the responsibility for their actions, connected to freedom, by taking refuge in moral codes which give them a sense of safety. (See, for instance, Kołakowski, 1971) Finally, both are aware that conflicts between values are unavoidable and how dangerous it is to allow one's life to be dominated by one value regarded as superior to others. (Kołakowski, 2009; Kołakowski, 1964)

Even Delsol's critique of Communism, seen as an attempt at dissolving individuality in the name of a future common good, is conducted, as it were, in the spirit of Kołakowski. It was Delsol's reflections on Communism that pointed me in the direction of Jerzy Niecikowski's defense of Kołakowski in the article *Man Against Man*, (Niecikowski, 2007) where the former argues that Kołakowski is consistent in his humanism and that, where others see a conversion, one can actually discern a persistent philosophical position. To begin with, in his dispute with Christian philosophy, Kołakowski defended "the collective man" from the incursions of individualism; later, he wrote in defense of "the individual person" against the transgressions of "the collective man" as represented by Communism. Niecikowski represents this tension between the individual and the collective man as a consequence of the irremovable conflict between the values of freedom and justice. There is little doubt about this point. In my opinion, there is no exaggeration in the statement that Kołakowski's entire philosophical reflection revolves around the tensions and conflicts between the values and needs of man understood in these two different ways. Nor is it very original for a philosopher to maintain that freedom is linked with the subject's responsibility, (see e.g. Kołakowski, 2011) and that justice can be combined with the need for safety. (See e.g. Kołakowski, 2014) Hence, I do not feel obliged to provide demonstrations. This context allows us to problematize those of Delsol's statements in which she ties the role of patriarchy in our culture with the possibility of the existence of the free and responsible individual. At the same time, she regards all social movements which fight for women's equality and for minority rights (i.e. movements which break up the patriarchal order) as symptoms of a regression to matriarchy. Matriarchal culture is conceived as one in which an individual can find shelter among a group and identify with that group, while the group provides the individual with patterns of conduct and a sense of safety.

Since Delsol contrasts these two aspects of human reality by distinctly ascribing the patriarchal model and all positive values to the individual man,

while depreciating matriarchy and identifying with it Communism, the welfare state, and even equality-for-women movements, the question arises whether, by doing so, she advocates the superiority of freedom over safety. And if that is the case, how does this affect the problem of the unavoidable conflict between these two values?

On the one hand, this seems justified in our culture, where Communism has come to be regarded as a symbol of oppression and of the sacrificing of the individual for the common good. And matriarchy itself, understood (by Delsol, for instance) as a communal form of existence, is described by scholars as a primitive and transient phase in the development of social life. No doubt, this narrow understanding of matriarchy as a communal form of life is a great simplification. Still, this perspective turns out to be very useful in that it reveals the other side of the coin. In his article, Niecikowski argues that for Kołakowski, the individual and the collective man are equally important while remaining in perpetual conflict. Kołakowski's writing is full of warnings about attempts to prioritize any particular value. (See, for instance, Kołakowski, 2009) What's more, in her *Essay*, Delsol similarly stresses that the elevation of one value to a superior position is fraught with danger, for such choices are causes of the failures which inevitably await, as it were, all universalist utopias. Moreover, Delsol observes that a person's inability to live their life without identifying with a specific social group is a psychological fact. She uses this as an argument against universalist claims of humanism, questioning the idea that it is possible for a person to identify solely with the species.

First, the assumption concerning the primary position of the individual arouses doubt as to whether this orientation towards the free and autonomous subject may be a cause of the egoism of the contemporary man, which is the object of Delsol's critique. Further, the egoism may be a logical consequence of a turning away from the social world and of the concentration on the family, which ought to be regarded as a higher level of the subject's emancipation. In this sense, this egoism and the individual's solitariness ought to be regarded as a consequence of patriarchy in Delsol's understanding of it. No doubt, there is no room there for Kołakowski's postulate of a needful balance in the fulfilment of the individual and the collective man.

Second, in compliance with these assertions and examining from their perspective the contemporary social world as reconstructed by Delsol, we need to ask if the fact that people identify with different social groups – sometimes with more than one and sometimes even with groups representing intersecting and divergent interests – ought not to be read as an outcome of subjects' free and responsible decisions as well as – simultaneously – of their attempts to fulfil their need of belonging and safety.

A variegated world of different groups with which we can identify seems to be a better option than participation in a “grand narrative” inasmuch as it consists of a collage of overlapping interests and conflicts rather than the simple we-them polarisation. In this variegated world a global conflict aiming at the extermination of a particular group is less likely to occur, even though it certainly does generate a great number of minor tensions.

The primacy of freedom turns out to be problematical not only in contradistinction to the need to identify with a group; we also need to ask: Whose freedom is at stake? Who is calling for justice? Usually, when we think of “a person”, “a free and responsible subject”, “a person with their inherent dignity”, “an individual”, we unreflectively assume that the referent is any representative of the human species.² This is an indication that we are the children of our times, at least in name. Suffice it to say that those who extol Athenian democracy tend to forget that it was limited to the *citizens* of Athens, on whom depended the lot of women and for whom slaves had the status of live tools. (See Aristotle, *Politics* 1253b) The above makes us ask: Whom does Delsol have in mind when she speaks of the free and responsible subject? And also: Does she succeed in remaining consistent in the position she takes in her *Essay*? On the one hand, it would be absurd to accuse her of limiting her considerations to the male representatives of the human species when writing about a contemporary subject; on the other hand, when talking at length about the advantages of the patriarchal family model for the formation of that subject, she seems to forget that that model, as its very definition suggests, is a non-egalitarian one; that it does not allot the same degree of freedom to all the participating adults. And I stress the idea of adulthood, for, when discussing the idea freedom, the taking into consideration of the status of children within a family significantly complicates the issue and takes us beyond the remit of this analysis.

Keeping in mind these objections and the fact that, at the beginning of her book, Delsol cites Plato’s assertion (Delsol, 2006, p. 6) that every institution eventually dies from the surfeit of its founding principle, it makes sense to ask: What is the primary cause of the decline of the patriarchal system? Is it the primary position of freedom or the excessive power vested in the father/husband?

² This could explain the sociological phenomenon of women voting for the representatives of Confederacy. According to IPSOS, during the 2019 parliamentary election and the 2020 presidential election in Poland, more than 4% of women voted for the candidates of Confederacy [Confederation Liberty and Independence], which is a party whose leaders postulate, among other things, to deprive women of the right to vote. The only assumption that, in my opinion, would help us to understand this phenomenon is that female voters – when it comes to the extension of civil liberties and the limiting of the role of the state in the economy – think of themselves as rightful citizens while at the same time ignoring the vision of the state advocated by the party’s prominent representatives.

I want to propose the following answer to that question.

On the one hand, there are fathers who, on the strength of their authority, have managed to confer subject dignity not only to their sons but also their daughters, raising them as free and responsible individuals. On the other, there are cases where paternal power becomes absolute. In such cases, an education based on the undisputed authority of the father is fraught with the risk of shaping individuals with authoritarian personalities.

Hence, paradoxically, feminist movements, in their fight against patriarchal oppression, have been able to build on what in patriarchy is good and praiseworthy; their attack is (or should be) aimed at that system's abuses. It seems, then, that – in the sense of a logical sequence – the overcoming of patriarchy, like the idea of universal human rights and the specifically understood Enlightenment³, has been present, as it were, in the potential of Christianity from its birth.

Kołodkowski addresses in a number of his texts the problem of the influence of Christ's teachings on the development and shaping of our civilization, and thus on the current state of our culture. However, here I would like to refer to one of the earliest essays, *Jesus Christ: Prophet and Reformer*, (Kołodkowski, 2005) rarely cited these days. This talk, given and published in 1965, is an attempt to approach Christ's teachings from a philosophical perspective. In European culture, regarded as a relative whole, Kołodkowski is trying to find those elements of Christ's teachings which are essential to its identity. These are elements so deeply embedded in the fabric of Western civilization that a person who identifies with Western civilization to any extent also identifies with these elements, even in the absence of identification with any particular religious group.

If Kołodkowski is right in inferring from Christ's teachings the postulates of abolishing law for the sake of love, of abolishing violence in human interactions, and, finally, of abolishing the idea of the chosen nation; and if Kołodkowski is right in pointing them out as the pillars of European culture which find their reflection in the universal idea of human rights, then they can be said to concern not only the white male, but every representative of the species *homo sapiens*, male or female. Drawing upon this assumption we can say that, in Christ's doctrine, we find inspiration and a foundation for movements, including feminist movements, which battle all forms of discrimination.

The above seems to allow us to propose that contemporary culture keeps evolving, which involves its continual revisitation and reexamination of its premises and drawing from them ever new implications. This kind of evolution

³ The idea that Greek rationalism and Christianity constitute the pillars of our civilization does not arouse much controversy. Nor does the fact that we owe the development of science in part to the medieval scholars at Chartres. Seen in this context, the history of our civilization presents itself as one of man's progressive emancipation in the double sense captured by Kołodkowski.

seems to have been written into our culture since its dawn and certain changes seem to be inevitable in the sense that they are a consequence of the inner logic of this process. Two subjects, individual, autonomous, responsible, and endowed with the same personal dignity, cannot form an asymmetrical relationship, one that is based on subjection and authority. Such subjects can only enter into relationships of partnership. In this context, we must deem as sound Delsol's diagnosis that the contemporary subject "wishes to bind himself to others only through a voluntary contract, a contract he can nullify if he no longer wishes to be party to it." (Delsol, 2006, p. 60) I am not sure, however, if this is to be regarded as an objection. To be sure, from this statement one can deduce the conclusion that the insolubility of marriage has ceased to be regarded as its highest value. Yet, in my opinion, it does not follow that a responsible subject does not want to form any relationships, that it wants to form ones which are impermanent, or that it finds family unimportant. It may mean that, instead of living out cultural patterns fixed by tradition and custom, the person attempts – on the basis of those patterns – to make responsible decisions informed by the current situation and circumstances.

To sum up: Delsol and Kołakowski have one more thing in common: they believe that people are not demiurges but merely gardeners. Looking at the deeper sense of this metaphor, we come to understand that the success of a gardener depends on his knowledge of, and ability to comprehend, the laws of nature, the cycle of vegetation, the characteristics of the soil, and the limitations imposed by climate. By analogy, just as a gardener lays out his plot in preparation for the growing season to come, it is our understanding of certain necessary conditions that makes it possible for us to influence the development of our social lives. We judge the state of a garden by the condition of plants and flowers; yet, while tending to them in the hope that they will flourish, the gardener must not forget about the roots.

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Rodzina w kontekście relacji między wolnością a odpowiedzialnością: kryzys czy ewolucja?

Streszczenie: Chantal Delsol na początku XXI w. napisała, że człowiek późnej nowoczesności próbuje się cofnąć przed historię uzyskania autonomii i ustanowienia własnej podmiotowości, którą francuska filozofka wiąże m.in. z decydującą i kształtującą rolą rodziny. Człowiek zwracający się ku społeczeństwu czy grupie, z którą mógłby się identyfikować robi, jej zdaniem, krok wstecz, do organizacji plemiennej, gdzie traci prawo decydowania o sobie. Dane demograficzne zdają się potwierdzać opisywany przez Delsol kierunek zmian; rośnie liczba rozwodów, maleje liczba zawieranych małżeństw, opiekuńczego państwa w życiu jednostki jest wyraźnie więcej niż mniej. Można by przyjąć, że pesymistyczna wizja człowieka późnej nowoczesności zaproponowana przez Delsol znajduje potwierdzenie w rzeczywistości.

Jednak rolą filozofii jest podważać wszystkie oczywistości i zadawać pytania tam, gdzie pozornie wyraźnie widać jak się rzeczy mają. Niniejszy tekst jest tego rodzaju propozycją. Ujmując diagnozę Delsol przez pryzmat rozważań Leszka Kołodkowskiego – za pomocą wypracowanego przez niego myślenia o relacji między wolnością a odpowiedzialnością oraz z użyciem wyraźnie widocznych w jego twórczości rozważań o nieusuwalnym napięciu między człowiekiem indywidualnym i zbiorowym – autorka stawia na nowo pytanie, czy rzeczywiście mamy do czynienia z kryzysem rodziny, czy raczej z jej ewolucją. Czy zmiany, które obserwujemy są zagrożeniem dla naszej kultury i cywilizacji, czy może są dowodem jej rozwoju?

Słowa kluczowe: filozofia kultury, patriarchy, antropologia filozoficzna, Delsol, Kołodkowski.