

Interview with Prof. Karol Modzelewski

Pagan Substratum



Tadeusz Pórniasz/REPORTER

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Academia: We would first like to congratulate you on winning Poland's top research award, the 2007 Prize of the Foundation for Polish Science. The Foundation highlighted all of your achievements, but chiefly your 2004 book *Barbarian Europe*, whose very title goes against the grain of how we imagine our own heritage. We consider our roots to be Latin, Greek, Christian, but here you describe the pagan aspect of Europe brilliantly and interestingly.

Karol Modzelewski: *The title is of course chosen to be teasing, but also to stress a phenomenon that remains overshadowed by the dominant stereotypes in our country and in the West. The*

barbarian heritage is in my view crucial to the European identity. As a medievalist I initially focused on Piast-era Poland, and my research indicated a significant difference between Western Europe on the one hand and Poland plus its neighboring countries on the other. Quite early on I became inclined to question the sort of historiographic terminology which classed early medieval Poland into a pigeonhole labeled "feudalism." Feudalism was a Western European phenomenon. According to my research, Piast-era Poland, like early Přemyslid Bohemia, Ruricid Rus', and also the Scandinavian countries, cannot be forced into that pigeonhole because large-scale land ownership

was there a marginal part of agrarian structure. Seeking an explanation for that difference, I then increasingly began to see that the barbarian heritage was considerably stronger there. It was significantly harder to eliminate than in Germania, not to speak of the Frankish state, for example.

Why was that?

Here we are dealing with countries which themselves adopted Christianity and the models of Western, i.e. post-Roman culture, drawing upon those models in a less selective or more selective way and tailoring them to suit local conditions. Simplifying things some-

what, the Saxons were conquered and absorbed by Rome's Frankish heirs. In the case of the other Germanic kingdoms within the Western Empire (the Visigoths, Longobards, Burgundians) the Germanic invaders settled down in the Roman environment and – to a lesser or greater degree, albeit always significantly – they based their power upon the existing institutions and adopted the culture they encountered there. The differences in medieval Europe depended mainly on under what historical circumstances and in what way the barbarians encountered Rome. This gave rise to the idea of studying so-called barbarian laws.

Yet you did so significantly later on.

Aleksander Gieysztor encouraged me to do so at the outset of my university career. He wanted me to write my master's thesis on that, but I stuck with the Piasts. It was only later that I approached the topic, deciding to do something that had been called for by Reinhard Wenskus already 40 years ago: to explain two different ethnic regions of barbarian Europe, Germanic and Slavic, within a common comparative study. I based myself on a somewhat different body of sources than most researchers, who had focused on the Slavs, on individual Germanic peoples or Germans in general, or on the Celts.

Your perspective was also different.

The profession of historian requires one to have some imagination. At the very least in posing questions, which starts off a process that eventually leads to the statement of certain conclusions. Such questions depend on a historian's social vision, and that vision is shaped by his own personal culture and experience. The positivist historians considered themselves as objective as God himself, but that was an illusion which eventually proved costly. One has to be aware of how modern times condition and shape the historian's view of the

past. That does not mean seeking a coded way to make some sort of claims about the present. But it does mean that each generation and each group understands and interprets the past in its own way. I differ from my Western colleagues and friends because I have had different experiences, including personal ones.

Reading your book, one gets the impression – and this is to its advantage – that you illustrate pagan Europe in a positive way, as an extraordinarily rich world. You describe it fondly, with sympathy.

A historian must be capable of empathy. And there is no empathy without a modicum of sympathy, true? In this sense, things are most difficult for historians who study Stalinism, or even worse Nazism. They of course have to try to understand their subjects. If a historian wants to say something about Nazis, he has to put himself somewhat in their shoes. At least to the extent necessary to understand their motivation, the cul-

tural and sub-cultural underpinnings of their collective actions. Otherwise he is no historian, just a trashy commentator. Even though the barbarians did awful things from our standpoint, I am indeed fond of them. That is nothing surprising, because they were already loved by Tacitus, the world's first ethnographer and first ethnologist. His Germania evidences something like a stereotype of a noble barbarian, which later recurred in various versions among the heirs of classical culture.

After reading *Barbarian Europe*, one regrets the loss of that world, conquered and eradicated with all of its traditions.

One has to regret its loss, yet we should keep in mind that it does live on in contemporary times, it has not disappeared without a trace. The most dramatic moment of Christianization described by the sources (mainly of missionary origin) is the point when not individual people but whole conquered political communities of the

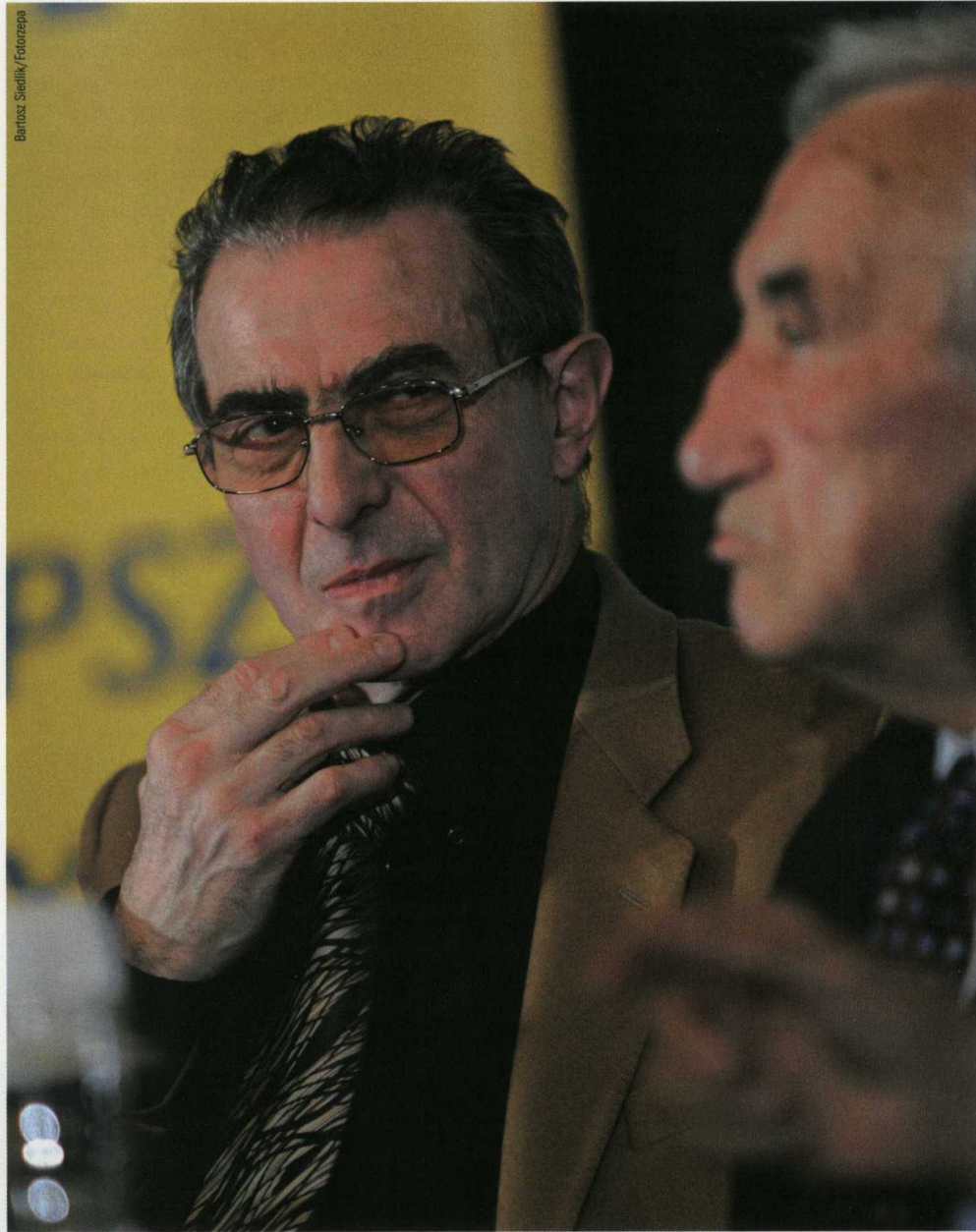


Karol Modzelewski lecturing on "Conflict and Negotiations – The Experience of the First Solidarity" as part of the "White University" lectures organized during the protest staged by nurses outside the Polish Prime Minister's office in July 2007

barbarian world were forced into a ritual called *abrenunciatio diaboli*, or renouncing Satan. This is a ritual we are all familiar with. Back then it meant that before such communities were Christianized, they had to reject their entire existing pantheon and either destroy it themselves, or to assist in its destruction in quite theatrical fashion, in a deliberately brutal spectacle. This was intended to represent deliberate sacrilege – from the pagan standpoint – and triumphalist behavior on the part of the new religion's priests. The statue of *Świętowit* on Rügen came to such an end. It was so revered that a priest was not even allowed to take or release a breath of air when in its sanctuary, having to run to the entrance to do so, so that the breath of a mortal should not defile *Świętowit*. Saxo Grammaticus describes how conquerors entered, cut through the statue's legs, and toppled it.

Do we still have some link to those times? They must have left a traumatic mark upon the memory of generations.

That is the view of Prof. Maria Janion, author of *Incredible Slavs*, but as a literary historian she is bound by different rigors than I am. I think this traumatic experience definitely left some vestiges behind, but above all it did not immediately eradicate paganism and its related stratum of traditional culture. Because that was simply impossible. Strabon wrote how the Celtic Triballs responded to Alexander the Great's question of what they feared. "Only that the sky should not fall on us." In descriptions of pagan beliefs and cult sites there is a repeating motif of a pillar which holds up the arch of the heavens, a sacred pillar. It was only thanks to the gods that the sun would keep rising, that a warrior's sword would smite his enemies and not injure himself. The Christian view of the world has no notion that crops will not grow, rain will stop falling, animals will not reproduce, if we fail to perform certain rituals. But the traditional view of the



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world among illiterate pagan peoples did not draw a distinction between the sacred and the secular: nature's innate order is maintained through constant intervention by the gods.

What happens when that order gets disrupted?

God revokes his guardianship. It is not god who takes up swords and fights,

but he ceases to protect people. If swords heed their wielders, if people are healthy, it is only because god is guarding over them. If he revokes such care, it is like they immediately lose their immune system: they will fall ill and die. In other worlds, the world only exists as an environment friendly to mankind and allowing man to live, thanks to the constant guardianship and intervention of pagan deities. It

rests upon the belief that deities control all such phenomena. That's why the overthrow of the pagan deities was seen as a cataclysm, as the end of the world.

That ancient culture must have somehow survived in myths, tales, legends. In folklore.

Prof. Aleksander Gieysztor broke the existing taboo of positivist historiography, which held that asynchronism was impermissible, that comparison could only be made between sources from the same period and the same area. But in addition to medieval writings about Slavic paganism, Gieysztor also looked at ethnographic material recorded in the early 20th century, when folklore was still tangible enough for ethnographers to decently study it. Saxo Grammaticus describes a harvest ritual dialog between a priest of Świątowit and the people. The people gather before the temple, offering up a festival cake nearly as big as a man. The priest stands behind the cake and says: "Can you see me?" "We can, we can." "Let us pray you won't be able to next year." In a rural Bulgarian church, on the local saint's day, the priest stands behind a heap of bread loaves sprinkled with holy water and asks: "Can you see me?" "Yes, we can." "Let us pray you won't be able to next year." The former case is pagan, the latter Christianized, but in the identical ritual one can perceive a pagan myth that survived 800 years.

As long as we are speaking so much about memory, we should mention that many remember you as an individual very closely involved in politics, in very important events.

I have always been torn between two impulses: the need to rebel, because that is what politics essentially meant, and the need to work as a historian, which demands devotion and one's undivided attention... This is not even

about wasting time in prison - I once even managed to write something in prison. First there had to be a particular shift in historical circumstances, the repression combined with liberal gestures that was so characteristic of Poland's military regime after 13 December 1981. In other words people would be put behind bars without being charged, while at the same time a certain ostensible leniency towards oppositionists was demonstrated: I was allowed to request my notes and materials. I wrote a rough draft under conditions similar to those in a monastery. It subsequently had to be checked and amended, but that is how I did write my book *Peasants in the Early Piast Monarchy*.

You did give the authorities cause for dissatisfaction...

I was *Solidarity's* press spokesman ever since *Solidarity* first had one, from November 1980 to late March 1981. I was a member of the regional board of the Silesian chapter of *Solidarity* until the end. A regular union leader, not an advisor. And at the convention I was elected a member of the National Commission, aside from being on the regional board.

The initial letter that you wrote together with Jacek Kuroń, which led to your imprisonment, was an expression of a profound commitment to political action.

Definitely so, because we expected prison.

You did have the temperament of a politician, yet one somewhat different than that of your friend Jacek Kuroń.

But we had similar ways of thinking. Still, Jacek was engaged in politics constantly and called me a "Sunday politician," like a Sunday driver. That meant that once things couldn't be handled otherwise I got politically involved, but if they could I preferred to work as a historian. I still regret becoming

a Senator in 1989 - eight and a half years in prison had not been enough for me! (laughs) But then I gradually withdrew, until I had left politics completely. It is one thing to be part of an insurrection, but quite another to do politics in a democratic, more or less normal country. There are a great many things about the new Polish state and system I do not like, but the system at least has the advantage that I am able to say and write such things.

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Prof. Karol Modzelewski. A medieval historian and a student of Prof. Aleksander Gieysztor, he was thrown out of doctorate studies for writing, together with Jacek Kuroń, an "Open Letter" criticizing the communist authorities. As a democratic oppositionist and co-founder of *Solidarity*, he was repeatedly imprisoned. He has worked at the Institute of Material Culture and the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Institute of History at Wrocław University, and now at Warsaw University. He has taught at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, at College de France, and at Sapienza University of Rome. He has authored many scholarly publications on medieval history. His work *Barbarian Europe* on the pre-Christian European tradition has been translated in France and in Italy. Since 2006 he has been Vice President of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and in 2007 he won the Prize of the Foundation for Polish Science for his research on the history of the European identity.