

## Between Analysis of Discourse and History of Ideas

Jozef Lysý: *History of Political Thought I. The Ancient Near East, Greece, Rome, China, India and Islam*. Comenius University, Bratislava 2006, 168 pages.

Jozef Lysý: *History of Political Thought II. From Medieval Ages until Today*. Comenius University, Bratislava 2006, 184 pages.

The two-volume *History of Political Thought* composed by the political scientist Jozef Lysý is neither a dictionary of relevant terms, nor an encyclopaedia. The aim of the book is neither to explicate technical terms, nor to provide a systematic overview of attained and acknowledged results from the field of political philosophy and political science. Lysý's work is more of a guide through the history of political ideas beginning in the ancient Middle East until today. And let us add that this guide is knowledgeable and reliable. Naturally, the chosen time span may seem a little awkward, just as the periodisation itself of this temporal passage is rather difficult. In this respect, J. Lysý combines historiographical and sociological approaches. According to the author, this is not merely a methodical problem of organising empirical material – it is also an analytical scientific issue, as the correlation between theoretical doctrines and specific historical epochs too depends on selected periodisation. (p. 5)

When we identify the resources used by J. Lysý to divide history of political thought into „antique, Middle Ages, Renaissance, reformation, bourgeois revolutions, liberally restricted modernity, organised modernity and the present“ (p. 5), it becomes obvious that his concept is based on works by the French Annales school, F. Braudel, J. Le Goff, Z. Bauman, E. Bloch and Czech sociologists J. Keller, E. Gellner etc. The range of topics chosen by J. Lysý may take those readers by surprise who see political thinking as encompassing government concepts, evolutionary state forms, its various definitions, political system, the issue of political order and its resources, questions of legality and legitimacy of governments, or problems of political organisation. This is because J. Lysý has a wider understanding of the term „political thinking“. This includes not only political institutions as such, but all institutions, „institutes, values and ideas that are influenced by power or themselves affect power as seen by Foucault rather than strictly through the perspective of political science. Such broader view of political thinking thus needs to include the legal, ethical, religious, economic, historical, social and cultural-anthropological ideas that have shaped political ideas. J. Lysý supports R. Scruton and his definition of political thinking and it is thus unavoidable that he addresses issues of social and legal philosophy, philosophy of history, historiography, law and axiology – for political ideas were always formed under the pressure of certain values, personified by the dominant worldviews.

Tome I is divided into seven chapters: Ancient Middle East (pp. 7-21); Political thinking in ancient Greece – origins of European political thinking (pp. 22-72); Rome (pp. 73-86); Political thinking of early Christianity (pp. 87-95); Chinese political thinking (pp. 96-126); Political thinking of Hinduism (pp. 127-147); Political thinking of Islam (pp. 148-164). It is symptomatic for J. Lysý that he tries to confront even very old ideological concepts which may seem bizarre from the viewpoint of history of traditional European ideas with their fate today. This is apparent especially in chapters dedicated to political thinking of China, Hinduism and Islam. Author demonstrates his admiration for E. Bondy and generally attempts to overcome the paradigm of eurocentrism.

The second tome contains six chapters: Medieval political thinking (pp. 7-33); The Island episode? (pp. 34-38); Foreboding of Renaissance and Reformation (pp. 39-44); Evolution of thought systems in politics. From tradition to change (pp. 45-74); Political thinking during the era of liberal restricted modernity (pp. 75-117); Political thinking in the labyrinth of modernity crises (pp. 118-179).

The reviewed book features extensive empirical material of factual as well as theoretically interpretive nature, it combines historical and cultural reflections. It is a colourful mosaic of sociological, social, political and cultural history. Diversified views are partly explanations of ideas of key thinkers and personalities of the surveyed eras, partly explications of thought coordinates of particular civilisation's cultural range or religious systems. These different angles are consolidated by the author's belief that history of even utopian political thinking needs to be explained within the context; and that many of the determinants that shape political ideologies and forms of political power should be judged by the potential possibilities they harbour. Author admits his sympathies toward Marxist criticism of liberal capitalism, rejects unjustified optimism and imperialist nature of eurocentrism. Guided by his knowledge of social and cultural anthropology he offers a stance that enables us to approach other civilisations and their political ideas without bias and prejudice. Of course, the width of author's chosen range and somewhat unconventional approach toward political ideas set within a broad cultural-historical framework is no easy reading, and can hardly substitute a textbook. Nevertheless, the book represents a welcome attempt to present history of political thinking not only as a framework of political institutions and linked with the political system, but in addition to explain these within the context of all relevant socio-cultural systems within a society.

The book would profit from some knowledgeable editing, which would eliminate some repetitions and compress the factual material that is a bit too diversified in places. In my opinion, the book suffers from lack of a conclusion where author would summarise his methodological approach, selected perspective and motivation. Intervention of an editor would also balance out explanations based on personalities with those linked with doctrines of specific periods. In spite of these critical comments, this work is remarkable in terms of how the empirical material as handled, its concept as well as spectrum. The author avoids bias and prejudice regarding other civilisations and cultures that greatly differ from our European culture with its Judeo-Christian, Roman legal and Greek theoretical foundations. Political scientists, philosophers, historians and sociologists – they will surely all be impressed by this book, albeit for different reasons. It

can be recommended to all those interested in socio-political conflicts of today rooted in recent but also distant past, as well as all those readers who take interest in the intellectual heritage that continues to shape our world today.

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