

The Greek commonwealth fell apart. Disputes over what is good and what is evil split the strongest city-states. Immersed in devastating strife (civil war) between the “aristocrats”, the “democrats”, and the tyrants produced by both factions, the city-states of Greece fell victim to external empires after successive wars fought among themselves for primacy in Hellas. And this is an important lesson for the nations of Europe, for their modern states, and their rabid ideologues – the “drones” who continue to incite civil war.

Macedonia, formed on the periphery of Greek culture, gained control over Greece. After Aristotle’s disciple, Alexander the Great, completed his stunning conquests stretching from the Nile to the Himalayas, a new perspective emerged: we are no longer just a polis, but a cosmopolis. Instead of a tight political community where citizens could meet in the marketplace – the agora – to exchange arguments for the common good, one could now imagine a community for all humans. The new community, however, was no longer ruled by discussions among free citizens, but by imperial decree. The citizens could in no way exercise any influence over the affairs of the cosmopolis. The kingdoms of Alexander and of the Diadochi fighting for his inheritance shifted the importance of the agora to the institution of the royal court that followed the ruler’s military campaigns and revolved around his person. Personality cult – which in the Greek world acquired any real meaning only during Alexander’s reign – precludes citizenship.

In a situation where polis loses its true meaning, people move away from politics even though – let it be said now – politics does not necessarily move away from them. Two philosophical schools reflected this change. Epicurus of Athens (341-271 BC) saw in the new situation not some order, or cosmos, but chaos. There is no order in the world and it cannot be built. Consequently, there is no objective justice and there is no point in wasting our lives searching for it. To enjoy a good life, we must seek a prudent fulfillment of our personal, individual pleasures. Epicurus was by no means an advocate of some debauchery: prudence consists of pushing away the temptation of pleasures that are either unattainable, or at least very difficult to achieve. This helps us to avoid something very unpleasant – constant frustration. A good political system makes this kind of life possible by allowing the necessary connections between the individual and others, and by preventing chaos from growing due to potential clashes between individual pursuits of happiness. We need no moral law for reference aside from agreements on how to avoid getting in each other’s way. Law is a convention whose usefulness we can measure by assuming this point of view. Here we come close to the sources of liberal thought that would unfold gradually in the concepts of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and their successors 1,800 years later.

The teachings of Epicurus that recommended a form of withdrawal into privacy were not, as we have already mentioned, the only reaction to a fundamental change in the conditions of human coexistence in public. Another school of thought was developing along with Epicurean teachings. It was formulated by stoics. Their master, Zeno of Citium (c. 336-264 BC), and his successor, Chrysippus of Soli (c. 280-205 BC), taught in the Athenian Agora at the Stoa Poikile, the painted portico from which the school derived its name. Zeno advanced the notions already present in the pre-Socratic philosophy of nature seeking the primordial principle of world unity in one divine element. Presuming the principle’s existence, Zeno accepted both the unity of nature and its determination by the primordial principle. The vision of the objective order, the cosmos, is based on the unifying principle dictating the law of nature. The law cannot be confined to any specific city-state because it applies to all people. Our task is to find the voice of that law within ourselves. A quote attributed to Zeno states that “the virtue of a happy and harmonious life consists of conducting out actions in accordance with our inner voice and the will of the ruler of the Universe”.

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Selected books

Dzieje Polski, t. 1-4, 2014-2019

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Selected awards

Catholic Publishers’ Association FENIKS (2018)