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Political Radicalisms: Polish and European Cultural Contexts

The article starts by considering the incommensurability between the word “radicalism” in everyday use and in the social sciences. In contemporary political and media discourse, the word radicalism—understood as a *verbum tremendum et fascinans*—is used with increasing frequency, while as a scientific concept the word has completely vanished from the academic language. This article presents critical reflection on the possible substantive meaning of “radicalism” as a concept of the social sciences. The author is convinced that determining the areas of “radicalism”’s applicability is relevant for any attempt to understand political practice itself: for both its description and the normative determination of its limits. The author begins to reconstruct the conceptual meaning of “radicalism” by tracing the roots of the word in the history of ideas. The subject of the reconstruction here is the European cultural context, which is responsible for the historical shaping of the theological, philosophical, and political understanding of the idea of radicalism. This context is identified, according to the main contemporary critics of radicalism, with early forms of religious consciousness such as Pelagianism (Kołakowski), gnosis (Voegelin) and Messianism (Talmon), but also with their modern transformations, such as Puritanism (Walzer). The conceptual meaning of radicalism and consequently its different concepts distinguished in the article—that is, philosophical (for example, Rousseauism, English utilitarianism), political (for example, that of the French *Parti Radical*) and integral, social radicalism (prepared by Marx)—are defined here as historical conceptualizations. The author attempts to conceptualize two isolated types of radicalism: of the radical left and the radical right, understood as “affair-radicalism” and “blood-radicalism” (Plessner), and to lay the theoretical foundations for investigation of their functioning in the historical, contemporary, and Polish context (Szacki, Laclau, Walicki).

Key words: political Messianism, liberalism, communism, national socialism, populism