

Andrzej Maksymilian Fredro (1620–1679)

A theorist of Polish Sarmatism

A. M. Fredro disappeared from school textbooks and university courses—and therefore from social memory—in Poland under partitions and in Soviet-occupied Poland (1945–1989). He theorized the modern Polish state and wrote on personal morality, counseling Poles on how to win and how to be virtuous. He disliked tyranny of the mob and tyranny of kings. He was an enthusiast of the republican form of government, similar to what the Founding Fathers originally envisaged for the United States. He made mistakes, but he also exemplified the vigor and wisdom of public debates in seventeenth-century Poland. The following excerpts have been translated from Latin into Polish, and then from Polish into English. The Polish text can be found in Zbigniew Ogonowski, editor, *700 lat myśli polskiej*, Warsaw: PWN, 1979, pp. 317–322, 338–339.

From *Scriptorum seu togae et belli notationum fragmenta* [1660]:

It is obvious that liberty in Poland should not be mistaken for anarchy. Yet such is the interpretation of those who do not understand what the Polish *Res Publica* is all about. These critics have weak brains and prattle nonsense, trying to see faults in a country they do not in the least understand. Erroneous interpretations have also been offered by those who mind primarily their own advantage, but pose as impartial judges in public life. They are masters of deception. They hate freedom and love to caricature it. They like to attack the most virtuous citizens, those who struggle to preserve freedom; they call these citizens nihilists, simpletons, or barbarians. A similar eristic game was played in Rome when the model citizen Cato the Younger was called a simpleton. To speak up for the preservation of ancient customs and laws is not an act of barbarism or stupidity; it is part of the struggle for the common good. . .

Each nation has a mysterious strain in it that makes it what it is, and trying to unravel it is fruitless. For instance, it would be futile to fulminate against the Spartans because they were forbidden to deal in money and to build walls of protection around the city of Sparta,

even though in other city states reason indicated that this should be done. Sparta survived for a long time because it followed its own rules. When it abandoned these rules, things began to get worse until Spartans returned to their traditions, tore down the city walls and returned to a money-free economy. No nation lasts forever, but preservation of the national character allows it to last the longest. Polish interests can be realized only if the character of the nation is cultivated by those who rule it. It would be disastrous to go against these innermost characteristics—unless, of course, one wants to destroy the Polish nation. If Poland were ruled “against itself,” so to speak, it would be imperative to return to the old traditions and rule her as she should be ruled—according to her character. Thus a good counselor to the king should diligently study the nature of the Polish people, rather than wander away into alien lands or embrace odd philosophies, trying to cultivate them on Polish soil.

Poles cannot live without liberty: this is their deepest national characteristic. The gentler and more tactful the king, the more faithfully Poles serve him. In such a situation there are no revolutions and no assassinations. In Poland more can be achieved through generosity than elsewhere through threats, force, and fear—the inevitable accompaniments to absolute rule. . . .

Do not multiply threats if you know that others are not afraid of you: if others despise your threats, the best course is to keep silent about what you really think. Weigh your words carefully.

The person who listens to others with friendly sympathy and answers questions politely gains power over human hearts and will meet with reciprocity. Those at the top of the social ladder who possess this ability become popular rulers. If you listen to what others have to say with a wrinkled forehead and patronizing impatience—even if you intend to do something good for the fellow who is speaking, he will not be grateful to you and will treat your kindness as something that you were obliged to do. One is less upset by a refusal dressed up in polite and friendly words than a consent expressed in a contemptuous manner. Hence. . . the saying: “A person in

trouble experiences relief after talking over his troubles with someone else.” Thus Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba, made few friends because of his gloomy and proud personality, and was disliked even by those for whom he did favors.

Do not prattle about your achievements, and even less so about your plans for achievements.

If you must punish somebody, make sure the punishment is proportionate to the trespass. If you are lenient by nature, it is better not to punish the culprit at all, because weak punishment does not prevent the trespass from being committed again. . . .

Do not make excessive excuses before a person who accuses you of an offense. Making excuses is a sign of fear and submission; say rather than there is no reason for him to accuse you or for you to justify yourself. . . .

Is it better to be liked or feared? This question has elicited comments for many centuries; in my view, one does not truly love either God or man if one does not feel a kind of awe before the object of love, the awe that can also be described as deep respect. Do not humiliate yourself to excess and keep reasonable limits in your charity works; nor should you try too eagerly to gain someone’s favors. Act with dignity if you want to acquire friends and if you want others to acquire you as a friend; show respect to others and it will be shown to you. . . .

A just government brings demographic stability and growth, whereas an unjust one diminishes population numbers. Italian historian Francesco Guicciardini rightly observed that the inhabitants of Pisa, tired of Florentine rule, preferred to sacrifice their wealth and lives (both men and women fought in the war against Florence), rather than be subjugated by Florence again. Who knows whether the Cossack wars in our own country did not have the same source: the Cossacks have complained of harsh treatment by the authorities, and they returned to peaceful life with a great deal of suspicion toward these authorities, remembering well what they call past enslavement.

Thriving agriculture and artisanship, good schools for the young generation, numerosity of

marriages, colonization of thinly inhabited territories, and welcoming neighboring nations to join in one state are means of increasing the population of the state. Of course there also are military conquests of nations or states, and the possibility of them joining the conquering state with all the rights and privileges of the original citizens (i.e., as co-citizens and not as the conquered). Demographic increase means more taxes are collected by the Treasury. Thus the Romans bestowed citizens’ rights on the Sabines, Volskis, inhabitants of Campagna, and Etruscans—just as Poles gave full rights to Ruthenians, Lithuanians, and others. Thus even though we have diverse nations within the Polish state, we have a common citizenship and would be unable to live separately from one another. In contrast, Athenians and Spartans treated the conquered nations as slaves, and as a result they eventually withered instead of growing into one large and strong state. Δ



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