

Kuba Gąsiorowski
Chair of History of Political and Legal Doctrines

Summary of the doctoral dissertation entitled: „The American Project” – the Idea of United States in political thought from the times of the Founders until the Reconstruction Era – prepared under the guidance of Professor Michał Jaskólski.

The present dissertation is an attempt at filling of an important gap in Polish state of knowledge about history of American political thought and also an attempt at updating scientific data in that regard. The work is based mostly on primary sources and modern publications from American literature. Its purpose is to present the development of the American worldview – the opinions of Americans on law and state from historical perspective – in the formative period for the US statehood, i.e. from the times of the Founding Fathers until the Era of Reconstruction. The present dissertation does not simply describe particular doctrines but rather shows its evolution, passing from one ideological formation to another within the American society. It aims – first – for facilitating understanding of American history which is necessary for any dialogue with the US in the present times – second – for drawing conclusions from the history of the, in fact, the oldest functioning democratic state, in the post-Enlightenment meaning of that notion.

In the first chapter the author discusses the causes of the American Revolution, indicating that – contrary to the opinion widely spread in Polish literature – at its roots were not the economic reasons (e.g. fiscal oppression of the American colonies by the British) but an ideological conflict. On the one side, it was the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty which formed a backbone of English political system, on the other, the colonial doctrine of sovereignty of the people, practiced in America. It was the lack of “compatibility” of those two systems due to which thirteen American colonies could not remain a part of the British Empire.

Subsequently, the dissertation presents the course of the debate on the form and ratification of the US constitution. The Author explains how far innovative was the work of the Founding Fathers, which amounted to transfer of mechanism of the so called “mixed government” from the system of a class divided society (where executive means a king, higher chamber of the parliament refers to aristocracy and lower to the gentry) to a practice of a democratic, class-less society. It critically analyzes the opinion according to which the US constitution was a document prepared by the political and economic elites against the lower and middle classes. It also discusses in a historical context the true genesis of the political mechanisms (check’n’balances) contained in the US constitution, with indication that their present form is different than the meaning that was attached to them in the past, moreover in the light of the constitutional debate one might diagnose the reasons for their limited effectiveness in present times.

Then, the Author presents the dispute on the character of the United States between the parties of Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. The dissertation is not limited to description of the political opinions of the parties but also

attempts to explain why their members thought and spoke in certain way. It explains that the party of Hamilton did not represent the interests of rich merchants and party of Jefferson – American masses. The Author argues once again that for both parties economic issues were of secondary importance and what was material were the matters connected with the center of political power, its scope and objectives it should serve.

The chapter that follows concerns the so called “Era of Good Feelings” and presents the Monroe Doctrine, Missouri Compromise and the American System created by John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay – i.e. all three elements that, up until the Civil War, defined the political debate in the US.

Then the dissertation discusses the legal and political thought of the “Jackson Era”. It explains the connections between the doctrines of the party of president Andrew Jackson with the Jeffersonian thought and the exact meaning of the “Jacksonian Democracy” as another emanation of the doctrine of sovereignty of the people. Moreover, the “Jacksonian Democracy” touches upon the relations between capital and work – i.e. those issues that from the middle of 19th Century became the dominant elements of public debate during the Second Industrial Revolution.

After that, the Author presents political ideologies of the North and South before the Civil War and also changes in the political philosophy during that conflict and subsequent Era of Reconstruction. According to the Author – once more – the beginning of the Civil War had nothing to do with economic differences but was caused by two incompatible worldviews in both parts of the country. Furthermore, the Civil War was a part of a nationalistic currents of that period and was – in the opinion of the Author – an American equivalent of the Unification of Italy or Germany.

In conclusions, the Author presents comparison between the Roman and American Republics and shows key elements which between 1764 and 1877 formed the Idea of the United States. According to the Author, Alexis de Tocqueville was right that the dominant doctrine of that period was the sovereignty of the people, then: the idea of equality and possibility of economic advancement for everyone and expansionism. Author explains that although the above were the “core” of the Idea of American, this idea is subject to constant adaptation to currently dominating intellectual currents of given eras and does not possess a static character.

09.06.2016
R. G. G. G.