

Marek Jedliński
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

No Compromises! The Traditionalistic Philosophy of the Culture of Julius Evola

The life and works of Julius Evola were characterized by the uncompromising nature of the traditionalist trend represented by him. Born in 1898, Baron Julius (Giulio) Cesare Evola — thinker, poet and painter, participant in military campaigns — referred to the philosophy of culture of René Guénon and his criticism of the world of European modernism (modernity). The French traditionalist recognized the West as an historical anomaly on the traditional, sacred map of the world.¹ Evola, developing the motifs taken up by Guénon, took a pose of a rebel and antagonist of modern times. Aristocratic extravagance and dandy sense of superiority determined his contemptuous attitude to Christianity, cult of activism, racialism, hatred of bourgeois and capitalist banality. The aim of these considerations is to present the main assumptions of Evolian philosophy of culture — showing the radicalism of his views. Surprising, uncompromising artistic choices underlined the autonomy of Evola and the unwillingness to categorize himself. However, he was closest to Dadaism (it was a distant background to his later theoretical deliberations). He expressed this in the *Arte astratta* brochure (1920).² A year after publication, he unexpectedly abandoned

¹ Cf. R. Guénon, *Orient et Occident*, Les Éditions de la Maisnie, Paris 1987, p. 19.

² Cf. J. Evola, *Arte astratta. Posizione teorica, 10 poemi, 4 composizioni*, P. Magliione & G. Strini, Roma 1920.

art, devoting himself exclusively to philosophy. Intransigence, maximalism, increasing desire for totality led Evola to a marriage with fascinating intellectual elites (though he never joined the party). The thinker demanded the creation of an elitist culture — he was offended by the plebeianism of many fascist leaders. The literature on the subject provides a discussion on the Evolian interpretation of fascism — Zbigniew Mikołajko discusses it in more detail, supporting the opinion on the genesis of the fascist mythology created by Evola³. At this point, it is also worth quoting the argument formulated by Philippe Baillet — he believed that despite his heterodoxy, even in the post-war years, Evola considered fascism as the only, though imperfect, ideological barrier against degenerated communism and liberalism (capitalism), bringing the world of machines, cult of matter and triviality, so hated by traditionalists.⁴ Evola, like Guenon, also discovered Far Eastern doctrines and explored the esoteric scriptures. 1928 was a significant year in his evolution, when in the neo-pagan spirit he wrote the provocative anti-Christianist book *Imperialismo pagano*, crystallizing his traditionalistic radical anti-modernist profession de foi. The thirties bring interest in alchemy, spiritualism, theosophy, sagas, knightly and esoteric legends. Spreading Spengler's writing on the pages of magazines, travels to Germany, meeting with Eliade, his interest in Mussolini and a visit to Hitler put him in a strong political context. He was ignored in the post-war reality, though he did not allow himself to be forgotten, associated with a group of fascisting rightists and publishing, among others, the provocative brochure of *Orientamenti* (1950) and the book *Kali-yuga. Gli uomini e le rovine* (1953). In a systematic way Evola explained his traditionalist philosophy of culture in a work published in 1934 *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*. In the introduction of the work, the author expressed the mood of the era:

For quite some time now it has become almost commonplace to talk about the “decline of the West” and the crisis of contemporary civilization, its dangers, and the havoc it has caused. Also, new prophecies concerning

³ Z. Mikołajko, *Mity tradycjonalizmu integralnego. Julius Evola i kultura religijno-filozoficzna prawicy*, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warszawa 1998, p. 69.

⁴ Vide: Ph. Baillet, *Les rapports de Julius Evola avec le fascisme et le national-socialisme*, “Politica Hermetica” 1987 (No. 1), pp. 61-62.

Europe's or the world's future are being formulated, and various appeals to "defend" the West are made from various quarters.⁵

Evola recognized the advanced atrophy of the will of Europeans who, while looking at the deepening crisis, do not show any special readiness to resist and fight. The Italian thinker demanded to leave the vicious circle, to turn towards the past and all that was lost. The author believed that the revolt against "materialistic modernity" brings the truth closer to people, opening up their horizons for spiritual life.⁶

The main motif present in Evola's books was the criticism of the modernist image of the world, which is a complete denial of tradition and sacredness. The announcement of the future fall of the West Evola has noticed in the world of antiquity. He located the beginnings of Renaissance humanism, secularism and rationalism in ancient Greece.⁷ Especially

... humanism (a characteristic theme of the Iron Age) made its appearance as a result of the emergence of religious sentimentalism and the decline of the ideals typical of a virile and sacral mankind.⁸

"The Elders" lost contact with tradition, subjecting everything to criticism, to any judgment of reason, verification, and henceforth relied on the "authority" of profane knowledge. The author did not fail to notice the negative role of Christianity, which — in his opinion — has consolidated humanism in the form of religious pathos (or religious sentimentality — according to Guénon) in subsequent centuries.

Hellenization of Rome was recognized by Evola as the main cause of its fall. Aryan forces tried to stop it unsuccessfully. In the "ancient" Roman, he recognized the "spiritual race" element, characteristic of the heroic-uranic period and inhabitants of the north-western lands. He claimed that in the "original" Rome, the traces of the oldest sacred and traditional world were preserved, with its heroic character,

⁵ J. Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, transl. G. Stucco, Inner Traditions International, Rochester-Vermont 1995, p. XXVIII.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. XXIX-XXX, XXXIV.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 253.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 261.

severity, hierarchy, fondness for order and discipline.⁹ With the passage of time, this holy, patriarchal and “masculine” Rome was replaced by the “classic” world, which became the cradle of law or manners shaped by humanism.¹⁰

The Evolian philosophy took the efforts of positive valorization of medieval times. The author recognized them as an era that brought about a slowdown in the degradation of the West. Traditionalists were not limited to recognizing a crisis state, but they proposed a specific remedy, postulating the presence of the past. In the spirituality of the Middle Ages, they saw the last manifestation (and “bastion”) of the world of tradition. Despite his negative attitude towards Christianity, Evola tried to defend the world of tradition created by Catholicism. In his view, the Church, despite numerous abuses, managed to create a system of dogma, symbols, myths, rituals, and sacred institutions. The Italian thinker also sought to prove the existence of a Mediterranean, non-Christian (pagan) Western tradition, which for the last time in history revealed itself as a medieval Gibelian imperial ideal — a heroic spirit. Therefore, in the book *Imperialismo pagano*, Evola called for rejecting the triviality of the world of modernism: “The power of a new Middle Ages is needed — a revolt, interior as well as exterior, of a barbaric purity.”¹¹ The author called for the awakening of consciousness, for a specific, great act — carrying out a profound upheaval, overturning the current culture, stopping unnecessary, nondescript and endless deliberations:

Philosophy, “culture,” everyday politics: nothing of all this. It is not a matter of turning on the other side of this bed of agony. It is a matter of finally waking up, and getting up.¹²

According to traditionalists, the “sensual-material” mentality shaped in the antiquity, which remained in the Middle Ages in the state

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 263-278; cf. *idem*, *Men Among the Ruins. Postwar Reflections of a Radical Traditionalist*, transl. G. Stucco, Inner Traditions International, Rochester-Vermont 2002, p. 254.

¹⁰ J. Evola, *Men Among ...*, p. 253.

¹¹ J. Evola, *Heathen Imperialism*, transl. R. Berkeley, Thompkins & Cariou, Conway 2007, p. 19.

¹² *Ibidem*.

of “hibernation,” revived in the era of modernism and appropriated almost all areas of life. It created the ideal of modern science, “killing” the spirit, subordinating man to his alienated creations: technique and machine. Evola wrote that the contemporary representative of the Western world “thinks fleshly,” placing everything in a limited space-time, which differs radically from people of tradition, for which the invisible was real.¹³ The author explained that the modern ideal of knowledge led man to lose contact with authentic life¹⁴. From a traditionalist point of view, every profanic knowledge appeared to be trivial and primitive — it was devoid of a higher (directed “upward”), lofty goal. In this context, Evola wrote savagely about the preposterous claims of academics and pseudointellectuals to have useless knowledge.¹⁵ With his characteristic elitist radicalism, referring to Guénon, he opposed the modern science of ancient wisdom. Western science, oriented positivistically (agnostically), was considered as typical socialist, democratic and anti-hierarchical. The truth has become consensual, applying equality solutions to science, promoting quantitative criteria instead of qualitative ones.¹⁶ However, true wisdom belonged to the world of traditional spirituality (its approaching resulted from the rite of initiation, leading to the transformation of consciousness). In the eyes of traditionalists, modern humanism, pre-configured in antiquity, symbolized the fall of pride and faith in one’s own human mind. Evola claimed that Renaissance humanism created the civilization of the absolutized man. He called it the era of so-called geniuses surrounded by their machines, factories and demagoguery.¹⁷ Evola also saw in the seemingly bloodless humanism the layers of the future evil crescendo — under its banners, extreme subversive trends were supposed to arise in the culture, directed against man and tradition. In this way — as he wrote — cunning liberalism crept into the Western world through demonic

¹³ J. Evola, *Revolt Against ...*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁴ J. Evola, *Heathen Imperialism*, p. 94.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 99.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 93.

¹⁷ J. Evola, *Revolt Against ...*, p. 312.

Jacobin movements, exchanging the tactics of direct, frontal struggle with tradition in favor of its successive elimination.¹⁸

Evola called *cult ratio* the main pillar of humanism — a fragile man then interiorized the truth, despised dogma and tradition and traditional spiritual authority.¹⁹ Traditionalists recognized Protestantism as the embodiment of rationalism, humanistic individualism or a revolution directed against tradition. Evola wrote that the Reformation transformed religion into a transcendent “sentimental and moralizing” tale. Breaking its traditional firmament, it contributed to the aggressive expansion of materialism, capitalism or democracy.²⁰ The former empires were replaced by democratic states with their bourgeois, motivated conformism, shallow morality. Hence the Evolian postulate of evoking anti-reformation and returning to austere Aryan ethics.²¹

Protestantism was also a manifestation of renaissance individualism brought to its consequences. The author recorded his destructive influence:

One of the principal and most apparent aspects of modern decadence refers, in fact, to the advent of individualism as a consequence of the collapse and destruction of the former organic and traditionally hierarchical structures, which have been replaced primarily by the atomic multiplicity of individuals in the world of quantity, that is to say the masses.²²

Modernity has brought a peculiar increase in individualism and egoism in mass communities. It had its numerous negative manifestations. The author argued that in the atomized world, human intimacy was primitivized, the institution of marriage and family was destroyed.²³

¹⁸ J. Evola, *Men Among ...*, p. 133.

¹⁹ J. Evola, *Revolt Against ...*, p. 318.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 314-318.

²¹ J. Evola, *Heathen Imperialism*, pp. 38-43; por. *idem*, *Ride the Tiger. A Survival Manual for the Aristocrats of the Soul*, transl. J. Godwin, C. Fontana, Inner Traditions International, Rochester-Vermont 2003, p. 31.

²² J. Evola, *Ride the Tiger...*, pp. 106-107.

²³ J. Evola, *The Metaphysics of Sex*, Inner Traditions International, New York 1983, p. 173.

For Evola, the phenomena described were a manifestation of the collapse of the idea of aristocratism and the expansion of modern mass. The author led a frontal struggle with “plebeianness,” regretting that an era has come in which law and morals are not given “from above,” but come from social low positions. An Italian traditionalist, as already mentioned in the biographical outline, clearly distanced himself from the “plebeian” variety of fascism.²⁴ This opinion is confirmed by Mussolini’s biographer — Renzo de Felice.²⁵ Evola wrote that the crowd without properties has no spiritual needs at all and does not even want to know ideals or values; it is only a dark substance, unconsciously “pouring out” and forming in this way into modern societies composed of collectivized, formless, conformist bodies without heads.²⁶ The body has a quantitative advantage due to its weight, but the head is pure quality, shapes individualism, has talent, feelings and great thoughts. Evola argued that in the liberal democracy born under pressure of mass of liberal democracy, an outstanding minority is hampered by the average majority. The author has announced the need to exterminate conformist attitudes, which mean the acceptance of the rule of the formless mass. The thinker, in this way — according to the slightly mythical interpretation of Georg Mehlis — himself rising “above” Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, expected people to wake up their uniqueness, reject the humiliating compromises of “subhumans.”²⁷

The Italian traditionalist wrote that a human person, deprived of metaphysical references and spiritual authority, becomes a number (atom), head in a herd-collective:

Therefore, we go from liberalism to democracy: and then from democracy to socialist forms that are increasingly inclined toward collectivism.²⁸

²⁴ Cf. T. Sheehan, *Myth and Violence. The Fascism of Julius Evola and Alain de Benoist*, “Social Research” 1981, Vol. 48, No. 1, pp. 45-73.

²⁵ R. de Felice, *Der Faschismus. Ein Interview von Michael A. Ledeen*, Clett-Kotta, Stuttgart 1977, p. 97.

²⁶ J. Evola, *Revolt Against ...*, p. 323.

²⁷ G. Mehlis, *Der Magische Idealismus*, [w:] *idem*, *Italienische Philosophie der Gegenwart*, T. XII, Junker und Dünnhaupt, Berlin 1932, pp. 62-64.

²⁸ J. Evola, *Men Among ...*, p. 145.

The liberal revolution (constitutionalism, parliamentary democracy) made a breakthrough in the world of tradition, opening the way for a socialist and communist revolt (Bolshevik), based on — according to Evola's words — ignorants and primitives. Evola perceived communism as the next stage of the fall, in which power passed into the hands of the lowest of traditional castes — servants engaged in physical work. Such inversion took place for the first time in the history of the world.²⁹

Evola did not conceal contempt for the world of communists who flattened the life, apologizing the work. He had equally negative feelings for the capitalists and the bourgeoisie. He claims that money hampered humanity with its invisible chains, transforming into an inert mass of slaves.³⁰ The thinker proposed a return to community land management, solidarity and justice in the distribution of material goods. In this context, he proclaimed the need to establish the rule of the aristocracy of the spirit and the instigation of a traditional revolution, getting rid of the “capitalist-Jewish” yoke of machines, automated dependence and humanism prohibiting to look to the sky.³¹ Referring to Guénon's writing, the Italian author described the world of modern civilization in the following words:

Reign of matter, of gold, of machine, of number, it no longer possesses breath, or liberty, or light.³²

Neopagan manifesto of Evola (*Imperialismo pagano*) was an apology of brutality: the author asked rhetorically why Europe had become weak and average (pacifist, sentimental and humanitarian), why it lost the ideal of a strong state-empire, why it does not treat war as a sacred way of spiritual fulfillment (like Islam).³³ Evola explained that Europe lost its authentic life, and that “Semitic venom,” Christian-democratic egalitarianism, “softened” a strong Aryan (Nordic) tradition. Europe, he wrote,

²⁹ J. Evola, *Revolt Against ...*, pp. 329-332.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, s. 334; cf. *idem*, *Heathen Imperialism ...*, p. 86-87.

³¹ J. Evola, *Heathen Imperialism ...*, p. 92, 112.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 17.

³³ Cf. J. Evola, *Metaphysics of War. Battle, Victory and Death in the World of Tradition*, Arktos, London 2011, pp. 28-34.

... is a big insignificant body, possessed and shattered by an anxiety which no one dares to express, whose blood is gold, whose flesh is machines, factories and arms, whose brain is a newspapers page.³⁴

The thinker announced the approaching end of the era of compromises, “pulling out” the weak Semitic-Christian roots that poison blood and reason; he urged to say “enough!” to aestheticism, spiritual need, creating a Semitic God only for the purpose of praying. He wrote pathetically that the ultimate burial of the world of trivial (Christian) egalitarianism requires a return to the heroic Norse culture, extraction from the vaults of eternal and primitive tradition, reminders of mythical Hyperboreans or pagan Rome — the last, great, creative manifestation and attempts to renew as part of the cycle, power in the form of heroic, solar and masculine culture.³⁵ Evola argued that only in the West, with the spread of Semitic religion and spirituality, a great catastrophe occurred — the domination of lunar, feminine spirituality, the gynaeocratic image of the Church for the weak, children and slaves.³⁶

Recapitulating the above description of Evolianism, one should point to his uncompromising refutation of the world of modernism. It is possible to formulate a philosophy of culture that holds all his views: modernism brought the death of the spirit of tradition, the emergence of humanism, the modern ideal of science, technology and the world’s engineering, revolutions, constitutional systems and parliamentary democracies. The author wrote vividly that in modern times the authorities passed from the hands of knights and warriors, kings of blood and spirit to the hands of “kings” of coal or oil. Heroes were replaced by industrialists, merchants, shopkeepers, economists, bankers and businessmen, while honor was replaced by social and commercial agreements. The era of economics has begun — anarchic, nihilistic, not referring to any spiritual authority. In such circumstances, Evola recommended taking an attitude of uncompromising fight against the triviality of modern times.

³⁴ J. Evola, *Heathen Imperialism ...*, p. 18.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 22-25, 29.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

Marek Jedliński

Compromises! The Traditionalistic Philosophy of the Culture of Julius Evola

Abstract

The article discusses the main assumptions of the cultural philosophy of Julius Evola highlighting the radicalism of his views. This Italian thinker urged to fight the world of modern times and proclaimed the need to return to the old, traditional orders. He saw the beginning of the decay of Western culture in the Greek, ancient model of knowledge, which after the period of the Middle Ages was absolutized, leading to the crisis of the Western world.

Keywords: cultural philosophy of Julius Evola, radicalism, tradition, traditionalism.