



Włodzimierz Brus

Włodzimierz Brus has died in Oxford, days after his 86th birthday. After Oskar Lange, and Michał Kalecki, Brus was the Polish economist best known outside his country. In his life-time that spanned the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Second World War; the establishment of Communism in Poland; its decline and ultimate failure at the end of the 1980s; and the restoration of capitalism, accompanied by mass unemployment, in Eastern Europe; many Polish economists adopted the wisdom of the Vicar of Bray, reinventing themselves with each successive change of regime as apparently life-long supporters of whatever happened to be the current ruling orthodoxy. Włodzimierz Brus distinguished himself from those economists not by clinging onto orthodoxies discredited by history, but by his refusal to deny a past that included Stalinism, and his willingness to face up to the lessons of that and subsequent experience.

Włodzimierz Brus was born on the 23 August 1921 in the northern Polish city of Płock. On completion of secondary school, he applied to enter the leading Polish business school in Warsaw, the *Szkola Główna Handlowa* (the Main School of Commerce, SGH). In 1938, on failing to get into SGH, because of quotas applied to Jewish students, Brus entered the *Wolna Wszechnica*, a free university that had been set up at the end of World War I to provide higher education to students unable to get into Poland's backward and conservative universities.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, Brus fled to Lvov. He completed his studies there and at the University of Leningrad, when it was evacuated for the duration of the siege of Leningrad to Saratov, and even taught briefly. Brus had married Helena Wolinska before the War, but she had stayed behind in Poland and both remarried. They came together again in the mid-1950s.

When the Polish Workers' Party (PPR) was established under Soviet auspices, Brus joined. He headed the Party's propaganda effort in Poland's second city of Łódź, in alliance with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) to win constitutional referenda in 1946, and elections in 1947. He subsequently supported the campaign to unite the PPS with the PPR as the Polish United Workers' Party, which was to rule Poland for the next forty years.

But Brus was also determined to complete further studies in economics. Now allowed to enrol in SGH, he completed a doctorate in economics under the supervision of Edward Lipinski, who had been *Prorektor* of SGH in 1938, when Brus

has failed to get into that School. (Lipinski had lost that position when he protested about the anti-semitism). Brus' thesis was on the Marxist law of value under socialism, an approach to economics that was to be the foundation of his most original work. Together with Maximilian Pohorille, he published a textbook on the political economy of socialism that was marked by its intemperate attacks on the so-called 'national' (i.e., non-Soviet) road to socialism then advocated in Yugoslavia by Tito and, in Poland, by Władysław Gomułka. Poland, he argued, must follow the superior Soviet example. In 1952 he hailed the publication of Stalin's *The Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*. In 1954, Brus was appointed to a Chair in Political Economy at Warsaw University

In 1955, a lively discussion on political and economic reform emerged in Poland, and was joined by Michał Kalecki who returned from the United States, as well as Oskar Lange. Brus was now at the peak of his political and economic influence, and turning away from his earlier views. He wrote a book entitled *The General Problems of the Functioning of the Socialist Economy* advocating market socialism. He joined Lange and Kalecki as Vice-Chairman of an Economic Council that was to advise the Polish government on economic reform. After the shooting of Polish workers in Poznań in 1956, all this seemed to be so much more urgent.

However, as the economic and political situation stabilised, the government of Władysław Gomułka lost interest in reform. Improvements in the economic situation in the late 1950s were followed by disappointing results in the early 1960s. Brus now took on the role of an inside critic of the return to bureaucratic management of the economy, but also as an advocate of democratic reform. In 1965, he took the bold step of appearing as a witness for the defence of Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski on trial for their Open Letter to the Party, calling for real democracy in the party and the state. In the following year he echoed their demands in speech to the University's Party organisation. When the philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, and Krzysztof Pomian were expelled from the Party, he defended their positions. When, at the beginning of 1968, he realised that this internal criticism was in vain, he resigned from the Party.

That year, in the face of political discontent, Władysław Gomułka lost control over the Party and was obliged to seek support from an anti-semitic faction in the Party, with the result that a

purge of Jews and 'revisionists' was conducted. Many Poles, who happened to be of Jewish origin, lost their jobs and were forced into exile. But Brus would not go yet. He hung on in Poland as a researcher with the Housing Institute, unable to publish in his own name, until 1972. In that year, on his way from Glasgow to the United States, his son fell ill when they were passing through Oxford. Brus and his family stayed. He was offered a Fellowship at Wolfson College and then, in 1978, became a Professorial Fellow.

In many respects, Oxford offered refuge, but remained a place of exile for Brus. Cut off from political circles in Poland, he had no influence over the Solidarity movement that emerged during his absence, and his political economy fitted in badly with the 'Sovietological' approach that marked the study of Eastern European economies in the West. His earlier essays were published in English during the 1970s, and appealed to those who hoped for reformed socialism in Eastern Europe. His last attempt to influence event was with a book, co-authored by Kazimierz Laski, another exile from 1968, published in 1989 under the title *From Marx to the Market*. This urged a more determined embrace of market economics under central control to ensure that markets did not result in the waste and inefficiency that marks capitalism. An interesting political innovation was to be the separation of economic planning from state control.

Brus' exile did not end with the fall of Communism. In the 1990s, his wife was the object of politically motivated extradition proceedings, which prevented their return to Poland. In recent years diabetes and heart problems limited his activity, although his acute observation and memory did not leave him. He died in Oxford on the 31 August. Włodzimierz Brus leaves behind him his wife Helena, daughters Janina and Helena from his second marriage, and a son Tomek, as well as an ageing generation of dissidents in Poland, grateful for his support in the 1960s, and a wide circle of admirers throughout the world.

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