

# The New Criterion

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## Honoring Leszek Kolakowski

*On the first Kluge Prize.*

It was with great pleasure that we read the announcement last month that the Polish philosopher (and occasional contributor to *The New Criterion*) Leszek Kolakowski had been awarded the first Kluge Prize. The new prize, which carries a purse of \$1 million, is funded by the philanthropist John W. Kluge and administered by the Library of Congress. Designed to honor lifetime achievement in the humanities, the prize could not have found a more worthy recipient. Although best known for *Main Currents of Marxism*, a monumental three-volume dissection of “the greatest fantasy of our century,” Kolakowski is also the author of a score of books on philosophical and theological topics from Plotinus and the Church fathers, to the English empiricists, Edmund Husserl, and Henri Bergson. The seventy-six-year-old philosopher grew up in Lodz and lived through German occupation and Soviet domination of Poland. In 1968, having lost his position at Warsaw University, he left Poland for England, and subsequently taught at Yale, the University of Chicago, and Oxford, where he now lives in semi-retirement. In the 1980s, working from abroad, Kolakowski was active in supporting the Solidarity movement that helped liberate Poland from Soviet tyranny. Totalitarianism was a daily fact of life and later an object of study for Kolakowski. But his deeper subject has been the insidious variety of human bondage: not just political tyranny but also the sundry metaphysical tyrannies with which mankind has striven mightily to perpetuate its enslavement even as it mouths the word “freedom.” Of particular relevance to our own situation today is his analysis of “The Self-Poisoning of the Open Society” (the title of an essay in his book *Modernity on Endless Trial*). Among the many dangers that threaten a pluralist society from within, Kolakowski notes, perhaps the most destructive is “the weakening of the psychological preparedness to defend it.” It is a lesson we have yet to master.

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