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On writing intellectual history: Leszek Kolakowski and the Warsaw school of the history of ideas

My work in writing intellectual history forms a small part of a certain intellectual process which took place in the first two post-war decades in my country, a process which culminated in the emergence of the so-called 'Warsaw school of the history of ideas'. The most outstanding representative of this school, Leszek Kolakowski, is widely known today in the West, but knowledge of his intellectual background, his evolution and his achievements in fields other than the history of Marxism, remains very limited. This is due to the fact that his main books in the history of ideas—his monograph on Spinoza (1958) and his magnum opus on seventeenth-century non-denominational Christianity (1965)—have not been translated into English. I hope that what I have to say may help, at least partially, to fill this gap.

The other leading members of the Warsaw school were: Bronislaw Baczko, now a professor at the University of Geneva, the author of an excellent book on Rousseau (1964) and of a comprehensive, extremely sophisticated study of eighteenth-century Utopias (both available in French), Jerzy Szacki, the author of a recently-published History of Sociological Thought (London 1979); and myself. In this lecture I shall talk about myself, but I shall concentrate on Kolakowski because it was he who formulated the methodological premises and research tasks of the school with the greatest precision and profundity. I should like to stress, however, that as an academic teacher the most important member of the group was Baczko, an older colleague of mine who greatly influenced two generations of Polish philosophers and historians of ideas: those of his own generation and those who, like myself, defended their doctoral dissertations in the second half of the 1950s and became better known in the early 1960s. I must also

1 This paper was originally delivered as a lecture in the series 'Critical Approaches to History' arranged by the History Department of the University of Sydney, Trinity Term 1984.


Andrzej Walicki emphasize that my failure to refer to Szacki’s works does not stem from an under-estimation of his contribution but solely from his separate position within the school. As a sociologist he has always stood somewhat apart from his philosophically-trained colleagues and these differences cannot be discussed here simply through lack of time.

The common experience of us all was the Stalinism of the early 1950s and the vigorous reaction to it during the Polish ‘thaw’ of 1955-56. Except for myself, all the members of the group belonged to the party and in the early fifties Kolakowski and Baczko were, in fact ardent Stalinists, deeply engaged in the fight against ‘bourgeois philosophy’ and religious beliefs. The difference between them and myself may be described as the difference between those who had become tools of ideological repression and those who had been its victims. But the importance of this difference should not be exaggerated. Kolakowski and Baczko moved towards revisionism very early, probably just after Stalin’s death; as for me, though never a convinced Marxist — rather the reverse — I was still heavily influenced by Marxism and my first works might be seen as a sort of broadly conceived Marxist revisionism (if revisionism is defined as a certain thought-content, and not as a critical attitude towards orthodox Marxism within the party).

In 1955-56 Kolakowski emerged as the leading radical revisionist philosopher in Poland. Baczko, though much less outspoken, was almost equally quick to revise, or rather dissolve, the dogmas of orthodox Marxism by making Marxism historically oriented, conscious of its historicity and, thereby, of its inevitable historical relativity. Both were fascinated by the problems of historicism in the two different meanings of this term, as a Hegelian belief in the rational and necessary laws governing historical processes and, second, as historical hermeneutics, the art of interpreting ideas of the past by the application of Dilthey’s method of empathetic understanding (Verstehen), enriched by a sophisticated ‘sense of history’, the peculiar cognitive privilege of the ‘freely floating, socially unattached intellectuals’, to quote Karl Mannheim. In other words, both represented a kind of Marxist revisionism, which was openly contemptuous of dialectical materialism and critical of historical materialism as a comprehensive theory of history, but which used certain aspects of marxian historicism, together with certain aspects of other forms of nineteenth-century historicism, for a deeper understanding of historical processes. By these means ahistorical modes of thought were relativized, the foundations of long-established dogmas were destroyed and a higher level of historical self-awareness was attained. Let me try to explain the reasons for this fascination with history.

Historicism as belief in the Hegelian Weltgeist, in the hidden Reason of History, unfolding in accordance with its immanent, necessary laws, was, as I see it, a substitute for a naive belief in the socialist ideal. The existence of evil under socialism, the contrast between ideal and reality, were so obvious that the only justification of one’s commitment to the cause of socialism in Poland had to be sought in historicism. Historical determinism, combined with the Hegelian concept of the inner meaning of history, made it possible to believe that cruelty
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was a necessary price for progress, that present evil was, in fact, paving the way to a better future and that further sacrifices were demanded in order to realize the great design of History. There was also an element of fear in this attitude, an element consciously exploited by Stalinist intellectuals who tried to intimidate people by claiming that the Reason of History, the Hegelian Weltgeist, was on their side. As Kolakowski has confessed, such a view was quite widespread in Poland: 'In innumerable instances Stalinism has repeated the spiritual history of young Belinsky, who believed that Russian czardom embodied the spirit of history and that one should not resist history for foolish personal reasons but assent to its basic course despite the anxieties and resistance of the individual conscience.'  

The man who deeply influenced Kolakowski and Baczko (my own case was rather different in this respect) was the Hegelian philosopher Tadeusz Kronski. He also profoundly influenced Czesław Miłosz, the recent literary Nobel Prize winner, who called him ‘Tiger’ and devoted the last chapter of his Native Realm to him. He learned from Kronski that common sense was reactionary, that the average man had to be ‘terrorized into a philosophical being’, i.e. into the understanding of ‘this monster, historical necessity’ that paralyzed intellectuals with fear. The future founders of the Warsaw school had suffered the experience of being terrorized into bowing down before historical necessity. They wanted to liberate themselves from this paralyzing hypnosis and did so by studying historicism historically, by setting its development in historical context and by showing different aspects of its historical function. Their revisionism started from an attempted ‘vindication of human subjectivity’, as opposed to the vast impersonal forces of history. Kolakowski discussed these problems in his long essay ‘Responsibility and History’; my own contribution was the book entitled Personality and History (1959) in which I dealt, among other things, with Belinsky’s ‘reconciliation with reality’. (The parallel between Belinsky’s Hegelianism and the kind of historicism which haunted the Marxist intellectuals in Poland seemed to me obvious).

At this juncture, however, a question arises. Why did the young Polish intellectuals prefer to deal with historicism by means of an historical analysis of its genesis and function, rather than a theoretical scrutiny? Why were they neither

4 See L. Kolakowski, ‘Responsibility and History’, in Kolakowski, Toward a Marxist Humanism New York 1967, p. 120.
5 See his posthumously published Rozważania wokol Hegla (Reflections on Hegel), Warsaw 1960. The appendix to this book contains memoirs of Kronski by Kolakowski and Baczko.
9 It was obvious also to Miłosz who was struck by this parallel while reading my first article on Belinsky (published in 1954).
influenced nor impressed by Karl Popper’s critique of the theoretical content of historicism, lightly dismissing it as just one more manifestation of a notorious ‘bourgeois simplicity’?

It should be remembered that logical positivism, by then very influential in Poland, was for us merely another variant of that narrow-minded dogmatic certainty from which we wanted to free ourselves. We had had enough of the ‘only scientific methods’ and the ‘only scientific answers’, we were suspicious of people who wanted to study ideas from the point of view of their truth or falsity, especially of those who claimed to have a monopoly of ‘truly scientific methods’ and pretended to know the truth itself. The historical approach, with its inevitable ingredient of historical relativity, seemed to us a more reliable weapon against all forms of dogmatism than the substitution of one dogmatic theory for another. In other words, historicity became for us an antidote to the ossified, reified forms of dogmatic thinking, whether Marxist, or non-Marxist. Baczko made this assumption explicit in his important study ‘Cryptoproblems and Historicism’ (1958). He saw historicism, conceived of as historical hermeneutics (as distinct from historicism as the belief in the ‘objective laws of history’), as the best means of emancipating people from reified, alienated modes of thinking, as a means of acquiring self-awareness and thereby overcoming ‘ideological alienations’.

It followed from this that Marxism, in order to overcome its dogmatic self-alienation, must acquire a historical consciousness of itself, a consciousness of its historicity which must never congeal into a closed and arrogantly self-confident systematic theory.

Such a turn of Marxist revisionism was apparently peculiar to Poland. In other countries of ‘really existing socialism’ Marxist revisionists were much less preoccupied with history, especially the history of ideas. They wanted rather to improve Marxist theory, including the theory of dialectical materialism. They intended to make Marxism compatible with the development of the sciences and with a more liberal political practice, but not to dissolve all clear-cut theoretical formulae in a stream of historical consciousness. They did not try to undermine the ontological status of Marxist theory by proving that all questions of objective being were in fact questions of historical becoming, or that Marxism could be saved only by its self-awareness of certain, historically conditioned forms of human praxis, both material and ideological.

I cannot speculate here about the many different reasons for this peculiar historicist bent in Polish revisionism of the fifties. I can only suggest that the main reason for it was the fact that the crisis of Marxism was much deeper in

11 A Walicki, W kręgu konserwatywnej utopii. Struktura i przemiany rosyjskiego słowianofil-If
Poland than in other socialist countries. The historical relativism and sophisticated scepticism, characteristic of my older colleagues Kolakowski and Baczko, the leading minds in Marxist revisionism at that time, reflected the lack of genuine, naive idealism in the younger intellectuals of the Polish party. Post-Stalinist Marxism in Poland could produce no self-confident, idealistic Don Quixotes; its best representatives were devoid of illusions and thus doomed, as it were, to become sceptical and reflective, divided in themselves like Hamlet.

This intellectual background explains many features of the Warsaw school of the history of ideas. The seminal ideas of the school can be traced back to some books and articles published during the Polish ‘thaw’ of 1955-56. These ideas were further developed in the second half of the fifties and early sixties, in the seminar devoted to the problems of historicism — a seminar organized by Baczko at the Polish Academy of Sciences, which for several years provided a forum for lively discussion among philosophically and historically oriented young scholars from the major academic centres in Poland. In the mid-sixties four books were published, which, in spite of obvious individual differences, presented a well-defined common approach to the historical study of ideas. The first was my Habilitationsschrift on Russian Slavophilism and the Slavophile/Westerner controversy (written in 1962-3, published in 1964). This was followed by Baczko’s monograph on Rousseau (1964) and in 1965 Kolakowski’s magnum opus on nondenominational Christianity and Szacki’s concise study of French counter-revolutionary thinkers. All these were widely reviewed and the term ‘Warsaw school of the history of ideas’ was coined.

Before moving on to a brief presentation of some general assumptions and methodological principles of this school, I must define what I consider the history of ideas, or intellectual history as such, to be, irrespective of the different schools within it.

First, it is generally acknowledged, I hope, that the history of ideas breaks the traditional divisions between different disciplines, cutting across specialised interests in various, well-established and separate branches of scholarship. This is because ideas, or groups of ideas, or even world-views and styles of thought, appear as a rule in all these fields and historians of ideas must trace them everywhere. Thus, to give a classic example, Arthur Lovejoy traced the idea of the great chain of being through philosophy, theology, literature and in ‘certain phases of the history of modern science’; the conception of society as an organism appeared in philosophy, political thought, sociology and economics. Similarly, romanticism, both as a type of world-view and as a historically located style of thought, must be studied not only in literature but in philosophical and political thought as well; even some economic doctrines deserve to be labelled

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'economic romanticism' and historians of ideas interested in romanticism cannot ignore them.

Second, historians of ideas must use historical and comparative methods, which exclude a purely analytical, ahistorical approach. In the Introduction to my book on Russian Slavophilism, mentioned above, I suggest that ‘in order to grasp the regularities which explain the emergence of a given ideology and to determine its structure and historical individuality it is necessary to compare it with other related ideologies and to place it within a specific development continuum’. A very similar view was expressed later (1980) by Carl Schorske who wrote: ‘The historian seeks to locate and interpret the artifact temporally in a field where two lines intersect. One line is vertical, or diachronic, by which he establishes the relation of a text or a system of thought to previous expression in the same branch of cultural activity (paintings, politics, etc.). The other is horizontal, or synchronic; by it he assesses the relation of the content of the intellectual object to what is appearing in other branches or aspects of a culture at the same time’.15

Roger Chartier, a French historian connected with the Annales school, called this ‘the only definition of intellectual history presently admissible’16 We may agree with this, or not, but we should at least recognize that in order to be called an historian of ideas or intellectual historian certain minimal conditions must be fulfilled. The practice of treating thinkers of the past as if they were our contemporaries and of dealing with their views by purely immanent, contextless, ahistorical analysis may be useful for certain purposes but must not claim to be the history of ideas, or intellectual history.

The members of the Warsaw school took the historical and comparative approach for granted. The specificity of their views on the methods and essential subject of the history of ideas lay elsewhere.

The first formulation of the method commonly accepted by the small group which was to become the core of the Warsaw school was given by Kołakowski in his book on Spinoza. He described this as an attempt to present philosophy as a ‘science of man’, defining his intentions thus: ‘to interpret classical problems of philosophy as problems of moral nature, to translate metaphysical, anthropological and epistemological questions into the language suitable for expressing moral problems, to reveal their hidden human content; in other words, to present the problem of God as a problem of man, the problem of heaven and earth as a problem of human freedom, the problem of nature as a problem concerning the value of human life and the problem of human nature as the problem of interhuman relationships’.17 A similar view was put forward by Baczko in his ar-

17 Kolakowski, Jednostka... (see fn. 2), p. 5.