

The Polish Intelligentsia at the Turn of History

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In Poland, as is well known, the debate about the intelligentsia restarts at every turn of history: what was the intelligentsia? what is it now? who needs it and what for? is it wise? ridiculous? alienated? united or de-vided? will it be able to face the times that are coming? The intelligentsia is accused and defended, judged and sentenced — by whom if not by itself? It is never tired of watching itself, of analysing itself. And yet, this debate reveals something more: in fact, the most dramatic problems experienced by the Polish nation, if only they transcend the narrow horizon of a particular moment, are reflected in the mirror of this unending discussion. This is so because in Poland, where historical continuity has so often been broken in the course of the last two centuries, the intelligentsia was the sole carrier and guardian of collective memory.

The very concept of *intelligentsia*, transplanted from German philosophical vocabulary, came into use in the Polish language as early as the 1840s, long before it appeared in Russian literature, where it began its world career. From the beginning, however, the term was vague and it has remained so. One reason for this is that the term has two distinct meanings which have often been confused; this failure to recognize the separate meanings has been the cause of many a misunderstanding.

In the first meaning the term embraced all inhabitants of the country with at least a high school education who earned their living with so-called "intellectual work": the *professional intelligentsia* so conceived included professors, judges, physicians, but also clerks or technicians. Today the contours of such a social stratum are completely blurred.

The second and much more restricted meaning of "the intelligentsia" (which will be of interest for us here) developed as a special case of the former one. This more specific group was composed of men and wo-

men, whatever their professions, who were active in public life, openly or clandestinely, and who were creating or disseminating ideas, opinions, patterns of conduct and were convinced they had a mission to serve their people. The intelligentsia understood in this way had played a historical role before 1918 when state authorities were alien and oppressive, and the education system served the purpose of "denationalizing" young people by depriving them of their national culture.

This old and rich tradition of social and national service was revived in the late 1970s, with the foundation of the Committee for Workers' Defense. Indeed, what could have been more in conformity with the traditional *ethos* of the intelligentsia than this new approach to the workers who were being brutally downtrodden by the party and police dictatorship? In addition it was this intelligentsia who restarted a free underground press and ran open, but formally illegal and forbidden courses given at *the flying university*. It is true that, initially, no more than several hundred persons participated in all these activities, but their courage and determination brought credit to the intelligentsia as such. Consequently, it was the alliance between the intelligentsia and the industrial workers that was credited with the political victory of the big strike movement of August 1980 and, in fact, with all the successes achieved by *Solidarność* during the next 15 months. Nevertheless, some union activists and leaders, Wałęsa included, never lost a certain mistrust toward their better educated colleagues and advisors.

In spite of some internal friction, the fraternity of people of all classes in fighting communism seemed to survive the blow of December 13, 1981. It lived on, in prisons and in the underground, during the whole period of the delegalization of the Polish resistance movement. And when negotiations with the authorities and the famous *round-table* talks finally came about in 1989, it was natural that the experienced intellectual cadres of the movement should play the leading role. Thus, for all the striking differences between individual *curricula vitae*, the intelligentsia as a whole entered the time of rebuilding the independent Polish republic and its democratic institutions with a heroic legend and a feeling of well performed national duty. Why, then, four years later do the same social circles feel so deeply frustrated, lost and divided? Why does that topic of the *end of the intelligentsia* recur again and again in the press columns?

The Polish intelligentsia, its grave-diggers of today would say, had two historic tasks. Its first and foremost mission was, within the space of two centuries, to save, preserve and enrich national memory, or the whole sacred treasure of the nation's romantic history, poetry and myth.

Its other task was to resist and denounce every abuse of power and censorship — this bold, even if often ineffective criticism which a well-known satirist, in the times of Gomułka, named *gagging*. And now, when Poland has finally become a nation like others, normal and democratic, both these tasks are apparently finished. Neither the romantics, nor the gagglers are needed any more. The end of the romantic era, the end of the century-long power of national symbols over the martyred Polish soul has been announced, by some with satisfaction, by others with a shade of sorrow. Finally, they say, we have a free market of ideas and dreams, where everybody can buy whatever he or she likes. And this being so, the pretensions of those professional non-conformists who still regard themselves as guardians of sacred values, educators of society, or rebels in the name of freedom and truth, are merely ridiculous. The role of the intelligentsia as a separate social group has come to a close: it is today, or so the critics say, a marginal formation at best, receding now into history. It is going to be replaced by a young and energetic *middle class* and by the professional politicians, while those conceited intellectuals should do what they can do — treat their patients, teach physics, write novels — in brief, do their jobs and not claim a leading role in society.

But all this talk is sheer nonsense! — retort the defenders. The announcement of the funeral is at least premature. The role of intellectual elites in the present world — in politics, in the mass media — is not declining, but, on the contrary, increasing. This is no time in Poland for them to leave the public stage, stepping aside, locking themselves in their laboratories. The post-communist transformation of the economic system and social structure, the change in the constitution and the reconstruction of the whole edifice of law cannot be successfully executed without a vision of purpose and direction, without an alert body of criticism, in other words without *gagging*. The future is too serious a matter to be left to mere managers, politicians and journalists. Dissident values in politics, readiness to object and protest when necessary, can yet prove useful. The Polish intelligentsia, although deeply divided, had nevertheless a common, dominant system of values: it always stood on the side of the weak and oppressed, remained faithful to the principle, **Utopian** perhaps, of social justice. So today is less than ever the time to renounce this legacy and leave the whole public arena to the aggressive egoisms of the free market.

So far culture seems to be the first victim of the free market. The state is getting poorer, and so is its patronage. And much time will cer-

tainly pass before we have resourceful private foundations able to protect the arts and sponsor cultural events. At present, publishing houses, journals, theaters, museums, galleries, concert halls have to somehow cope with their financial deficit. And the whole impoverished intelligentsia must itself cope with the realities. But of course adaptation to the new market conditions is being achieved at the cost of ethical, esthetic and intellectual values. East and Central European countries are witnessing an invasion of Western kitsch, American entertainment, clownish fun, brutality, pornography, trivial sentimentalism. And in such a situation our self-proclaimed liberals argue that Polish literature should become low-key, cease at last to feel responsible for the destiny and morale of the nation and become a mere trade which must seek and find the outlet for its products.

Good advice, answer these writers and critics who feel a stronger attachment to the tradition of Polish culture, but — they counter — today, more than ever, one must protect one's own spiritual identity and not yield to a vulgar, commercialized, ubiquitous and uniform mass culture. The writer must not voluntarily restrict the impact of his words. In this period of disorder, when all social and cultural norms are questioned, it is the duty of literature to strive, as often before, against the current, against the fetishes of collective consciousness and of mass public tastes. It is its obligation to argue with society, to tell it bitter truths, to fight the omnipresent savagery of manners, coarseness and vulgarity which are a legacy of communism, its sediment in our souls.

All this is a fairy-tale, say the uncompromising critics. Why should the intelligentsia be any better than other classes of society? What is the source and basis of this arrogant claim? Dissent? Dissent is a myth. It was an adventure for a handful of intellectuals, a sort of expiation for some of them. But what did they do previously? Is it not true that it is precisely the intellectuals — writers, artists, historians, philosophers — who first, and most readily, succumbed to the totalitarian temptation? How many well known names were inscribed, in the Stalinist years, on the list of shame, not of glory! This stigma is not yet erased, since only a sincere clearing of our own individual accounts can lighten the heavy burden of the past on our shoulders. Meanwhile the intelligentsia cultivates the art of forgetting rather than the art of remembering. Had communism in Poland been only a matter of external coercion, it would now be easy to delete its effects. But it is worse than that, say the moralists. Communism ate into our souls and brains, left its enduring mark on them. We, the survivors, are all, in part at least, *homines sovietici*. The specter of the unsurmounted past follows us, gets a hold over us, and no

myth of undaunted dissent can help cast it out.

But isn't this paranoia? shouts back the other side. Leave history to historians, we have plenty to do now! Whatever our sins and weaknesses, our expertise and power of imagination are badly needed in this transition period when our whole society is groping its way in a fog.

And so the argument continues. In these bitter and emotional quarrels, which I have tried to summarize, it is no small issue that is at stake. The main issue in the controversy, as I see it, is to identify the sources of moral authority in the transition period. A paradoxical result of the first four years of liberty is the sad fact that all democratically elected institutions — Sejm, Senate, and President — have lost most of their prestige. Party politics in new democracies hardly present an encouraging picture. Under these circumstances then the struggle for an informal authority, for an ideological influence upon public opinion becomes all the more important, and this struggle provides a natural space for the intelligentsia's activities.

In this space, among the multiplicity of parties, associations and groupings, a division into two blocks, labeled — more or less conventionally — 'nationals' and 'Europeans', is becoming more and more salient. This division has also rich historical antecedents, going back to the 18th century, and now a new chapter of the long story is being added.

The nationalist or national-Catholic camp is not as a rule — if we exclude the extreme parties — directly hostile to Poland's opening to the West and to its association with the European Union. It demands nonetheless that the government protect national interests against foreign capital, and also against the dangers of laicization, pornography, and moral corruption that are being brought to Poland from the outside by free trade. Thus the liberals, for whom a fast civilisational *return to Europe* is a favorite ideal and slogan, are, in the eyes of 'nationals', uprooted cosmopolites, often suspected, moreover, of leftist sympathies, if not of cryptocommunist. Sometimes even a rich personal biography of a member of the anticommunist resistance movement, including years spent in jail and in the underground, may not shield him or her from such suspicion.

The older generation of the left-oriented and liberal Polish intelligentsia has indeed a long and often twisted road behind it. It proved to be, as a *milieu*, not immune to the charms of Stalinism in the early fifties. From 1956 on, however, it led protests against dictatorial party rule. Slowly it came closer to a better understanding of the spiritual mission of the Roman Catholic church and it has also appreciated the previ-

ously neglected significance of patriotic symbolism. These processes resulted in an amazing moral solidarity of various national forces which found expression in *Solidarność* and in the resistance of the eighties.

Hardly a trace of this illusion is left today. Even if temporary political agreements can still be struck when necessary, the dividing line between the two blocks — however internally differentiated both of them are — is difficult to cross: so different are their styles of thinking, world outlooks, and purposes. The 'Europeans' have discovered, with a sometimes naive disappointment, that the established church, which now dictates articles of law and is invited to schools, army barracks, offices, hospitals, prisons with its apostolic mission, is less prone to a dialogue with them than it used to be in the older days of a common resistance against the arbitrary power. Consequently, some of them sharply censure what they see as a trend toward the denominational Catholic state. Needless to say, criticism of this kind cannot but further deteriorate mutual relations.

The Catholic faction centered around *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Znak* and *Więź*, which for lack of a better label may be called 'progressive' (the 'nationals' call it derisively the 'catholeft'), has found itself in a very difficult situation. This circle, faithful to its personalistic tradition and to its ideal of open, tolerant and ecumenical Catholicism, politically supporting mainly the Democratic Union, is steadily trying to build bridges over the abyss. In vain, because it itself enjoys the sympathy of neither the episcopate (with a few notable exceptions), nor of the 'national' section of the intelligentsia.

Adam Michnik recently remarked that in Polish culture there was never a serious discussion between the 'progressive' intelligentsia and the nationalist camp. In fact, liberals as well as socialists were allergic to the language and style of nationalism, and they never considered it to be an intellectual partner. Consequently, they were unable to explain, even to themselves, what spiritual or emotional needs are satisfied by various forms of nationalistic ideology, and what the cause of its powerful appeal could be. Undoubtedly, both the leftist and liberal intelligentsia have always had much stronger creative potential in Poland. Even today its political or intellectual leaders enjoy higher personal popularity than the nationalists, while its press — with Michnik's *Gazeta Wyborcza* at the top — has a higher standard, bigger circulation and a wider social influence. All the same, a willing manifestation of the 'Europeans' superiority, plus the fact that they often regard the whole national-Catholic block as a reserve of obscurantism, cannot help alleviate the conflict.

Tactical compromises are still possible: after all, the coalition on which Suchocka's (1992-1993) government was based, included the leading parties of both orientations. Still, their visions of a desired social order, their conceptions of human rights, minority rights and the obligations of the state are so different that one can only expect a further increase of mutual distrust and prejudice, up to a point where compromises become unthinkable. Thus in Poland, and probably in the whole of East Central Europe, the chances that practical politics can free itself of ideology, by which I mean basic axiological choices, are rather small.

Young people are a big enigma in the present situation. It is surprising indeed that in all this period of rapid transformation of the systems of government and economy no authentic youth movement has emerged. In this time of the newly awakened animation of the public stage, universities remain grey and dull, nothing particular in them attracts attention, even the students' unions are anemic. Publicists and sociologists who are experts in this area agree that the present generation of twenty-year-olds is apathetic, lukewarm, and not interested in politics. Only rock music can move them as a mass. The continuity of national historical and literary tradition is about to be broken. The few existing youth magazines mock romantic symbols and gestures, the heroic legends of their predecessors, and all authorities, including the church. So far, however, no creative stream of thoughts and feelings has been born from this spirit of contradiction.

Who will win young people's hearts and minds is impossible to guess. If, however, the current rise in unemployment continues, especially unemployment among educated, young people, then it is conceivable that a large part of that generation might follow a radical demagogue of any sort, right or left.

It is popular rhetoric in the post-communist countries to accuse an ideological enemy of imitating communist ways in his passionate and intolerant behaviour, even if he does this unconsciously, or to denounce industrial workers for making economic and social claims or political choices which demonstrate their old socialist and egalitarian mentality that obstructs the road to the capitalist affluence of the nation. The intelligentsia, often prone to self-analysis, is looking inwards to discover the hidden, passive and envious *homo sovieticus*: it is said that dozens of years of re-education are needed to drive him away. There is a view that changing political institutions is the easiest part of the overall reform: changing the economic system is said to be more difficult, while changing the mentality and ways of life will be the hardest.

I am of a precisely contrary opinion in this respect. I see that 45 years of communist training is running off the Poles like summer rain. We will of course have yet to bear for many years the burden of the recent past in the shape of a non-rational structure of our economy and our civilizational backwardness that was not created by *real socialism*, but certainly aggravated and consolidated by it. But customs? Mentality? Motivation? Never in Poland did they become really collectivist. The state-monopolistic economy developed, especially from Gierek's time, strictly individual abilities of living by one's wits, circumventing absurd prohibitions and mocking the ideological bombast. It was no *homo sovieticus*, but a resourceful and crafty fellow who became the typical product of the epoch of the construction of socialism. This may not be the best basis from which to reconstruct a private economy, but after all capitalism was nowhere, even in puritan states, built by saints.

The rapidity with which Poles are learning the rules of the market game and the political game of democracy might be used as an argument supporting the thesis of the plasticity of human nature. Nevertheless, this process of learning and adapting oneself to the new situation is not uniform. It is of course slower in those regions which have so far felt the big transformation mainly as a degradation of their social environment and a decline in their standard of living. The fall of big state industrial plants and mines, technically obsolete and unable to cope with the requirements of the competitive market, soaring unemployment in the industrial regions of Łódź, Wałbrzych or Starachowice, all this gives rise to a despair and fury that can yet find an outlet in a dreadful explosion. But paradoxically, it is also a sign of the new capitalist epoch with its sharp social stratification and uneven development of regions.

From the perspective of four years of democracy the communist era appears like a serious infection which emaciated the patient's organism but which need not be remembered any more in the period of convalescence. Even the strong ex-communist party, now rebaptized 'socialde-mocratic', does not seem to look back with nostalgia, but rather strives to adapt its political orientation to conform to its new name.

But the economic and civilizational distance dividing Central European countries from even the poorest members of the European Union is still very real. This however, from the Polish point of view, is an old problem caused by a long historical process. It is this backwardness, no less than an imperative to defend national culture and identity from the partitioning and occupying powers, that assigned to the Polish intelligentsia its prominent social role. The intelligentsia was, obviously, the social group which always managed to be in contact with European cul-

ture, but which also suffered most from the complex of civilizational periphery and tried various devices to achieve psychological compensation.

This aspect of the situation is not only still topical, but even more painful than ever, since the present ease of travelling, trade and migration of ideas allows the *demonstration effect* to exert an extremely strong impact upon Polish minds, thus draining the country of its most creative and best educated element. It is a common belief among the Polish youth that only in the West can one have a chance to attain decent living and working conditions. And so every now and again new hosts of educated specialists in various areas set off to enlarge this mass of Poles who can be met at almost every university, clinic and enterprise from the River Oder to Australia. It can be added incidentally that while emigration of talents and diplomas from the poor to the wealthy countries is not a peculiarly Polish phenomenon, it has in Poland nonetheless already lasted, with short breaks, for two centuries and its damaging effects for the country's development are hard to assess.

The intelligentsia remaining in the country lives under a permanent strain caused by this civilizational gap that never disappears from Polish consciousness, whether the response to its existence is a program of Po-and's fast assimilation to and fusion with the West, or — on the contrary — a cultivation of our own distinct spiritual character and a feeling of the moral superiority of the native realm.

Thus, I cannot agree with those authors who with a barely disguised *Schadenfreude* maintain that the intelligentsia "has been lost in the chaos of liberty" and so after the fall of tyranny has no role to play any more, apart from decent work in the professions. I strongly believe that just the opposite is true.

First of all, the intelligentsia has supplied the state ranks with fresh qualified staff members. It can be said, for instance, and without great exaggeration, that a large part of the Polish diplomatic corps has recently been composed of professors of history who were as a rule sent to the posts in the countries whose languages, history and culture they know better than anybody else.

Is this but a feature of the initial period of democracy after which a professionalization of the *political class* and its separation from intellectuals will become unavoidable? I would not be so sure. Should this, however, be the case, the intelligentsia, impoverished and frustrated as it may well be, will probably not lose its *raison d'être* even then: because its *raison d'être* is the ideological controversy which will neither die

out soon, nor be reduced to the format of practical policy.

A conflict of values, or of irreconcilable reasons and rights, is the proper element of the intelligentsia. Its extra-professional task is to define the country's external and internal situation, outline its future prospects and propose solutions to its dramatic problems: these solutions may well be mutually contradictory and satisfy nobody, but without them we would be blundering in the dark. And again, the intelligentsia's function will be that of maintaining the political equilibrium: since whatever criticism can be leveled against this class which I have no intention of idealizing, it nonetheless feels an aversion to radical catchwords and extreme movements. This was not always so, I concede. Yet it seems that lessons of history are not forgotten and the educated classes are apparently less than ever inclined to save humankind, or their own race, once and for all. They already know how utopias end.

And there is also a lot to think about outside the political and economic sphere. With the advent of post-modernism the standards of quality and the hierarchy of values in literature, in the arts, in the humanities, were no longer fixed and generally accepted. Is there really no counterweight to the shallowness of uniform popular culture? Is there no defence of the endangered pluralism of cultural idioms? Is literature doomed to become nothing but a form of entertainment? Such questions are impatiently awaiting a serious debate, especially in a country where everything is fluid and unstable, but where this very instability can yet be our chance.

All those who are willing to undertake these tasks have at their disposal means of communication and influence which East and Central European intellectuals could not even dream of for most of this century: a free and diverse press, radio, television. Under these circumstances a permanently low collective self-esteem and feeling of impotence seems really groundless, and to invite the intelligentsia to kindly *leave the stage* is but a ritual fulfilment of the very Polish scenario *du éternel retour*.

Bibliographical notes

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My extremely concise survey of the recent dispute on the social and moral condition of the Polish intelligentsia and its possible future role, or its approaching end, is based on dozens of articles and interviews that have appeared from 1991-1993, in the two Warsaw newspapers *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Życie Warszawy*, as well as in the weekly journals *Polityka* (Warsaw) and *Tygodnik Powszechny* (Cracow). Among the authors whose views have been given special attention are: Ewa Bieńkowska, Teresa Bogucka, Maria Janion, Leszek Kołakowski, Łukasz Kądziera, Ryszard Legutko, Tomasz Łubieński, Adam Michnik, Aleksander Smolar, Jerzy Sosnowski, Hanna Suchocka, Andrzej Szczypiorski, Józef Tischner, Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz, Jerzy Wertenstein-Żuławski. Relevant essays by, or interviews with, some foreign writers Uke Vaclav Havel, György Konrad and Vladimir Tismaneanu have also been taken into account.

Warsaw

