

Liberal Traditions in Polish Political Thought

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In the beginning of the nineteenth century the terms "liberal" and "liberalism" were already well-known and popular in Eastern Europe. It is easy to comprehend that, with the nation divided by invading neighbors and without its own state, catchwords like "freedom," "tolerance," and "independence" had to be especially attractive. Everybody who wrote or spoke about progress, abolishment of absolutism, or self-determination of nations was recognized as liberal. The process of crystallization of the liberal framework was far from complete. In the first ranks of liberals were people of various ideas, for example the Russian Tsar Alexander the First, and Prince Ksawery Drucki Lubecki, who was very servile to Moscow but nevertheless supported the development of big industry in Poland. Prince Adam Czartoryski was the Tsar's friend, but a great Polish patriot as well and later the leader of the conservative camp of exiles in France. Liberalism was a term which everyone seemed to understand yet no one tried to explain in a more precise way.

It was in the circle of Polish economists that the notion of liberalism was first interpreted distinctly. In the first twenty years of the nineteenth century they presented the ideological skeleton of liberalism which made possible a more definite portrayal of the entire phenomenon. In the works of D. Krysiński, W. Surowiecki, or S. Węgrzecki we can find the main attributes of "the liberal spirit": tolerance, an attachment to progress, a prospective attitude, freedom of action, particularly liberties in competition and a free hand in economic endeavors, and an inclination to a mechanical conception of society. In the situation of the Polish nation, the idea of tolerance, explicated later as the principle of religious freedom, took first rank. Catholicism, though suppressed in the Russian and Prussian parts of the divided country, was the religion of the great majority of Poles; it unified the nation and was worthy of protection. On the other hand, Catholicism supported a conservative idea of society and demanded priority for its church. These claims led to collisions with non-Catholic minorities and was unfavorable to

the interests of the nation. The idea of tolerance or a full freedom of faith was of the highest importance in these conditions. The liberals who supported this principle emphasized that in Poland, where even in the times of the Inquisition religious executions were unknown, the idea of tolerance should be treated as an absolute principle.

The liberals tried to argue that Poles should not only discuss the past of their powerful country, but ought to look into the future and seek ways of progressive change. The development of industry was considered the only way to enrichment and internal reinforcement of the nation. The radicals showed that economic development was conditioned by economic liberties, while the moderates agreed with free competition inside the Polish provinces but emphasized that free trade and open gates for foreign capital might hamper the development of local initiatives. Limited *laissez faire* seemed to be the best policy in these conditions.

The liberals decidedly rejected the conservative idea of "the society as organism," giving priority to the mechanical conception. W. Surowiecki wrote that "a society is like a machine, in which the turn of one wheel spreading on the other caused the common motion. One person moves another with his action, one class gives a motion to all surrounding classes."¹ It was a distinctly different view from the organic idea of society, but different also from the typical individualistic conceptions of "society as aggregate." This atomistic vision, popular in the circle of English Benthamites was too abstract for Polish liberals. They realized that in the situation of a nation fighting for independence, the slogans of "solidarity" could not be rejected. The "atomistic society" was not able to win in the political struggle.

At the end of 1815, Tsar Alexander confirmed the constitution of the Kingdom of Poland, which was part of the Great Russian Empire. The constitution was recognized as the most liberal in the world. Poles particularly expected that the organization of the legislature, consisting of two chambers, would enable them to participate in political power. The Tsar, being the Polish King, had the initiative and the right of veto on the decisions of the legislature. Both chambers could discuss governmental drafts and the reports on the situation of the country, while the lower chamber could require explanations from the ministers and lay before the Senate reports on the officials' activity. The publicity for the debates was to open the possibility of public control of the observance of law.

In a few years, however, vague expressions in the constitution opened the gates for circumventing its principles and for struggles between the representatives and the government. This quickened the process of forming a parliamentary opposition, which decided to defend the principle of rigorous observance of the liberties and rights warranted by the constitution. They were called "The Benjamites," from the name of the famous French liberal, Benjamin Constant, whose political doctrines they fully approved.²

The liberalism of the Benjamites was confined to the political sphere, in which they upheld the ideas of representative government. As wealthy country gentlemen they were not interested in economic and social change. In their naivety they assumed that Russia was a legally governed country, and the Tsar a genuine liberal and defender of the law. They did not comprehend that the Polish situation was quite different from that in France and that therefore the realization of Constant's ideas was very difficult. Liberalism had no support among the large bourgeoisie, and the absolutism of the Tsar's administration, masked by liberal labels, could not be compared with the governmental power of post-revolutionary France. The doctrinaire attempts of Benjamites were suppressed quickly, and absolutism was openly declared as the ruling system in all Polish provinces.

The experiences of the Polish legislative opposition proved that liberalism not only had formidable enemies in this part of Europe but also lacked sufficient groundwork for its development. Even the emphatic adherents of this current of ideas did not see any chance for creating an independent liberal political movement. In this situation, popular liberal slogans began to penetrate neighboring ideological trends, as was typical under Polish conditions. Middle-of-the-road organizations and coteries with a conservative-liberal profile appeared. Conservatism, which formed its shape in the fire of dispute with reaction on the right-wing and socialism on the left, was inclined to compromise terms with liberalism. "True" conservatism, as opposed to reaction, acted on the assumptions of Edmund Burke's evolutionary conservatism. It borrowed the concept of progress, accepting, but never initiating, unavoidable changes. Progress, understood as a gradual improvement of the conditions of life, was incorporated in an organismic theory of society; and the life of this social organism remained unthreatened only by slowly emerging and unplanned regulations. This kind of progress, rather than posing a threat to conservatism, was used to illustrate "conservative wisdom." This concept of progress—"the only admissible" one to conservatives—became not a "*sensu stricto*" assumption, but a reflection of typical conservative compromise. It should not be equated with opportunism, but rather with the search for the Aristotelian "golden mean."

The conservative compromise expressed itself typically in a complex of landowners' propositions on how to solve the problem of peasants' reform, this being the crucial problem of the time. The reform was seriously discussed and, in spite of the elaborate phraseology used in the discussion, the main impulses were landowners' fears of an agrarian revolution and of socialism. This may easily be found in the writings of the leading conservative theoreticians.

Conservative anti-revolutionism acted finally upon the conception of an organism-like society and was on this point quite contrary to liberal assumptions. According to this idea, an individual was confronted with a

set of conditions determined by the forces laying the foundations for historical development. These forces can be neither fully understood nor changed. In the organism-like society with a hierarchical structure, individuals are so interdependent on each other that they must keep to the principle of mutual solidarity. At the same time the social order and stability of hierarchy can be maintained only by a strong power. For society to be a continuing formation comprising entire generations, it must be governed by a strong power and, through that power, be protected against fall and decay.

These principles were morally sanctioned by the Catholic Church. There were mutual dependencies between the Church and conservatism. The landowners were convinced of the Catholic character and traditions of the nation and only the most progressive admitted the justness of the tolerance principle. This attitude was deepened by the fact that the Church supported conservative ideology with its own authority, providing moral sanction to its dogmas, and was concerned that divine justice be carried out through the conservative program. Thus the Church, which was naturally conservative, was provided care and protection by the conservatives. In contrast with previously mentioned liberal assumptions, only the Catholic Church participated in steering the society.

Thus, while some liberal tendencies existed in Polish conservatism, they should not be exaggerated. Conservatism remained the ideology of the rich country gentlemen who accepted only a compromise with the bourgeoisie, the weaker partner in this union. Such was the position of liberalism, transmitting only its ideas, and not pretending to an independent political position.

The special feature of the common policy appeared when conservatives presented their program of so-called "organic work," as opposed to the socialists' revolutionary program. "Organic work" was presented as the only means by which the longed-for restoration of the state could be attained. It was a program of progressive internal change, but it was criticized by the left-wing currents for its dependence on the support, or at least on the toleration, of the states occupying Poland. Politically, the program led to the acceptance of the tri-loyalism principle, that is, loyalty to the three occupying powers: Prussia, Russia, and Austria-Hungary.

The forces of "organic work" had never been homogeneous, but it was at the beginning of the 1870's that a distinct split became evident. The new movement, attracting the young Warsaw intellectuals, separated emphatically from all conservative concepts of "organic work." Developing under the overwhelming influence of contemporary European trends, the new movement was called "Warsaw Positivism." It presented the idea of gradual change improving the well-being of the nation, and rejected conservative opportunism and the preservative idea of social structure. The young positivists' forward-looking attitude was authentic in that they believed that man was able to participate in the process of creating the surrounding

reality and were truly engaged in the struggle for progress.³ The conservatives, being in accord with Burke's principles, agreed "to change, not to lose the chance for preservation." They wanted all along to renovate "the building" so as not to have to construct it from the beginning. The positivists wanted to improve the system not only because of the danger of collapse, but also because they wished to live more and more comfortably. They agreed to conserve "the foundations" in order to modify the front and the structure of "the building."

This view of the best conditions for progress was consistent with the "formulas" of West European liberalism. In accordance with Mill and Spencer, who were quoted most frequently, the best warrant was seen in the best possible protection of freedom. The positivists discussed primarily freedom of scientific research, complete freedom of opinion, and tolerance for all ideas and intellectual movements. They repeated Mill's thesis that human genius was able to breathe only in the atmosphere of freedom.

The influence of the positivist movement was hampered at the end of the century by new currents of political ideas. New players appeared in the arena of political struggles. Nationalists, socialists, and peasant movements were taking the places previously occupied by conservatives and liberals. They presented more popular variants of independence programs, which were important in this time of new struggles for a Polish state, and were at last successful thanks to the events of the first world war.

There was no climate for the development of "the liberal spirit" in the new Poland at the beginning of the interwar period. Prevailing opinion tried to prove that the new and growing state required a strong centralized government. Only Cracow's old conservative center raised once more the liberal banner. It was out of the conservative club of Cracow that a new "neoliberal" economic society appeared. The main founder of this group was A. Krzyzanowski, the famous Polish economist who already at the beginning of the century predicted the serious economic recession of the Western world.⁴ Up to the end of the thirties, the neoliberals tried to fight against protectionism and attempts at State control of industries. They argued that the government could not take an individual's place in his economic endeavors. Everyone had to look to himself for ways to prosperity. The state could only help the able people to achieve success. However, in spite of the intellectual significance of the neoliberal movement, its political role was not very important.

There was also no atmosphere for liberalism in the period after World War II. A current of ideas related to conservatism could not expect support in a socialist country. Even research into these problems encountered some difficulties. The socialist state eagerly covered the costs of and supported studies on leftist currents of ideas, neglecting research into middle-of-the-road and rightist ones. This situation not only caused considerable gaps of knowledge and limited the general view of the whole range of ideological

currents, but also deformed, in a significant manner, knowledge of past and current leftist movements. It was also characteristic that this poor state of knowledge did not conduce to an interest in social affairs, particularly in student circles and in academia. When, in the fifties, studies on Polish liberalism were taken up, it was clear that they could not succeed without grinding out what liberalism really was. An infiltration of liberal ideas into conservative ideology led to a very broad interpretation of the controversial term. All the representatives of rightist and middle-of-the-road movements, from reactionaries up to adherents of *laissez faire*, were called "liberals." All discussions of liberalism in this situation were necessarily dull and led to no conclusions.

It should be emphasized that this tendency was strengthened by attempts to apply Lenin's definition of liberalism to the Polish variant of this phenomenon. According to this idea, liberalism was the attitude towards the political and social problems of the nation assumed within the limits of the compromise between the landed aristocracy and bourgeoisie. This definition might be correct where two equal partners—the great bourgeoisie and the landowners—are fighting for their position. Such a compromise could create conditions not only for the spread of liberal phraseology but also for a fully developed liberal ideology. The situation in Poland, however, was quite different. The bourgeoisie was not an equal partner; its position was weaker. Weaker also, therefore, was the chance for liberalism to become the official ideology of the "alliance" mentioned above. Conservatism remained the predominant movement and trend of ideas in nineteenth-century Poland. Although liberalism had its own representatives and infiltrated neighboring currents, it had never gained primacy in Poland.

In the 1970's the situation changed a little and the author of this article, along with other scholars, tried again to prove that liberalism was not as "guilty" as reaction or other variants of traditionalism, and that it deserved particular attention. At the same time, the first marks of growing interest in rightist currents of ideas in general could be noticed, and this stimulated the intention to "revisit" liberalism once more. After the publication of L. Kasprzyk's 1961 book, *The Social and Political Ideas of H. Spencer*, many dissertations and doctoral theses devoted to the representatives of French and English liberalism were prepared in Cracow's university circle. Some of them, such as the book of the author of this article—co-authored with J. Woleński—on Mill, and that of B. Sobolewska on the ideas of French aristocratic liberals in the nineteenth century, were published at the end of the seventies and beginning of the eighties.⁵ The Institute of Political Science in the Jagiellonian University in Cracow also prepared the first attempt in Poland to synthesize liberal ideas.⁶ W. Sadurski engaged in research on neoliberalism. In the late seventies he published many articles and in 1980 a monograph devoted to this theme.

Utilizing an opportunity, the present author presented once more the

problems of Polish liberals of the previous century. In 1976 he published his *Conservatism of the Kingdom of Poland*, and four years later *Essays on the Galician Political Movement and Ideas: 1848–1892*, both devoted to the relations between Polish liberals and conservatives in the nineteenth century. His other book, *Polish Political Thought in the XIXth Century*, showing these problems on a broader background of other political trends, is in press at this time.

However, many other studies undertaken in the last few years will not be completed in the near future. Shortages of paper and the financial troubles of Polish editors have already hampered the preparation and publication of these studies. A paradoxical situation has appeared. Our research problem, neglected and incorrectly presented in the post-war period, met at last the great interest of readers and scientific centers. There also appeared groups of scholars well prepared to undertake profound studies. The necessary relations with foreign centers were established and many dissertations awaiting print were prepared. The lack of publishing facilities, however, delays the presentation of these studies to the Polish reader. The gap in research, therefore, may not be filled, and adequate information on the history and current filiations of one of the most significant trends of thought may be lacking in Polish political culture for some time to come.

NOTES

1. W. Surowiecki, *O upadku przemysłu i miast w Polsce* (Warsaw, 1810), p. 31.
2. They were also called "The Kaliszans" from the name of the town where the main leaders of the group—Wincenty and Bonawentura Niemojowski—resided.
3. The main representatives of this current were: A. Świętochowski, B. Prus, P. Chmielowski, J. Ochorowicz, K. Kraushar, W. Smoleński. They were centered around the *Przegląd Tygodniowy* (The Weekly Review) and other positivistic journals like: *Niwa*, *Ateneum*, *Nowiny*, and *Prawda*.
4. The other particularly active members of the society were: F. Zweig, A. Heydel, T. Lulek, S. Wyrobisz, and S. Schmidt.
5. R. Ludwikowski and J. Woleński, *J. S. Mill* (Warsaw, 1979); B. Sobolewska, *Doktryna polityczna liberalizmu arystokratycznego we Francji w latach 1814–1848* (Cracow, 1977). In 1978 Maria Zmierzak published her *Ideologia liberalna w II cesarstwie francuskim*, (Poznań).
6. M. Sobolewski and B. Sobolewska, *Liberalism* (Warsaw, 1978).