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The Philosophy of the Polish Enlightenment and Its Opponents: The Origins of the Modern Polish Mind

Usually the period of the Enlightenment in Poland is considered to have coincided with the reign of King Stanisław August Poniatowski, the last king of Poland (1764–95). In fact, however, some important antecedents of Polish Enlightenment philosophy had emerged before 1764, and some of its mature products appeared after the third partition of Poland, or even after 1810.¹ One might say that the Enlightenment in Poland was the work of the generation born about 1750.

In Polish historiography the Enlightenment has been termed an “intellectual upheaval”; its essence consisted in a rapid change in style of thinking and in world outlook. The upheaval took place in the last twenty years of independence when the Enlightenment reached its height and gained a predominant position in national culture. In this period the modern Polish mind was born. The Enlightenment gave rise to a flowering of Polish national culture that took place after the state disappeared.

The Enlightenment in Poland brought a general secularization of the philosophical image of man, of society, and of the world as a whole, thus creating the theoretical foundations for a modern attitude of rational criticism toward all elements of culture. The self-satisfied particularism of the Polish gentry of the first half of the century gave way to a universal vision of the world of man which became the theoretical basis for critical reflection on social and political institutions. This movement of intellectual emancipation embraced all possible spheres of action and reflection: science and politics, metaphysics and history, religion and art, economy and way of life.

The development of the Enlightenment in Poland was determined by a series of dramatic events and processes taking place in Poland's last decades of independence. From the time of the first partition in 1772 the menace of

1. Hugo Kołłątaj's *Porządek fizyczno-moralny* (*The Physical and Moral Order*) was published in 1810, and his *Rozbiór krytyczny zasad historii o początkach rodu ludzkiego* (*The Critical Analysis of the Principles of History*), written at the turn of the century, appeared in 1842. Jędrzej Śniadecki's *Teoria jestestw organicznych* (*The Theory of Organic Beings*) appeared in 1804–11, and Staszic did not publish his *Ród ludzki* (*Human Race*) until 1819–20.

Poland's being wiped from the map of Europe once and for all became one of the important factors forming the attitudes of representatives of the Polish Enlightenment. Under the pressure of this menace the thought of the Enlightenment was infiltrated by the ideas of nation and historicity, which specifically modified the character of this formation in Poland.

The beginnings of the Polish Enlightenment were reflected in Warsaw periodicals of various kinds—moralizing, literary, and learned ones. At first the most important one was the *Monitor*, very much like the English *Spectator*, appearing in the years 1763–85. That periodical appeared under the auspices of the king himself and was originally edited by Ignacy Krasicki and Franciszek Bohomolec.² The successful endeavor to re-establish a connection between Polish culture and the contemporary intellectual life of Europe—France in particular—was one of the achievements of these periodicals. Thanks to them the names of Galileo, Descartes, and Newton came into cultural circulation once again, and Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot became well known to the readers.

The *Monitor* in particular exerted a strong influence on the public opinion of the day. Its moralizing and didactic writers popularized a new model of man and citizen: he was to be an individual well brought up rather than religious, well educated and enlightened, well qualified to perform the duties of a citizen of gentle birth. Those new ideals were aimed against Sarmatianism, including its cult of the “golden liberty” of the gentry, and against the sort of superficial though spectacular devotion and attachment to the church fostered by Jesuit influence on educational patterns during the Counter Reformation.

The spontaneous development of periodicals in the second half of the century was a *signum temporis*: it was the first time that they became on such a large scale a means of disseminating information, exchanging opinions, and spreading propaganda; most of their writers wished to inform, teach, enlighten, and morally improve the society as quickly as possible.

It is thus quite understandable that the Commission of National Education was in the seventies one of the chief manifestations of the spirit of Enlightenment. The commission was set up in 1773 in connection with the dissolution of the Jesuit Order, which had played until then a great part in the educational system in Poland. The purpose of the commission was to plan and organize a uniform state educational system—from primary schools to universities. It was an institutional embodiment of the faith of the Enlightenment in the transformatory power of education and science. Education was

2. Of the numerous periodicals that appeared later, one should mention *Zabawy Przyjemne i Pożyteczne* (*Amusements Enjoyable and Useful*) published in 1770–77. The periodicals originally assumed a moderately critical attitude toward ideas of the French Enlightenment. This was particularly visible in the publications directed against deism and natural religion.

supposed to change men in the spirit of the new ideals and thus lead to the salvation of the state, whose very existence was threatened. Reforms carried out by the commission became the object of argument between traditionalists and supporters of the Enlightenment; they awakened fierce resistance from part of the clergy headed by the papal nuncio in Warsaw and the conservative part of the gentry attached to the tradition of Jesuit colleges.

Despite opposition, the commission's intentions were partly implemented and played an important part in the popularization of the Enlightenment. The reformist activity in the commission was a sort of school of the Enlightenment for a number of the most outstanding publicists, scientists, and thinkers of the day, to mention only Hugo Kołłątaj, Jan Śniadecki, and F. S. Jezierski. In sharp conflict with Sarmatian attitudes, they waged the first open battle for the victory of new ideas, thus developing the assumptions of the new methodology of science and pedagogy, and the theoretical foundations of secular morality and of the new philosophical anthropology.

In the late seventies there began a period in which the struggle for social and political reform became the central preoccupation of the Enlightenment thinkers. Such an evolution of interests resulted from the disillusionment of some representatives of the Enlightenment with the hitherto assumed omnipotence of education. They came to the conclusion that only a profound change of the political system and social relations would bring about the improvement and further development of the state and nation.

The new period opened with a four-year struggle for a codification of laws (1776–80),³ which was unsuccessful. However, the efforts of the reformers were renewed in the Four-Year Diet (1788–92), whose main achievement was the Third of May Constitution (1791). In the course of the deliberations of the Diet the Patriotic Party was set up. Its dynamic and radical nucleus was the so-called Kołłątaj Forge—a group of writers, politicians, and publicists, in which the ideology of Polish Jacobinism, exceeding the ideological bounds marked by the program of the Patriotic Party, came into being. The emergence of this group was conditioned not merely by the internal situation—the growing spirit of revolt among the peasantry, the development of the aspirations of burghers, the victory of the Targowica Confederation, and the defeat of the Kościuszko uprising in 1794—but also by the strong echoes of the French Revolution that kept resounding in Poland.⁴

The consciousness of participation in the most profound changes in the

3. I mean the movement connected with the so-called code of A. Zamoyski.

4. These influences are to be seen in the writings of F. S. Jezierski as early as the period of the Four-Year Diet. It was not until after the victory of the Targowica Confederation that the patriotic emigration, when preparing for armed uprising, established direct relations with the Gironde and later with the Jacobin dictatorship and the post-Thermidorian governments.

contemporary world, so vivid among the Polish Jacobins—changes which were thought to be the beginning of a new epoch in the history of mankind—exerted a strong influence on the directions and themes of philosophical reflection. That consciousness was also expressed in the opinions of the conservatives for whom, for instance, the Kościuszko uprising was but a “French piece of work,” whereas the diplomacy of the invading states justified the partitions of Poland, in the eyes of European public opinion, as a prevention against the wide-spreading “plague of Jacobinism and revolution.” The drama of the disintegration of the state was thus fused, in the Polish consciousness, with the fight for freedom of the peoples of Europe against despotism and feudal privileges. Such were the real foundations of the integration of national and universal values in the philosophical culture of the Polish Enlightenment.

At the end of the century the men of the Polish Enlightenment, without a state of their own, faced a Europe which was undergoing “political earthquakes” (Kołątaj) originating from France. It was for them the time of a great confrontation of their philosophy with history, which revealed a defectiveness and helplessness of the philosophy of the Enlightenment with regard to the new historical situation. The periods of the Duchy of Warsaw after 1807 and of the Congress Kingdom of Poland after 1815 were ones of the continuation of the Enlightenment and, at the same time, of its crisis and hopeless attempts to defend it.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, Polish philosophical culture was still dominated by scholasticism. It was cultivated in religious colleges, mostly Jesuit ones, and universities; outside the schools there was practically no philosophy at all. The philosophy syllabus included logic, metaphysics, and ethics as well as mathematics and physics. Scholasticism as formed in the Jesuit colleges of the second half of the seventeenth century became a thoroughly anachronistic and sterile philosophy based on queer and purely verbal speculations. Its chief intention was to defend Catholic orthodoxy against true or imaginary heretics.

In such an anachronistic shape scholasticism had become, in the eighteenth century, an obstacle to the development of science and philosophy. The beginnings of the philosophy of the Enlightenment in Poland were bound up with the fight against the predominant position of scholasticism. It is a fact of particular importance for the understanding of the Polish philosophy of the age, because its attitude of opposition toward scholasticism—an enemy which had disappeared from the European philosophical scene as early as the seventeenth century—was until the end of the century one of the factors influencing its course.

The opposition to scholasticism originally assumed the form of the so-called *philosophia recentiorum*. Its first center was the school known as Collegium Nobilium founded by Stanisław Konarski (1740). Antoni Wiśniewski

was, along with the founder of the Collegium, a well-known spokesman of the *philosophia recentiorum*. His lectures and publications—for example, *Propositiones philosophicae ex physica recentiorum* (1746)—became the target of a loud campaign of polemics led by the defenders of the scholastic tradition. The *philosophia recentiorum* in the version spread by Konarski and Wiśniewski, particularly in the Piarist schools, did not go any further than endeavors to add more modern works and authors, such as Bacon, Descartes, Leibniz, and Locke, to traditional philosophical education. A certain popularity was gained in that period by the German philosophical school of Christian Wolff; at the same time the Piarist circles undertook a timid attempt to popularize the works by French enlightened authors (for example, Wiśniewski published in 1753 a Polish translation of Montesquieu's *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*). Konarski's example was followed by the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Kraków, which constituted a department of the *philosophia recentiorum* in 1760.

Along with the reception of the newer philosophy, the beginnings of the Enlightenment brought an effort to establish connections with the tradition of Renaissance culture and philosophy in Poland. It was a conscious struggle to bridge the gap over the cultural depression marked by a hundred years of the Counter Reformation, between the reviving national culture of the eighteenth century and its golden age at the time of the Renaissance. That is how, after decades of oblivion, the works of Copernicus, Kochanowski, and Morzewski were, so to speak, recovered by Polish culture. The feeling of a bond with the Polish Renaissance became a strong component of the Polish Enlightenment. Popularization of Copernican astronomy and the fight led by the representatives of the Polish Enlightenment for an official and common recognition of the theory of one of the greatest products of Kraków University was a symbol of this bond.

When inaugurating the Department of Astronomy at the University of Kraków, Śniadecki delivered a lecture under the title "Praise of Copernicus." The lecture, expanded and published as a book, translated into several European languages, contributed considerably to the removal of Copernicus's work from the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (1816). Copernicus was, for the representatives of the Polish Enlightenment, a national model of the scientist free from all conformity to external authority; he inspired them with arguments against "servility of the spirit unworthy of a philosopher" (Kołłataj). The reform of the University of Kraków carried out by Kołłataj under the auspices of the Commission of National Education in the years 1777–82 brought about a final overthrow of scholasticism and created conditions for a development of sciences which were soon to produce fruitful results. Scholasticism gave way to mathematics, empirically oriented natural sciences, and philosophical anthropology based on a secular concept of the law of nature.

Thus, paradoxically, the “age of philosophy” culminated in the educational reform that removed chairs of philosophy from universities (1782).

In the field of political philosophy the opponents of the Enlightenment rallied to the banner of Sarmatianism, which was also reflected in the Bar Confederation and later on, in an apparent paradox, in the Targowica Confederation. Sarmatianism was the way of life and, in a way, an ideology of the gentry. This ideology defended the traditional institutions of the democracy of the gentry, claiming them to be exceptional, specific, and superior to all foreign forms of political life. The philosophy of the Enlightenment rejected this ideology; its political reflection was based upon the rational law of nature, identical for all nations (Leszczyński, Konarski, Wybicki, Jezierski, Kołłątaj, Staszic). And yet Sarmatianism specifically modified Polish political and social philosophy and introduced into it the universal concept of national independence, an understanding of specific national peculiarities, and an attachment to the values of republicanism.

In the literature on the Polish Enlightenment there is a widespread opinion that Sarmatianism was the main opponent of the Enlightenment, while the latter was supposed to be a sort of “Westernization” of Polish culture. The opinion that Sarmatianism was nothing but a polar opposite of the Enlightenment became popular as early as the eighteenth century, particularly in the years 1765–75, and it was, to a large extent, owing to the writings of Voltaire and those of the Encyclopedists, let alone of the Western press, inspired and paid by Catherine II. Those writings were directed against the Bar Confederation, to which Voltaire himself devoted as many as two separate publications: the first under the pseudonym of J. Bourdillon, *Essai historique et critique sur les dissensions des églises en Pologne* (Basel, 1767), and the other under that of Le Major Kaiserling au Service du Roi de Prusse, *Discours aux confédérés de Kaminiak* (Amsterdam, 1768). In these publications the Bar Confederation was portrayed exclusively as a rebellion of the Sarmatian conservatives and religious fanatics against the best intentions of the enlightened monarchs from Petersburg and Berlin. It is well known that some of the representatives of the French Enlightenment did not share that view; for example, Rousseau, Mably, and some physiocrats had much sympathy with the tendencies that had been expressed by the Bar Confederation. Nevertheless, the simplified view of the “patriarch of Ferney” became the prevailing one on Polish ideological and philosophical conflicts in the period of the Enlightenment.⁵

In fact, the conflicts were much more complicated. For Sarmatianism, though it was an ideology of resistance against the Enlightenment, became at

5. Among French writers perhaps Jean Paul Marat alone might be believed to associate a condemnation of the Bar Confederation with a complete refusal of all justifications to its enlightened oppressors, his opinion being expressed in an otherwise poor roman du coeur entitled *Les Aventures du Comte Potowski*, written in 1771 in London.

the same time one of the sources of the Enlightenment philosophy. It is true that Sarmatianism was an ideology of the defense of the particularism of the Polish gentry; it is equally true that this ideology supported the dubious political tradition of the status quo. And yet, thanks in part to Sarmatianism, the ideas of republicanism and democracy kept attacking the consciousness of the Enlightenment thinkers in Poland. To this situation one may refer the words in which the French scholar, Jean Fabre, describes the French reception of Stanisław Leszczyński's *Free Voice of the Citizen* (*Głos wolny wolność ubezpieczający*, 1749). Having found that the reception of the French translation of this work in the circles connected with the *Encyclopédie* was cool, Fabre concludes:

d'autres seront mieux préparés à donner un sens aux mots fétiches de la szlachta: liberté, égalité, fraternité, aux vieux mots de république et de patrie, à vivifier, à partir de l'exemple polonais, cette nostalgie de civisme que leur éducation classique, Tite-Live et Plutarque, avaient déposée en leur esprit.

La Voix libre du citoyen trouve ainsi sa place aux origines d'une révolution qui tournera, vers la fin du siècle, tout autrement qu'on n'aurait pu l'imaginer aux beaux-jours de Voltaire et de l'*Encyclopédie*.⁶

The language of Sarmatian republicanism, insistently present in the Polish culture of the eighteenth century, was practically a ready-made form of expression for the modern republican and democratic ideas which were gaining such popularity by then both in Europe and America. In that respect Sarmatianism played a part similar to that of the French Parliaments about which Professor Palmer writes: "as early as the 1760's [they] put a good deal of incipient revolutionary language into wide circulation—*citoyen, loi, patrie, constitution, nation, droit de la nation, and cri de la nation*."⁷ In such a situation it is understandable that in the political philosophy of the Polish Enlightenment there was no room for an ideology of enlightened absolutism. Even if the leading representatives of the age, such as Kołłątaj and Staszic, sought salvation of the Commonwealth in the abolition of the magnates' anarchy and in reinforcement of the central power of the state, it was a republic of which the king was to remain head, and republicanism remained—explicitly or implicitly—the central idea of their political doctrines.

But not only did Sarmatianism inspire the political philosophy of the Enlightenment. Sarmatian particularism and its cult of a specific individuality and uniqueness of the nation stimulated questions and investigations concerning the genesis and the character of the qualitative differentiation of the civilizations of mankind. Interest in the nation and history was also stimulated, as already noted, by intense awareness of the menace to the independent

6. Jean Fabre, *Lumières et romantisme* (Paris, 1963), p. 140.

7. R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1959), 1:449.

existence of Poland. It was in such an intellectual atmosphere that a new feeling of history was shaped, thanks to which the Polish Enlightenment thinking tended to transcend the horizons of the law of nature and historicism as understood in that age.

As early as the eighties, the interests of many a Polish writer of the time were directed on the one hand toward the prehistory of the nation and the origins of the Slavic peoples, and on the other toward the most recent history of Poland and Europe. These directions were not accidental: the "beginnings" were considered to be important in explaining how the nation and its specific institutions had come into being; the present, in providing a clue to the future of the nation.

Among the most outstanding writers who carried out research in this field was Jan Potocki (1761–1815), known for his fantastic novel, *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* (*Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie*), still widely read. After he had published a number of contributions to Sarmatian and Slavic antiquities he came out with his monumental *Histoire primitive des peuples de la Russie* (1802). It was characteristic of Potocki's historical method to combine an all-round erudition, both philological and historical, with empirical research into cultures then considered "primitive." From 1784 to 1806 he made journeys to Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, the Caucasus, and Mongolia, which he described in published reports. For four of those years, 1788–91, he was also a member of the Four-Year Diet. Significant for his method of describing cultures remote in time and space was the attempt he made to understand them from inside, in their qualitative and unrepeatable uniqueness; he made a conscious endeavor to approach them from the perspective of their own ideas and values, without any Sarmatian or Europeocentric prejudices. It seems that this kind of approach was, to a certain extent, a paradoxical product of Sarmatianism. True, Sarmatianism contained a certain xenophobia, and foreign cultures were for it almost exclusively a reservoir of illustrations and examples of deviations from—Sarmatian, of course—"regularity" and "naturality." And yet such attitudes, inspired by the cult of Sarmatian uniqueness, gradually produced a sensitivity to all uniqueness and specificity of culture. In such a way Sarmatianism played an important part in the development of historical thinking in the Polish philosophical culture of the Enlightenment.

Thus the conflict between Sarmatianism and the Enlightenment in the Polish philosophy of the eighteenth century was not one of absolute opposition. Neither of these currents appeared in an isolated and pure form, for the ideas of each penetrated and modified the other. Such confrontation and mutual interpretation was occurring not only in the national culture as a whole, but also—more or less clearly—in the writings of many a philosopher. Such an opposition imparted an inner dynamism to the Polish mind of the age and lent color to it.

The Polish philosophy of the Enlightenment could accept for its motto

those well-known words of Alexander Pope, "The proper study of mankind is man." Kołłątaj wrote that the main object of philosophy is man, his vocation, and life in a "free, safe, and just society."

The first step taken by the anthropology of the Enlightenment in Poland consisted in emancipating the study of man from the tutelage of theology and from the religious world outlook specifically colored by the Sarmatian version of Catholicism. To man as a "privileged child of Providence"—more specifically one who was Polish and Catholic—was opposed a secular perspective of the "human race" as part of the natural order of the universe. In such a perspective man was understood to be a natural being in the universe, one responsible for himself, both exclusively and finally.

In this connection one may notice a break with the opinions of the Sarmatian religious tradition. Sarmatian and Catholic particularism gave way to the vision of man subject to the uniform law of nature on a world scale, irrespective of social condition, nationality, and race. Kołłątaj wrote: "Philosophers! You who persecute fanaticism, you who write against multiple austerities inflicted out of false or transitory ardor, why do you write so little against the legal slavery of men who are your equals? What is the subject of any country? It makes no difference, slave, black or white, he is a man, in no way unlike us. In Europe and in any part of the world, he is our equal, a citizen of the earth" (*Odezwa do Deputacji Konstytucyjnej*, 1790).

The unity of the "physical and moral order" constituted the central concept of this vision of man. This concept may be traced back to French physiocracy which was one of the main sources of the theoretical inspiration of quite a number of Polish thinkers of the time. Hugo Kołłątaj (1750–1812) was one of the most outstanding representatives of this kind of philosophical anthropology; his treatise, *The Physical and Moral Order* (1810), gave the most extensive exposition of this doctrine. Along with the "physical and moral order" there was, however, another pillar on which Kołłątaj's philosophy of man rested—historicism. When approaching man, in the categories of the universal, unhistorical law of nature, Kołłątaj sought at the same time an answer to the question of how history was possible, history the reality of which is confirmed by a differentiation of civilizations of the human race, and, what is more, by the contemporary changes of the character and essence of the human world, as they are being intensively experienced.

The question whether history is possible and what its real substance is was taken up by Kołłątaj in the treatise *The Critical Analysis of the Principles of History*. The work undertakes an interesting attempt at a coherent solution of the antinomy of the law of nature and historicism. The conclusions of this solution could be schematically presented in the following manner: according to necessary natural law, our planet experiences periodic changes of situation of seas and lands; out of necessity the changes assumed the form of the violent

submergence of existing lands and the emergence of new ones in the place of former seas and oceans. As a result of the last catastrophe of that kind the whole previously existing civilization was wiped out. The few that survived the “deluge” had to start everything all over again. The experienced disaster was, for those rescued, so extraordinary and horrifying that a theocratic political system alone could enable them to return to life in community and to rebuild civilization. Theocratic rules—originally useful, exercised by patriarchs remembering the pre-“deluge” civilization based on the “physical and moral order”—were soon abused as instruments of particular interests of the ruling groups. Such was the beginning of the history of mankind which is known. Before the “deluge” there was a harmonious civilization of “physical and moral order” but we have not and shall never have any empirical knowledge about it. The only accessible reality of man is the history of man after the “deluge,” hence, history is, practically speaking, the only reality of man. That is why man, within the bounds accessible to our knowledge, must be considered as a historical entity, as a being whose nature is actually changed and created in history. Hence, the fundamental postulate of the study of man is historical investigation.

Kołątaj believed that in such a way he preserved the internal coherence of his philosophy of man, for he found a transition from an unchangeable and necessary human nature to the changeability of the human world. In fact, however, it can easily be noticed that this doctrine of anthropology, spread between the poles of natural order and history, was inclined toward historicism and prepared some methodological and theoretical premises for romantic historiography. The concept of the “physical and moral order” was pushed away into an unempirical and practically chimerical time before the “deluge,” and the only reality remained a continuing self-formation of mankind in the empirical time of history. This endeavor reflected the intensive experience of the concrete historical time, which by the end of the century brought changes that forced their way into philosophical consciousness (the fall of Poland, the rise of the United States, the French Revolution).

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw a crisis of the philosophy of the Polish Enlightenment and its last theoretical battle which ended in defeat. At about that time there appeared in Polish philosophy the so-called Polish Kantianism (J. K. Szaniawski, Feliks Jaroński, and others) which became the theoretical starting point for the beginning of romanticism in Polish culture. The then living representatives of the philosophy of the Enlightenment (Hugo Kołątaj, Stanisław Staszic, Jan Śniadecki, and others) unanimously rejected Polish Kantianism, considering it to be a return to scholasticism and idealism. The paradox is, however, that despite Polish Kantians and their opponents, the development of Polish philosophical culture in the nineteenth century was an unconscious continuation of the philosophy of the Enlightenment from which it had arisen.