ON WRITING INTELLECTUAL HISTORY: LESZEK KOŁAKOWSKI AND THE WARSAW SCHOOL OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

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My work in writing intellectual history forms a small part of a certain intellectual process which took place in Poland over the first two post-war decades, a process which culminated in the emergence of the so-called 'Warsaw school of the history of ideas'.[1] The most outstanding representative of this school, Leszek Kołakowski, 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)[2] – 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)[3] 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 Kołakowski 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

[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 and published in *Critical Philosophy* 2 (1985).

[2] See Leszek Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność. Wolność i antynomie wolności* w *filozofii Spinozy*, (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1958); Leszek Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i wieź kościelna. Studia nad chrześcijaństwem bezwyznaniowym siedemnastego* wieku, (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1965).

[3] See Bronisław Baczko, *Rousseau. Einsamkeit und Gemeinschaft*, (Wien: Europa-Verlag, 1970); Bronisław Baczko, *Rousseau. Solitude et communaute*, (Paris-La Haye: Mouton, 1974); Bronisław Baczko, *Lumieres del 'utopie*, (Paris: Payot, 1978); Bronisław Baczko, *Utopia. Immagionazione sociale e rappresentazioni utopiche nell 'eta dell'illuminismo*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1979).

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 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 a lack of space.

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 Kołakowski 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. Kołakowski 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 Kołakowski 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 the ideas of the past through 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 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 Kołakowski 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 tsardom 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'.[4]

The man who deeply influenced Kołakowski and Baczko (my own case was rather different in this respect) was the Hegelian philosopher Tadeusz Kronski.[5] He also profoundly influenced Czeslaw Milosz, the 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.[6] 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 a historical context and by showing different aspects of its historical function. Their revisionism started from an attempted 'vindication of human subjectivity',[7] as opposed to the vast impersonal forces of history. Kołakowski discussed these problems in his long essay 'Responsibility and History'; my own contribution was the book entitled *Personality and History (*1959)[8] in which I dealt, among other things, with Belinsky's 'reconciliation with reality'. (The parallel between

4 See Leszek Kołakowski, 'Responsibility and History', in Leszek Kołakowski, *Toward a Marxist Humanism*, trans. Jane Zielonko, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 120.

5 See his posthumously published *Rozważania wokoł Hegla*, (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1960). The appendix to this book contains memoirs of Kronski by Kołakowski and Baczko.

6 See Czesław Milosz, *Native Realm. A Search For Self-Definition*, (New York: Garden City, 1968), 273 and 276-277.

7 Cf. Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism,* vol. 3, trans. Paul Stephen Falla (Oxford UP, 1981), 461-462.

8 Andrzej Walicki, *Osobowość a historia. Studia z dziejów literatury i myśli rosyjskiej*, (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1959). The book includes studies written in 1956-1957.

Belinsky's Hegelianism and the kind of historicism which haunted the Marxist intellectuals in Poland seemed to me obvious).[9]

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 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'.[10] 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.

[9] It was obvious also to Milosz, who was struck by this parallel while reading my first article on Belinsky (published in 1954).

[10] See Bronisław Baczko, 'Cryptoproblems and Historicism', in Bronisław Baczko, *Człowiek i światopoglądy*, (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1965), 411-412.

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 Poland than in other socialist countries. The historical relativism and sophisticated scepticism, characteristic of my older colleagues Kołakowski 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 communist 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 nineteen 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/Westernizer controversy (written in 1962-3, published in 1964).[11] This was followed by Baczko's monograph on Rousseau (1964) and in 1965 Kołakowski's *magnum opus* on non-denominational Christianity and Szacki's concise study of French counter-revolutionary thinkers.[12] All these were widely reviewed and the term the 'Warsaw school of the history of ideas' was coined.

Before moving on to a brief presentation of some of the 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';[13] the conception of

[11] Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy. History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought*, trans. Hilda Andrews- Rusiecka, (Oxford UP, 1975).

[12] Jerzy Szacki, *Kontrrewolucyjne paradoksy. Wizje świata francuskich antagonistów Wielkiej Rewolucji 1789-1815*, (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1965).

[13] Cf. Arthur Oncken Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being. A Study in the History of an Idea,* (Harvard UP, 1948), 21.

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 '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'.[14] 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 *Anuales* 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

14 Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy,* 9-10.

15 Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 21-22.

16 Roger Chartier, 'Intellectual History or Sociocultural History?', in Dominick La Capra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History. Reappraisals and New* Perspectives, (Cornell UP, 1982), 42.

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 article on cryptoproblems. Cryptoproblems, he argued, are not pseudoproblems; they are rather a mask for real problems, a mask which we must remove in order to understand the real issues involved. Such cryptoproblems are peculiarly characteristic of philosophy because philosophical thought has evolved special techniques for presenting real problems, i.e., the problems of man's historical and social existence, disguised as purely theoretical speculations about the nature of nonhuman and non-historical objective being.[18]

My own position on this question was determined by two factors: first, my image of the history of philosophy was shaped by Władysław Tatarkiewicz, an eminent Polish philosopher of the older generation whom the Marxist revisionists strongly disliked; second, the subject of my studies was nineteenth-century Russian thought, which, while rich in ideas, was unsystematic, poorly structured, at times, as in the 1840s, full of philosophical enthusiasm, at others indifferent to philosophical problems, or even violently anti-philosophical. As a disciple of Tatarkiewicz I was reluctant to give up the idea that the history of philosophy might legitimately be seen as concerned with purely theoretical problems. As a student of Russian thought, on the other hand, I was aware both of its relative unimportance to philosophical theory and of its great importance for and contemporary relevance to the history of thought conceived of as a record of different expressions of the vicissitudes and predicaments of man's historical fate. The method of translating theoretical problems of philosophy into the language suitable for expressing moral problems' seemed quite natural in the Russian case; it was indeed the only method which could reveal the true calibre of nineteenth-century Russian thinkers and the value-relevance of nineteenth-century Russian problems. For example, it was obvious to me that, when Alexander Herzen wrote of the possibility and desirability of reconciling materialism (and empiricism) with idealism, he meant in fact the need to defend the human personality against both the danger of disintegration and atomization, inherent, as he saw it, in materialism, and the danger of subordinating the individual self to a hypostatized totality, as it occurred, in his view, with Hegelian idealism.[19] I made many such discoveries, quite independently of Kołakowski's and Baczko's views on the subject of the history of thought. But I concluded from this that what I was studying was in fact something quite different from philosophy, something which could underlie philosophical systems but which could also be expressed in non-philosophical language. Like Kołakowski, I was impressed by

[17] Kołakowski, *Jednostka i nieskończoność*, 5.

[18] Baczko, *Człowiek i światopoglądy*, 373-376.

[19] See Walicki, *Slavophile Controversy*, 388-393 and Andrzej Walicki, *History of Russian Thought From the Enlightenment to Marxism*, trans. Hilda Andrews-Rusiecka, (Stanford UP, 1979), 131-134.

Lucien Goldmann's conception of 'visions of the world'[20] but I preferred to use a more common and more modest term: world-view, *Weltanschauung*. In the Introduction to my *Slavophile Controversy* I stressed that world-views were for me the basic units of study, i.e., both the subjects and the tools of research, developing this idea as follows: 'The use of this term (world-view) implies that it is a comprehensive vision of the world, a meaningful structure and system of cognitive, ethical, and aesthetic values that is internally coherent within its own chosen framework. *Weltanschauung* conceived thus differs both from the looser meaning of the word and from philosophical theory which is always [I would now say 'as a rule'] an expression and conceptualization of a particular view of the world, but never identical with it. The same *Weltanschauung* can be expressed in many philosophical theories, while a single philosophical theory can combine elements from different views of the world, since theoretical coherence does not necessarily imply a coherence of the underlying system of values. A particular *Weltanschauung* may, moreover, be expressed in theological, economic, or historical writings, or its principal vehicle may be works of art. Since *Weltanschauungen* are essentially atheoretical, they need not be expressed through concepts, but find a variety of expressions, thus enabling the investigator to use the tool of comparative analysis and to search for the 'common denominator' in many formally different and apparently heterogeneous cultural products (In this context I referred to Karl Mannheim's study 'On the Interpretation of Weltanschauung'.[21]) This history of Weltanschauungen – today a discipline in *statu nascendi* in which many Marxist and non-Marxist scholars are showing growing interest – would put an end to the largely conventional and old-fashioned 'division of labour' in scholarship and would encourage the reintegration of artificially isolated branches of the humanities'.[22]

In studying the Slavophile world-view I made use of some concepts elaborated by historical sociology and the sociology of knowledge, especially by Ferdinand Tonnies, Max Weber and Karl Mannheim. Thus, for instance, I tried to show that the Slavophile antithesis of Russia and Europe corresponds in almost every detail to the contrast between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft,* as elaborated by Tonnies, and that the Slavophile critique of Western rationalism is explicable in the light of Weber's sociology, as a reaction to the process of rationalization – a process which both the Slavophiles and Weber conceived of as peculiar to the Occident. I also used Mannheim's concepts of conservative thought and conservative utopia, presenting Slavophilism as a specifically Russian variant of a pan-European style of thought, that is, as a Russian variety of conservative romanticism – a collective *Weltanschauung* which emerged in response to the rational-individualist

[20] Cf. Lucien Goldmann, *Le Dieu cache*. *Etude surla vision tragique dans les Pensees de Pascal et dans le theatre* de *Racine,* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955). I quote from this book (and from other works by Goldmann) in the introduction to my book on Russian Slavophilism (*Slavophile Controversy,* 2-3).

[21] In Karl Mannheim*, Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge,* (Oxford UP, 1952).

[22] Walicki, *Slavophile Controversy*, 2.

philosophy of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution in England. I was impressed by the fact that Tonnies's and Weber's concepts proved useful in explaining not only the Slavophiles' social ideology but also their philosophical and theological conceptions. For this I did not refer to the Marxist view of the relationship between the base and the superstructure, but insisted only that 'there is a correlation between structures of thought and imagination on the one hand, and the social structures – and the types of human relationships determined by them on the other'.[23] In accordance with a general tendency of the Warsaw school I saw this correlation as resulting from the inescapable 'humanism' of our knowledge. We are imprisoned, as it were, in the historical world of human praxis, unable to transcend ourselves, to attain to a disinterested, supra-human pure theory. This, I argued, 'gives rise to a certain hypothesis which results indirectly from the basic thesis of historical materialism. This hypothesis, which might be called anthropocentric, implies that at the core of every view of the world lies a specific philosophy of man and society'.[24] Thus historical materialism was interpreted not as a 'truly objective, scientific theory' but rather, as self-awareness of the epistemological *impossibility* of creating such a theory.

To study the history of thought as the history of world-views presupposed a totalizing approach, a search for an inner coherence and structural unity, which was very different from Lovejoy's programme of isolating a certain 'unit-idea' and tracing it through all the provinces of history.[25] I must admit, too, that we were not familiar with, even altogether ignorant of, Lovejoy's works. I can imagine that, had his views been discussed at Baczko's seminar on historicism, he would have been accused of an atomistic approach, of a programmatic refusal to see ideas as parts of larger, historically shaped and culture-bound meaningful structures.

We were keenly aware that structures of thought were not facts, i.e., something immediately and unreflectively recognizable as self-evident and simply given. Structures, we thought, were both discovered by the researcher and created by him, because an important part of his task lay in the effort to introduce a certain order into the chaotic mass of empirical data and thus make them intelligible. In describing this creative effort I used the term 'structuralization', by which I meant the construction of certain ideal models and their use to explain certain patterns of thought or clusters of ideas. A concrete example will make it more clear. In studying different forms of romantic opposition to the process of rationalization I found it helpful to apply to them Max Weber's categories and to create two ideal models of romantic anti-rationalism: the romanticism of tradition and the romanticism of charisma. The first explained many features in Russian Slavophile ideology, while the second led to the discovery of a well-structured pattern of thought in the

[23] Walicki, *Slavophile Controversy*, 5.

[24] Walicki, *Slavophile Controversy*, 5.

[25] Cf. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, 15.

messianic ideas of Adam Mickiewicz, the great Polish poet who set his hopes on divinely inspired heroes.[26] In both cases the result brought more coherence and intelligibility to a body of texts which otherwise could have been dismissed as chaotic, lacking the rigour of disciplined, systematic thought and therefore unworthy of serious attention. Indeed, I could not claim that the Slavophiles and Mickiewicz were rigorous, disciplined thinkers; I *could,* however, claim to have shown that there was an inner coherence in their ideas, that their thought closely approximated the two ideal models of romantic reaction to rationalism and that their ideas therefore deserved serious treatment in a comparative study of different forms of European romanticism.

Leszek Kołakowski rarely appeared at Baczko's seminar and we knew little about the further development of his methodological views. He set these out, however, in his book on non-denominational Christianity and I was happy to find myself in almost complete agreement with him. It can truly be said that he formulated the position of the Warsaw school in the most vigorous way, combining intellectual sophistication with extreme clarity of expression and unrestrained, sometimes deliberately provocative, boldness of thought.

The historiography of ideas and historiography in general, Kołakowski argues, must beware of the danger of historical over-exactitude – the danger of describing with equal care all aspects of the subject of study, all facts relevant to it, and thus eliminating all ideal types, all conceptual constructions.[27] Such a striving for fidelity to facts makes history unintelligible, since historical phenomena become intelligible 'only on the basis of various deformations whose number, within the bounds of acceptable standards of scholarship, is practically limitless'.[28] Rousseau proposed to start by forgetting all about facts, Nietzsche said that all facts were stupid, and both were perfectly right. To strive for an all-round view, taking account of all aspects of a given phenomenon, is a vain aim, since it is simply not realizable, but it is very effective in eliminating from the picture all contrasts of colour or shade, thus making it totally incomprehensible. Kołakowski concluded: 'We propose therefore a method which may be called *expressionist historiography;* a method which organizes the empirical elements of the historical world by subordinating them to a central idea which manifests itself in a system of ideal constructions and through them confers meaning on each particular element (of the emerging picture)'.[29]

[26] See Andrzej Walicki 'Prelekcje paryskie Mickiewicza a slowianofilstwo rosyjskie', in *Filozofia a mesjanizm. Studia z dziejów filozofii i myśli spoleczno-religijnej romantyzmu polskiego,* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1970), 240-293. For a shortened English version see Andrzej Walicki, 'The Paris Lectures of Mickiewicz and Russian Slavophilism', *Slavonic and East European Review,* 46/106 (1968). See also Andzej Walicki, *Philosophy and Romantic Nationalism: The Case of Poland,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 269-276.

[27] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna*, 251.

[28] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna*, 253.

[29] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna*, 253.

I found in these words a somewhat heightened expression of my own methodological credo. Though inclined to think that the number of legitimate ideal constructions is not unlimited, I entirely agreed with Kołakowski's views that only ideal constructions can confer meaning on facts and that the historiography of ideas should be expressionist, making ample use of colour contrasts. The same view was implicit, I think, in Szacki's book on the French counterrevolutionary thinkers whereas Baczko's position in the question was rather different. He did not try to present Rousseau's world-view as a coherent whole, but stressed instead its ambiguities, obscurities, dialectical contradictions and the tensions between its different constituent parts which, taken together, had given rise to a multiplicity of completely different but equally legitimate interpretations of Rousseau's legacy.[30] It seemed to us that the hidden message here was sufficiently clear: by exposing the ambiguities, contradictions and vague nuances in the legacy of the spiritual Father of the French Revolution, Baczko implied that the same was true of Marx, that there were in fact many different Marxisms, all equally legitimate derivations from the original sources, and that all talk of 'the only correct interpretation of Marx' should be seen as the arrogant usurpation of simpletons.

Another important feature of Kołakowski's methodology was his combination of historical hermeneutics with phenomenological insight into the essence of the irreducible 'primary phenomena'. He stressed that in order to approach a given subject historically we must first know what it is in itself, what is its nature, its essence, as revealed by eidetic insight.[31] Sometimes he even described his method as a sort of phenomenological hermeneutics. From the phenomenological point of view, he argued, each system of ideas represents, as it were, three different subjects of study: the unity of the personality of its author, the unity of his ideas as a historical phenomenon and the unity of his thought as teleological structure.[32] In the first case we must concentrate on the author's intentionality, in the second we should be concerned with the proper location of his views in the historical process, and in the third we should deal with the autonomous logic of his thinking. The aim of the historical study of ideas is to achieve an understanding of the *human meaning* of a given work, a meaning that can be found even in texts which from a scientific or logical point of view seem completely nonsensical. To achieve such an understanding the historian must fulfil two requirements: he must be able so to identify himself with the thinkers of the past as to understand them from within, to see their perspective as open, while at the same time viewing them from a historical distance, that is perceiving their perspective as historically closed.[33] There is no adequate criterion of how much empathy and how much distance should be involved; the deepening of our knowledge depends

[30] See Baczko, *Rousseau,* 9-10.

[31] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna,* 448.

[32] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna,* 550-551.

[33] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna,* 554.

rather on a constant confrontation between understanding cultural products from within and understanding them from without. We must reject the illusion that meaningful structures may be understood by reducing them to their historical determinants; we must also be aware that the meaning of a given fact is not its immanent quality, but depends on the place of this fact in a structure, and that structures of meaning, reconstructed by us, are always open, since they may always be changed by the addition of new facts, produced by further historical development.[34] Because of this our knowledge of the past always depends, and must depend, on the age in which we live, on our place in it and on the peculiarities of our cognitive perspective.

If we ask how this methodology has been applied by Kołakowski himself in his *magnum opus,* we must recognize that he has applied it very consistently and with most impressive results. Kołakowski agrees with Rudolf Otto, Max Scheler and other phenomenologists that religious faith, the experience of the sacred, belongs to the category of irreducible primary phenomena, but insists that its different concrete manifestations could and should be explained historically.[35] He defines the nature of his subject as nondenominational religious faith, i.e., one characterized by resistance to the organized, institutionally controlled forms of religious life.[36] He singles out as a peculiarly important form of this type of religiosity, mysticism, a special kind of religious subjectivism that is subjective and anti-individualist at the same time. It is subjective in concentrating on the inner religious experience, which leads, explicitly or implicitly, to a denial of the need for organized Christianity; it is anti-individualist in its aim of direct union with the Absolute Being, the annihilation of the finite individual self.[37] Of course, for Kołakowski, all these concepts (non-denominational religious faith, religious subjectivism, mysticism, etc.) are ideal types rather than logical notions, ideal constructions in the light of which he presents the historical vicissitudes of different forms of non-demoninational Christianity in seventeenth-century Europe. In his book he covers the different conflicts between religious consciousness and ecclesiastical bonds, the attempts to abolish any organized mediation between the individual soul and God, the struggle against religious subjectivism within the existing Churches and, also, the wise policy of the Catholic counter-reformation – a policy which tried, quite successfully, to domesticate mysticism, to find a place for it within the Church and thus give it an outlet while, at the same time, keeping it under control.

Kołakowski could not be accused of using history as cover for the discussion of contemporary problems, but it was obvious to me that he saw the conflicts between non-denominational Christians and the Churches as examples of a broader phenomenon,

[34] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna*, 39 and 560-561.
[35] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna*, 35-36.
[36] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna*, 16-22.
[37] Kołakowski, *Świadomość religijna i więź kościelna*, 25-27 and 267.

characteristic also of the secular forms of faith. It was easy to draw a parallel between non-denominational Christians, denying the need for ecclesiastical bonds and Marxist revisionists, trying to liberate themselves from dogmatism and the organizational discipline of the party. It was equally easy to see the contrast between the wisdom of the Catholic Church, which had managed to assimilate certain tendencies of various centrifugal movements (among them not only mysticism, but also secularism and some elements of the reformation), and the stupidity of the communist parties which proved unable to assimilate, even partially, the ideas of the Marxist revisionists and so to make themselves more compatible with the demands of modernity.

In 1968, as the result of the so-called March events in Poland,[38] Kołakowski and Baczko (together with five other university professors) were expelled from their chairs at the University of Warsaw. They were allowed to continue their work at the Academy of Sciences but a campaign of slander was launched against them in the press, against which they were unable to defend themselves. Publication of their works was forbidden and even footnote references to their publications by other scholars were only allowed in exceptional cases. Small wonder, therefore, that they decided to leave Poland. Unlike the victims of the so-called 'anti-Zionist campaign', they did not apply for permanent emigration, but it was clear, none the less, that they were leaving Poland for many years, if not for good.

The campaign of slander unleashed in 1968 was directed against revisionists within the party and against people of Jewish origin, who were globally accused of divided loyalties. I was not attacked since I was neither a party-member nor a Jew. Moreover, the hard-liners within the party had already passed through the process of de-ideologization and, paradoxically, often tried to compromise their opponents by reminding them of their Stalinist past, although this involved direct appeals to the anti-communist feelings of the population. They also tried to make use of nationalist phraseology and to claim that ideological control over those fields of research which were not *directly* political would be relaxed rather than strengthened. Their flirtation with Polish nationalism resulted, among other things, in special support for the study of Polish culture, including Polish philosophy, and it happened that the history of Polish thought was just then becoming the main focus of my research. This explains why the department of the history of modern philosophy at the Institute of Philosophy of the Polish Academy of Sciences was renamed the department of the history of modern Polish philosophy, and why I became its head.

In the given situation it was morally difficult to accept this position, but I agreed to do so. I had the moral support of my colleagues (including, of course, Baczko and Kołakowski) and I hoped to defend the tradition of independent scholarship, especially

[38] This refers to student demonstrations at the University of Warsaw on 8 March 1968, quelled by the police disguised as 'angry workers'. This event marked the beginning of a violent power struggle within the party which resulted in a series of anti-Semitic purges.

that of the Warsaw school. It turned out, however, that a simple continuation of my work was not enough. I had to ask myself new questions and, also, answer questions which began to be asked both by my colleagues from the Institute and by representatives of the younger generation of Polish philosophers and historians of ideas.

First, I had to answer the objection to the legitimacy of the history of Polish philosophy as a separate subject. It was argued that the history of philosophy, as well as the history of ideas broadly conceived, should not be divided along national lines. In fact I had always studied the history of ideas within a national framework, as the history of Russian or Polish thought, while at the same time never ceasing to stress the necessity for setting Russian or Polish ideas in their pan-European context. Nevertheless I felt obliged to legitimize the subject of my studies anew and did so by distinguishing between the history of ideas and intellectual history, two terms often used interchangeably. Unlike the general history of ideas, I reasoned, intellectual history is, as a rule, a history of concrete communities; universal intellectual history is hardly imaginable, while intellectual history with qualifications, such as *European* intellectual history, *Russian* intellectual history or the intellectual history of *medieval Christendom,* is perfectly natural. Intellectual history deals with the intellectual life of a certain collective subject, with its spiritual biography, as it were. Therefore to study it in a national framework is just as legitimate as in the case of political history. The history of philosophy might be studied as the history of purely theoretical problems, in which case to divide it on national lines would indeed be illegitimate. But it might also be studied as part of the intellectual history of a given nation, as an expression of its culture, its aspirations, as part of its historically-shaped and history-bound collective mind. In the case of Poland and Russia such an approach seemed to me especially fruitful.

Second, the disappearance of Baczko and Kołakowski from the Polish intellectual scene strengthened the opposition to the Warsaw school within Polish philosophical circles. There arose a strong tendency to vindicate the traditional view of the history of philosophy as an autonomous discipline, distinct from the general history of ideas, interested in the theoretical content of philosophical problems and not their 'humanistic coefficient' (to use Znaniecki's term).[39] I did not resist this tendency, which seemed to me perfectly legitimate; sometimes, however, I was forced to defend the legitimacy of my own approach. More disturbing to me was the growing strength of an anti-historicist and anti-humanist tendency within the history of ideas broadly conceived, especially the so-called 'strategy of dehumanization', initiated by Foucault in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*.[40] While not denying the possible advantages of this strategy, I was, and still am, convinced that it cannot be applied to the study of the intellectual history of particular nations. If

[39] Cf. Lewis A. Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 526.

[40] Cf. Mark Poster, 'The Future According to Foucault: *The Archeology of Knowledge* and Intellectual History', in *Modern European Intellectual History*.

intellectual history is studied in a national framework, it must be searching for continuities rather than discontinuities; it must try to make the national heritage live, not treat it as dead archaeology; it must strive for empathetic understanding of the national legacy, and treat intellectual history as the history of the ideas of thinking subjects, and not 'discourse treated as an objective phenomenon'.[41] After all, my main aim in writing the intellectual history of Russia was to make it easier to understand the Russian mind, and my study of Polish intellectual history sprang from a growing need to understand our roots, to know both the strengths and weaknesses of our intellectual traditions. I was so firmly convinced of this that any discussion with the advocates of the dehumanizing approach seemed to me completely pointless. Instead, I wrote my *History of Russian Philosophy From the Enlightenment to Marxism*[42] as a concrete example of how philosophical and other ideas might be studied as part of the intellectual history of a particular country.

Most disturbing, however, was the criticism of the legacy of the Warsaw school which began to be heard in the 1970s, at a time of almost complete de-ideologization of the party and of growing awareness of the need for new ideas to change the world, not merely to understand it. The Warsaw school was increasingly associated with historical relativism, a good tool for destroying Marxist dogmas but at the same time destroying the grounds of belief in objective truth and in absolute values. This criticism, which I heard from many quarters, was summed up in an article which appeared in 1979 in the underground journal *Res publica*. According to its author, the members of the Warsaw school struggled against Stalinist Marxism but failed to elaborate an alternative philosophy: 'They came to the conclusion that every idea leads to its own negation, to the betrayal of values which gave birth to it, and this awareness made them fearful of a clear self-determination, incapable of defining their own position in an unambiguous way'.[43]

In other words, it was claimed that the desire to destroy the grounds of dogmatic beliefs led the members of the Warsaw school to a sort of historical scepticism. There was a grain of truth in this, and the reasons for it were readily explicable. In the middle of the nineteen fifties the future members of the Warsaw school were settling their accounts with Stalinism, trying to undermine its arrogant self-assurance, to liberate thought from what pretended to be the only correct way of thinking. Historical relativism and historical hermeneutics were liberating forces for us: relativism was a weapon against dogmatism and hermeneutics a means of vindicating the richness of our historical heritage and thereby enriching ourselves. We were indeed striving to free the humanities of all dogma,

[41] Cf. Poster, 'The Future According to Foucault', 146.

[42] The English edition is entitled A *History of Russian Thought From the Enlightenment to Marxism* (see footnote 19). It was written in 1967-1968 but not published till 1973 (in Polish).

[43] 'W pół drogi. Warszawska Szkoła Historyków Idei', *Respublica,* 1 (1979), 68. Two years later this article was published in the Catholic monthly *Więź* 277 (1981), and its author, Paweł Śpiewak, revealed his name.

but our historical relativism was of a peculiar quality, stemming not from indifference towards values but, rather, from a commitment to certain values, such as freedom of thought, ideological pluralism, self-awareness. We were keenly sensitive to the fact that to absolutize certain truths or values leads to the destruction of all other values.[44] It could truly be said that our intentions were as far from 'relativisitic nihilism' as possible: we concentrated on relativizing truths and values, not in order to destroy them, but to justify the *pluralism* of truths and values and to protect it against the arrogant claims of narrow-minded dogmatists.

Younger people, whose generational experiences were the events of 1968 and 1970, were in a completely different situation. They faced an oppressive system whose representatives were cynical rather than dogmatic; a system which to some extent tolerated intellectual freedom while at the same time very effectively blocking all attempts at political or economic reform. In such conditions relativism became suspect as a possible ally of cynical opportunism, while the need for absolute truths and absolute values was becoming more and more apparent. What was at stake was not so much freedom from ideological oppression (although some forms of such oppression were still with us) but rather freedom to express social aspirations in action. But, in order to act one needs to have faith, since only faith can move mountains.

This need for a new inspiring faith found expression in widespread dissatisfaction with Kołakowski's book The *Presence of Myth,*[45] written in 1966 but published in Paris in 1972. Unlike myself, Kołakowski could not be accused of a lack of direct political commitment, neither could he be reproached with an inability to understand the need for faith. On the contrary, he defended the view that faith is necessary to human life, that even a belief in objective truth presupposes an act of faith. But he refused to concede that belief in objective truth can be rationally grounded. Such a belief was for him a sort of myth;[46] he stressed the necessity of myths, warning that their disappearance would lead to universal nihilism, but he did not renounce his view that nobody can 'know the Truth', that such claims are equally illegitimate in religion and in science. He proposed that our commitment to change the world should be based upon an arbitrary, irrational act of faith, an act made in full consciousness of its arbitrariness and irrationality.

Such a solution, presupposing a constant tension between the search for the absolute and the consciousness of relativity, was not easy to accept. Younger people

[44] The danger of 'absolutization' was analysed in Kroński's excellent study of Nazism. See Kroński, *Rozważania wokół Hegla*, 301-313.

[45] Leszek Kołakowski, *The Presence of Myth*, trans. Adam Czerniawski, (University of Chicago Press, 1989). The title of this book was meant to indicate the omnipresence of myths in human life.

[46] In his Tanner lecture, delivered in Canberra in July-1982, Kołakowski used the term 'epistemological utopia', defining it as 'a hope for a perfect certainty or for unshakeable criteria of validity in cognitive processes'. See Leszek Kołakowski, 'The Death of Utopia Reconsidered', *ANU Reporter,* 13 (1982), 3.

were dissatisfied with the thesis that their convictions, the foundation of their opposition to the existing regime, were based upon just another myth and could not invoke the authority of objective truth. Hence they accused Kołakowski of an inability to overcome relativism, and of abandoning the search for truth, thereby betraying the true calling of philosophy.[47] Some pointed to the connection between Kołakowski's philosophy and the methodological orientation of the Warsaw school.

There is no doubt that such a connection really exists. The methodology of the Warsaw school explains much in the philosophy of its most outstanding representative, and vice versa. This does not, however, mean that Kołakowski's philosophy can simply be treated as a further elaboration of the philosophical assumptions inherent in the methodological views which he shared with other members of the school. Despite all criticisms, his philosophy is still at the centre of Polish intellectual life while the Warsaw school no longer exists within the historiography of ideas.

To conclude. I have tried to explain the emergence and disappearance of the Warsaw school by applying to it its own methods of historical analysis and empathetic understanding. The school emerged in response to Stalinist dogmatism in philosophy and disintegrated as a result of the de-ideologization of the ruling party on the one hand, and the growing need for alternative ideologies on the other. Its contributions to the history of ideas have successfully withstood the test of time, but the extremes of its methodological views were too closely linked to a specific ideological situation to be defended in changed conditions. Here I refer primarily to our stubborn refusal to make unambiguous value-judgements, deriving from our determination to avoid all ahistorical dogmas. The spirit of the Warsaw school is still alive in some Polish works in the history of ideas, but, as a rule, in combination with the polemical method (to use John Passmore's term)[48] i.e., with purely philosophical criticism of the ideas under scrutiny. This important change seems quite natural; I was, possibly, the most reluctant to accept it, but in my recent works I, too, am moving in this direction.

[47] A good summary of this argument is to be found in Marcin Król, 'Leszek Kołakowski i zmierzch filozofii racjoialistycznej', *Zeszyty Literackie* 3 (1983).

[48] See John Passmore, 'The Idea of a History of Philosophy', in *History and Theory* 4, Beiheft 5: *The Historiography of the History of Philosophy* (1965), 6-13.