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A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL, HISTORIOSOPHICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL DISCOURSE ABOUT THE NATIONAL CHARACTER OF POLES FROM THE TURN OF THE 19TH CENTURY TO THE 20TH CENTURY

The issues of mentality, collective sensitivity, and the features of the national character were fashionable in the literature – mainly historical and political journalism – of contemporary times, including the turn of the 19th century to the 20th century¹. Over time, these problems became also present in the scientific literature regarding sociology, social psychology and political science². However, they have never enjoyed a good reputation in science. These topics have always been controversial, and those who attempted to address them were accused of *intuitionism and psychologism, subjectivism and inconsistency, and sometimes also ahistoricism*³. Sometimes even the use of this concept was *a source of suspicion about evil intentions of using science for specific ideological purposes, tinged with national chauvinism*⁴. In fact – the thesis about the existence of simple psychological differences between people representing particular nations has not been confirmed yet, even though the scientific category which was undermined as non-scientific is still alive in colloquial thinking⁵. Nevertheless,

¹ T. Lepakowski, *Polska – narodziny nowoczesnego narodu 1764–1870 [Poland – the birth of a modern nation 1764–1870]*, Warszawa 1967, p. 509.

² S. Kowalik, *Zmiany charakteru narodowego pod wpływem procesów globalizacji [Changes in the national character under the influence of globalization processes]*, in: *Ludzie przełomu tysiąclecia a cywilizacja przyszłości [People of the turn of millennia and the civilization of the future]*, ed. M. Ziółkowski, Poznań 2001, p. 39.

³ T. Lepakowski, *Polska...*, p. 509.

⁴ S. Kowalik, *Zmiany...*, p. 40.

⁵ J. Wiatr, *Socjologia stosunków politycznych [Sociology of political relations]*, Warszawa 1980; S. Kowalik, *Zmiany...*, p. 40.

the expression used in the title hereof, namely *national character* with a rich tradition in social sciences, was given various interpretations and became a theoretical category useful in understanding and explaining social or psychological processes, e.g. in research on national and ethnic stereotypes⁶.

Among some theoretical and methodological stances known and described in the scientific literature concerning the issue of national character, the first and most adequate genetic description comes from the concepts popular in the 19th century regarding *the spirit of a nation* and *the collective soul*, i.e. the mentality expressed in the literature, art and national philosophy. This approach assumed that *a certain group of people, due to their national origin, tends to have personal forms of behaviour, thinking and perception of reality*⁷. The grounds for these similarities stem from i.a. genetics, historical experience, climate, and geographical and natural living conditions. Another understanding of national character concerns the system of attitudes, values and beliefs shared by the majority of society.

Next to almost all political doctrines, the concept of a *nation* was shaped by the influence of Romanticism which perceived both a man and a nation as *the product of history*⁸. Maurycy Mochnacki, as he stated in *Kronika Emigracji Polskiej (the Chronicle of Polish emigration)* (1837), understood nationality as *a collection of all native and historical, sensual and mental features, distinguishing one nation from another, a set of conditions of national individuality*⁹. Also Józef Piłsudski who often referred in his speeches to his Polish romantic tradition talked about *the soul of a nation, a product of its history*¹⁰. A similar belief was expressed by Kazimierz Tymieniecki, a famous Polish historian. In his work published under the characteristic title *Cechy moralne narodu jako wynik historii (Moral qualities of a nation as a result of its history)* (Poznań 1926), he formulated the thesis that *the history of the Polish nation influenced the creation of moral features that are appropriate for us, and which connect us or make us different from other nations*¹¹.

National character was also perceived in the category of myth, which is one of the most permanent and dynamic elements of social awareness. It was (and still is) present in the literature, art, political thinking, political propaganda and

⁶ Ibid., p. 39, 40.

⁷ A. Jasińska-Kania, *Teoretyczne i metodologiczne problemy badań charakteru narodowego [Theoretical and methodological problems of national character research]*, „Studia Socjologiczne” 1979, No. 1; S. Kowalik, *Zmiany...*, p. 41.

⁸ K. Grzybowski, *Ojczyzna – naród – państwo [Homeland – nation – state]*, Warszawa 1977, p. 91–92.

⁹ Ibid., p. 124–125.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 166.

¹¹ K. Tymieniecki, *Cechy moralne narodu jako wynik historii [Moral qualities of a nation as a result of its history]*, Poznań 1926, p. 5.

social pedagogy¹². Myth is defined as *a collection of images reaching beyond the rational layers of awareness, which form a pattern in which one can sense its archaic elements and the current power of influence which affects the impulses of imagination rather than refers to the premises of rational thinking*¹³. Stanisław Wyspiański was critical with regard to this topic as he wrote that the Polish people considered the turn of the centuries as the myth of the nation and the country which outran all other countries¹⁴.

An important feature of the Polish historiography and historiosophy of the 19th century and the early 20th century was the discussion on the Polish national character. Apart from historians, philosophers, politicians, social activists and publicists of various ideological and political orientation, writers and moralists participated in it as well. The essence thereof focused on the reasons for losing statehood by the Polish nation. In this context it was considered whether the character features of Poles prevented maintaining independence and statehood¹⁵. Different, sometimes even extreme, stances were revealed in this matter. However, a common feature thereof included references to the past, sometimes very distant past, explaining defects with mainly historical habits and conviction that overcoming them is possible. The discussions and their conclusions had mostly didactic values. By indicating negative features of the nation, an attempt was made to explain them and to make society aware of the possibilities of eliminating them. Statements – often emotional – about the national character of Poles were a sign of patriotism of their authors and concern of the nation¹⁶.

Historians from the Cracow school, the authors of *Teka Stańczyka (Stańczyk's Portfolio)*, blamed the Poles alone for losing the statehood of Poland – their mismanagement, myth-generating tendencies, political short-sightedness, selfishness and rowdiness. According to Michał Bobrzyński, Walerian Kalinka and Józef Szujski, those features led to the defeat of Poland¹⁷.

The facts supporting the demoralization of society of the First Polish Republic were perceived and evaluated in a more gentle way by the representatives of the Warsaw School, including i.a. Władysław Smoleński and Tadeusz Korzon. Aleksander Świętochowski, the leader of positivism in Warsaw, who shared similar opinions, in the programs of organic work and the work at grass roots

¹² W. Wrzesiński, *Polska mitologia polityczna XIX i XX wieku [The Polish political mythology of the 19th century and the 20th century]*, in: *Polskie mity polityczne XIX i XX wieku [The Polish political myths of the 19th century and the 20th century]*, Vol. 9, ed. W. Wrzesiński, Wrocław 1994, p. 7.

¹³ M. Janion, *Polski korowód [A Polish procession]*, in: *Mity i stereotypy w dziejach Polski [Myths and stereotypes in the history of Poland]*, ed. J. Tazbir, Warszawa 1991, p. 188; W. Wrzesiński, *Polska...*, p. 8.

¹⁴ P. Augustyniak, *Polacy, obudźcie się. Z Wyspiańskim [Poles, wake up. With Wyspiański]*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, November 25–26, 2017.

¹⁵ J. Ochorowicz, *O polskim charakterze narodowym [On the Polish national character]*, Lublin 1986, p. 28.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 28, 31–32.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 28–29.

developed by his environment, intended to rebuild Polish society in terms of its national character¹⁸.

In contrast, the supporters of the messianic vocation of the Polish nation from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, who referred to the tradition of the Polish Romanticism, such as Stanisław Szczepanowski and Wincenty Lutosławski, declared that *the Polish nation has a set of features that make it aspire to play the leading role in Europe. They claimed that such features as the will to act, heroism, a love of freedom, democracy, tolerance, an advantage of feelings over reason, create a unique and deep internal character of the Poles which is manifested in the spirit of a nation*¹⁹. The spirit was supposed to help Poland regain independence through internal changes of Poles. It was the opinion held by Zygmunt Krasiński earlier in the Romanticism when he claimed that *there is some extraordinary feature in Poland's spirituality, which, if conditions are favorable, will revive not only Poland, but the whole Europe*²⁰.

The works written by Julian Ochorowicz (1850–1917), a leading ideologist of positivism next to A. Świętochowski, a philosopher, a psychologist, a writer and an inventor, were important in the discussion on the national character of Poles conducted at that time²¹. It should be noted that the texts displaying the reflections of J. Ochorowicz on the Polish national character were collected and published – with an excellent introduction presenting the life and work of their author – Leszek Gawor²².

J. Ochorowicz in his work entitled *Pierwiastki charakteru narodowego (The elements of national character)* (Warsaw 1907) considered and compared the history of Central Slav tribes, precursors of i.a. the future Polish nation²³. The main factors shaping character traits of the Slavs were seen in the determinism of the conditions of geographical environment – the influence of the environment on individual and collective human psyche²⁴. This stance was similar to the romantic historiosophy and its belief about *the archetype of the beginning* – the era of an original state of the nation that shaped its national nature²⁵. J. Ochorowicz also believed that the attitude of Poles regarding power stemmed from the pre-slavic times. It was supposed to be the result of the mental remains functioning in the Slavs which had been shaped in the times of *the original Slavdom*²⁶. While looking for the grounds of the weakness of centralized power of the Slavs, he also paid

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

²⁰ M. Król, *Matka Boska bić się za nas nie będzie [The Mother of God will not fight for us]*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, July 22–23, 2017, p. 18.

²¹ J. Ochorowicz, *O polskim...*, p. 5.

²² Ibid., p. 5–33.

²³ Ibid., p. 59–80.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 23–24, 39–45.

²⁵ K. Grzybowski, *Ojczyzna...*, p. 144.

²⁶ J. Ochorowicz, *O polskim...*, p. 49–57.

attention to the fact that the Slavs did not respect law as much as the Germans and Anglo-Saxons.

The reflections of J. Ochorowicz on the Polish individualism which he referred to as *osobnictwo* (*individualism*) were important, even fundamental to the entire collection of considerations²⁷. The author based them on the theses and content of the work by Julian Kaliszewski entitled *Moi kochani rodacy* (*My beloved compatriots*) (Warszawa 1888). Moreover, when referring to the judgments and findings established by Karol Libelt and W. Lutosławski, he stated that Poles had no *drive to unite and to pursue one common goal*²⁸. The Polish *osobnictwo* (*individualism*) and equality understood in a specific manner which, according to J. Ochorowicz, was derived from the Slavic times when in his opinion only paternal or family power was recognized, determined the lack of spiritual communication, which united the nation into one homogenous unity, i.e. a national community²⁹. This highly unfavorable to the Polish statehood state of affairs was to be broadened as a result of a lack of solidarity and social brotherhood of Poles who are able to overcome their passivity manifested on a daily basis and – in exceptional moments and circumstances – demonstrate their ability to perform heroic deeds. At the end of all of those not too optimistic considerations presented above, J. Ochorowicz expressed the hope that he and his Polish contemporaries were assisting *an attempt undertaken instinctively on a large scale by the nation to get one common spirit*³⁰, i.e. to overcome and liberate from the centuries-old *osobnictwo* (*individualism*), and to mature as one whole nation.

In a similar way Stanisław Wyspiański in his work *Wesele* (*The Wedding*) (1901) assessed the state of awareness of the Polish people, in which *the fantasies of being chosen, and unfair persecution cover the truth about Polish inability to act in a constructive and consistent way*³¹.

J. Ochorowicz dedicated a separate text from 1876 to the issue of *recklessness* (*nieopatrność*) as one of the Polish national character flaws. According to the author, a precursor of Polish psychology, this concept includes a lot of other national flaws he had recognized, such as i.a. a lack of regularity and work planning, no saving skills and advantage of imitation over independent entrepreneurship. The essence of his considerations on this subject was expressed in the following, informative statement: *Let us be wise at least after the event; in failures and social failures, let us first seek our own guilt, which is recklessness; let us learn from our own history in its naked truth; let us eradicate the flaws*

²⁷ Ibid., p. 59–80.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 62–63.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 24, 59–80.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 78–79.

³¹ P. Augustyniak, *Polacy...*

*which take away our strength, let us gain virtues, the past of which teaches us, and which reward the future*³².

The book published in the last year of the life of J. Ochorowicz entitled *Psychologia, pedagogika, etyka. Przyczynki do usiłowań naszego odrodzenia narodowego (Psychology, pedagogy, ethics. Contributions to the attempts of our national revival)* (Warszawa, 1917) included a dissertation under an unambiguous title: *Mówienie na wiatr (Speaking idly)*. The text begins with a sentence: *No other country speaks so idly as ours*³³. According to J. Ochorowicz, this character flaw rooted in the human psycho of the Polish people determined the following flaws such as: unreliability, unpunctuality and disrespect for time, a small sense of duty and inaccuracy at work³⁴.

The aim of Julian Ochorowicz, like other Polish intellectuals writing about the national character of Poles, who in particular stressed their character flaws, was not only to name and describe them, and explain their genesis, but primarily, to eradicate them. Presenting those negative features and making people aware of them – as L. Gawor stated in the introduction to the texts by Ochorowicz – were meant *to shake Poles, and put them on the road of virtue*³⁵. J. Ochorowicz called for overcoming them by intensifying the educational actions in society. He called this task a national duty and a condition for Poles to fight for independence. Not limiting only to registering and describing national flaws, J. Ochorowicz formulated theoretical bases that could possibly help to overcome them. His recommendations and practical advice were included in the dissertation of 1873 entitled *O kształtowaniu własnego charakteru (On shaping your own character)*³⁶. The initial thesis of this erudite and very modern substantive dissertation at that time was included in the following statement: *If you want to educate yourself, first of all you must know yourself*³⁷. In his opinion, we should *commence* any necessary reforms regarding upbringing the nation *from ourselves* – each father, each mother and each teacher. That is why, the first task of education included in his pedagogical indications *was to train a moral character, which is demonstrated in three elements: in an aesthetic feeling, in the sense of one's own dignity and in a moral sense*³⁸. In a number of advice on the ways of improving the moral character of human beings, he associated the social dimension of morality with a national issue. He formulated an educational program of work in positivism by pointing the desired values. J. Ochorowicz finished his dissertation in a very significant way – with the statement that *self-improvement*,

³² J. Ochorowicz, *O polskim...*, p. 91–92.

³³ Ibid., p. 97.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 97–123.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 125–166.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 26, 144–165.

*while shaping your own character, is hard and long – but it is our national duty, as: individuals reflect the nation*³⁹.

A feature of the literature analyzed herein was the confrontation of the national character of Poles with other nations and in terms of the works by J. Ochorowicz, with Germans. In turn, Kazimierz Tymieniecki compared the national features of Poles and Russians. All those authors who wrote about this topic, including Tymieniecki, presented a common view about national characters shaped throughout the history. The historian from Poznań quoted previously, as positive features of the Polish people mentioned, i.a. a love of freedom, spontaneous self-organization and self-government, which stemmed from the tradition of local – noble – government⁴⁰. However, while referring to Paris lectures in the Slavic literature of Adam Mickiewicz, he included the poet's quotations about *our national lightness, curiosity, laziness and gluttony*⁴¹, and added *the Polish passion for fun*⁴². However, while concluding his statements, K. Tymieniecki, similarly as earlier J. Ochorowicz, was optimistic and claimed that our nation is *on its way to achieve a more perfect type of a citizen who, attached to freedom, maintains social discipline, and demonstrates the ability to undertake initiative, and has the power to persevere and endure*⁴³.

One more common feature of the literature analyzed herein is the statements regarding the attitude to work and the economic condition of Poles. A lot of weaknesses were noticed in the area of individual and communal life. Władysław Grabski, a leading politician and an economist of the inter-war period, similarly as other intellectuals quoted before, claimed that the deficiencies of Polish economic disposition stemmed from our history. In this context, as significant reasons for the state of affairs he had diagnosed he listed: a number of manifestations of economic weakness, inability to work, idleness and negligence of Polish peasants⁴⁴. In his book *Idea Polski (The idea of Poland)* he wrote: *Poland's biggest field of enlargement will be open when we manage to improve and increase the ability of economic and cultural life of every Pole*⁴⁵. Therefore, W. Grabski as one of the first claimed that the entire process of upbringing and education should aim to prepare society for economic life. He attributed a special role in this matter to the system of education of independent Poland. Schools were to promote economic virtues and to shape among the pupils not only the mentality of a consumer, but also of a manufacturer able *to fight in the economic field*⁴⁶. W. Grabski assigned

³⁹ Ibid., p. 26, 165.

⁴⁰ K. Tymieniecki, *Cechy...*, p. 8–9, 20.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 32–33.

⁴² Ibid., p. 33.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ W. Grabski, *O własnych siłach. Zbiór artykułów na czasie [On their own. A collection of up-to-date articles]*, Warszawa 1926, p. 51–52.

⁴⁵ Idem, *Idea Polski [The idea of Poland]*, Warszawa 1935, p. 179, 180.

⁴⁶ Idem, *O własnych siłach...*, p. 94.

an important role to higher education, which, as he claimed, required reforms in order to adapt to promoting the economic spirit in society and managing economic creativity.

K. Tymieniecki, a professor at Poznań University quoted before, believed that a lack of social discipline and perseverance typical for Poles was a result of the fact that our society had not gone through the stage of the Enlightenment absolutism, which in Western societies encouraged discipline⁴⁷.

W. Grabski, quoted before, similarly as Roman Dmowski, the leader of the Polish national camp, considered a shortage of townsmen in our past as the factor that determined the low culture of work of our nation. In the Middle Ages, we did not have *strong guilds, which were based on a local element*, and later, as Grabski wrote, we had no larger, indivisible crofts for peasants. We did not have *those middle classes, proud of their ability to work, who strongly contributed in the West to the creation of democracy, and did not consider work as humiliating or degrading*⁴⁸. The period of national slavery was widely recognized as the factor that negatively affected the Polish national character and provoked social inertia. It was widely believed, also Grabski held this opinion, that the period which lasted for more than a century when the Polish nation did not have their own country did not foster the liberation of social initiative in various areas of life, including economic one⁴⁹.

The factors which led to the situation that *we are not awarded with an honourable place in the race of work and economic culture of different nations* were seen in the flaws of the so called Polish national character⁵⁰. That is why many Polish politicians, moralists and educators advocated recognizing national flaws in a thorough manner and conducting intensive re-educational activities. Philosophers, politicians and teachers mentioned in the set of our flaws such features as i.a. lawlessness, absence of proper order and discipline in the organization of community life, no regularity, individualism, tendencies towards illusions, laziness, inability to think and a lack of perseverance⁵¹. The ideals of a Pole formulated at that time were combined with such features as diligence. The concept

⁴⁷ K. Tymieniecki, *Cechy moralne narodu jako wynik historii [Moral qualities of a nation as a result of its history]*, Poznań 1926, p. 10, 29.

⁴⁸ W. Grabski, *Wychowanie gospodarcze społeczeństwa [Economic education of society]*, Warszawa 1929, p. 22.

⁴⁹ J. Sobczak, *Postulaty i próby podniesienia kultury pracy w Polsce okresu międzywojennego [Demands and attempts to increase the work culture in Poland in the interwar period]*, „Studia Pedagogiczne. Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej w Bydgoszczy”, Vol. 8. *Wybrane problemy pedagogiki pracy [Selected problems of work pedagogy]*, ed.. Z. Wiatrowski, Bydgoszcz 1982, p. 123.

⁵⁰ W. Grabski, *Wychowanie gospodarcze...*, p. 18.

⁵¹ L. Zarzecki, *Charakter i wychowanie [Personality and upbringing]*, Warszawa 1921, p. 144; I. Panenkowa, *Myśli o wychowaniu narodowym [Thoughts about national upbringing]*, Lwów 1918; Fr. J. Woroniecki, *Wstęp do nauki o charakterze polskim. Cykl wykładów z zagadnień wychowania narodowego [An introduction to learning about the Polish personality. A series of lectures on issues of national education]*, ed. J. Saloni, Lwów 1918, p. 64–65.

of the economic upbringing of society was developed as well. It was supposed to contribute to satisfy the frequently repeated demands regarding increasing the work culture in Poland. At the same time, it was highlighted that education should be universally recognized as *the main demand of public actions undertaken in the name of Poland*⁵². In fact, the greatest success of the Second Polish Republic included the educational *integration of Poland from three partitions and the upbringing of a generation of patriots, who was entirely committed and devoted to Poland*⁵³. I reckon that the politicians, especially those operating in the period of the Second Polish Republic, both from the national camp and the sanation, should take credit as well for that. Their educational ideologies – both of national and state education – included overcoming national character flaws. It was also the aim of the great educational campaigns conducted by them: the National Democratic Party – creation of a nation, and sanation – shaping the pro-state attitudes of young Poles⁵⁴.

While analyzing the Polish literature from the turn of the 19th century to the 20th century concerning the national character of Poles, apart from distinct stances on this matter presented by various historiosophical schools, as it was indicated herein, a collection of common opinions on a number of the authors quoted above might be noted. It should be also highlighted that the diagnoses of the national character of Poles formulated at that time, most often unfavorable, was aimed at inspiring the desired and expected educational mission in this field. The path towards eradicating those national defects was supposed to lead from self-discovery to individual and social (collective) improvement. After many years, in the revolutionary period for Poles in 1981, Kazimierz Dąbrowski, an outstanding Polish psychiatrist, and the author of a famous concept of *positive disintegration*, similarly to the Polish philosophers and politicians of the period studied herein, outlined negative and positive character qualities of the Polish people. The negative features included: excessive moodiness and *flash in the pan*, recklessness and superficiality, self-interest and lawlessness, tolerance of impunity, cult of incompetence and egocentrism. On the other hand, in his point of view the positive qualities of the Polish character are: courage and heroism, gentleness, humanity, hospitality, as well as a sense of independence, freedom and individuality⁵⁵. It seems that the opinions and observations cited herein regarding the Polish national character which go back one hundred years have not only a historical and

⁵² W. Grabski, *Wychowanie gospodarcze...*, p. 55.

⁵³ A. D. Rotfeld, *Polska została przeorana za głęboko [Poland has been plowed too deep]*, „Gazeta Wyborcza”, May 12–13, 2018, p. 29.

⁵⁴ K. Jakubiak, *Wychowanie państwowe jako ideologia wychowawcza sanacji [State education as an educational ideology of sanation]*, Bydgoszcz 1998.

⁵⁵ T. Kobierzycki, *Pojęcie charakteru narodowego i problem człowieczeństwa w koncepcji Kazimierza Dąbrowskiego [The concept of national character and humanity by Kazimierz Dąbrowski]*, Internet, (access: 6.07.2018), available at: <https://dezintegracja.pl/pojecie-charakteru-narodowego-i-problem-czlowieczestwa-w-koncepcji-kazimierza-dabrowskiego-pl/>

documentary value, but can also inspire Poles who live at present to pause and reflect on changing themselves and their own national identity.

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A historiographical, historiosophical, and pedagogical discourse on the national character of Poles from the turn of the 19th century to the 20th century
Summary

Issues of the mentality and properties of national character have been topical in the literature, mainly in the historical and political journalism of modern times. An important feature of the Polish historiography and historiosophy of the 19th century and the early 20th century was the discussion about the Polish national character. The diagnoses of the national character of Poles formulated at that time, most often unfavorable, were aimed at inspiring the desired and expected educational mission in this field. The path towards eradicating those national defects was supposed to lead from self-discovery to individual and social (collective) improvement.

Keywords: national character, Polish nation, national spirit, myth, national features and flaws of Poles, economic education.