

Jerzy Jedlicki, *A Suburb of Europe. Nineteenth-Century Polish Approaches to Western Civilization*, Budapest 1999, Central European University Press, 307 pp., bibliography, index of persons.

This is an English translation of the book which was published in Poland ten years ago under the title *The Civilization that the Poles Need. Studies in the History of 19th Century Ideas and Imagination* (State Scientific Publishers — Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1988). The title of the book, in both its Polish and English version, is not only a perfect epitome of the author's arguments but arouses the reader's interest.

Jerzy Jedlicki raises a subject which has probably been the most profoundly discussed subject in Europe during the last two hundred years, a subject which has provoked the most vehement polemics and inspired philosophers, men of letters, preachers, journalists and politicians. The question about the destination of the Western world appeared during the Age of Enlightenment when the ideas of civilization and progress were first formulated. However, almost from the very beginning optimistic prognoses and visions of linear progress were accompanied by diagnoses of degeneration and decline. They were expressed from the beginning of the 19th century in the very centre of Western civilization, in France, Germany and, first and foremost, in Britain, which was then experiencing the decline of a stormy economic development and profound social changes. Criticism of industrial civilization, of monster towns ruled by money and soulless machines, accompanied these changes throughout the 19th century, assuming various forms in individual countries, depending on their economic and social development.

Together with the concept of modern civilization, the 18th century raised the question of the centre and peripheries of the developed world and of backwardness and retardment, that is, the opposite of the idea of progress. According to the diagnosis made by Polish thinkers and political activists at the end of the 18th century Poland was a periphery. Modernization became one of the basic points of the Polish Enlightenment programme, but this made it difficult for its arbitrary champions to establish contact with the „backward” nation. From that time on, Polish ideological disputes were dominated by a dialogue between modernizers and conservatives, between advocates of West European patterns and defenders of traditional native values, between champions of progress and glorifiers of continuity. However, after the partitions the Polish polemics were dominated by a subject which was of primary importance for the Poles: the nation's right to independence, to the recovery of its own state. Disputes over whether Poland was a member of Western civilization or should follow its own road of development were natural in the conditions when the nation was divided among the three partitioners and when its sense of being a periphery was strengthened by bondage and by the struggle to preserve national identity.

Jedlicki's book reconstructs the views expressed throughout the 19th century but its construction departs from the traditional model of scholarly studies.

*A Suburb of Europe* is not a typical monograph examining the views of ideological and political camps; its axis is a dialogue, a confrontation of opposing attitudes and arguments, and this construction corresponds best to last century's polemics. The dialogue is divided into two main parts, the dividing line being the year 1863, the year of the January Rising which opened an epoch of profound social changes and new ideological ideas in the Polish territories.

The first part of the book *Images of the Future*, presents the theoretical disputes between the advocates and adversaries of modernity, from the 1780s to the January Rising. The disputes focused on three important questions indissolubly linked with the idea of social and economic progress. In three chapters of Part I the author presents the incompatible concepts of national identity and supranational, cosmopolitan civilization, of natural way and an artificial development disturbed by modernization efforts, and the diametrically different models of a society ruled by the laws of the market and economy and a world of traditional Christian values (*The Gospel and Economy* is the terse title of this chapter). Jedlicki reconstructs the polemics of that time in chronological order; he presents the views of all important political circles and movements as well as ideological currents, starting with the enlightened circles, the liberals and conservatives of the Congress Kingdom, the advocates of the specific character of Polish historical development, to the Romanticists and conservatives in Poland and in exile.

The years 1863–1864 not only brought it home to the Poles that they should look for a new national policy which would lead to the society's economic development rather than to an armed struggle for independence; first and foremost they brought radical social changes (liquidation of the vestiges of the feudal system in the Polish Kingdom). The decades that followed were a period of new doubts brought about by the inevitable progress. Jedlicki presents them in the second part of the book entitled *Ambiguities of Progress*. The second part of the 19th century witnessed the formation of a new social group, the intelligentsia, and its emancipation from the other social classes. However, Poland, a country on a relatively low level of development and deprived of its own educational, scientific and state apparatus, soon experienced a specific phenomenon: a surplus of the intelligentsia. The chapter bearing the significant title *Vicious Circles* presents discussions on the useful and redundant representatives of the new social group: the semi-amateur non-professional intelligentsia derived from the nobility and the urban population, a small group of academic intelligentsia (limited in number as a result of the lack of Polish universities) and the equally small group of professionals connected with industry. After the January Rising this new inconsistent social group created a new matter-of-fact but ardent ideological movement: positivism. Its representatives joined in the debate on progress and backwardness, but they no longer questioned Poland's membership of the world of Western civilization. The positivists put forward an innovative thoroughly pro-European programme the aim of which was to reduce the disproportion between Poland and the West, „to open the windows on Europe”, to modernize a society which was several score years behind the times. To implement these great tasks, the intelligentsia was to take over the role of the non-existent state and weakly development local government and stimulate cultural, educational, economic and social development. It soon turned out however that this was a breakneck task (the chapters *Affirmation and Negation* and *Growth and Distribution*).

The story of *A Suburb of Europe* is brought up to the 1880s, the threshold of an epoch of profound social conflicts and new political challenges. This does not mean that the question of the relationship between Poland and the West, between attachment to Polish customs and cosmopolitanism, between progress and backwardness was solved or lost its topicality at the end of the 19th century, but attempts to answer these eternal questions have since that time been made by the modern ideologies of socialism and nationalism, by modern mass political parties and ideologists using new propaganda instruments.

Jerzy Jedlicki's book recalls the discussions which contributed to the intellectual atmosphere in Poland for over a century and which sound fresh and topical also today. Jedlicki's vivid flexible style, the quality of which has been preserved in the English translation, is an indisputable virtue of the book. Despite his erudition, the author did not yield to the temptation of overburdening the book with academic material; the most important notes can be found at the end of each chapter. The chronology placed at the beginning of the book and maps of the Polish territories will make it easier for foreign readers to take in the situation of a country whose frontiers kept changing during these more than 100 years (1766–1893). The book is equipped with a competent bibliography which lists selected items in French, English, and Polish.

*A Suburb of Europe* shows the history of the supranational idea, which is important irrespective of geographical, historical and political conditions; it also reconstructs the incarnations and members of this idea in a concrete East European society during a period when unprecedented changes and processes took place in this part of the European continent. Disputes over the identity of a nation living on the confines of Western civilization, over the development roads of a peripheral society, over the shape of the nation's inheritance and the necessity of modernization were an important element of the Polish ideological debate in the 19th century; but they also stirred the imagination of other nations in East-Central Europe and, to some extent, were, and still are, of topical interest to all peoples which have come across the ideas of progress and civilization in their history.

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