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NEW OUTLOOK ON THE HISTORY OF THE POLISH INTELLIGENTSIA

On the book of Ludwik H a s s, *Inteligencji polskiej dole i niedole. XIX i XX wiek (The Polish Intelligentsia in Wealth or Woe. The 19th and 20th Centuries)*, Łowicz 1999, Mazowiecka Szkoła Humanistyczno-Pedagogiczna w Łowiczu, Stowarzyszenie Mazowiecki Ośrodek Badań Naukowych im. St. Herbst, 437 pp.

This recently published book by Ludwik Hass does not contain the entirely new texts, since this is a collection of the articles issued from 1972 to 1997, over a 25-year period. The book brings, however, a new quality to the research on the Polish intellectuals, and that for two reasons. First, the articles put together became the chapters of a comprehensive monographic study, the pivot of which is the sequence of generations of the intelligentsia together with an attempt to explain new events and qualities by means of new and specific features of these generations. Second, some of the collected papers have been expanded significantly by not only the new details, but the new issues as well. In particular, it concerns the essays on the intelligentsia after 1918, but we can find various supplementary information in other texts too. The new issues explore ethnic problems, especially a subject of the Polish–Jewish intellectuals and anti-Semitism, without which a modern history of the Polish intellectuals cannot be convincing.

Let us begin with the question what this book is not, because it cannot be? It is not a detailed report on meticulous and

exhaustive source–research which would enable us to draw the ultimate conclusions about the history of the intelligentsia perceived as a social group during the two last centuries (or only 150 years) of its existence. It was quite right to describe a recent publication of some of Ludwik Hass' studies on the intellectuals¹ as a scientific historical essay. In historical presentation of important epochs, movements, or social groups it is generally the only possible form of scientific approach, in particular for recent historical periods².

In a preface (*From the Author*) to the book Ludwik Hass disposes of the potential critics, who could possibly shake up the validity of studies on the intellectuals and their generations, based on intuition rather than on scientific foundations. The author is well known for vigorously defending his political, methodological, and historical opinions, which he himself humorously describes as a *perseverantia in errore*, referring to the inquisitorial terminology. As a consequence, he was persecuted and oppressed, not only by the Communist authorities, but also by the newly converted defendants of freedom and human rights. Perhaps under the influence of this bitter experience, the author *a priori* disparages the critics (or at least some of them) of his method as the representatives of an intellectual caste, who are fighting to defend against the denunciation of their genuine substance, against the unmasking of their real values: the group's solidarity and concern, hidden behind proclaimed mythology and sublime watchwords (pp. 5–6, 15–16). But does it make his reasoning more credible? The only deciding factor is usefulness of methods and models applied to explanation of history's meanders. Karl Marx, whose methodology the author uses (e.g. p. 20), cited with approval the principle *De omnibus dubitandum est*, and it has to apply both to the rules observed by others, as by ourselves. These rules are not protected by any sort of ideo-

¹ H. Słabe k, *Inteligencja — postawy — zachowania (The Intelligentsia — Attitudes — Behaviour)*, "Dzieje Najnowsze" 1988, № 4, p. 137. The study in question: L. Hass, *Pokolenia inteligencji polskiej (Generations of the Polish Intelligentsia)*, Łowicz 1997, 87 pp.

² Let us consider any example at random: there has been recently published a last probably volume in the series of Eric Hobsbawm's synthesis on the history of the 19th and 20th centuries (E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, 1 ed., London 1994). In this series, enthusiastically reviewed by the critics, the distance from the text as a whole to the detailed source–studies is unquestionably much longer than in Hass' book in question.

logical, methodological, or class immunity. But, as a matter of fact, in the question of scientific value of the comprehensive studies in a form of essay, and “generational” method of studying history, as well as in some other individual issues, Hass, in general, is right.

To finish with these critical notes concerning the writing style, I will also mention that Ludwik Hass is very severe not only with his (still potential) critics, but also, and mostly, with his victims, the intelligentsia itself and its generations. In their characterisation the author has emphasised self-interest, hypocrisy and all sort of any possible low motives. These dark colours seem to deepen as we are approaching the present day, especially for the generations of the last 50 years. In the opinion of the reviewer this general tendency, as well as its intensification, does not seem to be entirely justified.

Even though we believe in original sin and that it contaminated the human nature, we have to attribute the imperfections to every individual in equal measure. Why the intellectuals have to be more corrupt than the other groups or classes, as, for example, workers or peasants? It is difficult to say. The conviction, however, that the modern generations are always worse than the older ones seems to be reflection of the older generation's point of view, known already to the Romans, to whom *mores majorum* were by nature better than the modern ones (at least in the official ideology, expressed also in the legend of the golden age — *aurea aetas*).

People strive for prosperity and, very often, for certain kind of stabilisation. Such aspirations concern every social class and group, the lower class as well as the intelligentsia. And why should it be blameworthy? A higher standard of living stimulates a higher cultural and civilisation level. The majority of people has such kind of aims, and for this reason a Marxist principle that “existence determines consciousness”, with which the author probably agrees, in general could be true. And it applies to the politicians, too. After all, the politicians, particularly these representing the working classes, have to live off the profits of politics, and to live on the same standard as the others. They are not incorporeal beings representing peoples or nations, or ghosts existing only in spiritual world of ideology. They have to do their job in such a way that could be profitable for them too. The

deviation from this principle could have been possible only in the case of princes and barons, basing their political activity on a solid ground of their inherited estates. So, it could have been in the case of Ludwik Hass' book on the *Sect of the Warsaw Freemasonry*³, but not in the 20th century. And what about the "professional" revolutionists? Even before the Revolution they lived off the politics, and not off the party's money (sometimes given by the rich sympathisers); they did not make a living as workmen, and after the Revolution they became the dignitaries, with the same standard of living as the pre-Revolutionary dignitaries.

Thus, if we cannot justifiably reproach the politicians for fending for themselves — provided that it is done according to the law and decorum — we cannot rebuke the less involved, politically and socially, for the same. Least of all we can blame a whole social group for being deeply interested in their standard of living and cultural interests. And such kind of reproach we detect in the author's reasoning, who seems to sneer at these worldly activities, and treats them as a betrayal, and certainly as unworthy of a mythologised image of the intellectuals and their social mission, which he himself ridicules.

At times the author gives us the impression that he blames the intelligentsia for living in such an unlawful political system, as existed in the Polish People's Republic, especially in time of Stalinism, but also afterwards, in times of "post-Bierut regime" (pp. 322, 337). It raises a question whether the author would be glad, *ex post*, if all his (negative) heroes had gone "underground"? But would there in Poland have been an "underground" big enough for containing an entire social stratum? All these questions are purely academic now, but what should have been, according to the author, the role of the intelligentsia of that time, is not quite clear yet.

Talking about the intellectual mythology, it is true that all too often it was, and still is, both persistent and used to serve different political purposes. But I do not think that we should attach to it more importance than it actually had. First of all, this mythology very often was equalised by a zealous, even exagger-

³ L. Hass, *Sekta farmazonii warszawskiej. Pierwsze stulecie wolnomularstwa w Warszawie, 1721–1821* (*Sect of the Warsaw Freemasonry. The First Century of Freemasonry in Warsaw, 1721–1821*), Warsaw 1980.

ated criticism, and its own harshest critics were the intellectuals. The mythology influenced the upbringing of the next generations, but barely affected the practical, everyday life of the intelligentsia, not to mention the state structures in the period when the intelligentsia was the most influential, i.e. between 1918–1939. Even if we take into account an exaggerated style of so-called Young Poland, very popular when the mythology originated, and particularly when it spread out, we cannot take the watchwords and ecstasies literally, and not only in this domain.

In the last decades of the 19th century and around the turn of the century, the circles of intellectual authorities, the “rebellious” group of that time, generally connected with the Left (in the broad sense of the term), held bourgeois affluence and stability in contempt. Indeed, the contempt was not a pure platitude as it reflected their simple lifestyle. Even before, in the 1880s, there originated an idea of “intelligent proletariat” as opposed to wealthy bourgeois society. But this conception neither spread out nor survived imminent historic events, the Revolution and the War.

It has to be emphasised that the tendency to identify an educated stratum, treated as a separate social group, with the intelligentsia has considerably weakened in the last decades in favour of new ideas about different professional structures, in particular (quasi-)corporate ones that in the Polish People's Republic played such an important role. The mythology was, and in a sense still is, alive in the intellectual circles. It has been evolving, and Ludwik Hass and I differ over perception of this evolution. He stresses the fact of sinking the group of intellectuals into the intelligentsia after the World War II, in the face of liquidation of the propertied classes, to which a part of the intellectuals had belonged. It seems that — despite the fact that, for example, a large part of the writers had a gentry's pedigree — at least between the two World Wars the intellectuals belonged to the intelligentsia almost entirely, on account of their social status, professions and cultural role. However, as a result of a disintegration of this stratum in the time of the Polish People's Republic, the

⁴ This climaxed with a long period of time, beginning in 1964 with the famous protest letter of 34 intellectuals, and ending with a victory of “Solidarity” won in the election of 4 June 1989, after which the intelligentsia, together with its mythology, was in for a huge disappointment.

intellectuals became a group that adopted old consciousness of the intelligentsia, and primary its ideology and mythology⁴.

As for the question whether the intelligentsia, since a long time almost tantamount to the enlightened stratum⁵, played — despite all mythology — the key and indispensable role in the development of the Polish society and nation, we can refer to an unshakeable testimony of two of the Tsar's satraps of the second half of the 19th century: Governor General Hurko and School Superintendent Apuchtin, and 60 years later — to an evidence of the Nazis' organisers of an exterminatory "Aktion AB" or Soviet murderers from Katyń. All of them took for granted that the most important factor in a subjugation of the Polish society and nation is to destroy its intellectuals.

Apart from the essays dealing with the subsequent generations of the intelligentsia, there is in the book an analysis of the essence of the intelligentsia as a social group, followed by — originated almost 30 years ago, and forming a natural introduction to the reasoning enclosed in the next part of the book — the studies of the genesis and pre-history of the intelligentsia. Together they contribute to the characterisation of the oldest generations of the intellectuals⁶. Three of these studies, dealing with the inter-war period and its generations of the intelligentsia,

⁵ The author's reasoning (pp. 10–11) trying to detect the chief distinctions between the intelligentsia and the enlightened stratum does not seem to me to be utterly convincing. Only in extreme cases the educated people could have stayed beyond the sphere of the intelligentsia. Where they could, if not within the intelligentsia circles, receive their education? Despite different social background of the members of that group, they mingled with the intellectuals when they were learning and studying, and afterwards, when they became white-collar workers. It seems to me to be a certain misconception to restrict the notation of intelligentsia to the leftist (and sometimes liberal) intellectuals. Such options could have been very popular among the intellectual authorities around the turn of the century, there could have been some confusion due to the Revolution of 1905, but even then there were such classic intellectual individuals — and not the leftist ones — as the followers of a magazine "Głos" (Voice), and afterwards the founders of the National Democratic Movement, connected with nationalist trends. And the author's thesis is particularly untrue to a period between 1918 and 1939. In those years the leftist intelligentsia, as well as rationalist- and anti-clerical, formed a minority, while dominant was the rightist orientation, traditionalistic and nationalistic, together with rapidly accommodating *Sanacja* orientation, which had left behind the liberal-intellectual elements.

⁶ The author's reasoning is based partly on another main trend of his research, which resulted in many studies on Freemasonry. In substance, according to the author's opinion, Freemasonry in Poland was formed by the intelligentsia or proto-intelligentsia.

supplement and enrich information about the political and organisational problems. But we are justified to state that the book's pivot is the history and characteristic features of the subsequent generations of intelligentsia.

In different surveys of intelligentsia and cultural history, the category of generation had been already used, especially in the history of literature. But Ludwik Hass employs this category to study the whole history of the intelligentsia. He uses the word "generation" in its figurative meaning, as he separates under this term the people born in the same decade (which suggests not a very nice-sounding statistics term "cohort"), regardless of historical events that could separate the distinctive periods of time. But he follows the lives of his generations till the end, so we can be sure that he is interested not only in the emergence of a new peer group with a new social experience, but also in tracing their future. As a consequence, the chronological order he uses, is of secondary importance and does not influence profoundly the logical and correct conclusions. Quite frequently, however, the author in his analysis is forced to separate an individual "cohort" of ten age-groups into two units: the older that participated in an event, and the younger that were children at that time. This emphasises the mechanical character of the division. But a different, more subtle and individualised method used to define the chronological order of generations and connected significant events was bound to be much more complex and problematical.

On the other hand, this perspective shreds the social stratum into generations/cohorts, which makes much more difficult the perception of the intelligentsia as a whole, its reactions to the different events and its essence. After all, we have some valuable information about its feelings or attitudes, putting aside the generation perspective, to give an example of the period immediate after the World War II. We cannot, however, demand the impossible; we cannot expect this book to portray the intelligentsia in its every noteworthy aspect. The chosen perspective seems to be sufficiently convincing.

Let's say it again that the representation of the intelligentsia history in form of the sequence of its generations has proved to be both relevant and inspiring. It would be very difficult to argue with the thesis that the circumstances and historical events stimulate the mentality of people and influence their, quite often

similar attitudes and psyche. The generation, for example, brought up in the inter-war period was not astounded by sheer fact of the achievement of national independence, as the older one, and in consequence it demanded more from the State than it was receiving. In the People's Republic, the generations that could not remember the inter-war period and the immediate post-war times turn a deaf ear to orations about pre-war poverty or the People's Poland achievements, as they could directly compare with their counterparts in Western countries and were not afraid of the weakening regime to the same extent as the generations that experienced the War and Stalinist terror. The events from 1956, 1968, and above all, from 1980–1981, could be explained by (along with other factors) the change of generations.

The most difficult part of Ludwik Hass' enterprise is to characterise correctly and precisely the individual generations/cohorts. The characterisation is written in an essay-style, sometimes even in a causerie manner, thus a very pedantic reader would be able to point at many factors and elements that were omitted by the author, and argue about their proportions. But in my opinion Ludwik Hass successfully coped with a task he imposed on himself. Of course, this analysis does not pretend to be a systematic history of the intelligentsia stratum (*nota bene*, could such a history extend beyond the reflections on the scope and barriers of the stratum?). The author combines scarce but important information on social and political position of the young generations with an attempt to understand their mentality and psychology, and sketched a number of very impressive images, although, in my opinion, he painted rather a black picture, full of suspicions about evil intentions and inferior qualities of analysed stratum, and in particular its eminent individuals. It raises a question to which extent can we scientifically talk about group psychology of the stratum, generation, etc., overlooking their differences and diversities⁷. The arguments about the issue (pp. 15–16) cannot, however, dispel all doubts.

In sketching these images the author displays a great erudition and profound knowledge about specificity of respective epochs of Polish history, from the end of 18th century till today.

⁷ It creates a considerable anxiety for being too close to a "group soul", or "spirit of time", the terms which are not liked by rationalistic social scientists.

The erudition extends over the domains the knowledge of which would surprise even his colleagues, as details of modern behaviour and conduct, current fashions in co-called “youth music”, youth subcultures etc.

The question is why the author, displaying such a great erudition and versatility, could not — within the chosen scope — extend beyond two preferred zones: the politics and ideology? The generations of intelligentsia existed in the world of changing technology and structures. There has been a change in proportion between decreasing industrial working class and increasing group of intellectual workers, who in the developed countries have become the most numerous category of employees, outnumbering the workers. And this change has been certainly influencing the position and prospects of the intelligentsia for a long time. At least some of these phenomena, in particular the growing number of the intellectual workers, have been apparent in the Communist countries, including Poland. It positively holds true for the whole complex of different occurrences, labelled together as post-industrialism, seen from a certain distance in Poland before 1989, and fundamental nowadays, as it imposes certain changes in social and economic proportions. It is connected with a process of technicalisation and informatisation of the society, which affects every facet of intelligentsia lifestyle. But its effect the author decided to leave unnoticed. Though he admits that the awareness of national, or social-national, mission — as such an ideological factor — is vital to the existence of intelligentsia, without which we would be able to speak only about a set of professional categories, I am not sure whether we are justified in making such an ideological and subjective interpretation of existence or non-existence of social group⁸. It would imply that the only possible intelligentsia is the traditional 19th-century one. And what we are supposed to do with the same categories of modern times? We have an ample evidence that the intelligentsia is able to adapt itself to new conditions, and actually is doing so.

⁸ See p. 9. For the author his interpretation is an axiom, but among the intellectuals themselves the real scope of awareness of the mission of intelligentsia is not so explicit. Equally, I do not agree with the author's opinion on the literature on the subject that is supposed to be in possession of intellectual- and megalomaniac mythology. Such tunes could have been heard from time to time in journalism.

We can also see the ideological momentum when the author refers to the famous scheme of “vacillations of intermediate stratum”, trying to explain the attitudes of the intelligentsia⁹. It can be interpreted that the working class and the bourgeoisie do not vacillate politically and ideologically, which is evidently untrue.

And now a few remarks about the intellectuals¹⁰. We have already talked about the author’s opposing opinion on the intelligentsia seen as a social group. In Ludwik Hass’ book the intellectuals make their full appearance after 1945. A large part of the text has been devoted to dispose of this, paraphrasing an ancient poet, *irritabile vatum genus*. In general, in this part of the book the author describes the intelligentsia compliance with the State authorities, which he himself stigmatises. In many cases he provides such vivid descriptions of the violent ideological manoeuvres conducted by the intellectuals (as around 1956 or 1980) that there is not much we can add. But it is hard to overlook the fact that the author is prone to certain oversimplification, which leads him to negativistic schematism. How does he deal with a great writer, Maria Dąbrowska? He suggests that she adulated the regime while profoundly she rejected it. But, as a matter of fact, in the light of her journals, to which the author refers, her attitude towards the regime was ambivalent: she rejected its alien origins and evident misdeeds, but she did not reject the whole political system, as she saw in it some positive values. She was of the negative opinion about the structures of the emigration, so the then existing regime seemed to have no alternative. But at that time such state of mind was very common in the leftist, or even leftist-liberal, circles (but not communistic). Extremely harsh criticism of the attitudes of this category of the intellectuals leads the author dangerously close to the circles treating similar criticism as one of the elements of suppression both of the Left, and of democracy in general, whose idols are McCarthy and Pinochet. I doubt very much that the author would like to find himself there.

⁹ See pp. 264–265, 306–307.

¹⁰ The author apparently has not noticed (see p. 16) an already formulated in Polish literature definition of the notion and essence of the intellectuals, together with their descriptions, published (by me) in the *Encyklopedia socjologii (Encyclopaedia of Sociology)*, vol. 1, Warsaw 1998.

It seems to me that the author's thesis about the existence of a separate bureaucratic stratum in the communistic countries forms a part of his social paradigm. As there is no place to engage in polemics, I will only state that some expatiation on the subject, in reference to Poland, could be expected as it is closely related to the question of intelligentsia. But what we get instead is only very vague outline of this stratum. Hass says, for example, that some of the intellectuals could have joined the bureaucratic group and he calls it a success (p. 324). It is not quite clear, however, what was the mutual attitude of both groups. I think that these difficulties stemmed firstly from too narrow a basis to formulate the theory of a distinct bureaucratic stratum. There was the apparatus of the Party, social and military, there was the Party's nomenclature, but these circles formed some distinctive, and staying aloof, groups of the "new intelligentsia", rather than a separate social stratum. They lacked both separateness, and continuity, and they were not numerous enough. They were a product of the different institutions of the Party and State, and they were sinking into oblivion together with these institutions. It is confirmed by a history of one of the younger generations of the Party's apparatus, whom the author calls by Byzantine name of *porphyrogenites* (pp. 17–18). But the bureaucracy in the institutional sense of the term soaked up a large part of the intelligentsia, because in the country where the State owed or controlled the whole wealth of the nation could have not been otherwise.

The problem of authority and ethos is not a minor one, but there is no place to explore it fully, so I will just mention some of the issues. The author's reasoning (pp. 15–16) that he is justified to judge the intelligentsia by the authorities that it imposed on itself and which it followed is more convincing than some examples he provides.

The Communistic Party reckoned new elements of intelligentsia, of plebeian descent, as its base and tried to increase their number. This was the real reason lying behind the additional points for prospective students of plebeian (from working class or peasants) descent. In fact, the number of such students decreased (p. 395) because of State's intentional pauperisation of the intellectual workers, that made this career unattractive for the working classes. Indeed, the good example of this phenome-

non is provided by the numerous young technicians, and sometimes young engineers, who decided to make their living by working in factories as workers, since they were able to draw much more than as graduates. These “degraded” technicians and engineers played an important role in the events of 1980–81, of course on “Solidarity” side¹¹.

It was my definite intention to make a large part of the above critical and polemical. I have not summarised the basic chapters of the book, which accurately depict many aspects of the intelligentsia history, although not all of them. It may convey an erroneous impression that the undersigned is very critical of Ludwik Hass' book. But it is not so: in my opinion the book is an outstanding event in the historiography of Polish social history of 19th and 20th centuries. The author, using his profound knowledge of 18th, 19th, and 20th was able to create an erudite, though hazardous, book that enable us to discover some obscure social, ideological, and cultural processes, not necessarily restricted to the intellectual circles, the limits of which are not very sharp, after all. And this book, like any outstanding study, raises many new question and doubts. This is the way science advances.

(Translated by Grażyna Waluga)

¹¹ This problem has been thoroughly explored by a German sociologist with a broad Polish experience: M. T a t u r, *Zu Wandlungen der Sozialstruktur in der polnischen Arbeiterschaft*, Köln 1981, pp. 23–24 ff. Cf. also the same author, *Arbeitsituation und Arbeiterschaft in Polen 1970–1980*, Frankfurt 1983.