

Krzysztof Mikulski, *Pułapka niemożności. Społeczeństwo nowożytnego miasta wobec procesów modernizacyjnych /na przykładzie Torunia w XVII i XVIII wieku/ (The Inability Trap. Society in a Early Modern Town and Modernisation Processes, with Toruń in the 17th and 18th Centuries as an Example)*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2004, 380 pp.

Krzysztof Mikulski's latest book on Toruń is a continuation of his research into the history of that town, in particular of his monograph *Przestrzeń i społeczeństwo Torunia od końca XIV do początku XVIII wieku (The Area and Society of Toruń from the End of the 14th to the Beginning of the 18th Century)* published in Toruń in 1999. But this is not just a simple continuation for in his latest book Mikulski sets new problems and poses new research questions.

The title of the book is enigmatic and perverse. What kind of trap and the inability to do what has the author in mind? The subtitle tells the reader more: *Society in a Early Modern Town and Modernisation Processes*. But it is only after reading the whole book that the reader knows what it is really about.

Mikulski has used as his main sources the poll-tax registers from the years 1723–1771, the Krongeld register from 1779 and the register of contributions from 1706. He has also made use of the certificates issued by the parish of the Holy Virgin's Assumption and two Protestant parishes from the Old and the New Town. This has allowed him to establish the number of Toruń inhabitants in the 18th century, the occupational and financial structure of the town's population, and indirectly the economic situation of Toruń. It is a pity that the author has not included the age and sex structure in his demographic analyses, and especially that he has not paid more attention to family structure (extended and nuclear families), to the age when marriages were contracted and the number of children per family. There is some information on these subjects in the third part of the book, devoted to the family strategy of Toruń townspeople in the 17th and 18th centuries. But these are only seven short biographies of selected families and the author concentrates on the motivation for the upbringing and education of children, and the motives behind marriages (property, social status). A great deal of scattered information on the number of children per family can be found in the tables in Part II which discusses Toruń's occupational structure. The number of children per family and the age when people concluded marriage deserve close examination because such data are important not only for demography; they also throw light on the social situation and economy of the town. In those days, the conclusion of marriage, the moment when this was done, depended on the partners' financial situation and their independence. A young man could set up a family only when he became financially independent. As Mikulski says (pp. 222, 229), this rule applied also to Toruń. The age when marriages were concluded illustrated the prosperity and economic development of a town.

Children were not only a family's heirs and continuators. Being heirs, they had, of course, to be properly looked after so that the family should not die out, but it was advisable not to have too many children to prevent the family property from being excessively divided. In a craftsman's family, children were also additional hands for work, cheaper and less troublesome than hired workers. This is

why middle class families tried to adjust the number of children to the actual economic situation. Family planning and even contraceptive devices were well known in the 18th century (and even earlier)¹, though they differed from the present ones. West European researchers have shown that during the formation of the capitalist system the number of children in artisans' families increased or dropped, depending on the economic situation: it rose markedly during the periods of long-lasting prosperity and stability and fell during times of recess and instability, when it was more worthwhile to use hired workers who could be easily dismissed when they were no longer needed². It would be interesting to examine what the situation was like in this respect in 18th century Toruń. Mikulski's tables indicate that craftsmen's families did not have many children (one son, one or two daughters, frequently no offspring at all), journeymen were a much more numerous group (tables 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 36, 41, 43, 48, 54, 55, 80). This would mean that the economic situation of Toruń was bad, in particular that it was not stable but kept changing.

As the author rightly says (p. 46), "The changes in Toruń's economic situation cannot be compared with general economic changes in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of those days", not only because of a lack of comparable data from other towns or because researches into prices — which provide only limited possibilities for comparison — have been imperfect and affected by elementary methodological errors (researchers have not eliminated non-typical data, have taken into consideration occasional price indices and ignored the fact that they were often of an official character, that is detached from the real situation on the market), facts which Witold Kula pointed out a long time ago³. The main reason why changes in Toruń's economic situation cannot be compared with the economic changes in the Commonwealth is that during the period of pre-industrial, non-market economy of interest to us here one cannot speak of a national market, which was only beginning to be formed, or of a uniform development of economy in the whole country; we are still faced with many regions and centres, each of which experienced its own cycles of boom and recess. In my opinion Mikulski's research on 18th century Toruń is very important because he has given a detailed analysis of the town's economy, which shows the reasons both for the town's economic development and for its economic stagnation. Let us hope that similar analyses of other Polish towns will be made for only then will it be possible to present an overall picture of the economy in the 18th century Commonwealth.

The materials presented by Mikulski clearly show that irrespective of its ups and downs in the 18th century, Toruń's economy clearly broke down after 1772, that is after the first partition of Poland when the town was cut off from its hinterland, the Chelmno region, a part of Kujawy and Gdańsk Pomerania. Samuel Geret, a learned councillor of Toruń, wrote then: "the wonderful town of Toruń collapsed: it lacked food, and being depopulated, poor, ruined and disdained, it was reduced to poverty"⁴. This was probably the reason why Toruń did not

¹ See A. Wyrobisz, *Rodzina w wieście przedprzemysłowym a życie gospodarcze. Przegląd badań i problemów (The Family in Preindustrial Towns and Economic Life. Research Survey)*, "Przegląd Historyczny", vol. LXXVII, 1986, No 2, pp. 311-312, the article includes bibliography.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 315-316; see the bibliography.

³ W. Kula, *Problemy i metody historii gospodarczej (The Problems and Methods of Economic History)*, Warszawa 1963, pp. 539-563. Even the prices of beer, which Mikulski regards as important (p. 46), are not conclusive, not only because they too were regulated officially but above all because beer could be brewed at home for private use, outside the market economy, and also because Gdańsk beer, for instance, willingly bought in Toruń, was exported in large quantities, which means that its price was regulated by other markets, not only the local one.

⁴ Quoted after J. Dygdała, *Toruń w okresie reform Rzeczypospolitej i zagrożenia pruskiego, 1764-1793 (Toruń during the Period of Reforms in the Commonwealth and the Threat Posed by Prussia, 1764-1793)*, in: *Historia Torunia*, vol. II, part III, ed. M. Biskup, Toruń 1996, p. 279.

participate in the townsmen's movement during the Four Years' Sejm⁵. Such being the situation, it is difficult to speak of a modernisation of the town's economy, its administrative system and social structure, of the development of elements of capitalism.

The inability mentioned in the title refers to the reasons why Toruń, one of the largest and richest towns in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was unable to get out of recession and stagnation and why all endeavours in this direction broke down.

Mikulski has a critical view of the results so far achieved by historians, e.g. by Jerzy Wojtowicz who half a century ago wrote about the germs of capitalism in Toruń in the 18th century⁶. In Mikulski's opinion Wojtowicz's studies were "ideologically biased" (he means subordinated to Marxist indoctrination). One cannot but agree with the author that the magnates' workshops, which were based mostly on the work of serfs and produced goods almost exclusively for the magnates and their courts, did not have much in common with a free hire of labour and a free market. Consequently, even though they introduced new manufacturing techniques and new methods of labour organisation which increased productivity, they could not provide a basis for the development of a capitalist economy. This was stated a long time ago by Witold Kula and by Zofia Kamińska who followed him. The workhouses set up in some towns (the one in Toruń was described by Wojtowicz), which used prisoners as their workforce or forced vagrants to work, were not genuine capitalist enterprises either. Urban workshops, which were nearer to capitalism, were few and small in Poland, and they were all short-lived. Only some synthesising studies and handbooks magnify their role, presenting them as an initial stage of capitalism. But what was needed for the development of capitalism was not workshops but a change of the country's social and economic structure, the abolition of the serfdom of peasants, which would have created conditions for the development of a free market, and a free hire of labour. Poland was still far from this. Even the endeavours to industrialise the Polish Kingdom in the 1820s ended in failure. Hence the Torunians' inability to get out of stagnation in the 18th century.

In my opinion, Mikulski's criticism of the economic initiatives undertaken in Toruń at that time is too severe. They did not bring the desired breakthrough but they showed that endeavours were made to revive and modernise the economy. Mikulski has also underestimated the role of craftsmen, who were not members of the guilds in Toruń; he has devoted less than four pages (pp. 183-186) to this question (Wojtowicz devoted a whole chapter, pp. 84-101, to this subject) and has refrained from analysing it. It was by no means a new phenomenon, which had existed in the Middle Ages. It cannot be treated as a form of capitalist or pre-capitalist production. Those craftsmen worked in the same branches as guild craftsmen, used the same techniques and the same labour organisation, and their links with the market were similar. But they enjoyed greater freedom (though free of the rigours imposed by the guilds and the municipal authorities, they depended on their private patrons, owners of some parts of a town) and undoubtedly undermined guild monopoly and the estate structure of society, were rivals of guild handicrafts; they created conditions for the emergence of a new organisation of production, and consequently also of capitalism. But let us remember that the Polish nobility also combated the monopoly of the guilds (without success) and even sought to liquidate them, and nobody would impute capitalist tendencies to the nobility. Nevertheless, if in 1757 the number of craftsmen not belonging to the guilds in Toruń (at least in some trades) greatly surpassed the number of master craftsmen (Mikulski quotes the figures mentio-

⁵ *Ibidem.*, 289.

⁶ J. Wojtowicz, *Studia nad kształtowaniem się układu kapitalistycznego w Toruniu. Stosunki przemysłowe miasta Torunia w XVIII wieku (Studies on the Emergence of the Capitalist System in Toruń. Industrial Relations in the Town of Toruń in the 18th Century)*, Toruń 1960.

ned by Wojtowicz), this was a significant phenomenon and it would be worth while to examine it more closely in order to assess the town's economic situation at that time.

However, Mikulski seems to have overestimated the possibility of state interference, the possibility of the state playing the role of a protector and stimulator of economic development. I agree that such a state as the pre-partition Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, plunged as it was into crisis and deep stagnation, a state with inept and incompetent administrative structures and meagre financial resources was unable to play a positive role; Polish towns could not expect that the state would support their economy. But neither did the Prussian state play an important role in modernising the economy, though Mikulski extols its role. Mikulski must have inadvertently succumbed to the influence of Marxist historiography which created the concept of "the Prussian road to capitalism".

Part IV of the book dealing with the choice of Christian names in Toruń families in the 17th and 18th centuries is very interesting and extremely important. This seems to be a question far removed from economy and political reforms, but the choice of Christian names reflects the susceptibility of various social groups to fashion, new ideological currents and innovations or, on the contrary, it may illustrate the conservatism of these groups and thus explain the inability or incapacity of Toruń society to undertake and carry out economic initiatives and reforms.

Conservatism was also visible in other fields of Toruń's life, including art. It is significant that the magnificent development of Toruń's art in the late Middle Ages was not followed by a period of an equally splendid development in early modern times; on the contrary, the 18th century witnessed a decline which was caused by the cultivation of academic models and patterns⁷. It is interesting that these conservative trends were not counterbalanced by the high level of scholarship and university education in Toruń, questions discussed by Mikulski on pp. 254-257.

So the inability referred to in the title means the inability to get out of the crisis, the inability to modernise the town. But was this a trap? A trap is something unknown, something surprising while Toruń's state of inability in the 18th century was the result of what had been happening in the town for decades and was well known to its inhabitants. What is more, the inhabitants of Toruń reached that state mostly at their own request; it was their conservatism which prevented radical changes.

Was Toruń an exception? Was the situation similar in other Polish towns? And what was the situation in the whole Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth? It will be possible to reply to these questions only after a thorough research, similar to the research carried out by Mikulski in Toruń.

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⁷ Z. Ważbiński, *Modele akademickie w procesie dydaktycznym cechu malarzy i rzeźbiarzy toruńskich w XVIII i na początku XIX w.* (*Academic Models in the Didactic Process of the Guild of Painters and Sculptors in Toruń in the 18th and Early 19th Centuries*), in: *Sztuka Torunia i ziemi chełmińskiej 1233-1815*, ed. J. Poklewski, Teka Komisji Historii Sztuki VII, Warszawa 1986, p. 199; J. Samek, *Pozycja Torunia w polskiej sztuce złotniczej (Toruń's Rank in Polish Goldsmithery)*, *ibidem*, p. 217.