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Glorious beginnings... what next? Polish and French Social Scientists. History and Perspectives of their Mutual Contacts¹

As you know, you can begin the analysis of any historical phenomenon with the Ancient Greeks. Since we have not yet managed to create such a glorious history of Poland, and there was some revisionist doubt about the history of the Gauls and Vercingetorix as the ancestors of today's France (alas! those destroyers of national glory!), we can begin our story much later—in the interwar period. For Polish intelligentsia of that time, Paris was the cultural capital of the world. For the Polish social sciences, coming back to life after 1918, it was the Mecca of thoughts and new ideas. It was there that the teachers of our teachers (Stefan Czarnowski, Marceli Handelsman, and others) found their point of intellectual reference. These contacts had little in common with the Polish emigration who arrived in France in 19th century and in the interwar years—even though, over time, the Polish Library became an important research outpost for Polish social scientists, and the Science Centre of the Polish Academy of Sciences is nowadays located in buildings tied to the history of Polish emigration. The contacts were determined by the role Paris of the time played in social sciences.

After the war, many people headed toward the restoration of the Polish-French connections. In a natural way, in Poland, everything that had been destroyed during the war was coming back to life then—most often as a simple extension of the pre-war institutions and societies. Many of our

¹ The paper *Débuts glorieux. Et les perspectives? Coopération polono-française dans le domaine des sciences humaines* was prepared for a conference to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Polish Cultural Centre at Sorbonne, Paris, May 2012. The ideas within I developed further in: M. Kula, *Mimo wszystko bliżej Paryża niż Moskwy. Książka o Francji, PRL i o nas, historykach* Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2010. Cf. also: P. Pleskot, *Intelektualni sąsiedzi. Kontakty historyków polskich ze środowiskiem „Annales” 1945–1989*, IPN, Warszawa 2010.

predecessors, exhausted by the occupation, happy because the nightmare had ended, believed that the country, though undoubtedly it would not be a simple continuation of the pre-war one, it would still be Poland—normal, and perhaps, in many an issue, even better. In any case, the Communists sustained the myth of rebuilding not just the houses, but life in its commonly acceptable form.

As historians, we can discuss in length how the hopes and fears were distributed in the Polish society immediately after the war. Currently, my student Marcin Zaremba is publishing a very interesting and important book about the fears. I will limit myself then to recalling an exchange between two historians, both sharing a beautiful past, having been part of the resistance movement (the AK) during the occupation: Tadeusz Manteuffel and Aleksander Gieysztor. Manteuffel told then to his younger colleague to be done with conspiracy, as the German occupation was over and the new reality was there to stay for a long time. So it was necessary, Manteuffel said, to take up the teaching and formation of young people. Indeed, both gentlemen quickly engaged in the reconstruction of the Faculty of History at the University of Warsaw. Part of this reconstruction was restoring the foreign connections, among others with the French social scientists.

This reconstruction phase ended, however, in the end or 1940s. In the Stalinist period it was difficult to talk about any foreign contacts except those extremely formalised. Another of my students, Dariusz Stola, who wrote an excellent book about foreign travels and migrations from the PRL, counted that if you compare the number of ordinary passports issued in Poland in the first half of the 1950s with the number of Ministers, the odds of becoming a Minister was decisively greater than the odds of going abroad. He also brilliantly remarked, that the name of the institution “Biuro Paszportów Zagranicznych” (“Foreign Passport Bureau”) was typically Orwellian—since the Bureau’s task was actually the not issuing of passports. About the sense of the name, that assumption based on the Soviet example that the citizens have internal passports as well, it is no place to talk here.

The situation began to improve after the transition in October 1956. Many people diminish its importance nowadays, because the change proved to be less than hoped, the authorities gradually limited the new found freedoms, while the Communism not only failed to disappear but showed many new negatives. Both on the level of softening the repression policy and, what is most interesting for us, the ability to pursue social sciences, it was a very important change, nevertheless. In its wake came the restoration of contacts between Polish social scientists and France. Never, of course, until the end of the Communism, were they free from the supervision of the party/state/police, just as neither of the social sciences was free from

that nightmare. For a long time, however, we were the only country in the bloc having such broad contacts with the Western humanities (excepting the unfortunately short episode of the “Prague Spring”, over time the Hungary began to have good contacts as well). It should be remembered that our colleagues from other countries of the “camp of peace and socialism” tracked the translations printed in Poland and our own works—to have, through that channel, a contact with the world, and also with our social sciences shaped in the contact with the West.

The University of Warsaw was maybe the only university in the Eastern Bloc which had, since 1962, a centre at Sorbonne. Nowadays some politicians speak ill of its organiser, Professor Geremek. Regardless of all political circumstances which motivate them, and with which it is hard for me to argue here, in the context of the Centre I must still mention an accusation I once read in the press. The author of that article maintained, that the fact that Bronisław Geremek had served as the Director of the Centre in Paris in the PRL time was a stain on his memory. Yet, in my opinion, it was very well that he did. And I will add that he was the right man in the right place. He truly helped in strengthening the bonds. To preserve the memory both of that early period of the Centre, and of its organiser, I let myself adduce a letter which Prof. Geremek sent on 10 December 1962 to my father, Witold Kula. He was a friend of Geremek’s and himself an important circle of Polish-French cooperation. Geremek wrote:

So the labour pains of the Polish Cultural Centre are nearing the end. I’m finally, after the formal inauguration, in control of my fiefdom. The inauguration itself—except Gieysztor’s lecture, *brillant et fin*, as usual—was a sheer spectacle. Everything there was at Champollion Street was borrowed, furniture, books, albums. The only real items, guests excluded, was porto (drunk), which frugally played the role of champagne, and a wonderful toilet, which truly is within my domain. It’s a serious thing—the main entrance to the Centre’s place is from the Champollion Street, and so next to four good, cheap cinemas. Thus a free and elegant toilet has a meaning of its own. Of all the inauguration activities I still have one quite a grim ceremony left—a cocktail (or coctail) at the embassy. Admittedly, the flower of the Paris science have announced themselves but I was told to stand at the door for two hours shaking hands. Pour Hania² couldn’t endure it, so perhaps it is for the best that she’ll arrive later (still she’s there on the invitations, as I don’t have a name by myself³). *Quel metier!*

Geremek had a very good rapport with Fernand Braudel, who led then the VI Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études (now the École des

² Hanna Geremek, Prof. Bronisław Geremek’s wife.

³ A reference to the traditional French form: Monsieur et Madame Bronisław Geremek.

Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales). This institution, and Prof. Braudel in person, were the basic factors for the development of contacts. First, what is very important, a high opinion of Polish historiography. Braudel would even exclaim sometimes that there were two serious historical schools: Polish and French. It cannot be ruled out that he could have made similar exclamations for the colleagues from other countries with whom he collaborated. Still, it was nice to hear such an opinion. Contrary to what is often said nowadays of the historiography of the PRL period, many sections of it were really good. Needless to say that the positive opinion did not apply, and most often cannot apply, to the contemporary history and a number of particularly delicate issues from other epochs. It is actually characteristic that Bronisław Geremek, in spite of various political factors, which should have directed him precisely towards contemporary history, chose medieval studies instead.

Another factor which inclined the École circle to work with us was that the broadly speaking French left wing was interested in Communist countries and in Marxism. After 1956, Poland seemed to be a much more interesting country than our “brotherly” countries. The third factor was that the West was interested in Poland because of the contemporary play between geopolitical blocs. In that time, sensing the changes in Poland after 1956, the West changed its policy. Instead of “walling itself up” against us, it began to draw us in, opened doors before the Polish elites, including even people openly connected to the Communism. Roughly speaking, it wanted to “soften up” the Communism in Poland. After 1989, we joked in the circle of Polish historians, that the scholarship given to Geremek (even before his post in Paris) was the best French investment in Poland. France invested in historians, and the United States, through the Ford Foundation, in sociologists.

What then facilitated the rapprochement from the Polish side after 1956? First, a very strong internal pressure on leaving the country door at least slightly ajar and allowing foreign contacts. In that particular situation Gomułka could not resist that pressure much—or perhaps he might have wanted some opening, of course one he would control. The circumstance that France took a special place among the Western countries in the Eastern Bloc policy may have worked in the same direction. As France somehow distanced itself from other Western countries, it began to be treated better in the East. There may have been some expectations in relation to France in the general international strategy.

Yet another factor favouring the rapprochement was a transformation in humanities and social science in Poland after 1956. For some time and to some extent, Gomułka seemed reconciled to it. In the given situation,

he might not have been able to do otherwise, or not have wanted to take everything firmly in hand. He did not like us, for sure. It was only in 1968 that the offensive was launched, in theory against the “Sionists and Revisionists” and in practice against the scientists who were wiser, brighter, and better in their profession. Until that time, it had been a fairly good period for our humanities and social sciences. Themselves, they became a pressure group of sorts, in the direction of sustaining foreign contacts. Of not the least importance, Party activists, including Party activists in the field of science, were not these Communist “believers” any more, who oriented themselves toward Marx and Moscow. Party elites of that time quite often did not like Moscow, they were just many times afraid of it, but they discovered the charm of staying in the West. Yet it was not possible to satiate all members of the intellectual Party elites with posts in the embassies. Scientific exchange was then convenient. For these or other reasons, the Communists accepted scientific cooperation with France.

As in the case of France I named Fernand Breudel as the advocate of contacts, and might add his numerous circle with Jaques Le Goff, Clemens Heller, and Maurice Aynard at the head, so on the Polish side I would like to name two people who gave their full support to the cooperation: Professors Adam Schaff and Stefan Żółkiewski. They were both professors-humanists and, at the same time, high-ranking Communist activists. Today they are rarely spoken of—especially the former—well. From my point of view, however, their role in many cases should be a matter of fairly complex assessment. Prof. Żółkiewski, who in any case changed his way after 1968, I generally respect both as a researcher and a man. In particular, I am convinced that without the support of the professors I mentioned, the Polish-French connection in the field of humanities would not have developed. They believed them necessary.

The said contacts were designed as an exchange. In practice of course, Polish scientists made more use of it and wanted to go to France more than their French colleagues to Poland—especially for longer sojourns. Many of us went, some more than once. These were systematic trips, ones you could rely on. Of course, not everybody went—but it would be false to say that only the chosen did or, what would be untrue and unjust, at unfair prices. True, that there were some of us who paid such prices, either convinced of such necessity or of their own will.

Obviously, all those trips required copious amounts of bureaucratic loitering, were being approved at many levels, and never became as casual as foreign trips in democratic countries. Yet we went, and it was essential. Although less essential, it should be noted that for longer trips we even brought our spouses, which the authorities amazingly allowed us to do.

What did we gain from trips to France? The first answer which would come to mind is that thanks to contacts with French scientists we gained much professionally. Certainly there would be some elements of truth in that answer. Yet, I have at least two problems with giving it. The first is the circumstance, that the results of scientific contact are hard to verify. Even counting references to French sources in Polish historiography would not be a conclusive argument in this case. It is possible, of course, to analyse the works created using the methods of the history of historiography, but doing so would rather ascertain the possible similarity of ideas than necessarily prove the influence of one environment over another. Some scientific thread may be “hanging in the air” and appear in works of various historians independently from the influence ascertained. The other difficulty in answering the question is the circumstance, that the case of scientific influence of the French environment over the Polish one in the field of historical research has already been discussed and brought diverse answers.

Trying to speak myself, and in a way groundlessly, I will say that in my opinion, we did not try hard enough to profit from the French contacts in the scientific sense. It was the time when the “Annales” school was on the rise, also a great epoch of French anthropology. We might have profited more from direct contacts. Instead, we spent plenty of time in libraries and archives. We wanted to gather material for works we were preparing in Poland. We lived in a conviction, that that sojourn might have been the only, or the last, opportunity to browse the French archives and libraries. Perhaps thanks to such efforts of ours, among other things, the level of Polish historiography was quite good (the signalled, ill-fated areas excluded). Yet even Prof. Tadeusz Manteuffel, as the Director of the Institute of History of PAN, thought it was his duty to remind the employees going abroad that France is not limited to Bibliothèque Nationale (then in rue Richelieu). Another thing is that, as the legend has it, he himself during his sojourns in Paris arrived at the Library so early that he might replace the doorman. Alas, I spent more time in libraries myself than in classes and in personal contacts with French researchers. I gathered material for many a work this way, but now I wish I had not overdone my choice.

Our contacts with France brought us also profits which are not directly scientific, though at the end of the day they also influenced our results. We got to know Paris and France, which was important for us as historians as well. We got to know its museums and monuments. We got to know the life in a democratic and capitalist country. We saw well-supplied stores and many private cars in the streets. We read uncensored publications, including periodicals and books published by the Polish emigration. All in all, thanks to contacts with France, we became wiser as people. Perhaps the same should

be said differently: we became less stupid than we might have been without that view of the world.

The supposedly leading system has been gone for 20 years. We lost the “most favoured nation treatment” we had long enjoyed in the West. When the “Solidarność” rebellion was on the rise, we still caught attention, the examples of which appeared e.g. in the joint research on “Solidarity” by researchers from both countries led by Alain Touraine. After the introduction of martial law, the interest in Poland as well as solidarity between colleagues were expressed by the material aid we were shown. Today, however, nobody is going to accommodate us just because we live in the East and still are relatively conscious historians.

If we wanted to hold on to the overused, and otherwise disputable word “normality”, we could say that the situation “normalised”. Trips abroad, to which we paid so much attention in the PRL, are not a problem anymore. Student exchange is happening almost en masse. Yet there is “the other side of the coin”. In a “normal” situation, people cooperate when they find it profitable. The Polish environment of history, or more broadly speaking, of social sciences, has become difficult terrain for France. That we have long-established and regular contacts paradoxically results in less need of them than in other former Communist countries. Even one of my French colleagues told me bitterly: “In Poland we have most friends, and yet we manage the least common projects”. Besides, you cannot build too much on friendship due to generational shift. Otherwise, France has a numerous competition in Poland nowadays. Especially strong are the efforts made by the Germans in the direction of scientific cooperation.

Contacts may have an opportunity to thrive and develop if they are mutually profitable—and that not in the general terms of Polish-French cooperation but from the viewpoints of particular people and teams cooperating with one another, not necessarily just from Warsaw and Paris. Yet for the cooperation to thrive, the Polish science must have something to offer to the French science. In this sense, the first step to further development of Polish-French cooperation is, in my opinion, to make Polish historiography, and other disciplines as well, more interesting. There is no better way to develop profitable cooperation with France in the field of social science than working for serious research in humanities in Poland, and finding in ourselves the energy to participate, to look for... Neither one nor the other is easy. This is not the best time for research in humanities, neither in Poland nor in the whole world. Nevertheless, let us be optimistic.

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by Marcin Kula

Abstract

This is a paper presented at the meeting organized at Paris in 2012 to commemorate the 50 years of activity of the Center of Polish Culture at Sorbonne. The Center was organized by Bronislaw Geremek, an eminent Polish historian who played an important political role in the anti-communist movement many years later, and who became the Minister of Foreign Affairs after the communism. Both Universities established the Center to facilitate contacts of Polish and French social scientists, difficult at the time of communism. The Polish communist government encouraged this endeavor to smooth the contacts with France, which seemed more independent from the United States than other Western countries. Polish social scientists used this political conjuncture to build contacts with their French colleagues, especially from the “Annales” school. Fernand Braudel wanted to know the Marxist historians from the East and he appreciated the Polish historical school. The Poles seemed him more reasonable than Marxists from most other communist countries. Quai d’Orsay looked with relative optimism to changes in Poland after 1956, so they facilitated the implementation of Braudel’s ideas. Most probably, Warsaw University was the unique University in the Eastern bloc to have such a center in Paris already in 1962. After the fall of communism the Polish-French contacts are not as important for Polish social scientists as they were before—for the simple reason that the contacts with most other countries are easy today. Let’s hope nevertheless that the Polish-French common programs will continue.

Keywords: Center of Polish Culture at Sorbonne, Bronislaw Geremek, “Annales” school, Polish and French social scientists.