

The Polish Intelligentsia as the Conscience of the Polish Society at the Turn of the 19th Century

Once in days which we can describe now as gone by Jerzy Szacki wrote that if it is impossible to talk about anything else, we pontificate about the intelligentsia¹.

It seems that this is feature of the Polish character not only in historically difficult times. The topic of intelligentsia remains an issue even in times when one is allowed to talk about everything. This may be due to the fact that one of the manifold attractions of the intellectual's life has been the constant questioning and undermining of his utility (a recurrent theme in Polish literature). This especially applied to humanists, as they were not able to give simple answers, remedy economic problems or find a rapid way out of complex social difficulties. This inability was a source of occasional self-criticism. On the other hand - and this may appear paradoxical - sometimes intellectuals who are allowed to talk about everything do not have anything to say. This may be another source of the relentless popularity of their deliberations on their own milieu, which started in the mid nineteenth century and are still part of a national debate.

Despite all this talk, however, no unanimous definition of the Polish intelligentsia has yet been given. Obviously, this should not discourage scholars from exploring this topic. We should keep in mind that no collective notion used by social historians is perfectly accurate. Although we can try to establish its meaning arbitrarily, such effort is very seldom effective.

The attempts to determine the social role of the intellectual elites are constantly carried out by historians, sociologists, political scientists. The aim of this paper is to shed light on the

¹ J. Jedlicki, *Inteligencja w demokratycznym teatrze*, (*The Intelligentsia in a Democratic Theatre*) „Gazeta Wyborcza” 31 XII 2004, s. 14. The author refers to the fact that since the freedom of speech of the Poles was gravely limited for almost two centuries (1795-1918; 1945-1989), they were looking for themes which would not meet with a strong opposition from censorship. In discussing the topic of the intelligentsia, Poles were safe, because they usually subjected it to criticism and the latter was always welcomed by foreign authorities which tried to take control over the independence of Polish thought. Although the true outcome of this critique was the consolidation of the Polish intellectual milieu by showing it a way for improvement, the oppressive forces believed it will undermine the foundations of the Polish society and made it more fragile.

unclear reason that intelligentsia has existed for so long. Before presenting the role, a few more words must be said about the way of understanding this very notion, which is the most debatable issue of all related to the subject. Providing some background may help to clarify what the intelligentsia notion meant to the people who created it in the moment of its coming into existence and to our contemporaries, but it will especially bring us closer to understanding the whole complexity and controversiality of the intelligentsia notion. The paper juxtaposes in several points the Polish approach to this term and social stratum with the Western view of the intellectual elite. Despite the fact that there existed considerable differences between the role of both groups, undoubtedly most functions were related, the role of conscience being a flagship example.

Problems defining intelligentsia have existed from the moment of its mysterious origin, that is why fixing a definition is the most debatable issue of all related to the subject. The first reason for this is the fact that the concept of the intelligentsia as a separate social stratum was born in unclear circumstances and for unclear purposes. Jerzy Jedlicki states that in the Polish society it created itself in the mid-nineteenth century, since when it has constantly vanished by self-deconstructions, but there always remains something for the subsequent vanishing.² The same observation can be made of Western intellectuals who are believed to be an effect of mobilization and self-recruitment.³

The intelligentsia was a unique phenomenon in the mid-nineteenth century when it appeared as a noun describing a social stratum mainly in Polish and Russian dictionaries. Before the nineteenth century a group later described as intellectuals was referred to as scribes, philosophers or learned people. They often travelled from place to place, earning their living from their knowledge.⁴ The collective term “intellectuals” then started to be used in Western Europe; this usage was preceded and perhaps even inspired by the appearance of the notion of “the intelligentsia” in Eastern Europe. It may have been Clemenceau⁵ who used it first or the signatories of a public protest against the Dreyfus trial.⁶

² Ibidem

³ Z. Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: on Modernity, Post-modernity and Intellectuals*, Cambridge 1987, p. 2.

⁴ T. Huszar, *Changes in the Concept of Intellectuals*, in: *The Intelligentsia and the Intellectuals. Theory, Method and Case Study*, ed. by A. Gella, Beverly Hills 1976, p. 79.

⁵ He used this term in French in 1898; while the Dreyfus affair at the end of the nineteenth century is often indicated as the time of full emergence of the intellectual in public life (it mainly concerns the role of Emile Zola in the public discussion).

⁶ On the history of the word intellectuals and its adaptation to English see the first chapter (*The Terms of the Question. The history of a Word and A Matter of Definition*) in S. Collini, *Absent Minds. Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford 2006; Z. Bauman, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

There are many points of contact in the theories defining the intelligentsia and intellectuals, which may suggest that differences between Western and Eastern European elites were not as significant as was believed. Since we can assume that – as has already been mentioned above – this group was invented and defined by itself, similar phenomena of self-reflection are observable elsewhere. The word “intelligentsia” itself has not been used in the West, but there were numerous attempts to recognize among Western societies the group for which the intellect played a central role in life. The representatives of this environment were referred to as descendants of “man of knowledge” or “la republique des lettres”. They were just like their counterparts in Eastern Europe: writers, poets, journalists, scientists and other public figures, who felt it was their moral responsibility to interfere directly with different political and social processes influencing the “minds of the nation”.⁷ In both cases the term “intellectual” usually referred to function and identity rather than occupation or belief. However, one of the best specialists on intelligentsia, Aleksander Gella, argues that these two groups - Eastern intelligentsia and Western European intellectuals – were, despite their superficial similarity, quite different. According to him, the intelligentsia was a specific Eastern social stratum and had no counterpart in the West. Nevertheless – as he argues – after the First World War the term gradually started to become a catchword internationally. The original meaning of the intelligentsia became increasingly hazy and finally it took on another meaning, which is often used nowadays.

Although the above may be seen as only a problem of terminology, the controversies over the semantic value of the notion have considerably affected discussions on the role and place of the intelligentsia in society. Originally, the word denoted a larger group, connected by bonds of solidarity resulting from similar habits, much the same social tasks and the feeling of a similar position in the hierarchy of social prestige.⁸ Furthermore, the term was much less related to a given profession in the Polish case than it was in the West. It referred to specific mental and cultural capabilities, and the degree of comprehension of the philosophical and political implications of the time.

The Polish intelligentsia had to provide its nation with the basis for national survival. The lack of a state and the policy of partitioners posed a constant threat to maintaining the continuity of national traditions. Due to a lack of possibilities to influence political and economic development, the intelligentsia devoted more attention to the spiritual growth of the

⁷ Z. Bauman, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁸ Z. Komorowski, *The Class of the Intelligentsia in Africa*, in *The Intelligentsia and the Intellectuals...*, p. 201.

nation. On the other hand, the fact of divorce of the intelligentsia from a political apparatus enabled it to preserve most of its moral independence.⁹ Independence, in turn, is the most important element of the functioning of the *conscience*. At the same time, its judicial role could turn the elite into passive spectator of the ongoing events.¹⁰

Therefore, the history of Polish lands after the third and final partition brought about the new role of educated people. They started to take a special custody of their national culture and language and tried to set out the basic principles of the nation-state without a state.

⁹ A. Gella, *Development of Class Structure in Eastern Europe*, New York 1988, p. 144.

¹⁰ S. Brzozowski, *Kultura i życie (Culture and Life)*, Warsaw 1973, p. 187.