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Disputes over the place of ethics in Polish Marxist philosophy

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Abstract
In the article, the author presents attempts by Polish Marxist philosophers to enrich Marxism with ethical issues. The initial absence of ethics in Marxism is associated with the ignorance of tradition related to their own formation. In the author's opinion, only polemics with the competitive Lviv-Warsaw school forced Polish Marxists to take the issue seriously. That is why Polish Marxist ethics in its mature form was only established in the 1960s, and did not enrich Marxism itself, but rather indirectly contributed to the initiation of socio-political transformations in our country.

Keywords: Marxism, communism, morality, Marxist ethics, Karl Marx, Adam Schaff, Maria Ossowska

Introduction

Eric Hobsbawm, the British historian pertinently noted that Marxism had been the main subject of intellectual discussions around the world over the course of almost a century and a half (Hobsbawm, 2011, p. viii). The complicated history of our country renders this remark only partially relevant to Poland, which can be easily explained by the fact that until 1918 Poland did not yet exist on the map of Europe as an independent state. Much more important, however, is the political message in which Marxism is portrayed as an intellectual product of the hostile nations that initiated the dismantling of Poland, and on this occasion, imposed on it not only their political authority, but also tried to dominate it culturally and scholarly. This left an indelible mark on the reception of Marxism in Poland both in the interwar period (1919–1939) and now.

The history of Polish Marxism is now barely known, mainly for non-scholarly reasons. Consequently, some of its traditions have been silenced or marginalised according to current political needs. Most of the participants in the discussion on the history of Polish Marxism represent one of the two opposing options in which Marxism is either completely alien to the Polish philosophical tradition, or – in the 20th century had only one face, that of Leninist-Stalinist ideology. This is the dominant narrative in most publications attempting to present its complicated history. Even the works of the most important representatives of Polish Marxism followed this rule, like Adam Schaff in the book entitled *Narodziny i rozwój filozofii marksistowskiej (The birth and development of Marxist philosophy*) (1950), and Leszek Kołakowski in his monumental work: *Main currents of Marxism: The founders – the golden age – the breakdown* (1976).

Adam Schaff associated the lack of Marx's successors in Poland with the civilisational backwardness of a country with no working class, which resulted in not needing an ideology that would aim at improving its social position. This was also due to the fact that Polish Marxism was only secondary in relation to Russian and German research, and certain issues were completely neglected therein. This meant focusing on ontological and epistemological issues at the expense of issues relating to human philosophy, especially ethics and aesthetics. Some Polish philosophers spotted such one-sidedness of Polish Marxism and tried to fill the existing gap by formulating cognitively interesting concepts. Others, while not finding answers to their axiological problems, abandoned Marxism or switched to revisionist positions. Studies

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in the ongoing discussions on these issues in Poland bring a number of interesting observations and is an important complement to the history of Polish ethics.

Polish Marxism before World War II

Publications devoted to the history of Marxism in Poland do not tell us anything about the achievements of the philosophers who authentically enriched its theoretical foundations at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A completely forgotten example of a thinker taking interest in Marxism was Władysław Weryho (1868–1916), the founder and long-time editor of the first Polish philosophical magazine '*Przegląd Filozoficzny*'. In 1892, Weryho defended his Ph.D. dissertation entitled *Marx als Philosoph* written under the supervision of Ludwig Stein (1859–1930) at the Swiss University of Bern. What is significant is that this dissertation was published by the local publishing house (Weryho, 1894) and is still cited today by many of Marx's biographers. Weryho's important contribution to the history of philosophy consisted in drawing attention to the fact that Marx was not only a philosopher but also a sociologist. Nevertheless, according to Weryho, Marx committed a mistake in absolutising the economic phenomena, which resulted in the one-sidedness of his philosophy. However, this fact did not diminish the great importance of Marx's thought for world philosophy (Weryho, 1894, p. 52). Weryho devoted several other texts to Marx's philosophy, including analyses of both his scholarly and popular works, highlighting two periods, the first of which lasted until 1848, i.e. the publication of *The poverty of philosophy,* and the second one – until his death (Weryho, 1897/98, pp. 159–160). This division corresponds more or less to the popular division between 'the young Marx' and 'the old Marx', but Weryho interpreted it differently. In the first period, Marx was mainly a philosopher and in the second period a sociologist. In light of Polish scholarly disputes in the mid-20th century, it is surprising that their participants had no idea that the issue they were dealing with had already been analysed within their native philosophy.

Selective interest in Marxism in Poland was also related to the popularity of positivism in our country. However, the physicalism of positivism led to the reduction of philosophical issues and in particular to the removal of those issues that could not be included in the framework of empirically verifiable theories. The first victim of such a reductionist approach was metaphysics, alongside axiological issues. In the view of the positivists, traditional philosophy, due to its saturation with metaphysico-axiological content, lost its right to the status of science. Such an approach, however, met opposition even among declared positivists. They tried to 'scientify' traditional ethics in various ways, which led to building of an independent ethics systems. This meant separating ethical issues from *a priori* accepted assumptions. In Poland, such attempts to build an ethics devoid of metaphysical assumptions were first formulated by Aleksander Świętochowski, who developed a unique treatise entitled: *O powstawaniu praw moralnych* (*On the formation of moral laws*) (1877) (Świętochowski, 1877). The uniqueness of this study consists in Świętochowski's usage of methods appropriate for empirical sciences; he tried to build a scientific system of normative ethics. However, this attempt met with many critical opinions, which made Świętochowski change its contents quite radically. He wrote a book entitled *Źródła moralności* (*The sources of morality*), in which there was not much left of his old revolutionary ideas (Świętochowski, 1912).

Another positivist, Julian Ochorowicz, in an effort to avoid Świętochowski's shortcomings, developed his own version of positivist ethics in *Metoda w etyce* (*A method in ethics*), a competing work, which presents his own version of positivist ethics and and tries to combine all moral issues into one system united by a common scientific method (Ochorowicz, 1906). Although this work revolutionised Polish ethics, it did not avoid numerous simplifications, and never, on its completion, fulfilled the promises made at the book's start. Today we know that it had a great influence on Kazimierz Twardowski, who attempted to implement Ochorowicz's intention by using methods derived from analytical philosophy. Unfortunately, during

Twardowski's lifetime (1866–1938), his works on ethics were completely unknown, as they were only published thanks to the efforts of his students almost half a century after his death.

At the same time, a book was published, which can be considered the first Polish attempt to formulate Marxist ethics. In 1906, Stanisław Garfein-Garski (1867–1928) published an interesting study: *Materialistyczne pojmowanie dziejów a etyka* (*The materialistic interpretation of history and ethics*), in which, under the influence of evolutionism and Nietzschean philosophy, he clearly wrote that ethics is indelible from human history, and it is always present therein, because all progress and persistence of culture depend on it. According to him, Marxist ethics embodies the progress of history, for it "leads mankind to fight for a more dignified, better and nobler life, building in it the revolutionary energy that leads to action" (Garfein-Garski, 1906, pp. 77–78). Although it was, in a sense, secondary to Karl Kautsky's well-known book *Ethik und materialistische Geschichtsauffassung* (1906), Garfein-Garski included elements of the Polish philosophy of action into ethical issues, making it an important element of the Polish philosophical tradition. Unfortunately, this publication was ignored by Polish Marxists oriented towards communist ideology, as it represented the revisionist trend which they rejected.

Polish Marxists of that period were active in the scholarly community alongside representatives of other philosophical trends. They participated in scholarly life, conducting intense scholarly polemics. The first Polish Marxist philosophers also tried to spread their views in various ways, including carrying out polemics with representatives of competing philosophical schools. They formed a certain, though today quite forgotten, tradition. For example, in 1906, Adolf Rejbekiel (1865–1935), today a completely forgotten supporter of Marxism, attacked Julian Ochorowicz for his work *Metoda w etyce* (*A method in ethics*) (Rejbekiel, 1906, p. 460). This attack, though it appeared to be scientific in character, was, in fact, a camouflaged attempt to promote Marxism. Rejbekiel also exposed a Marxist motif in his polemic, suggesting that enriching Ochorowicz's work with references to Marx would improve its scholarly value. It was, therefore, a question of demonstrating the need to take Marxism into account in all the scholarly discussions that were taking place at the time. The Polish Marxists of the Partitions period were therefore involved in the academic discourse, and, consequently, they closely followed the achievements of national and world research.

Therefore, at the time of the state's rebirth in 1918, Polish Marxism was not uniform. In the socialist option approved by its supporters, Marxism constituted one of numerous possible ways of interpreting the world, while for the supporters of the communist version, so-called Marxism-Leninism was the only possible option. Rosa Luxemburg was the last major authority among all supporters of Marxism in Poland, but, unfortunately, her untimely death during the Berlin Revolution meant that they had no theorist who could interpret the changes taking place in Europe in a way appropriate to philosophy. This meant that the left-wing radicals did not see the need for studying Marxism in a scholarly way at all. Some of them did not even know that Marxism was a scholarly theory, which, like any other theory, had to improve its assumptions. In Rosa Luxemburg's time, Marxism was still an attractive intellectual proposition because it "presented itself as an effort to abolish the dehumanized conditions of the bourgeois world, which was to be achieved by denouncing social injustice, 'work alienation', work liberation, and building a socialist relationship to work as a category significant indicative of a new reality, which was to be a 'vanguard of the bright tomorrows'" (Gluchman, 2020, p. 44).

Before World War II, Polish Marxist philosophers could easily cooperate with representatives of other orientations, even if their teachers and Marxist polemists never accepted each other. An example of this was the promotion by Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, one of the most outstanding representatives of the Lviv-Warsaw school, of the Doctor of Marxist Philosophy Stepan Oleksiuk (1892–1941). Oleksiuk, even before obtaining a Ph.D. degree, presented readings on Marxist philosophy at the meetings of the Lviv Polish Philosophical

Society (Twardowski, 1997, pp. 211–212). Furthermore, Mark (Mełech) Bitter (1902–1965) completed, under Tadeusz Kotarbiński, a doctoral seminar on philosophy. After the war, Bitter chose a political career. This clearly shows that before the war there was no rivalry between the Lviv-Warsaw school and Marxism. It was artificially triggered for the sake of political in-fighting only after the war, more precisely in the late 1940s.

What is important, such politically unengaged Marxists were approved not only by the pre-war administrative authorities, but could also conduct research according to their convictions without any problems. At that time, however, there was no such tolerance towards the agitators of communist ideology. Moreover, there was no work authored by Polish communists that could be considered a lecture on Marxist ethics. Only Jan Hempel (1877–1937) made some efforts directed towards such issues, but his efforts did not receive any synthetic development (Szmyd, 1973, pp. 95–124). In principle, he confined himself only to criticism of Christian ethics, considering it a tool of people's enslavement, and was inclined to return to the original Slavic customs having their roots in nature. This situation meant that post-war Polish communists did not have any ethical traditions that could be employed as an attempt to reorient the morality of Polish society.

Consequences of the lack of continuity of tradition for ethics in Polish Marxism

The problem with the reduction of ethical content in Polish Marxism was noticeable at the very beginning of post-war social transformations. Pre-war Polish Marxism of a communist orientation did not develop any systemic concept of ethics that would constitute an attractive offer for intellectual elites. It was for this reason that it could constitute an offer only for the economically disadvantaged strata, as it did not have anything attractive for other social groups. After all, such attraction is not due to the fact that it satisfied any existential needs of people, but to the fact that it would allow the development and consistent application of a certain formula of justice, which is a measure of self-esteem, as well as the evaluation of the behaviour of others. Marxists had quite a lot of problems with ethics, which is confirmed, for example, by a reading of the first Polish textbook on Marxism authored by Adam Schaff, in which ethics and morality are not even mentioned (Schaff, 1947). The author of this book undoubtedly followed the model of similar studies developed in the USSR at that time, which, however, does not explain the omission of the axiological component in Marxism. Yet, this was a testimony not so much to the absence of ethics in Marxism, but rather to the ignorance of recent traditions of his own formation, of which Schaff was, after all, the main ideologist.

For Polish intellectuals, Adam Schaff's attempts seemed exceptionally awkward, and in 1945, while objecting to the allegations of the lacking ethical component in Marxism, he stated; "Marxism has its own ethics and its own ethical norm. It is a demand to act in accordance with the interests of the proletariat, or indirectly in accordance with the interests of the majority of the nation" (Schaff, 1945, p. 5). Thus, the ideological content was equated here with the scholarly one. Schaff certainly could not refer to Garfein-Garski because he was influenced by Austro-Marxism when writing his book, so for communists he was a revisionist. Nevertheless, Schaff knew nothing about Garfein-Garski's book, although it was published in his native Lviv and received a lot of interest in Polish scholarly circles. This shows that Polish Marxists of the post-war period were poorly educated in philosophy, and it was only in polemics with competitive positions that they supplemented the gaps in their knowledge on cultural history and philosophy.

Schaff especially revealed his inadequate mastery of the theoretical foundations of Marxism in his polemic with Paul Konrad, who, in the '*Odrodzenie'* journal, criticized the ways Marxists practiced philosophy. Konrad called Schaff's principle: "that which serves the interests of the working class is moral", the 'bush' principle in the sense of its primitiveness. Konrad's charge sounded very serious, because accepting the assumption of a connection between morality and

the interests of the working class would not allow for a negative moral assessment, e.g. of Nazi crimes committed during the war (Konrad, 1947, pp. 10–11), with which Schaff did not even try to argue, although it was certainly a fundamental charge.

Adam Schaff did not have an easy task in this dispute, because in the Leninist version of Marxism, the so-called 'classics', that is Marx, Engels and Lenin, had a somewhat decreed infallibility. As one Russian philosopher aptly described this situation: "Not only criticism, but also the development of materialistic dialectics, was, in Soviet philosophy a completely marginalised topic. To be the author of a discovery in Soviet philosophy! God forbid! It would be like signing a death sentence for oneself" (Gricenko & Danilczenko, 2007, p. 28). In order to maintain his superior position in Polish philosophy, Schaff could not afford to lose the trust of political authorities.

This situation led to a kind of regression in Polish Marxism, because Marxist philosophy, in the Polish version before World War II, developed according to the positivist premise of the rivalry of ideas, the best of which wins, but, from this rivalry, the winner emerges enriched with the best content of the defeated idea. It was, therefore, an offensive strategy, attractive to intellectuals looking for new challenges all the time. After the Second World War, a defensive strategy prevailed, consisting in defending the already existing solutions at all costs. It thus lost all its intellectual attractiveness, and hence it was later so easily rejected by the elites.

Paradoxically, it was only the pre-war philosophers, fought by Marxists, who took seriously research on the ethical component in Marxism. Maria in her *Socjologia moralności* (*Sociology of morality*) treated Marxism in the same way as any other philosophical concept, and thus criticized the compatibility of its proclaimed slogans with scholarly justified reasons. Her study of the place of ethics in Marx's work begins with a devastating diagnosis that, in principle, there is no room for such considerations in Marx's philosophy. According to Ossowska, the "quadruple source of ethical abstinence of Marxism" (Ossowska, 1957, p. 1) was derived from the following:

a) The influences of Hegelianism,

b) Attempts to oppose traditional utopian socialism (in the Proudhonian version),

c) Aversion to bombastic declamatory enunciations (full of hypocrisy) 'cultivated by the ruling classes',

d) The ambition of scientificity characteristic of the era in which it originated (Ossowska, 1986, p. 372).

According to the scholar, this was due to the conviction of the creator of this trend that "morality is not transformed by moralization, but by a change in the social relationships that determine morals. In his *German ideology*, Marx claimed that communists did not formulate any morality, they did not say that we should love one another and should not be selfish, because they knew that selfishness was determined by social conditions, and that it was not man's ideal which affected his liberation, but the productive forces" (Ossowska, 1986, p. 372). While developing her article on Marx's ethics, in her notes she added another important remark: "There is no point in preaching morality when you know the conditions that determine it. These conditions must be created" (Ossowska, 1957, p. 1).

Ossowska also noted that ethical thought in Marxism was not formulated within a coherent concept, and therefore this thought had yet to be reconstructed. Moreover, she tried to perform such a reconstruction herself. Adequately, in Marxism, she identified the fundamental problem areas in which such reconstruction was possible. It was about the model of man – what kind of man he should be, not what he is. Furthermore, "the description of the deformity to which man is subjected in the capitalist system" is, of course, an indication of what is considered evil in Marxism. Ossowska pointed out the essential features of this design and the way in which it was presented by Marx. She called this model a 'Renaissance' one, in the sense that man should be characterized by the richness of his entire personality. This does not, of course, exhaust all

the richness of the model, as it should also be characterized by the "cult of work and solidarity between people" (Ossowska, 1986, p. 379). Ossowska perceived a negative example of depriving a person of such opportunities for personality development in her descriptions of female characters subjected to a kind of training and pressed into ready-made patterns to which they had to adapt, thus becoming deprived of the opportunity to fully externalize their personality qualities. Summing up her reflections, she emphasized the social and emotional nature of the popularity of Marxism, although its ethical message was basically hidden.

Ossowska also attempted to capture how Marxism enriched the science of morality. In her opinion, at least four factors can be mentioned here:

1) "The designation of morality by the interests of the ruling class;
2) Moral variability;
3) The misleading hope for changing values through education;
4) The family has no morality" (Ossowska, 1957, p. 4).

Obviously, the last point refers to the assumption that the family is not a subject of morality, because it may consist of people characterized by different levels of morality, or even showing opposing views. Ossowska noticed an example of this in family situations: "Parents exploit children; it is a clear deformation of the relationship that should unite parents and children. Children are traded, children are the tools. Violence is carried out by parents through upbringing" (Ossowska, 1957, p. 8) .

It is striking that the representatives of competing concepts, owing to their analyses, knew more about Marxist ethics than Schaff and his disciples or supporters did. The situation changed dramatically after the announcement at the 20th Congress of Khrushchev's paper on the consequences of the cult of the individual, which, from a philosophical point of view, was mainly an accusation of all those who forgot about ethics in Marxism. Therefore, the breakthrough that took place at the time of the publication of Khrushchev's paper, in Poland primarily caused shock, after which yesterday's declared communists switched to 'revisionist' positions, against which they had only recently fought hard. Thus, Polish communism lost its intellectual elite, which meant that it was no longer able to influence the attitudes of society or gain other followers beside opportunists. The crash of the system based on such fragile foundations was therefore inevitable.

Adam Schaff himself, however, was able to assess the mental and political breakthrough that had taken place at the time. Evaluating the condition of Polish Marxism, he wrote:

> Today, together with false myths, in the eyes of many there disappeared also that which is undoubtedly the truth and strength of Marxism. At the same time, we have helped to restore the authority to bourgeois science – discrediting our own positions and surrounding the opponent's positions with the romanticism of the forbidden fruit. [...] The shock was enormous, especially in the case of people who, acting in the best faith, turned out to be objective co-creators of evil (Schaff, 1957, p. 1).

He wrote openly that the party had used violence, which exposed him to a wave of criticism, especially from the political elites of the time.

Schaff, however, continued his reflections on morality in the subsequent editions of the 'Polityka' journal. In the article *O sprawach moralnych – bez mitologii* (*On moral issues – without mythology*), he expressed an idea that puzzled Ossowska. He, namely, once again stated that Marxism has its theory of morality, and that it is not the theory but the practice of its implementation that is faulty. He pointed out two reasons for making such a charge: "Because, *primo,* it does not have a codified and equally old system like religions, and, *secundo,* because of the atheistic nature of Marxism, people are willing to attribute to it a denial of those moral principles which have been codified by religion" (Schaff, 1958, p. 1).

The direct confrontation of Maria Ossowska's reflections on the ethical content of Marxism with the views of Adam Schaff took place during the 1st National Conference on Ethics organized on May 10–13, 1965 in Nieborów by the Department of Ethics of Warsaw University. Besides the opponents, Tadeusz Kotarbiński was one who participated in the conference. Adam Schaff was the last speaker to deliver his lecture *Jednostka a socialism* (*The individual and socialism*). After the lecture, a discussion took place in which all participants of the conference, except for Kotarbiński, took part. The content of the presented paper does not arouse any emotions today, but in the period when it was delivered, it meant a kind of 'earthquake' for Marxists. How much emotion it aroused was best evidenced by the fact that the editors of the 'Etyka' journal did not decide to publish it, limiting themselves to a short mention that the paper was an abridged version of the fifth chapter of Schaff's newly published book *Marksizm a jednostka ludzka* (*Marxism and the human individual*). Maria Ossowska took part in the discussion on the issue of individual freedom under socialism and its so-called necessary limitations. Schaff's reply could not, first of all, satisfy the Marxists, because in his paper he pointed to the existence of various forms of alienation, also in socialism. The freedom of individuals acquires a political dimension, which means that it must be regulated to some extent. "By introducing certain necessary restrictions on the freedom of an individual […] it is not always possible to guarantee the rightness of these restrictions. But the lack of a guarantee, the possibility of risk is a distinctive feature of politics" (Schaff, 1958, p. 1). At the same time, defending himself against the objections of the debaters, the speaker emphasized the fact that he was a communist and did not undermine Marx's authority in any way. Nevertheless, Schaff's speech had mainly a symbolic meaning, because since then ethical issues have become a permanent part of Polish Marxist philosophy.

The marginal treatment of ethical issues in Marxism occurred mainly in the Stalinist period, as on the wave of the thaw after October 1956, Marxist ethics in Poland began to develop dynamically. Leszek Kołakowski also approached issues of this kind, although they were on the edges of his scholarly interests. His work entitled *Etyka bez kodeksów (Ethics without codes)*, published in 1962, constituted a controversial attempt to defend the absence of ethics in Marxism. Kołakowski wrote there that "conservatism, like nihilism, constitutes a self-defense against the compulsion to make moral decisions" (Kołakowski, 1962, p. 148). Thus, dynamic Marxism would not have to expose its moral message, as it was contained in each of its postulates. It was also a critique of Adam Schaff's attempt to enrich Marxism with the content of existentialism. In other words, at that time Kołakowski was still convinced that the ethical message was inextricably linked with each postulate to improve the existing situation. Therefore, Marxism does not need a code of ethics, as long as the striving for progress is preserved in its postulates. The problem only arises when Marxism itself becomes a conservative doctrine. It is then that the need to codify Marxist ethics will arise, which in fact will mean the end of its development potential.

Conclusions

The shallowness of perceiving Marxism solely as an ideology was, therefore, common in Poland, both throughout society and among the supporters of new orders. A closer understanding of Marx's own thought paradoxically led philosophers to a crisis, which eventually resulted in a shift towards positions that were officially called revisionist, although this did not necessarily mean rejecting Marxism as such. When Adam Schaff moved to the position of Euro-Marxism, he recognized that in Poland there had never been true Marxism, but only a caricatured form of it, which he himself called communo-fascism (Schaff, 1990, p. 45), which according to political decision makers did not need any philosophical justification. However, this does not change the general conclusion that Marxism in Poland, despite having a formal monopoly, was unable to enrich the achievements of national and world science.

Undoubtedly, the achievements of Kołakowski and Schaff arose only when they finally had the opportunity to confront their beliefs with the achievements of world science. In other words, all the achievements of Marxist philosophy in our country arose from challenging its Leninist version. As a result, Polish Marxism has never been as static as that practiced in the former USSR, which is why practically all the activists of the former Polish democratic opposition have Marxist roots. However, this does not change the fact that only the incorporation of ethical issues into Polish Marxism has indirectly become the main cause of democratic changes in our country. This dictates a completely different approach to Marxism, since its importance does not lie in scientific communism, as Lenin's followers believed, but precisely in underappreciated Marxist ethics.

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