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ON THE NECESSITY OF THE HISTORY OF GEOGRAPHICAL THOUGHT*

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ABSTRACT. Studies in the area of history and philosophy of geography have disappeared in Poland for the last fifty years. The aim of this paper is to restore its importance and show reasons for its revival. They can be found in societal, scientific, and educational contexts in which we practice geography. History of geographical thought contains numerous ideas which could be useful in activities aimed at understanding and reconciling different visions of reality, since geography is the study of diversity, understood as a source of unity. The most popular example of this is the fundamental principle of classical geography “Unity in diversity”, that has been accepted as the banner slogan of contemporary Europe. This example shows that the history of geographical thought is the reservoir of ideas, which still await their rediscovery. It should be also utilized to restore geography’s identity and rationale, as well as to create new lines of thought which could make geography a socially relevant field.

KEY WORDS: Polish geography, history and philosophy of geography, education, social relevance.

INTRODUCTION

It is a universally accepted fact that the necessary condition of harmonious development of every field of knowledge, whether natural or humanistic, is that it should care for its humanistic element, which embraces the history of the field and its philosophy. In spite of that, historical and philosophical problems are in the field of interest of a rather few Polish geographers. Polish geography is deprived of journals, commissions, symposia and seminars devoted to historical and philosophical research, and at our universities there exists neither a chair nor a department dealing with such problems. Historical topics appear in our journals exclusively on occasions of celebrated anniversaries. Such celebrations

and accompanying publications are however not a good place for controversies and philosophical discussions. It could be said then, that in the frame of history of Polish geography, there exists only the documentary (or antiquarian) aspect, while the history of geographical ideas and philosophy of geography have deteriorated. And it is highly symptomatic that some aspects of history of geography are more interesting for historians of science than for the very geographers. It is mainly due to the fact that important elements of geographical knowledge, which before the Second World War were the most fundamental and necessary for educational aims, have been later abandoned and have fallen into oblivion. This is the direct response to the changes in the system of geographical education in Poland during the 1950s. History, which was the area necessary to understand the cultural landscape, has been replaced with mathematics – the discipline useful for the explanation of spatial relations.

WHAT IS TO BE THE HISTORY OF GEOGRAPHICAL THOUGHT

History of geographical thought is the domain, which joins in itself two different disciplines, that is to say, history of geography and philosophy of science. This is in accordance with an age-old tradition of putting them together. In this spirit during the International Geographical Congress in Warszawa in 1934, Professor Bolesław Olszewicz proposed that a Société Lelewel should be formed with the French geographer, Lucien Gallois, as the chairman. The name of the society has been chosen to commemorate the 19th century Polish historian and geographer, Joachim Lelewel, author of the “Géographie du Moyen-Âge” (5 volumes, edited 1839–57), “The Ancient History with Regard to Geography” (in Polish, ed. in 1818 with the atlas), and “Geographical description of the Polish Lands” (in Polish, ed. 1858). The name “Lelewel” is a short Polish form of the German original Löhlföfel von Löwensprung. Joachim’s father was just Karl Moritz Löhlföfel von Löwensprung, who came from Prussia to become the citizen of the Kingdom of Poland. In 1768 he gained the indigenate (recognition as a Polish nobleman) along with the name correction. In accordance with Joachim Lelewel’s interests and style of research, Olszewicz’s intention was that such a society should be concerned with history of geographical thought including philosophical and ideological issues. However, there is no sign that such topics were actually discussed during the Warszawa Congress or at the next Congress in Amsterdam in 1938. In spite of that, the idea was not completely forgotten and finally led to the formation of the IGU Commission on the History of Geographical Thought at the New Delhi Congress in 1968. From the very beginning the Commission worked mostly on the border between two established

fields: history of ideas and philosophy of science. For example, the Commission's Objectives 1996–2000 formulated during the IGU Congress in Den Haag state that “the current and often violent conflicts linked to the political and cultural fragmentation of the world invite us to a renewed study of the ways of conceiving the human occupation and use of the Earth, as well as of the means of making these views compatible”. In particular, the activity of the Commission included the following questions:

- how ideological concepts have influenced the social and institutional construction of geographical knowledge;
- how ideologies and religions have shaped geographer's conception of the human use of the Earth; and
- which geographical concepts promoted or prevented mutual understanding in the situation of growing political conflicts and cultural fragmentation.

Such were also the main topics of the special symposium held in Sandomierz, Poland, in 1997 (see Wardenga and Wilczyński, 1998). These problems are still valid and even more and more important, but today the reasons for a revival of the history of geographical thought are manifold and are to be found in the societal, scientific and educational contexts in which we practice geography. These three contexts are considered further separately but it must be borne in mind that they are often intermingled and their complete isolation is rather an artificial measure. In spite of the fact that Polish geography has a long and very rich tradition, the history of geographical thought does not seem to be an attractive area of study for Polish geographers. Contrary to our British, French, German and American colleagues, we have published no academic handbooks in this area of knowledge for the last fifty years, we have no historical-geographical journals, no conferences, no commissions within our national geographical society, and there are no departments and chairs dealing with the history of geographical thought at our universities and geographical institutions. Consequently, it could be ascertained that history of geographical thought in Poland is dead.

SOCIETAL CONTEXT

The aim of this chapter is to prove that history of geographical thought embraces ideas and concepts that could be useful from the point of view of contemporary social and political problems. Recent history in many parts of the world has in fact challenged geographers to contribute to explanations as well as to reconciliations between different visions of reality in the circumstances of the more and more conflicting situations. History of geographical thought contains numerous ideas which could turn out to be useful in such situations, since

geography from its very beginning is the study of diversity, understood as a source of unity, complementarity, coherence, harmony and beauty. For example, one of the banner slogans of contemporary Europe is “Unity in diversity”, but none of the users of this idea seems to realize that this is just one of the fundamental principles of geography, formulated originally by one of our classics, that is to say Alexander von Humboldt. To recognize and understand the unity which exists in the diversity of terrestrial phenomena was, according to Humboldt, the key purpose of geography (originally “*Erkenntnis der Einheit in der Vielheit*”). This statement was a logical consequence of the so-called Humboldt’s paradox. According to this principle, every unit is the more coherent, the more divergent are the functions of its constituent parts. That is to say, if any unit is to form a coherent whole, its particular parts have to work divergently, or according to different principles. Humboldt applied this paradoxical principle to the idea of Nature, understood as the whole embracing both the natural and human elements of reality. It must be emphasized that the contemporary understanding of nature is strongly reduced in comparison to the classical, Humboldtian idea of Nature. For Humboldt it denoted exactly all beings and things, whether man-made or existing independently of man. At that time the main distinction was not between the natural and the cultural (human), but between the natural and the supernatural. Then the supernatural things were effectively excluded from research, and in the frame of the former natural, the natural (in narrow sense) and the cultural parts were distinguished (Wilczyński, 1998; 2003). Since the natural part of the reality worked with no essential changes, and simultaneously the contemporary people acted more and more divergently in relation to natural laws (due to science and technology), both natural and human elements of the reality (the Nature in Humboldtian terms) must have created, paradoxically, the more and more coherent whole. And the source of this coherence was nothing but the diversity in the functioning of those two different parts of the system. This example shows that history of geographical thought is in fact the reservoir of socially important ideas, which still expect their rediscovery.

The question of diversity constitutes only one example of the broad array of contemporary social problems which could be investigated by historians of geographical thought. A lot of important problems are connected with the inequality in the social, economic, technological and mental developments of societies. During the fourth and fifth Kondratieff waves we witness unprecedented developments in science and technology. People have gained access to numerous mechanical and electronic devices, which have significantly changed everyday life and landscape, particularly in the economically advanced countries. Most of the necessary every-day activities have become easier and more pleasant. Unfortunately, the developments in the mental (spiritual) sphere

are not fast enough to keep pace with the changes in technology and economy. Again and again, people show that their mental maturity does not correspond to their economic wealth and technological power. This situation is a source of numerous social problems, pathologies and sicknesses, which affect mostly the economically wealthy societies. Also in Poland, where the so-called Western way of life suddenly has become available for most of people, we can notice the appearance of social problems that were not known during the previous epoch. Classical geographers were conscious of these problems and their consequences and we can expect that their ideas could prove to be useful again. Since the inequalities between particular developments of human societies are connected with some aspects of development in science, they will be considered in the next chapter devoted to the scientific context.

SCIENTIFIC CONTEXT

Contemporary disproportions between technology and consciousness are the reflection and consequence of the gap which exists between arts and sciences, or the dichotomy between fact and value. This distinction came to be the basis on which the sciences and the humanities were differentiated and separated. To avoid values scientists adopted a doctrine of moral neutrality. The result was such estrangement of the sciences from humanities that scientists generally lost the desire and ability to communicate with non-scientific scholars. After these attitudes had been defended by positivism in the middle of the 19th century, the gap grew to the point, that many scientists were no longer willing to accept that the work of humanists had any meaning at all. By the middle of the 20th century the sciences and the humanities were generally considered to be so different from each other, that they could appropriately be characterized as two different cultures (Snow, 1961). Few scholars understood the need of interdisciplinary cooperation and tried to formulate special humanistic-scientific projects. Among them one can find mainly the representatives of theoretical physics, medicine, and geography.

Huge expansion of science and its growing specialization make it difficult to develop a coherent view of the world, and to gain understanding of the very essence of human life. This has led to the mental crisis oppressing contemporary human civilization and to the serious social and environmental problems. It was expressed by the great Polish writer, Nobel Prize winner, Czesław Miłosz, who said that

“The pollution of the natural environment with the by-product of technology should be considered a direct response of the pollution of human mentality with the by-products of science” (Miłosz, 1990).

The pull-push tensions of humanism and science are an age-old theme that lately has attained particular pertinence in the world of exploding technology and economic growth. For geography this problem should be one of the key issues. It is due to the fact that geography was a discipline which covered both the natural and cultural phenomena. According to the concept of the first Polish geographer, Wincenty Pol, geography was essentially to be an original idea of integration of particular areas of studies. Pol realised the abstractiveness of strictly scientific considerations and the fact that they disturb the natural unity and order. He saw geography as a necessary supplement to the particular sciences, getting a coherent picture of *cosmic unity*, which raises human intuition and cognitive abilities, which are far beyond the reach of perceptual experience (Pol, 1877). The Polish geographer seems to be close to the view of Varenius, who wrote, that geography possesses special value (*excellency*), which allows geographers to see synthetically *Kingdoms and Properties of the Earth*, with the eyes of the soul. This kind of recognition is available to geographers only and no specialist can reach that: *neither Divines, Physitians, Lawyers, Historians nor other Professors* (Kish, 1978: 377).

Geography was seen as a counterweight to an unavoidable specialization process in science also in the writings by another Polish 19th century geographer, Waław Nałkowski:

“The specialist prevents the geographer from shallowness and from too quick generalizations, and the geographer in turn prevents him against the one-sided views of limited horizons of thought; he prevents the specialist from straying amid the oppressive weight of details in one exclusive area of study, he teaches to understand these details as an integral part of a coherent and harmonious whole – the Gaia” (Nałkowski, 1911).

So geography has a long tradition as a “great synthesis”, but the far reaching consequences of the quantitative revolution and the fragmentation of study areas have led to the situation in which geography loses its identity and autonomy as an unified area of knowledge. Today geographers seldom refer to the classical synthetic concepts, and they even deny the role of geography as the great synthesis. Even one of the most eminent contemporary geographers, Roland J. Johnston, turned out to be the representative of the reductionist view of geography. In the contemporary discussion he showed no inclination to accept that geography... “*is the discipline with the mind-set to take all of the pieces, position them, integrate them and explain the big picture*”. In his critical review of A. J. Pitman’s paper (Pitman, 2005, pp. 137–148) he argued:

“It is unclear when and where geographers first made the claim to be the grand synthesizers, the only members of the academic profession with a mind-set so skilled across the wide range of disciplines that we can put them all together

and see the big picture that others are too myopic to discern. But have we ever really been able to do that? Certainly as a student 45 years ago I had no training in ‘synthesis’” (Johnston, 2006, pp. 7–11).

It is hard to say, but even such figure, like Johnston, seems to be completely unaware of some key achievements of modern philosophy of science. He also did not understand the 20th century psychological experiments, which showed that the subjective and synthetic character of perception and knowing is one of the characteristics of human personality (Bruner, 1973). The position of Johnston seems to be particularly difficult to understand in the face of the fact that the synthetic (or interdisciplinary) concept of geography seems to be attractive for the younger generation of geographers (comp. e.g. Lau and Pasquini, 2008). The attitude of Johnston is quite popular among Polish geographers and this is the main reason why we are not in the position to decide what the essence of geography is. Is it the “great synthesis” or is it not? We are even not in the position to state what exactly geography is. Is it a natural science or a humanistic area of study? We do not know if there is a possibility to define exactly its subject-matter or not? And if not, how one can describe its essence? To answer all these questions we have to arrange epistemological studies and to examine and reinterpret numerous old ideas. And the necessary condition of that is the research in the area of the history of geographical thought, understood in the way designed by Joachim Lelewel.

EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

It was the common conviction among the geographers in pre-war Poland that geography, thanks to its unlimited scope and its closeness to the everyday life, is a field which could be a basis for creation of a coherent vision of the world, joining all ways of knowing (Wilczyński 1996). Geography was believed to be a field, which suited best the needs of general education. It was expressed by one of the leaders of Polish pre-war geography – Ludomir Sawicki of the Jagiellonian University, who wrote some 80 years ago:

“The hitherto existing education of societies has been performed at schools, which have cultivated separately the arts or the sciences. And there have emerged two camps. The first consists of people, who are mainly influenced by aesthetics, belles-lettres, history, and philosophy, who look at the world with the eyes of idealists, fixed on the past. The other camp in turn is coming from the empirical and looks at the world with the eyes of realists. Failing to embrace with their senses, and to grasp the whole of terrestrial phenomena, both camps have judged reality falsely, making mistakes in the arena of public life (...). Geography forces us to put both points of view together, and join the scientific and humanistic

perspectives to create an organic whole, it makes us see simultaneously with the eyes of scientists and humanists (...). Modern geography is a field, which wants to unify the whole of terrestrial phenomena, to comprehend them in a coherent view. If we make the cosmos, the eternal order of things intelligible for us, we will master our land and our people with care, and will lead them to where common needs and our conscience tell” (Sawicki, 1932: 2–4).

As you can see, Sawicki wanted geography to provide pupils with the broad, general knowledge useful in everyday life. He expected geography to become the core of general education. He wanted it to be a source of practical wisdom instead of the mere knowledge limited to the specialist areas. He saw geography as the only discipline which could fulfill the requirements of the pedagogical axiom, by which I mean the basic principle of pedagogy, formulated in 1920 by German humanist, Georg Kerschensteiner; and popularized in Poland mainly by Bogdan Nawroczyński (1987). This principle says that not all kinds of knowledge can be effectively utilized in the teaching practice. In the process of education only that knowledge can be applied the structure of which is closely related to the structure of human psyche, that is to say, which can simultaneously engage and influence all human psychic powers. This is also in accordance with the Kantian category of synopsis.

Due to the specialization and fragmentation of knowledge people have lost the primary feeling of unity of the world. The whole world seems to be fragmented and the knowledge of it divided into separate categories and domains. And in each of them different laws and values happen to be in force. In the sphere of material bodies, force and energy are the most important elements. In the world of biological life the ability to survive in the face of changing conditions is most essential. In economy money is the most important thing, meanwhile in the domain of humanities the spiritual values are in force. Which values should we follow in our own lives then, and how should we teach our children? What is more important: physical force and violence, biological wealth, economic power, or humanistic ideals?

How to reconcile the contrary values arising from different teaching subject areas? We have to admit that the values preferred by the particular fields of knowledge have not too much in common. Where should we then look for wisdom, which could help us to choose the right directions and ways of life, to reconcile the divergent tendencies, which influence us depending on where we are and what we do? Where should we look for the values, which could allow us “*to master our land and our people, and to lead them to where common needs and our conscience tell” (Sawicki, op.cit.).*

Looking for the answers to these questions we should keep in mind, that it was also one of the main problems for geographers and that they resolved

it decades ago. We have to remember, that it was geography that was the only field, which transcended all boundaries, in which all sharp distinctions between different disciplines and particular paths of knowledge, even between the natural and the human, disappeared. Looking at the Polish classical geography one can say that it was an effort taken in order to reconcile particular fields of knowledge and to create a necessary tool for the selection of the knowledge which could be essential from the point of view of education. What are then the values which arise from geography? Contrary to particular sciences, for a geographer there is no universal set of values. They are changing from culture to culture, from place to place. For a geographer, the most important value is always the value, which is the most important from the point of view of society, on the local, regional, and global scale. To make a selection of knowledge for educational purposes, a geographer has to know what is important from the point of view of ordinary people. This is the reason why geography has always been fascinating and interesting. It simply concerns the problems and phenomena, which are connected with the everyday life of societies. And this is the fact that makes true the old Kantian sentence: “*nothing is more able to enlighten the sound human intellect than exactly geography*” (Bergsten, 1988).

The history of geographical thought is probably the only discipline, which is in the position to restore geography’s rationale and to create new lines of thought, which could make geography a socially relevant field of knowledge. If we need to create new geographical concepts, we can do it only on the condition that we utilize the past ideas. We will discover nothing new if we fail to lean on the shoulders of our predecessors. This is because no discipline, neither scientific nor humanistic, can develop without special attention paid to its humanistic component, which embraces its history and philosophy.

NOTES

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