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HISTORIOGRAPHY AFTER REVISIONISM. REMARKS ON POMIAN'S IDEA OF WRITING HISTORY

As an introduction to a text about official, “bureaucratic” history and its revisionist counterpart, Krzysztof Pomian has written in an opening passage:

“The word *revisionist* has a negative tone. It has been used especially in order to condemn people described as such, which meant that they have supposedly doubted in principles held as obvious or in truths accepted as incontestable. Indeed, there were cases of usurpation of that notion, by people who in fact wanted to be stigmatised with it.” (Pomian, 2006, p. 188)

Revisionism, in a historiographical context, could simply mean that a historian would dare to contest an already well-stated interpretation of a past event, which was, obviously, of political significance. Revisionism is thus a will to revision, re-interpretation, which is a typical condition of history as discipline. At the same time, it seems obvious that the word has a political, ethical signification and thus can be instrumentalised by political forces, which is the reason why revisionism “has a negative tone”. It is also the case of Polish revisionism, a 1950s intellectual movement.

In my article I wish to show, firstly, that “revisionism” in Polish tradition had maintained both political and philosophical (methodological) meaning and, secondly, that Pomian’s, one of the prominent Polish revisionists, ideas on history rise from his political and philosophical position that can be seen as a critique of Marxism-Leninism.

Revisionism in the wake of socialism in Poland

Such a meaning of revisionism as presented above can be treated as a specific case of a general trend, i.e. revisionism within Marxism, which, as a consequence, is also critical of Marxist historiography. It still maintains that negative ambiance which can be easily used for immediate political aims. That double, philosophical and political, meaning of "revisionism" persists in Polish tradition.

Nevertheless, revisionism has primarily a philosophical meaning. It could be possible to trace a revisionist discourse in the wake of the socialist thought in Poland, when it was already considered as a kind of accusation by some, while other saw it as a political necessity or a part of a "true" doctrine. I believe that a good example of what revisionism meant philosophically and, at the same time, politically can be traced in Kelles-Krauz' article on Polish independence.

In *Niepodległość Polski a materialistyczne pojmowanie dziejów* Kelles-Krauz describes a dispute between PPS (Polish Socialist Party) and SDKP (Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland) where PPS was called by its opponents "«revisionists who reject historical materialism»" and that is why they dare to present such a [political] programme (that is, fight for independence of Poland), whereas SDKP is «fixed on doctrines of historical materialism»" (Kelles-Krauz, 1962, p. 370). For Kelles-Krauz it was not a case of revisionism, rather a necessity to change, revive, and adjust Marx' theory to a changing environment. He sees it as a way of finding accordance between what was the aim of the party and what was going on in the society: "the realisation of demands is secured (...) by their correspondence with the direction of economic growth and economic needs of society" (Kelles-Krauz, 1962, p. 372).

Thus, revisionism could be seen as a more nuanced version of Marxism that sees historical materialism as a dynamic doctrine, historical as any other theory, and thus forced to change and adjust. It does not necessarily mean modification solely on the level of political aims. As the aims and the whole historical process are unconscious (Pomian, 2014, p. 139), one can propose a sociological theory which unravels forces and political aims. It can describe them but cannot fully justify their significance. They "happen" independently from a certain theory and only if they are not in contradiction to economic conditions.

The latter seems to be, according to Kelles-Krauz, the core of historical materialism (Kelles-Krauz, 1963, p. 373).

The historical context in which Kelles-Krauz was writing that article is very different in many ways from the one of post-war Poland which was the background of Pomian's revisionism. Nevertheless, the nineteenth century dispute shows that the term has a certain history in Polish socialism. Even in the second half of the twentieth century philosophical disputes surrounding Marxism were deeply engaging and demanding. Marek J. Siemek regards this phenomenon as an effect of high standards of philosophical education and coexistence of three, strong philosophical traditions, that is Lvov-Warsaw school, Christian philosophy and phenomenology. Because of these strong contenders, Marxism in Poland "has always been inherently «revisionist»" (Siemek, 2002, p. 311-319).

Moreover, one should note that, in fact, "we are all revisionists now" (Labeledz, 1962, p. 9). It is virtually impossible to discern what can be treated as "true" teachings of Marx and to what extent they can be maintained unaltered. Even if we take for granted what an orthodox Marxist would say, there is no reason to believe that what is said holds up today. I would argue that revisionism within Marxism is an obvious and natural standpoint, rather than any sort of heresy. I will not examine that further in general terms but in a given scenery.

Revisionism of the 1950s and the 1960s

The first reference to revisionism¹ in the context of Polish thaw of 1956 was made by Leszek Kołakowski in his article *Intelektualiści a ruch komunistyczny* (Intellectuals and Communist Movement), and afterwards taken over by the Party to address unwanted ideas (Kemp-Welch, 2008, p. 135-139). Kołakowski stressed in this article that the existence of intellectuals in the Party is crucial, as is sociological research. The Party could benefit from intellectuals because they ensure that Party's decisions would be thoughtful (Kołakowski, 1956, s. 31). He also advocated for freedom of thought within the Party as well as the need for reforming Marxism to meet contemporary situation.

¹ For other specific meanings of revisionism in that period see Kemp-Welch's book *Poland under Communism: A Cold War History* (Kemp-Welch, 2008, p. 133-134).

As a result of the debate that started afterwards, repercussions, and protests², public opinion learned that there was a group of revisionists. That group was perceived, of course, negatively by the leaders of Party, even though the revisionists themselves had various ideas and did not form any organised group within the Party nor outside³. The history of revisionism ends substantially in 1968 when a group of intellectuals was expelled from the Party, some lost their jobs and were banned from publishing.

Among them was Krzysztof Pomian, who in the aftermath decided to emigrate to France. He took part in the revisionist movement as a member of the Party. Later, he said:

“My philosophy was as follows – and it was shared by Kołakowski – people who joined the Party not for profit and who wanted to make a political protest out of leaving it, should not send back the documents; the only honourable way out was to be expelled, and not just for failure to pay the membership fee.” (Pomian, 1991, p. 6)

I believe that the reason for such an idea is Pomian's understanding of what revisionism was, apart from its philosophical background. Its political dimension forced everyone involved to choose and formulate an explicit ethical position.

Pomian mentions his idea of revisionism couple of times and acknowledges the ethical postulate included in it. During the years of Stalinism every aspect of life was controlled by the decisions of the Party. Every individual was reduced to his or her social situation and any dilemmas encountered by that individual were understood as expressions of false consciousness (Pomian, 2006, p. 11). That is why the revisionist critique stressed “anthropocentric” moments in Marx' works, most notably in his early writings and within the whole strain of existential Marxism. Pomian realised at the beginning of the 1960s that epistemology and general history of culture interests him more than ethics and history of philosophy (Pomian, 2006, p. 12), and admitted that revisionism was no longer a part of his life. The fight with revisionism

² I do not want to recapitulate the history of Polish thaw with regard to intellectuals. One can find a detailed account in Kemp-Welch (Kemp-Welch, 2008, p. 132-145)

³ There were various groups that met during academic seminars or unofficially in private houses. There was no organized opposition within the Party (Pomian, 1991, p. 5).

was won by the Party in 1968, and it seemed to have shattered all dreams of reforming the principles of government⁴.

However, one should note two things. Firstly, Pomian and other revisionists maintained commenting political situation in Poland, even after the emigration in 1968. Unofficial groups reprinted some of Pomian's texts in Poland⁵. Moreover, Pomian stated in 1991 that revisionism had actually more importance as an experience than he realised earlier (Pomian, 1991, p. 6).

First of all, Marxism played in Poland a modernising role, a role that no other current of thought tried to do on such a scale. Revisionism stressed that role in spite of all the wrongdoings of the Party and the ideology itself. Revisionists believed in a free flow of ideas and realised their research in different domains. As the most interesting historical work, Pomian mentions achievements of Witold Kula, among a few others. All of that is a proof of revisionists' importance. Moreover, there is still a lesson to be taught from those events, namely the idea of autonomy of culture. "Culture should be equally autonomous with regard to religion as well as ideology. The same applies to ethics." (Pomian, 1991, p. 6)

Historiography after revisionism

The case of revisionism in Poland has some emblematic traits. It did not only show the pathologies of Polish government of that era – it posed questions of a truly philosophical nature, concerning the freedom of speech, the role of the intellectual, and, consequently, how to write about historical events. The latter issue is of special interest here.

Krzysztof Pomian has written numerous works on historiography and theories of history. As I have mentioned earlier, his interest has shifted from ethics to epistemology and general history. This is why his early works from 1950s are more focused on philosophical issues treated in an academic way. But even then we can find first remarks that show in what way he was critical of Marxism.

⁴ For more information on events of 1968 concerning Pomian and other members of the Warsaw School of History of Ideas see Sitek's part II of the second chapter of *Warszawska szkoła historii idei* (Sitek, 2000)

⁵ For example *Robotnicy i sekretarze (Workers and chairmen)* published in 1979 in *Biblioteka robotnika*.

In *Preface* to Polish translation of Lucien Goldmann's work *Philosophy and Social Sciences* Pomian presented a brief critique of a method adopted in the book. Sitek even treats this passage as expressing the opinions of Warsaw school of history of ideas and I shall cite it *in extenso*:

"[There is] a conviction that the basic fact, explaining literary or philosophical works, is the social division into battling classes. However, we believe that this basic fact should be that those works were created in the same epoch, at the same stage of development of certain social-economic formation. In practice, it means that (...) we should not only ask what constitutes differences in their (literary and philosophical works' – M.L.) content and worldview, but also what is common to all of them. Battling classes (...) exist in a common society; their antagonism is possible only on the grounds of a community's existence." (Pomian, 2006, p. 134)

Moreover, Pomian criticises Goldmann for establishing a symmetry and analogy between "grand works or philosophical systems", worldviews, and classes. For Goldmann that hierarchy is descending and transitive, which means that any kind of behaviour is, firstly, reducible to class consciousness, and, secondly, can be used to reconstruct a given worldview.

Pomian stresses that he maintains the basic premise of historical materialism, namely the fact that every worldview is a social product. Nevertheless, it seems that the change is clearly visible. Orthodox Marxism, which usually treated Marx' *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* as a short theory manual, saw the relation between material conditions and ideas as a simple cause-effect structure and denied any significance of legal, literary or philosophical works. As a consequence, it also rejected any proper history of philosophy or law because it would only be a specific history of a ruling class consciousness. Goldmann presents a more nuanced position, enabling research on history of literature by simply "dividing" literature into class related "portions", i.e., one author represented the working class, the other bourgeoisie, and another the nobility. For Pomian it is still an oversimplified view which actually would not be supported by Marx himself. Marx used various methods and theories depending on the subject matter and strived to produce a nuanced and critical vision (Pomian, 2014, p. 141).

Marek J. Siemek credited Pomian, along with Kołakowski, for fully abandoning Marxist position. That may be true and I do not wish to prove that Pomian remained a Marxist. This would give absolutely no interesting results and would in fact say nothing about Pomian's work at all. Of course, any contemporary social theory and historiography, both of which are important parts of Pomian's theoretical endeavour, is indebted to Marxism. That debt, obviously, consists in rejection, acceptance, or reworking. The latter seems to be the most common situation.

In the domain of historiography, Marxism has posed questions which are still valid and constructed conceptual framework which was adopted, even if partially. The main problem of Marxist historiography, as I see it, concerns the ground for explanation. The question arises: which laws are universal? Which laws of history are to be taken into account? From which standpoint, temporal or ethical, should I perform a critical analysis? Adam Schaff answered those questions as follows. There are three types of laws that form a Marxist worldview on history. There are law of dialectics, immanent to reality and applicable to every ontology, there are laws of historical materialism that explain the development of society and, finally, there are laws of methodology that should operate according to the abovementioned laws and produce ideologically coherent texts (Schaff, 1955, p. 52-53). Schaff also realises the problem of temporal standpoint, that is: can we use contemporary critique to describe what happened a century ago and what is the relevance of the outcome to our current situation? When referencing to Engel's work *Peasant war in Germany* he writes:

"Indeed Engels is interested in the peasant war in relation to a new, contemporary democratic revolution. He rejects a false, mechanistic method of vulgar analogy; he refrains from looking at past events through lenses of today. In the past Engels finds the forces, analysis of which enables understanding the present and establishing the rules for demeanour. (...) [The] class struggles of today become more comprehensible in the light of experiences of the past, and conversely – the past events seem more familiar to the contemporary reader thanks to unravelling regularities which occur in a current event in their developed form." (Schaff, 1955, p. 64-65)

Those regularities were both universal and local, or rather, pan-historical and specific to a given epoch. One should note, however, that the idea of class struggle and immanent contradiction is specific to

capitalism, in a sense, that an economic formulation of material thesis cannot be taken for granted and applied to every epoch (Pomian, 2014, p. 138). Here lies one of the most important differences between mainstream Marxist historiography and a more nuanced standpoint presented by Pomian.

Two theses in Pomian's work which are connected to the problem discussed above drew my attention especially: the irreducible pluralism of history and the characteristics of presentism.

The first one is rather self-explanatory. History is a discipline that gains knowledge of facts through sources, which means that historical knowledge is always indirect. Pomian compares the difference between memory and history to the difference between direct knowledge of an event and indirect reconstruction of a fact (Pomian, 2006, p. 233). Because of that, there are multiple ways to reconstruct that fact and, consequently, many different methodologies. Moreover, those methodologies are not reducible to each other, nor is there a possibility of presenting an all-inclusive theory. Why is that? There are two reasons for that. Pomian acknowledges that ideological, ethical etc. standpoint of a historian is constitutive to his or her ways of research. Secondly, every source has undergone some cognitive act, which determines a conceptual framework for outcomes. According to Pomian, there is little chance to eradicate any of those characteristics. That is why history is always methodologically plural (Pomian, 2006, p. 231).

Presentism, on the other hand, has a double meaning. Presentism is a term used by François Hartog to describe one of the regimes of historicity. Regime of historicity is a concept which can be translated into "the way historians write history in a given epoch". Presentism would then mean that historians tend to narrow their interests to the present. At the same time, the present enlarges to encompass not only the immediate moment but at least one generation before. Historians do not restrict themselves to the past and the present; they tend to speak about future as an unavoidable effect of the present. Obviously, presentism is a regime of historicity typical for modern times (Hartog, 2015).

There are various reasons why history has reduced its temporal interests. More important, I think, are the consequences of such a situation. Pomian notices the fact that the present is the most important temporal level of our culture. It shapes our norms and the way we look at the past. We use "the criteria and norms of today as if they were valid

for all the epochs of the past” (Pomian, 2013, p. 84). Moreover, we believe that our present will last forever; sciences, even social sciences, are shaping our belief in an a-temporal view on reality. Then there is no reason why we should not believe in perpetual reproduction of the present (Pomian, 2013, p. 83). History becomes a science of curiosities: the past is known and symmetrical to the present and the only thing that can draw our attention is something unusual and local.

Pomian is sure that the past “persists in the present” and shapes its every aspect (Pomian, 2013, p. 84). The problem, then, is the question of making the past important on existential level. Here Pomian stresses the need to change the way history is taught. In order to show how the past is valid today, one should tell the history both from the past to the present and from the present to the past (Pomian, 2013, s. 89, 92). More importantly, what should also be showed is the multi-layered construction of the past and its meaningful relation to the present (Pomian, 2013, p. 86).

It seems that the idea of meaningful past is consistent with what Schaff said about Engels’ historiography. Of course, the main problem concerns the question of critique: what do we want to show? Pomian does not express his ethical position robustly, but we can assume that he maintains values that can be labelled as liberal or leftist. It is not unimportant, given the fact that Goldmann acknowledges a primarily ethical point of departure of every historian. And he concludes that the only acceptable one is the thesis of emancipation of the working class. From this the choice of methodology should be obvious (Pomian, 2006, p. 125). Pomian rejects it and shows not only that we can maintain a progressive ethical position and write history in different ways (probably not all possible). He also gives the reason to make that ethical choice. Our present situation is relevant as is the past that shaped it. Historical and ethical preconditions of a discipline are unavoidable. Acknowledging that may help social sciences and humanities to overcome the crisis they are in (Pomian, 2010, p. 33-35).

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ABSTRACT

HISTORIOGRAPHY AFTER REVISIONISM. REMARKS ON POMIAN'S IDEA OF WRITING HISTORY

Krzysztof Pomian's works on history are one of the most interesting theoretical achievements of contemporary humanities. Being one of the prominent revisionists, Pomian took part in an important period of Polish history. Revisionist movement has also played an important role in shaping some basic ideas of Pomian's later work. Article shows the meaning of revisionism in Polish tradition concerning historiography, and more specifically the meaning of Pomian's ideas on historiography.

KEYWORDS: Pomian, Marx, historiography, revisionism, presentism

HISTORIOGRAFIA PO REWIZJONIZMIE. UWAGI O POMIANA IDEI PISANIA O HISTORII

Prace Krzysztofa Pomiana dotyczące historii są jednym z najciekawszych osiągnięć współczesnej humanistyki. Pomian, będąc tak zwanym rewizjonistą, brał udział w ważnych wydarzeniach w historii Polski powojennej. Jednocześnie sam ruch rewizjonistyczny wpłynął znacząco na kształt podstawowych wątków w późniejszej działalności naukowej Pomiana. Niniejszy artykuł pragnie ukazać znaczenie rewizjonizmu w Polskiej tradycji historiograficznej, a w szczególności w poglądach Pomiana na historiografię.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Pomian, Marks, historiografia, rewizjonizm, prezentyzm

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