

**MODELS OF BACKWARDNESS
VERSUS TRANSFORMATION IN EASTERN EUROPE**
Review Article

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Anna Sosnowska, *Zrozumieć zacofanie. Spory historyków o Europę Wschodnią (1947-1994)* [To Understand Backwardness: Historians' Debates about Eastern Europe (1947-1994)]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2004, pp. 387.

The phenomenon of economic backwardness of Eastern Europe has been of wide interest in the social and historical sciences for many years. In 1928, at the 6th International Congress of Historical Sciences in Oslo Jan Rutkowski (1986) presented the conception of the rise of manorial-serf economy in Eastern Europe. At that time, however, neither Rutkowski's paper nor his article published in French two years later in conference proceedings excited any greater interest.¹

The aftermath of WWII had been the Yalta division until 1989, as a result of which at least in Eastern part of Europe the debate about the causes of economic backwardness, in order for it to encompass wider intellectual and social circles, had to be continued in a more or less ideologised Marxist language.² The elimination of historical backwardness constituted one of core propagandist arguments substantiating the establishment of communist systems in Eastern Europe and granting them legitimisation to exercise power.

The subject of Anna Sosnowska's book *Zrozumieć zacofanie. Spory historyków o Europę Wschodnią (1947-1994)* [To Understand Backwardness: Historians' Debates about Eastern Europe (1947-1994)] is a reconstruction of developmental backwardness models of Eastern Europe presented in the works of four Polish historians: Marian Małowist, Witold Kula, Jerzy Topolski and Andrzej Wyczański. Her reconstruction is based on the conceptual categories developed by comparative historical sociology. She preceded her reconstruction of each scientist's views by a short intellectual biography.

While none of the scientists discussed by Sosnowska subjectively identified themselves with comparative historical sociology, in her opinion their works can still be placed in this sub-discipline of the social sciences because they:

- undertake studies of social macrostructures;
- interpret development and social change;
- search for explanations of social backwardness in historically shaped social structures;
- use models and apply theoretical categories;
- apply a comparative perspective.

The author assumes W. Kula's postdoctoral lecture qualification (habilitation) *Social Privilege and Economic Progress* of 1947 to be the beginning of the discussion on the origins of Eastern European backwardness (Kula 1983), with J. Topolski's book published 1994 *Poland in Modern Times. From a Central-European Power to the Loss of Independence (1501-1795)* closing the discussion, although in this case the closing date could be moved forward by six years so as to regard the year 2000 as the end of the discussion – the same year that Topolski's book *Economic Breakthrough in 16th c. Poland and its Aftermath* was published posthumously.

The research task proper is preceded by extensive introductory considerations. In the following chapters the author defines the notions of development, progress, growth, modernisation, backwardness, dependencies and delays (Introduction), deliberates the specific character of historical sociology alone (Chapter 1), and disambiguates the meaning of the following geographical and historical terms: Eastern Europe, Central Europe, "Slavic" Europe, and Central Eastern Europe, which are mentioned in historiography and the works of the historians in question (Chapter 3).

In her introduction she also presents the conceptions of Western authors or those who published in the West explaining the phenomenon of Eastern Europe's developmental autonomy. Sosnowska presents the conceptions of Immanuel Wallerstein, Ivan Berend and Györgi Ránki, Fernand Braudel, Robert Brenner, Perry Anderson and Jenő Szűcs. Her presentation is structured according to two criteria/questions allowing her to classify the views of the authors mentioned above:

- (i) whether or not the development of Eastern Europe was independent of Western Europe,
- (ii) the origins of Western Europe's prosperity.

The first question is polar question (yes-no question). Therefore, are two possible answers to it: Eastern Europe developed independently or it was dependent on the West in its history. The second question is a constituent question (why-question) and it can require more than one answer. Here, the author provides three possibilities: Western Europe's power could have been a result of: the development of "its social and political institutions" (i), "a simple coincidence" (ii), or "the exploitation of other regions" (iii) (Sosnowska 2004: 78). The answers to this question are by no means disjunctive. As a matter of fact, both the development of certain social and political institutions (as indicated by the theses contained in the works of the members of the so-called school of the "European Miracle"³) and the exploitation of some countries by other countries could have been a coincidence – e.g. a confluence of unfortunate circumstances which weakened a given society to such an extent that it easily fell prey to exploitation/ conquest initiated by its more historically fortunate neighbour. Moreover, it seems that the answers above belong to different theoretical and methodological orders. The answers (i) and (iii) are of a more theoretical character in that they identify the type of factor – internal or external – which influenced historical development. The answer to question (ii) identifies the way those factors operated and their methodological status, i.e. whether they were the main factors influencing a given social structure or whether they belonged to the group of accidental factors which influenced the historical process only in certain circumstances.

Thus, Sosnowska classifies the material under investigation. As one might have guessed, I. Wallerstein belongs to the group of authors pointing to Eastern Europe's developmental dependency on the West, with Eastern underdevelopment counterbalanced by Western progress. Ivan Berend and Györgi Ránki continued the analyses of the founder of the World System Theory. Going beyond Wallerstein's theoretical categories, Ivan Berend and Györgi Ránki grant some more autonomy to individual Eastern European societies given the fact that Eastern European elites were said to have attempted some kind of modernisation, which in most cases however proved to be only partially successful or it failed

entirely. The next author under consideration is Ferdynand Braudel who also assumes that there existed some Eastern Europe's developmental dependency on Western Europe, but at the same time ascertains that internal factors were more significant when it comes to the origins and the process of reinforcing backwardness in our part of Europe. Next, Sosnowska turns to interpret the views of Robert Brenner, Perry Anderson and Jenő Szűcs who, albeit to different degrees, underscored the historical independence and developmental autonomy of Eastern Europe with regard to Western Europe. Brenner is the most consistent in this respect as he considers the social and economic differences between Eastern and Western Europe in terms of the different outcomes of class struggle between the peasants and feudal lords. In contrast, Anderson interprets the origins of Eastern Europe's separateness in the light of different mechanisms behind the origins of feudalism. Both Szűcs and Anderson however take notice of Western influences in the history of Eastern Europe.

Having thus laid a solid basis for her discussion, Sosnowska proceeds to reconstruct the views of four Polish historians and distinguishes four models of backwardness in their works: M. Małowist's *Model of Colonial Development*, A. Wyczański's *Model of Catching Up with Europe*, J. Topolski's *Model of Unfortunate Coincidence*, and W. Kula's *Model of Hybrid Development*.

Model of Colonial Development

Małowist considers the unequal trade exchange of the late Middle Ages to be the reason for Eastern Europe's underdevelopment. The trade exchanges of that period, with the West selling more processed craft goods while the East specialised in farm produce and raw materials, contributed to the strengthening of dependency and serfdom, which consequently led to a social crisis in Poland. The negative impact of the manorial-serf economy – the crisis of the cities – was already visible in the 16th century.

Model of Catching Up with Europe

According to Wyczański, Poland and her neighbours formed a group of countries with a similar development potential. The development of Poland was based on catching up with the more developed

countries of Western Europe, mainly France and Italy. That process consisted in state elites consciously imitating the cultural and institutional paradigms of the more civilisationally superior countries. It lacked determinism – in certain periods the distance between Poland and other countries would get smaller, in some – greater.

Model of Unfortunate Coincidence

According to Topolski, the origins of economic dualism date back to the 13th century, when nobles' revenues fell across entire Europe. The ensuing chasm between the culturally conditioned social status of the nobles and their revenues which were supposed to uphold that status, made the nobles look for many different ways – depending on local conditions – to counteract their fall from wealth. The specific conditions operating in Eastern Europe enabled the creation of the nobleman's manor, where serf labour of the peasants was used to manufacture and sell produce in the local and foreign markets.

Model of Hybrid Development

Kula's primary unit of analysis is the level of the national society, where the manor and the peasant farm formed the basic institutional framework. The hybrid development of the manorial-serf economy was already clear at the micro-social level since the calculation of the manor owner was different – given the possibility of using forced peasant labour – than that of a capitalist entrepreneur. In a serfdom system, the owner of a manor was able to make peasants carry the burden of production costs, which allowed him to consider his income from corn sales in the external markets as a clear gain. At the macro-social level, the hybrid character was visible in a bisector economy, a part of which was grounded in natural economy while the other part was subject to market mechanisms. It also manifested itself in the presence of institutions such as *propinacja* (literally: taproom – Polish) and manufactures that used serf labour of the peasants etc. That hybrid feudalism later transformed into hybrid capitalism, which was followed by hybrid socialism.

The author then classifies the views of the researchers using the following questions/criteria (Sosnowska 2004: 263):

- (i) did Eastern European countries follow the same path of development as Western European countries?
- (ii) what kind of influence did Western Europe have on Eastern Europe: was it positive or negative?

Those two questions are polar questions. A. Wyczański provides a positive answer to both questions emphasising that Poland was a society like any other in Eastern Europe and that the influence of the West on our country's development was by all means favourable.

In contrast, Małowist, Topolski and Kula provide a negative answer to the first question. According to Sosnowska, the three historians differ in their periodisation of the developmental disparity of Eastern European countries – Topolski speaks of a period between the 16th and 18th century, Małowist speaks of a period from the 13th century to the 17th century, while Kula dates the origins of developmental disparity from the 16th century to the early 20th century. As regards the second question, Małowist and Kula provide a positive answer, since to them our dependency on the West was the primary factor for backwardness (Kula is less firm on this issue). Given the typology in question, Topolski is even more restrained because he sees both some positive and negative sides to Western Europe's influences on the history of our part of the continent.

It would be interesting to construct such a classification framework which would allow to compare the views of the Polish authors with the concepts of the foreign scholars presented by Sosnowska. In such a framework, the constituent question "what are the origins of Western Europe's power" would have to be reformulated as an polar question (yes-no question), i.e. "is the power of the West a result of its autonomous development or the exploitation of other regions?". Such a step would eliminate the second answer ("the power of the West was a coincidence") (Sosnowska 2004: 78) to this question. In this case, Wyczański would have no counterpart (which is not surprising given the fact that he is closest to the views of the school of Modernisation) among the foreign authors discussed by Sosnowska, Małowist's views would be closer to Wallerstein (which, again, is not unexpected as Wallerstein mentions Małowist in his introduction to *The Modern World System*), Kula's views would be closer to those of Braudel and Ránki and Berend, while Topolski would be closer to Anderson, Szűcs and... Brenner

(which could be slightly shocking given his harsh criticism of Brenner's views) (Topolski 2000: 45-50).

Had Sosnowska only reconstructed the historians' discussion of the origins of Eastern European backwardness, her work would have belonged to the scope of investigation of history or the theory of historiography. Thanks to her work it emerges that despite the pressure exerted by official Marxist ideology, it is possible to identify in Polish historiography the counterparts of theoretical orientations present in global science. Polish authors were often precursors whose grasp of problems later enjoyed popularity (e.g. M. Małowist). However, Sosnowska's objective is much more ambitious. Her knowledge of the intellectual tradition should help in understanding the transformation not only of the Polish society but of the entire region following 1989. According to Sosnowska, theoretical reflection on social change in the making had been totally dominated by the theory of Modernisation. This happened for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the basic unit of analysis in the aforementioned conception is the national society, which sociologists take for granted. Secondly, the theory of Modernisation best renders the ideological mood after 1989 – its most excellent manifestation is Francis Fukuyama's thesis of a "democratic liberal" end of history. Thirdly, the theory of Modernisation was one of few serious non-Marxist social conceptions at the time so that it was spontaneously accepted by the intelligentsia opposing Marxism.⁴ Finally, Polish sociology had never seen the birth of any serious theoretical alternative because one manifestation of intellectual opposition in the Polish People's Republic against the domination of Marxism was a "reluctance to undertake research into social theory, especially macro-social theories" (Sosnowska 2004: 16).

According to A. Sosnowska, any studies of social change in Eastern Europe should assume that backwardness is structural and it determined the developmental continuity in that part of Europe. Consequently, the division into Western and Eastern Europe is still useful – rather than being a hegemonial construct imposed by Western elites, it reflects objectively different developmental patterns. Moreover, such studies should consider the multitude of competing theoretical orientations, apply a comparative and global perspective, and put their objects of study in a historical perspective (Sosnowska 2004: 17). Reconstructing a historical debate which is almost over fulfils the above criteria and "pro-

vides alternative ways to the modernisation approach as regards the process of conceptualising the problem” (Sosnowska 2004: 17). She also maintains that when discussing those conceptions we should speak of :

decisions and turns in the economic policy in the context of interests or conflicts of interest of some groups with other groups. It is analytically necessary to differentiate between sustainable economic development and a situation where economic growth contributes to a better standard of living for some groups and worsens that standard for other groups (Sosnowska 2004: 338-339).

This does not entail that the said conceptions are ideal. As Sosnowska points out:

we should discard (...) a conception of the state as a superstructure over the economic and social structures. The models presented here do not envisage any such conception of a capitalist state which would at least to some extent be autonomous with respect to the outcome of the class struggle and could start and successfully patronise modernisation. (Sosnowska 2004: 335).

Is the author right in hoping that a renewed understanding of historians’ debate will allow her to discuss the historical changes after 1989? Both the methodological and theoretical aspects should be taken into account. Let us discuss the former aspect first. Some of the historians discussed by Sosnowska (have) avoided any methodological or theoretical reflection out of programmatic reasons (Wyczański, Małowist) while some were inspired by Marxism (Kula, Topolski). Marxism, however, is not suitable to constitute a source of methodological inspiration, especially in view of the fact that the author rightly postulated to reject the conception of the state as “a mere superstructure over the economic and social architecture” (Sosnowska 2004: 335). Where should one search for inspiration then? One possible source of inspiration could be forwarded by comparative historical sociology developed mainly in the Anglo-Saxon countries, which presupposes autonomy and independence of state structures with regard to economic structures, and analyses its origins. One classic example of such an analysis is Thedy Skocpol’s *State and Social Revolutions* (Skocpol 1979). In a drastically simplified version, her theses could be summarised as follows. The autonomy of state

organisation could be analysed from two perspectives: internal and external. As regards the internal perspective, the role of the state is to maintain such a socioeconomic order as to allow the propertied class to amass wealth. From the external perspective, the state competes with other states within a single international political system (Skocpol 1977: 32-34). If a state's international position is weakened, that state initiates a modernisation process. Such a step leads to a conflict with the classes of land owners about the way production is organised and the revenues distributed, since the state needs more and more resources to maintain its position in the international arena. When the state dominates the propertied classes, it is able to complete the modernisation process. It may happen, however, that the government is weaker than ownership. In such a scenario, the prolonging conflict between the owners and the state weakens the cohesion of the social system, thereby enabling peasant riot outbreaks. Should social elites opposing the government join them, such peasant riots may well trigger a mass revolution. Victory in the revolution completes the process of social modernisation.⁵

In this view, the state's active role in modernisation is emphasised, the origins of separate interests and potential fields of cooperation analysed, the origins of any potential conflict with the classes of owners investigated. However, to what extent and on what conditions is this conception universal and may be applied to analyse the transformation of real socialism is a subject for a separate debate.⁶

Let us now turn to examine the theoretical aspect of the question about the importance of knowing the historians' debate when discussing transformations in Poland and Central and Eastern Europe after 1989. We may benefit from knowing past debates depending on what elements of contemporary reality we wish to clarify. It is undoubtedly useful to know that debate from the point of view of long-term duration encompassing the evolution of a certain sequence of political systems – let us adopt the conventional division into feudalism, capitalism, state socialism and a return to capitalism. Doubts arise when we ask how many and which mechanisms and phenomena taking place in the ongoing political transformation can actually be explained referring to the perspective of long-term duration. How to interpret the crisis of Polish democracy in the light of the origins and mechanisms of the manorial-serf system (one of its manifestations is the recent political slogan put forward by jour-

nalists and right-wing political parties encouraging the construction of the Fourth Republic of Poland), how to interpret the problem of vetting and overcoming the communist legacy, or how to answer the question regarding the directions of the economic policy or the strategy of integration with the European Union? In view of the current socio-political debate, a perspective of middle-term duration seems more useful, one that encompasses the transition from one system to another. Such a perspective requires a conceptualisation of the dynamics of real socialism, an analysis of its fall, as well as the impact of the former political system on the new capitalist order after 1989.

Anna Sosnowska's book *Zrozumieć zacofanie* [To Understand Backwardness] does not present any such vision: it does not put real socialism in the perspective of historical backwardness, it does not analyse the fall of socialism or the emergence of the new order. This is fully understandable since the book focuses on presenting a discussion of historians who – given the academic division of work and the political constraints in which they had worked most of their lives – likewise did not present any such vision. The book itself nevertheless provokes such questions, which constitutes one of its greatest assets.

Notes

1. Models of transition from feudalism to capitalism in Rutkowski's works were analysed by Domańska (1993) and Rutkowski's theoretical thinking by Topolski (1982).

2. For general mechanisms of the ideologisation of science in the USSR see, i.e., Amsterdamski (1989); for the process of ideologisation in the historical sciences in Poland in the 1950s see: Stobiecki (1993).

3. Compare, e. gr.: (Chirot 1985; Hall 1985; Jones 1981).

4. Interestingly, social theories inspired by liberalism in their deep structure (e.g. Rostow's Theory of Modernisation or Fukuyama's theory of "The End of History") are all structurally similar to historical materialism. For example, Rostow's modernisation (Rostow 1964) is conceived as a universal process encompassing all societies that are civilisationally dissimilar and have a monolinear character – all societies go through the same developmental stages (of which Rostow named five, just like in historical materialism). Fukuyama's vision of history (Fukuyama 1992), on the other hand, is characterised by finalism which is conceived to be an objection to historical materialism. According to the Marxist theory of the historical process, "The End of History" is meant to be communism while in Fukuyama's conception inspired by liberal philosophy – democratic capitalism. Those similarities point to a more general structure characteristic of historiosophical reflection (more in: Brzechczyn 2004: 16-31).

5. Collins (1999) underscores the importance of Skocpol's proposal and describes her theory as the *state-breakdown model of revolution*. In his view, Skocpol initiated a paradigmatic change in explaining the revolution by identifying and properly analysing the causes

of the outbreak of revolution in the political sphere of social activity and not in the economic sphere as it used to be the case. Trimberger (1978) also assumes a nation-centric view of the revolution, and that same view is later developed by Goldstone, (1991). In Poland it is worth to mention Nowak's non-Marxian historical materialism, where he assumes the independence of power from property and considers societies (e.g. the societies of real socialism) where property and economic structures are totally dependent on political power while the social arrangement evolves according to the mechanisms of political moment; this theory also builds a model different from the economy-based model, a model of a purely political revolution (Nowak, 1983, 1991); on application of this theory to explain historical backwardness of Central Europe in the XVIth century, see: (Brzechczyn 1998).

6. Examples of the extension of Skocpol's model to analyse the fall of real socialism in Russia are presented by Li (2002; 2003).

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