Poland and Conservatism—
An Examination of Current Research

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In recent years, popular Polish journals have given substantial attention to the nature and problems of conservatism and conservative parties around the world. Studies on the vitality of the conservative models of thinking—undertaken as part of broader research on the political culture of socialism—attempted to examine attitudes and values associated with the term “conservatism.” The results of these studies cannot constitute any scientific analysis of the attitude toward conservatism in Polish society, but they do offer some significant reflections.

One of the most interesting inquiries was undertaken in the first half of 1977 by Zycie Warszawy, the capital’s popular newspaper. The title of that inquiry was “Progressiveness and Preservation—which is which in 1977?” Presenting opinions of journalists, scientists, and representatives of other professions, who tried to show the meaning of progress and preservation in their work, the inquiry aroused a vivid interest in a broad circle of readers. The results portray quite well the attitude of the ordinary Pole toward conservatism and, what is perhaps more important, show what causes these attitudes.

In the opinions presented, “progressive” attitudes were emphatically contrasted with inclinations toward all sorts of preservation, inclinations thus put in a negative light. This stark contrast colored the whole discussion. Even the commentary of the newspaper and the formulation of the title—“which is which”—suggested that the editor expected not simply an explanation of the contrasting terms, but also an examination of the barriers that keep them distinct. The respondents to the question presented a whole range of viewpoints about “which is which” but still maintained the established view of progressiveness and preservation as two extremes, or opposites.

The confrontation of terms was unfortunate. It is questionable whether understanding of the term “progressive” is so indisputable in public opinion that the idea of “progress” itself can become a measure of what attitudes are desirable or undesirable. The problem is that it is often difficult to estimate “social progressiveness” in such spheres as art, philosophy, or literature. Yet recognizing behavior, attitudes, or ideas as “progressive” nearly always amounts to a positive estimation, so common is the desire for the idea of progress. The controversy concerns whether a change in behavior or attitude is really “progressive.” When we deal with preservation, the controversy is not over “preservation” itself—the inclination in any society to preserve some components of existing reality is obvious—but with the selection of “what we ought to preserve.”

The problems of opposing “progress” and “preservation” might be illustrated by another example. We can imagine an inquiry into the attitudes subsumed under the terms “a good man” and “an egoist.” The term contrary to “a good man” is obviously “a bad man,” and so the term “egoist,” opposed as it is to “a good man,” becomes a synonym for a “bad man.” A participant in this inquiry would begin by presenting “egoism” as opposed to the social good, and any advantages flowing from egoistic attitudes are excluded from the account.

The inquiry of Zycie Warszawy had the same problem. A progressive attitude came to mean almost the same as a good attitude. A preservative attitude could be evaluated in various ways, but it acquired a decidedly pejorative sense when opposed to a progressive attitude. As stated, the good majority of respondents identified preservation with backwardness; the opinion that progress does not exclude preservation but is conditioned
by it was quite exceptional. The majority further seemed to forget that even Marxism considers existing values selectively; some values need change but others are worthy of protection. Progress and preservation might be in conflict, but they also might be complementary.

It would, however, be too great a simplification to think that merely the arrangement of the terms of discussion caused the opinions expressed about preservation. The main reason for such convictions seems to lie in the general tendency to identify preservative attitudes with conservatism, which, one reads, is a dangerous phenomenon typically inclined to reactionary, backward, and obscurantist attitudes. Conservatism is, it is said, an obstacle to social development and is an attitude antagonistic toward humanism, peace, and socialist ideology. It favors a static vision of human affairs.

The scholars commenting on the outcome of the inquiry emphasized that the decidedly critical opinion of conservatism was a result of various factors, the first being that tendency long popularized in social science journals to identify conservatism as opposed to progress. According to the stereotype, conservatism as an ideology supported business and social elites in the capitalist states of the West and should therefore be regarded as alien to the socialist states.

In Poland, however, there are additional factors, resulting from the history of the nation, which accentuate the disadvantageous position of conservatism. In the nineteenth century, conservatism was the most influential movement and current of ideas opposing the advance of capitalism in Poland. As a result of the weakness of the Polish bourgeoisie, conservatism remained the ideology of the aristocracy and nobility. The ideology represented patterns of attitudes characteristic of the social elite rather than a democratic aspiration for the nation as a whole. When Poland was divided by her neighbors and ceased to exist as a state, conservatism represented the unpopular policy of conciliation with the invading states. This picture is in general accordance with the history of the conservative movement, but it is also true that every movement has its relatively bright and dark sides. The problem is that presenting the servile, opportunistic, unpatriotic stereotype of conservatism in Polish history has made presenting any achievements of conservatism difficult and has resulted in deformed simplifications and exaggerations. A society attached to the negative stereotypes of conservative attitudes and programs from the annals of history forgets that a considerable part of the representatives of the conservative camp realized the necessity of democratic changes and the need for reforming the feudal system. These representatives rejected only revolutionary change in favor of gradual change. In this aspect they departed from the social Left as well as from the reactionaries who stubbornly sought to maintain the old system of social relations as a whole.

There were also patriots in this camp who saw an opportunity to regain independence—though they rejected force of arms in this effort. This position was ignored as ineffective and the result was the useless loss of much blood. The general lack of knowledge of these other aspects of conservatism in Polish history has resulted in the stereotypes.

The inquiry by Zycie Warszawy was only one example supporting the thesis that the state of social knowledge about the current of ideas of the Right, its history and its present variants, is not sufficient. Scholars dealing with the history of political ideas have emphasized this for many years. As a matter of course, the socialistic state financially supports studies on the current of ideas of the Left, neglecting research on the Right. This situation, however, causes not only considerable gaps in research and limits the view of the whole range of ideological currents, but it also significantly deforms the understanding of past and current Left-wing movements.

Inadequate knowledge of the Right, however, is being corrected by many young scholars. There has been an increase in the number of dissertations and monographs dealing with the history of the Right and its current activity. This interest does not necessarily amount to sympathy for conservative assumptions and attitudes. A small, informal
sounding of those students in political and legal circles who were most vividly interested in the 1980 presidential election showed besides a real interest in conservative programs (yet a relatively limited knowledge of them) a predominance of sympathy for President Carter and his programs.

Beginning in the 1960's there appeared academic work reflecting the rise of interest in political thought of the center and right, especially in conservatism and liberalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They were undertaken under the auspices of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at Warsaw University. Of this work, the most interesting was undoubtedly In the Circle of Conservative Utopia by A. Walicki (Warsaw, 1964) and two books by J. Szacki: The Counter-revolutionary Paradox (Warsaw, 1965), dealing with the ideas of French theorists in the beginning of the nineteenth century, and Tradition—Review of Problems (Warsaw, 1971), reviewing the work available to Polish readers on the history and the variants of European traditionalism. There is also a growing interest in liberal thought. Following the publication in 1961 of L. Kasprzyk's The Social and Political Ideas of H. Spencer, many dissertations and doctoral theses devoted to the representatives of French and English liberalism were prepared at Cracow University. Among these studies were a book on J. S. Mill by the author of this article (and J. Woleński) and another on the ideas of French aristocratic liberals in the nineteenth century by B. Sobolewski. The Institute of Political Science at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow was also active in the publication of works on liberalism. One of them—Liberalism by M. Sobolewski and B. Sobolewski (Warsaw, 1978)—was the first attempt in Poland at a synthesis of liberal ideas. W. Sadurski engaged in further research on modern liberalism, many of the resulting articles being published in the late 1970's.

During this period, studies of the history of Polish conservatism came out of the Cracow and Warsaw academic communities. The principal figures of the Polish Right in the last century were examined in Political Profiles of the Nineteenth Century (Cracow, 1974), a collection of articles by M. Król and W. Karpiński. W. Włodyka analyzed the conservative movement in the interwar period (Wrocław, 1977). My own Conservatism of the Kingdom of Poland was published in 1976 and followed four years later by my Essays on the Galician Political Movements and Ideas, 1848–1892, both devoted to the Polish Right in the nineteenth century. The group of young scholars with whom I have been associated began methodical studies on conservatism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries both in Poland and around the world. Of particular note is the work of M. Jaskólski, which is devoted to W. L. Jaworski, the famous Cracow conservative.

At the end of the 1970's, these academic initiatives for developing studies on rightist political movements and ideas gained some support in official, governmental circles, which even gave the green light for research on conservatism around the world. One of the reasons for this green light was simply the desire to fill the gap in research. But another was an endeavor to guard socialist society from the conservative threat.

The central assumption about conservatism—that it favors the existing state of affairs in social, political, and economic structures—is, however, not typical merely in the capitalist world. So-called "functional conservatism," favoring existing social structures, is a feature of any political system, including socialism. Authoritarian and totalitarian systems are inclined to produce institutional guards protecting political and social institutions and hence encourage preservative attitudes. Liberal and democratic systems are open to greater possibilities, more innovative solutions, in all spheres of life; yet of course, that does not mean that political thinking is not also grounded in preservative attitudes.

The general increase of political activity of the Right in the world and in the United States in particular is the last factor promoting research on contemporary conservatism. This activity, seen as a threat to socialist societies, required extensive analysis. The Ministry of Science and Higher Education approved and financially supported research into the problem, "The evolution of the
political systems of the highly developed West European and American countries.” Part of this work was an analysis of the development of American conservatism after World War II, which was undertaken by T. Tof jóczko and myself at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. I also prepared a conceptual analysis of research on conservatism in the twentieth century. This work was undertaken at the Institute for Studies on the Current Problems of Capitalism in Warsaw, and the results are now awaiting publication. Further significant work in this area include “A Conception of Order in the Current American Conservative Thought,” a dissertation by R. Legutko (of the Institute of Philosophy at the Jagiellonian University), and a work nearing completion by T. To jóczko devoted to the ideas of Russell Kirk, the most famous American theoretician of conservatism in Polish circles.

The greater part of this research will not be available to the Polish reader in the near future, as paper shortages and the financial troubles of Polish editors have badly hampered the publication of these works. Thus the gap of research into one of the most significant currents of ideas in the modern world will continue in Polish culture for some considerable time.