



The Validity of Ten Organic and Romantic Challenges of the Interwar Period Generation and Ten Weaknesses of Their Implementation

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Abstract:

The paper aims to compare the challenges faced by youths of Radlinska's generation with the young of today, posing questions about what triggered the increased energy, agency and activism of the young of the interwar period and asks if it could be utilised by current pedagogical 'forces' in Poland. The focus is placed on teachers' education and emerging new systems of tuition, as well as the extraordinary achievements of the social pedagogue of the interwar period – Helena Rad-

linska. The article is a modified and updated version of an excerpt from the book entitled: *'Invisible environment'* (Witkowski, 2014) published in Polish language by Impuls. The idea of revisiting this theme was triggered by the upcoming celebration of the 100 years anniversary of the Independence of Poland (1918).

The incremental breakthrough in Polish education of interwar period was conditioned and challenged in favourable circumstances. I strongly believe that today Polish pedagogy faces similar challenges what makes the importance of analysing the interwar period even greater. This becomes particularly relevant when set against the anniversary of 100 years of regaining independence. It was the time when the Great Generation of educationalists' initiative activated rapidly with an essential role of Helena Radlińska. Thus, investigating the scope of work which released the enthusiasm and passion of the leading educators of those times can at least help us realise what issues need to be taken care of at present. Asking a question what focalised the energy of interwar Polish educationalists and juxtaposing the answers and their inclinations, we will have an opportunity to obtain the notion of the interwar educational challenges as well the criterion to compare the quality of the past motivation to act with what is happening now. Radlińska's efforts to meet the challenges were extremely vital in every single one of them. Nevertheless, we must not forget other reform prominent figures who represented the Great Generation of interwar period and who were enthusiastically committed to meet the challenges as well. All these problems Polish pedagogy was challenged with can be easily arranged in a hermeneutic circle that interlocks the problems into an indissoluble whole which depends on particular constituents that fail to work without the whole and other related links.

The first challenge the Great Generation was confronted with was to establish a modern education system taking advantage of available resources which merged the vision of splicing together the tasks of the new education system and initiating and developing civic attitudes. The education models such as 'work school' or 'creative school' were highly popular back then and they referred closely to the ideals of the New Education Movement. The advocates of the education reform wanted to provide Polish education with the best possible system incorporating up-to-date and innovative experience of other educationalist. The key figures in Polish education were employed in government institutions establishing and coordinating new forms and structures of educational network within its framework. It was not a coincidence that Bogdan Suchodolski



was a part of government administration involved in education issues and that Helena Radlińska worked as a temporary advisor for the Ministry of Education and administered the educational programme among the rural communities. The predominant idea encouraging the engagement in establishing new system was an impassionate endeavour to lay the foundations for a modern Polish school. Currently, the involvement of the main educational figures, with their knowledge and expertise, in framing and arranging the education system is practically non-existent. The Ministry of Education has been operating as an 'isolated island' far from the pedagogical thought what has resulted in the lack of educational culture among educators. Most of them are only professionally trained, educated in the area of particular school subjects and not provided with pedagogical as well as psychological knowledge about the subjects and their mutual interactions.

In the face of a challenge to found a modern education system the next key undertaking was to activate methods and motivate education communities to train high-level teaching personnel suitable for the outlined function of the education system. Thus, what played a significant role in overcoming this particular challenge was to find common ground for debates, organise congresses and conventions on education, trigger government-based financing and put an effort to integrate educators, educational administration and the circles of academic pedagogy around the disputed goals of the educational programme which were included in the Ministry of Education and local governments' decisions. The widespread movement in pedagogical journalism, at the head of which stood again the key figures of modern pedagogy, facilitated the function of a cultural link and a trigger motivating for initiative and independence by means of being able to make critical diagnosis and promoting compensatory actions which were taken with a view to restore the relation between long lost traditional and up-to-date reality. Yet, the phenomenon of no correlation between pedagogical studies and also the quality of professional thinking and teacher training system as well as the functioning of teacher training institutions, which prepare future educators for the two distinctive roles: a didactic and a methodologist, is still present in today's education system. This is also an observable fact in postgraduate pedagogical studies which are administratively alienated and incapable of combining the educational offer with the state-of-the-art knowledge and whose role boils down merely to distributing practical qualifications. Local conflicts of interests make it even more difficult in terms of responsible programmatic and structural solutions.

The third conception the Great Generation of interwar period had hoped for was to combine cultural dimensions with social ones in order to foster well-rounded individuals and their developmental dynamics. This was to channel all the concerns, outlooks, and actions focused on education which would have supported individuals on multiple levels to make them see their roles and social conditioning on the one hand, and developmental opportunities assisted by cultural processes on the other. This concept, in particular, resulted in realising how crucial it is to adopt ideas associated with so-called 'culture pedagogy' and other similar ideas stemming from so-called 'social pedagogy'. This awareness equipped the educationalist with some tools to deal with concerns related to children and adults, cultural institutions in urban and rural areas or broadly speaking, it referred to a particular social presence along with its dysfunctions and pathologies as well as to a symbolic legacy-based reality whose role was to root in more universal and timeless domains. Yet, what we can witness these days is a highly advanced fragmentation of experience and breakage of the connections into convenient, yet imperfect cognitive domains which prove to be poorly accepted. Culture has been subject, in a neoliberal way, to the notion of relativism or locally prevailing ideological pressures such as the ones related to religion, art or literature. It has also been subject to a primitive market-related professional utilitarianism which is not only damaging but most of all delusive. This attitude distorts the perception of social life in terms of the quality of thinking and civic as well as spiritual and civilizational engagement.

Confronting this perspective, it was obvious that the forth challenge was to introduce and promote 'devices' which incorporated basic cultural and educational functions providing at the same time a basis for enhancing social experience and exposure to cultural heritage. Apart from schools, courses, special-interest clubs, associations or societies there was a widespread trend for establishing libraries, museums, exhibitions, art galleries, higher education schools, folk high schools as well as cooperative solutions which would have enabled to merge social functioning with tasks of cultural nature understood in a sense of the quality of reception, experience and development of spiritual needs. Currently, the grass roots initiative in Poland is ineffective and supporting it, even by local government authorities, is inefficient as they are incapable of taking responsibility for it. Recently, there has been a case when the city councillors of one of the voivodships decided by vote to close down public libraries. The reason behind the decision was the fact that the reading figures had



been falling – as if closing down public libraries had been an ingenious method to raise readership from the ashes. But it is highly probable that because of the ‘homo economicus’ mentality the concern with such a low readership had not even crossed local decision makers’ heads most of whom presumably do not read either and remain deeply unaware of their own cultural disability and of causing damage to people.

The fifth challenge was to rethink the current concepts in pedagogy and therefore a thorough consideration was given to seeking for and developing modern pedagogy. It was realised by following the latest ideas in pedagogy and interpreting the most significant attainments of the traditional (back then still not so distant) pedagogical, social and philosophical school of thought marked with the names of Bronisław Ferdynand Trentowski, Hugo Kołłątaj, Stanisław Staszic, Edward Abramowski, Karol Fryderyk Libelt or Ludwik Krzywicki. The great advocates of the educational reform were convinced they were obliged to learn from the key figures of tradition and the advocates of contemporary approaches to upbringing and social life. Unfortunately, the concepts of antipedagogy and so-called alternative pedagogy have been generally prevailing and widely practiced in Poland. Alternative pedagogy does not cope with pathologies of the mainstream, official and on a daily basis approved norms in current education nor it is well rooted in the Polish traditional school of thought and what is more, it knows the manners of tackling humanistically superficial sentimentalism and its vision of development. And yet, we forget that a mature alternative for authoritarianism is not a fundamental permissivism – the truth the greatest had already come into possession.

The sixth challenge was to get involved in familiarising and popularising the contents of the attainments in the humanities and social science taking advantage of psychoanalytic movement represented by Alfred Adler (1924) and Carl Gustav Jung (see Mayes, 2005), pioneering impulses in psychology introduced by Charlotte Bühler (1933), Édouardo Claparède (1933) and young Jean Piaget (1937), American pragmatism represented by John Dewey (1938) and William James (1949), or philosophy and sociology of culture represented by Eduard Spranger (1966) and Georg Simmel (1955). This task also required an active participation in the widespread movement operating on an international scale as well as initiating actions and generating institutionalised forms of actions such as international congresses or inviting primary figures in education to Poland. In this case Radlińska’s accomplishments were invaluable and outstanding. Whereas today, the perception of international congresses has deteriorated and what is being exposed is cognitively secondary subject matters; moreover, hardly ever do our Polish representatives sit in the committees of international collective bodies.

The seventh challenge was to make an effort to synthesise the available pedagogic output and weld it to make pedagogy a coherent discipline. The educationalist such as Bogdan Nawroczyński (1938), Zygmunt Mysłakowski (1931) or Kazimierz Sośnicki (1936) tried to describe the condition of Polish pedagogy and the processes prevailing in the field of upbringing and the educational solutions worldwide. They also made an effort to look for some common ground conceptual framework for various forms of educational actions and methods of popularising them, which extended to different schools of thought in history, and the most significant contemporary disputes representing a wide range of concepts cross-section various disciplines. We, on the other hand, adhere to the principles of following narrow lanes, minimalizing frameworks, closing up in supposedly specialised circles which weaken the dynamics of development of scientific research in the light of international achievements. The communities concentrated around education and pedagogy lack the capacity for synthesis and cross-section studies and they are also deprived of genuine academic leaders who would play an important role on a greater international scale.

The eighth challenge the Great Generation of interwar period was deeply concerned with was to enter real processes, overcome real constraints and to make an attempt to reach specific circles and communities preoccupied with the matter of education. All these efforts led to a conclusion that a series of up-to-date research and social diagnosis of critical and postulate nature had to be made, accompanied by a thorough methodology and a responsible attitude towards problems such as detriment, cultural eradication and squandering opportunities. This mainly embraced studies on readership, conditions of education in rural areas, non-school education and adult education. Our current research, on the other hand, no matter how alarming its results are, does not attract attention nor becomes anybody’s concern. In addition to that, our cultural aspects of life are being neglected. By means of bureaucracy and pragmatism we are annihilating the understanding for humanistic culture and simultaneously legitimising shallow and cheap comprehension of what preparing for the demands of the job market is. Moreover, while investigating the job market, it is hardly noticed how



education is pathologically tailored to fulfil the needs of the market, which are tentatively articulated by some narrow-minded employers unable to perform beyond the two narrow notions of profit and business.

In the face of such a great number of challenges the ninth challenge was to integrate new disciplines, establish new elites and support them with institutionalised bodies providing various types of professional training courses in specific domains, academic contexts extending to departments and chairs, studying cycles, publication series and textbooks. Our so-called specialisation is nothing but an alibi for knowledge fragmentation which is complemented with oversimplified understanding of what interdisciplinarity is. The level and topicality of the intellectual facilities for postgraduate studies which are not only associated with the second degree diploma studies but also an obstruction in stimulating the need for further professional development that has been replaced with the need to meet merely the bureaucratic promotion requirements. This is the reason why new elites are not established. Instead of them only poorly educated and incapable of development graduates are produced as well as teachers constituting a professional group that is burnt-out and demoralised by being underappreciated in their efforts and the quality of their pedagogical work.

And finally, last but not least, the challenge which reflected the basic concern of organic work movement and romantic motivation in the battle for a modern school supported with culturally framed initiatives and its manner of functioning was to win wide circles of people and institutions which approved of the issue of education to have been an urgent and crucial social problem which determined the future of next generations, their national identity and the pace of modern transformation of the state. These days, on the other hand, there is a clearly distinguishable and serious decline in understanding and accepting the importance of education; and in the public sphere there is no reaction to a widespread and not at all promising neoliberal practices and institution-based strategies. All of the above seem extremely convincing as mission-based institutions are led by superficial and schematic thinking diminishing their role and substituted with short-sighted instrumental rationality and narrowly handled economics. The very same victims of poor standard education become the watchmen of further downfall and deterioration of next generations.

All of the above mentioned challenges had been discerned and realised to some extent. Books could be written on any of the outstanding people related to education matters whether authors, scholars, theoreticians or practitioners, pointing to their specific forms of involvement in the particular aspects of the education reform. It also refers to Helena Radlińska herself. I make a number of comments and references on the engagement on her part within the framework of ten challenges the interwar period generation faced.

Yet, it is worth pondering over the substantial weaknesses of the actions undertaken by the generation of interwar period as copying them in today's context might result in incapacity of current elites to overcome challenges similar to the ones of interwar period and revealing characteristic signs. Many of these weaknesses seem to be common for both periods. Moreover, the weaknesses are believed to have been largely persisting for the past decades and affecting the condition of today's educational circles and the quality of concern over today's education. The deficiency in multigenerational undertakings, which I have pointed to many times, e.g. on Shuman's [in Polish: Szuman] example and now Radlińska's (Witkowski, 2014), was, and still is, the fact that the authors and their advisors did not familiarise with each other's works, which is still a convenient norm among academic circles. They knew each other well, but they were not acquainted with works they had produced. And even if they had had an opportunity to read them, in other words, they had had access to some knowledge, they did not refer to each other's works. And even if this occasionally had happened, the references were non-systematic and often used to illustrate a problem and this was not at all inspiring for any of the parties. And when it came to some inspirations that were appreciated and pointed out, they were usually random and insignificant as they could not reach an accommodation in terms of each other's overall efforts and points of convergence. When they had finally reached a common ground as a community, they started to single each other out underlining the differences which they criticised each other for. In other words, they neither identified themselves with a group sharing one label nor constituted one domain. When they had finally agreed upon some similarities and the identification with a community took place, they underappreciated each other in terms of the importance of their accomplishments which strengthened, welded and developed could have turned out to be highly beneficial for everyone. As soon as they had approved of each other emphasising perversely each other's 'currency' or active participation which was worth stressing, they undermined each other by not respecting each other's merits or not subscribing to take up assigned challenges mutually in order to overcome the obstacles and shortcomings that resulted from the adopted solutions. Any



signs of mutual support in the attitudes and approaches to tackling the challenges they represented were translated merely to processes which prevented them from any possible development that would have made their academic domain well-founded and plausible as well as coherent and integrated. And even if there had been any symptoms of intellectual or scholarly growth in this particular field, the scholars did not respond to the impulses coming up from the outside of their own circles or traditions because of their confinement to homogenous tasks and clues or locally acknowledged authorities. When they had finally opened up to new inspirations and clues and recorded the significance of involvement then the contributors taking part in the process, usually out of sheer necessity, turned out to have been unprepared for the revolutionary change, or unaware of its arrival, or died prematurely just as it was in Radlińska's case who was ill, or they were knocked out by inadequate but younger competitors or conducive alignments and political games, or finally, their followers and associates proved to have been poor substitutes. Radlińska, who was ill, marginalised and isolated, was affected by all of these above. And yet, the issues of depression, despair, and the futility of spiritual existence were described in Bogdan Nawroczyński's copy of *A Diary of an Elderly Pedagogue* (1971) over twenty years after Radlińska's death.

And that is how a list of ten commandments unfolds – commandments that determine the quality of academic actions which have an impact on a ground-breaking mobilisation in a scholarly discipline, i.e. pedagogy. These ten commandments help us understand that in the structure of the hermeneutic circle there is a need for mutual reading, reference, inspiration, understanding, identification, acknowledgement, support, development, openness and complete maturity. These ten conditions that make an academic attitude valuable are rarely fulfilled by the representatives of humanities including pedagogy. It is clear that this set of challenges indicates a sequence of prerequisites which are inherent in the intellectual schools of thought, which Helena Radlińska, and the Great Generation she was a part of, represented but were hardly recognisable in Bogdan Suchodolski's attitude. His student-followers and associates inherited a set of behaviours which manifested a number of bad inclinations that deserve disapproval. Their attitudes were far from mature responsibility for the quality of development of the discipline as a whole and from handling synergy which reinforces the effects of the most valuable individual actions. What is more, there is no concord in terms of the criteria that are supposed to define this value. Radlińska emphasised that 'a social or academic activist' who takes part in a cooperative effort has to attain maturity features by means of his or her own academic input. The maturity finds its expression in showing interest in what other members of the academic team have to offer, being ready to assist the co-workers in taking pride in the findings gathered collectively (Radlińska, 1948, p. 16). It is clearly demonstrated how the criterion of maturity exposes the extent of immaturity of the whole pedagogical circles and disciplines. A number of reasons to take pride in our Polish tradition in pedagogy have been wasted and erased from the minds of new generations as a consequence of the key education figures being absent from the academically mature hermeneutic circle. The lack of social maturity in typical attitudes among academic circles, not only in a sense pointed at by Radlińska, prevents the circles from fusing their efforts or collecting brilliant ideas or better still, milestones of spiritual development into a collective treasury of significant impulses which integrate our efforts and thus enhance their value.

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