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MODERNISATION AND THE AVANT-GARDE IN EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE (1918–1939)

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Abstract: The establishment of independent states in Central and East Europe after 1918 not only generated changes in European geopolitical reality but also initiated many cultural processes carried out in the name of a modernisation of the region. The processes in question aimed at building the subjectivity of individual states based on their civilisational advancement made possible by political independence, which many Central European nations gained for the first time in their history. Anticipated growth was not only to confirm their right to exist, but also to occupy a place among leading states in Europe. Within the Old Continent East-Central Europe turned out to be a domain of modernisation *par excellence*, whose progress was the most awaited and stirred the greatest number of controversies. A particular role was ascribed to the arts and artists, whose mission was

to proclaim new slogans calling for a change of the *status quo*. Instead of indisputably adopting the already existing patterns of modernity they tried to work out original concepts of modernisation reforms based on an attempt to reconcile modernity with traditional values regarded by particular national cultures as worthy of preservation. Such processes were supported by representatives of the avant-garde and the more moderate promoters of modernisation, enabling a peaceful coexistence of radically avant-garde programmes and quests for conservative definitions of Modernism. In 1918–1939 “New Europe” was in favour of modernity and consistently pursued civilisational advancement while making skilful use of tools offered by new political reality and, first and foremost, of national independence achieved by numerous states in the aftermath of World War I.

Keywords: modernisation, Modernism, avant-garde, East-Central Europe, independence.

The establishment of independent states in Central and Eastern Europe after 1918 not only brought a fundamental change in European geopolitical reality but also initiated numerous civilisational and cultural processes taking place in the name of a modernisation of the region. Their purpose was to create the subjectivity of particular new states based on civilisational advancement possible due to political independence, which many Central European nations achieved for the first time in their history. Already at the time of the First World War Tomáš Masaryk wrote enthusiastically in “The New Europe”, a periodical with a truly symbolic title, issued since 1916 together with Robert Seton-Watson, and subsequently in a book with an identical title, published in 1918, about the opportunities created for

“small nations” by the fall of former empires. In the future newly established independent states were to embark upon co-operation and comprise a bulwark of democratic order in Europe. Analogous plans of political and economic federations were formulated also by other politicians and publicists. Despite the fact that they remained to a great extent unrealised – as in the case of the vision of a renaissance of the Jagiellonian community, formulated by Józef Piłsudski, the conception of an Intermarium discussed in Poland and envisaging a union of states situated between the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic, and the Black Sea, or the idea of a Danube Confederation conceived by the Hungarian liberal Oszkár Jászi – they accentuated the common history of this part of the Continent. Ultimately, local antagonisms

and conflicts, such as the controversy concerning Wilno and involving Poland and Lithuania or the activity of the so-called Little Entente, whose members: Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia were interested predominantly in hampering Hungarian efforts to regain lost territories, proved successful.

A union of new East-Central European states, therefore, turned out to be an unfulfilled hope.¹ Nonetheless, it was the experience of modernisation, based on the realisation of separate programs in particular states in 1918–1939, that should be recognised as an extremely important chapter in the history of East-Central Europe. Political elites treated the attainment of ambitious reforms as a source of the legitimisation of their power in the given country and a confirmation of the credibility of new states on the international scene. Anticipated civilisational advancement was supposed to confirm not only their *raison d'être* but also their right to occupy a displayed place in Europe and, as a consequence, to abandon the peripheral status imposed by the nineteenth-century division of the world. “New Europe” wished to finally become a subject of the “modern age”, while within the Old Continent the whole region proved to be a *par excellence* domain of modernisation and a place where its progress was both the most anticipated and gave rise to maximum controversies. The specificity of this region, however, was the reason why modernity, albeit created in a dialogue with chief centres in West European countries and the United States, possessed a specific character resulting from a lower level of economic development than in the West and a different social structure, including an underdeveloped middle class, enclaves of modern industry, and traditional forms of agriculture in the provinces.

In this situation a special role in modernisation was assigned to art and artists, whose vocation was to proclaim radical slogans calling for a change of the *status quo*. *Instead of simply adopting the already existing patterns of modernity they tried, however, to work out their original concepts of reforms, based on an attempt to reconcile modernity with traditional values, which were found worth preserving within individual cultures.*² During the inter-war period this process enjoyed the support of state authorities – culture found itself in the very centre of their attention. Consequently, we may speak about the appearance of a specific “state Modernism” constituting part of the official cultural policy of the states of “new Europe”.³ Visual arts, architecture, and design occupied conspicuous places in “new societies”, moulding public and private space, educating the “new man”, and supplying him with models of “modern life”. Modernisation, however, did not signify abandoning neo-Romantic ideas of national renaissance, and radical changes were often carried out in the name of slogans stressing cultural distinctness and proclaimed also by leading representatives of the avant-garde.⁴

Relations between modernisation and the activity of the avant-garde belonged to most frequently investigated research questions. As a rule, the avant-garde was described as a breakthrough, which, as its name indicated, preceded its epoch, opted for idealistic targets, and indicated a path towards the future. Avant-garde intransigence also denoted alienation in the world, not always treated by representatives of the avant-garde as negative, while a solution to this situation was envisaged as a strategy of building utopia,

often unexpectedly totalitarian. In turn, Modernism was to be deprived of the ideological and ethical objectives chosen by the avant-garde, thus comprising a less radical response to the challenges of contemporaneity and realising totally non-utopian projects yielding tangible profits. This is the reason why Modernism could be identified with state creating processes, but could also support colonial processes, act for the sake of great trade and industrial co-operation, or satisfy the daily needs of modern societies connected, for example, with the development of towns. For this reason it was granted a less essential role in the progressively inclined history of art by placing avant-garde rebelliousness higher than modernist pragmatism. It is difficult, however, not to notice that from this point of view the avant-garde matched the scheme of the classical theory of modernisation by realising the same program of changes all over the world, convinced that successive isms would lead to a better future. This teleological and universalistic program was an excellent summary of the celebrated scheme proposed by Alfred Barr, in which a minutely defined path towards modernity became the foundation of reflections on the history of twentieth-century art and the source of the majority of museum narrations in Europe and the United States. Not until the last two decades of the twentieth century did historians start questioning this way of thinking by demonstrating not so much the international character of the avant-garde as its numerous particular features resulting precisely from the cultural context that developed in individual countries, the best-known example being the differences between French and Czech Cubism. In turn, the history of Polish Formists shows that they linked the application of the pioneering geometricised form with quests going back all the way to the Young Poland period; they also pursued national distinctness in art by calling themselves Polish Expressionists and discovering inspiration in Polish Romanic poetry or folk art. Furthermore, the works of chief Formists referred to traditional iconography and religious themes, questioning the thesis maintaining that the avant-garde always takes the side of rationalistic secularism.

It should be also kept in mind that numerous representatives of the avant-garde in East-Central Europe joined state creating processes by executing works supporting the construction of state and national identity, i.a. by designing pavilions for world exhibitions in Paris (1937) or New York (1939) and even, as in the case of Poland, by creating the outfitting of a representative Presidential palace in Wisła (1929–1930). Nonetheless, even this new point of view, albeit cognitively attractive, cannot undermine the fact that the avant-garde proclaimed, first and foremost, the necessity of building new art for new times in accordance with the same model of cultural and political values, which were to be accepted by all mankind, and thus supported cosmopolitan artistic exchange referring to universalistic slogans and opposing national distinctness. Modernism, primarily in architecture, was initially described as an “international style” and treated as an expression of a universalistic model of modernisation. This concept, however, was reserved mainly for the most novel projects, closest to the avant-garde, and without stressing the less radical realisations, often more important from the viewpoint of their scale and impact, such as the construction of new districts of luxury residential architecture

granted forms close to avant-garde ones and experimental housing estates intended for a completely new type of clientele. From the present-day vantage point it is impossible to ignore the fact that the identification of Modernism with the "international style" turned out to be erroneous. This was rapidly noticed by the Modernists themselves – only some attempted to build in accordance with the postulates of the Athens Charter while many regarded the Charter as dubious and inadequate in those countries in which they worked. From this perspective the history of Modernist projects better matches definitions of modernisation as a polyphonic process adapted to concrete circumstances and in this manner attaining its objective. This is also the reason why – contrary to what heretofore history of art concentrated on the avant-garde would prefer – Modernism should be recognised as a much more reliable and effective tool for building a modern world than the avant-garde, which remains on its margin and cherishes universalistic ambitions. Finally, this is why studying Modernism could be much more important for a discussion about modernity and contribute new contents, which the history of art is unable to interpret, being limited only to the history of the avant-garde. After all, Modernism encompassed numerous currents, which sought legitimisation for introduced reforms in tradition and historical topoi referring to the cultural canon or national specificity defined as "conservative Modernism", radically different from progressive avant-garde programs.⁵ The essence of modernisation processes, therefore, was their attractiveness for a great number of ideological and political milieus, including left-wing adherents of social reforms as well as the elites of new states aiming at building modern national identities.⁶ An analysis of the Modernist transformation of the world thus calls for taking a look at the entire spectrum of "modernisation" projects embracing all aspects of reality, which the Modernists wished to design, i.e. architecture, design, visual arts, and sculpture as well as music, literature, the cinema, and even street decorations. Hence, while seeking an interpretation of the complex world of Modernism it is simply impossible to treat the avant-garde as privileged; more, this approach to the object of studies loses its ambiguity and diversity. Such syncretism makes it possible to accentuate mutual dependencies between various fragments of the Modernist project of rebuilding the world and appreciating each one of them as an element of a greater whole.

From the end of the eighteenth century, modernisation was integrally linked with the concept of "modernity" discussed in Europe by analysing the emergence of a "new society" as the effect of, i.a. the Industrial Revolution and technical progress, economic growth, urbanisation or the shaping of new types of personality and new collective identities.⁷ Jerzy Szacki stressed that sociology recognised that the new type of society and "modern" countries differ basically from all others, which had not yet undergone the great process of transformation.⁸ Consequently, there came into being a distinctive dichotomy between groups or individuals embedded in traditional structures succumbing to inevitable disintegration and those, who opted for modernity. The acceptance of a new vision of the world did not denote an indisputable acknowledgment of the approaching epoch, and modernity was perceived also as a threat resulting in the deterioration of interpersonal ties, conflicts, and

a faltering social order together with, as Witkacy put it, the *disappearance of metaphysical emotions*.⁹ Nonetheless, modernity described in the categories proposed by Max Weber remained the attribute of the developed world, and whoever wished to become part of the latter was compelled to accept it. In order to build a new society it was necessary to achieve its modernisation, which, it was believed, should be conducted according to models devised in developed countries, to which the rest of the world had to adjust itself. This conviction was questioned by research conducted in recent decades and by subjecting the concept of modernisation to far-going criticism. The most universal charges included those, which questioned the conviction claiming that due to modernisation society is reaching its final phase of development and could persist in modernity. References to the problematic idea of progress and, more essentially, belief in universalism, which assumes that Western-style modernisation must produce everywhere the same effects: *a free market, economic growth, secularisation, democratisation, individualisation, greater respect for human rights, etc.*¹⁰ were also questioned.

Within the context of the modernisation programs pursued by new states attention should be drawn predominantly to theses formulated by Shmuel Noel Eisenstadt, who accentuated that there is no single modernity and that "detraditionalisation" in assorted regions of the world follows diverse paths. Depending on the axial system binding in a given civilisation modernisation can follow a different course and thus does not always have to radically oppose tradition; more, modernity and tradition are mutually connected since if the former is not to become an abstraction deprived of contents then it is inconceivable without the latter.¹¹

Particular modernisation programs questioning the universalism of the Western model of modernity can be recognised as a characteristic feature of pro-reform activity pursued in East-Central Europe. Despite the differences dividing them, in 1918–1939 Hungary, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were compelled to tackle similar problems connected with the implementation of modernisation programs. Their peripheral location *vis à vis* West European centres also meant that minimalising civilisational differences, which split Europe, and stressing own subjectivity within European culture became an important task. The particularism of modernisation projects in individual countries of the region also created new perspectives for writing the history of inter-war modernity.¹² While following this path it is worth taking a step further and ponder the significance predominantly of those phenomena in the art of East-Central Europe, which did not have equivalents in other parts of the Continent and the world, and thus stress even more distinctly the specificity of experiencing "new Europe". Noteworthy examples include the activity of the "Bata" Shoe Company in Czechoslovakia or the appearance of the new town and port of Gdynia in specific political and cultural conditions; such cases can be multiplied while demonstrating that the region witnessed the emergence of original and autonomous modernisation projects, which underlined the pluralistic character of modernity.

Emphasis placed on the significance of the "new state" makes it possible to notice a community of the modernisation experience from the Baltic to the Adriatic, connected

with the restoration or winning of political independence and attempts at benefitting from it. This does not signify concentrating solely on the question of state patronage; the “new state” should be perceived as a pretext for an analysis of a multi-motif creation of new civilisational and cultural models generated by modernisation, which could not be achieved in the absence of political freedom. In inter-war East-Central Europe this process was particularly turbulent and assumed radical forms predominantly due to a universal conviction that in the heretofore history of modernisation this region was deprived of subjectivity. Tackling the consequences of such a state of things and a willingness to find oneself rapidly in the very centre of modernity were the reasons why it became necessary to seek original modernisation solutions unknown elsewhere, serving the promotion of modernity by using also contemporary art, architecture, and design. The “new state” functioned not only as a modernisation instrument acting by means of its administrative structures, but also as a source of inspiration for creating visionary projects of building a “brave new world”. While accepting the thesis about assorted modernisation strategies adapted to local conditions one should pose a question about the specificity of works of art, design or architecture created

as a result of such “regional” modernisations. Another fundamental problem is the history of cultural institutions established after 1918, and in particular museums, which became key authors of modernisation projects within the domain of culture, an outstanding example being the J. and K. Bartoszewicz Museum of History and Art in Łódź, and thanks to Władysław Strzemiński and Director Marian Minich the International Collection of Modern Art of the “a.r.” group was installed in 1932.¹³

The history of modernisation in East-Central Europe is tantamount to the co-existence of numerous parallel phenomena, whose range contains both avant-garde attitudes and quests for conservative definitions of Modernism, while the interest of the authors focuses on extremely varied domains of activity spanning from representative exhibition pavilions to designing leaflets. Jointly, those phenomena are evidence that in 1918–1939 “new Europe” favoured modernity by consistently striving towards civilisational advancement and skilfully using tools provided by new political reality and, first and foremost, by independence achieved by the states in the aftermath of World War I.

Przypisy

- ¹ The author of the article used fragments of an introduction to his book: *Modernizacje. Sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, 1918–1939*, Museum of Art in Łódź, Łódź 2010 and article: *Architektura, modernizm, nowoczesność*, “Autoportret” 2015, 3 (50), pp. 54–58. These questions were discussed in detail in comparative studies on new states in East-Central Europe; cf., i.a. W. Balcerak, *Powstanie państw w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Warszawa 1974; P. Wandycz, *Cena wolności. Historia Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej od średniowiecza do współczesności*, Kraków 1995, pp. 306–347; H. Seton-Watson, *Eastern Europe 1918–1941*, Hamden 1962; *The Economic History of Eastern Europe 1919–1975*, vol. I. M. C. Kaser, E. A. Radice (ed.), Oxford 1985. The concept of East-Central Europe is borrowed from: O. Halecki: *Historia Europy – jej granice i podziały*, Lublin 1994.
- ² I. T. Berend, *Decades of Crisis. Central and Eastern Europe before World War II*, University of California, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1998, chapter 6: *Belated National Revolutions*, pp. 145–184. The author analysed this problem in detail in his article: *Imaging Universalism: Democracy and the National Style in Central Europe ca. 1900*, “Centropa” 2008, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 16–25.
- ³ The concept is discussed by: M. Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham, N.C. 1987; cf. also: P. Piotrowski, *Eine neue Kunst – ein neuer Staat*, in: *Der neue Staat. Zwischen Experiment und Repräsentation. Polnische Kunst 1918–1939* (exhibition catalogue), R. Schuler, G. Gawlik (ed.), Leopold Museum, Vienna 2003, pp. 51–68.
- ⁴ M. S. Witkovsky, *Starting Points*, in: *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945*, National Gallery of Art, Washington 2007, p. 13.
- ⁵ A discussion on the definition of the avant-garde is presented in: K. von Beyne, *Das Zeitalter der Avantgarde. Kunst Und Gesellschaft 1905–1955*, München 2005. On “conservative Modernism” cf. R. Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia. Art and Politics in France between the Wars*, New Haven-London 1995.
- ⁶ C. Wilk, Introduction: What was Modernism? in: *Modernism: Designing a New World 1914–1939* (exhibition catalogue), idem (ed.), Victoria & Albert Museum, London 2006, pp. 12–21. On analogous “interdisciplinary” history of Modernism cf. S. McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Form*, Cambridge 2005; K. Varnedoe, A. Gopnik, *High & Low. Modern Art and Popular Culture* (exhibition catalogue), Museum of Modern Art, New York 1990.
- ⁷ W. Knöbl, *Teorie, które nie przemiją: niekończąca się historia teorii modernizacji*, in: *Współczesne teorie socjologiczne*, A. Jasińska-Kania, L. M. Nijakowski, J. Szacki, M. Ziółkowski (selection and prep.), vol. 2, Warszawa 2006, pp. 734–746.
- ⁸ J. Szacki, *Teorie modernizacji i systemu światowego*, in: *Współczesne teorie socjologiczne...*, p. 729.
- ⁹ On the dual perception of “modernity” in inter-war Polish art cf. K. Nowakowska-Sito, *Miasto, masa, maszyna. Mit współczesności w sztuce polskiej dwudziestolecia*, in: *Wyprawa w dwudziestolecie* (exhibition catalogue), eadem (ed.), National Museum in Warsaw, Warszawa 2008, pp. 70–85.
- ¹⁰ J. Szacki, *Teorie modernizacji...*, p. 730. On cultural contexts of modernisation cf. *Modernizacja Polski. Kody kulturowe i mity*, J. Szomburg (ed.), Gdańsk 2008.
- ¹¹ J. Szacki, *ibidem*, p. 731. S. N. Eisenstadt, *Nowoczesność jako odrębna cywilizacja*, in: *Współczesne teorie socjologiczne...*, pp. 754–768.
- ¹² In this context it is worth recalling the concept of “critical regionalism” introduced into research on architecture by Kenneth Frampton, cf. K. Frampton, *Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*, reprint in: *Die Bedeutung der Form*, B. Huber, C. Süsstrunk (ed.), Zürich 1988, pp. 16–30.
- ¹³ Cf. I. Luba, *Utworzenie Międzynarodowej Kolekcji Sztuki Nowoczesnej „a.r.”*, in: *Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi. Monografia*, vol. 1, A. Jach, K. Słoboda, J. Sokółowska, M. Ziółkowska (ed.), Łódź 2015, pp. 16–35.

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