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DILEMMAS OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD IN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND HISTORICAL EDUCATION

DYLEMATY WSPÓŁCZESNEGO ŚWIATA W HISTORIOGRAFII I EDUKACJI HISTORYCZNEJ

Introduction¹

Sources such as linguistic dictionaries and encyclopedias explain that the term 'history' originates from the Greek word *historie*, which means an interview, an interrogation of an eye-witness as well as a report of such an interview². History is a discipline which refers to both the past and the future. The past can serve as a good starting point for an analysis of contemporary problems. History has roots in the present time too, as this is the ultimate judge of its course³. There are two ways to understand history. One pertains to the past times, that is what has happened until our day; the other one is known as historiography, which is how we write and relate the former times. Thus, historiography is the contemporary interpretation of some events in chronological order, set in the context of an accepted system of values. It is the former perception of historiography that lies at the foundation of the following reflections.

History and historiography versus changing social and cultural currents

Historical concepts have always been saturated with thoughts related to ideologies, political doctrines or social and cultural aspects, and the degree to which historiography is loaded with such ingredients has varied in time. When history became a scientific discipline read at universities, some researchers saw this as a step towards submitting historical studies to stricter discipline, to some form of 'training', which also required more formal education of future historians. This is the reason why, as Michel Foucault puts it, 'history is a discourse of power'⁴.

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¹ Cf: J.M. Garbula, *Znaczenia historyczne w nauczaniu początkowym. Narracyjne konstruowanie historii rodzinnych*, Olsztyn 2010.

² J. Tokarski (red.), *Słownik wyrazów obcych*, Warszawa 1980.

³ J. Murphy, *Postmodern Social Analysis and Criticism*, New York 1989.

⁴ M. Foucault, *Wykład z 28 stycznia 1976*; w: M. Foucault, *Trzeba bronić społeczeństwa. Wykłady z Collège de France 1976*, przeł. M. Kowalska, Warszawa 1988, s. 74.

The theses proposed by modernists and post-modernists have been affecting the way we understand history. According to Andrzej Radomski, in modernism a historian gains knowledge of the past time on the basis of information originating from experience, from an external reality captured by historical sources⁵. Thus, supported by the empirical knowledge derived from references, a historian verifies the knowledge he creates. In modernism, the paragon of history as a science is objective and realistic historiography, which guarantees the achievement of the so-called true past.

Janusz Rulka juxtaposed the modernistic approach to history as a science and to historical education⁶. History was understood as a series of chronological structures, relationships and connections, while historical education was dominated by concepts of progress and revolution. Modernism chose to promote such universal values as the truth, objectivity, patriotism and family. The question of the truth seemed to be among the most pertinent issues raised by historical narrative because, as Wilhelm Dilthey explains⁷, in order to find out the true nature of man we must study history rather than indulge in analyzing our personalities or performing psychological experiments. Historians believed that there was only one truth and that their narratives were true as well. Jerzy Topolski nicknames such truth a selfish one. Another distinguishing feature of modernistic history was the emphasis placed on struggle, suffering, sacrifice, aggression and victims⁸. The fundamental matters were such historical events as battles and victories, failures and disasters, treaties and other legal acts, while questions related to culture, customs or everyday life were of marginal importance. J. Rulka concludes that modernistic history recounts stories of power, violence and pressure, while modernistic historiography focuses on men (leaders, rulers, warriors, important figures).

In modernism, history teaching intended to promote attitudes which helped to consolidate societies, to strengthen the notions of solidarity and cooperation, and to emphasize the need to care about what was in the people's best interest. History encouraged the formation and reinforcement of group identity. The knowledge of history enabled individuals to endow their own fate with sense by incorporating it into the fate of a larger human community.

Two types of factors contributed to the collapse of the modernistic approach to history. On the one hand, they were external conditions, independent of historiography. On the other hand, there was a growing feeling among the Annalists that the metaphors then employed in historiography were becoming exhausted⁹.

⁵ A. Radomski, *Historiografia a kultura współczesna*, Lublin 2006.

⁶ J. Rulka, *Postmodernistyczne problemy edukacji historycznej*, „Ars Educandi” 1998, vol. I, s. 111–112.

⁷ W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schrifften; Band V und VI: Die geistige Welt. Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens*, Leipzig 1934, s. 180.

⁸ J. Topolski, *Historia jako nauka po postmodernizmie*, w: E. Domańska (red.), *Pamięć, etyka i historia*, Poznań 2006, s. 32.

⁹ M. Szołtysek, *Od naukowej obiektywności do po-postmodernistycznego Romantyzmu – martwe powieki i nowe paradygmaty, czyli historiografia wobec wyzwań współczesności*, „Teraźniejszość–Człowiek–Edukacja” 2002, N. 3 (19), s. 14.

The former group of factors included the following developments:

- philosophy of science diverging from classical realism and from the corresponding concept of the truth as well as the specular theory of language (Willard Van Orman Quine, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Richard Rorty),
- the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy and humanities, which enabled the abandonment of the traditionally perceived dualism of the world and the language,
- a challenge undermining the belief that there exists only one, objective sense of all texts (deconstructionism, Jacques Derrida),
- ‘the end of grand narratives’ proclaimed by Jean-François Lyotard; heterogeneity of scientific discourses and opinions¹⁰.

The other group of factors leading to the downfall of modernistic historiography was rooted in the reflections formulated by the Annalists, through which they refuted the quantitative reductionism that appeared in the approach to analyzing the history of culture. It became evident that modernistic culture was unable to find satisfactory solutions to man’s existential problems. The Annalists began to include in their publications micro-worlds and micro-histories, which manifested their belief that history should open up to people who until then had been neglected; this meant a shift from the centre to marginally considered peripheries. The third generation of the Annalists, deriving inspiration from three sources: sociology (Pierre Bourdieu), ethnology (Claude Lévi-Strauss) and Michel Foucault’s ideas, dealt with the matters which had previously been considered peripheral, such as family, relationships between the two sexes, childhood, young age, getting old, everyday life, etc. In other words, ‘they focused on what used to be dealt with in commentaries under the main text’¹¹.

Changes occurring in the contemporary world as well as new attitudes to knowledge cause confusion. The post-modernistic society and its key representatives are satisfied with the world devoid of history; they are in favour of war against history and historical awareness. Post-modernists challenge history as a holistic description of the people’s past because, as they claim, it is possible to speak only about single events. In such disciplines as the history of ideas, science or literature, a shift has taken place from describing whole epochs or centuries to writing about disrupting events. History is a discourse sustained by the choice of one thing over another.

Post-modernist theorists refute the existence of a universal value such as the truth. In their opinion, there is no such thing as a finite, permanent or unchangeable historical truth and the reasons are: the logics and specific character of the language employed by humanities, research procedures pursued by individual historians, their conscious or subconscious submergence in a specific culture and finally accessible historical sources¹². As demonstrated by J. Topolski, his-

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ E. Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach*, Poznań 1999, s. 60.

¹² S. Sztobryn, *Narracja historyczna w polskiej pedagogice XX wieku*, w: E. Kurantowicz, Nowak-Dziemianowicz M., *Narracja–krytyka–zmiana. Praktyki badawcze we współczesnej pedagogice*, Wrocław 2007, s. 47–48.

toriography has experienced a change from the philosophy of confirmation to the philosophy of argumentation resting on two pillars. „The first pillar is the refusal of the claim that there is some universal truth, which we are nearing while gaining better knowledge of the world, and the approval of the fact that there is pluralism of truths. The other pillar is the comprehension that argumentation is more than logics (...) This makes a scientific discourse deeper, because a discussion is no longer a process of juxtaposing arguments of which the proponents are certain that they are ultimate truths”¹³. By developing this thought further, J. Topolski observes that „a historian does not ‘reflect on’ or ‘reconstruct’ something that has already been made and awaits to be described, but suggests some way of describing the past”¹⁴. Thus, a historian is not someone who reproduces the former past but someone which acts as its creator, bearing a special burden of responsibility on his shoulders.

Theorists of history define in a variety of ways the currents which stem from the positivistic canon of studying history. Andrzej Feliks Grabski¹⁵ talks about non-standard models of historiography, J. Topolski¹⁶ refers to new or modern historiography, Wojciech Wrzosek¹⁷ discusses non-classical historiography and Ewa Domańska¹⁸ writes about alternative history. Drawing on the texts published in an American journal *History and Theory*, E. Domańska defined both academic (conventional) history and unconventional history. Academic history applies the methodological principles such as the worship of facts, objectiveness as a must, the cause-and-effect chain or striving to discover the truth. Unconventional history negates the above principles while readily referring to emotions, empathy and honesty. The linguistic turn which took place in the 1930s¹⁹ and the criticism of analytical philosophy have stirred up an interest among historians in the interpretation of texts, discourse and theory of narration. Roland Barthes proves that post-modernism humanities comprise such aspects as linguisticism, textuality, constructivism and discoursiveness. This author claims that there was a shared moment at which the history of humanity and narration were born, because the narrative is „international, transhistorical, transcultural, it is simply there like life itself”²⁰. While collecting facts, a historian actually relates them or tells us about them. „In the historical discourse of our civilization, the process of signification is always aimed at ‚filling out’ the meaning of History. The historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of

¹³ J. Topolski, *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię. Tajemnice narracji historycznej*, Warszawa 1996, s. 347–348.

¹⁴ Idem, *Wprowadzenie do historii*, Poznań 2001, s. 15.

¹⁵ A. F. Grabski, *Dzieje historiografii*, Poznań 2006.

¹⁶ J. Topolski, *Teoria wiedzy historycznej*, Poznań 1983.

¹⁷ W. Wrzosek, *Historia–kultura–metafora. Powstanie nieklasycznej historiografii*, Wrocław 1995.

¹⁸ E. Domańska, op. cit.

¹⁹ R. Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn*. Chicago, Chicago 1967.

²⁰ R. Barthes, *Wstęp do analizy strukturalnej opowiadań*, w: M. Głowiński, H. Markiewicz (red.), *Studia z teorii literatury. Archiwum przekładów „Pamiętnika Literackiego” 1977, t. I*, p. 156.

signifiers; that is to say, he organizes facts with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series”²¹.

Theorists of historiography, R. Barthes, Hayden White, Frank Ankersmit, share the opinion that the way we think about the world is narrative in character because a narrative is the basic way of ‘talking’ about reality. Constructed texts refer to some reality which precedes a given text. Thus, we face two types of relations: representing and temporal, that is the history of something that has happened on a scale of some time (cyclic or linear).

There are many definitions of a narrative, which – according C. Levi-Strauss, the founder of structural anthropology – is a typically European creation. A. Radomski²² comprehends narration as „some way of organizing or creating reality with (written) language,” and its basic form is a narrative (discourse). This author claims that a historic narrative is the type of story containing a plot, which the narrator relates from some distance in time. Interpretation is thought to be the basic ‘research’ procedure in all humanities, while interpretation of texts performed by narrativists depends on different types of poetics originating from the theory of literature. One of the principal tasks of a historical narrative is to explain the past reality, which will make it more accessible and understandable. Narratives are constructed in the historian’s mind, based on his search through reference sources while collecting data. The process of transforming facts into a narrative is creative, which means that the same set of facts may serve for constructing different narratives. The narrative is a tool which helps the author to interpret the past. Sometimes a projection mechanism may appear, so that the historian will attribute his own characteristics to the person he examines. Transformation of facts into narratives is facilitated or hindered by such factors as the historian’s knowledge, his background (the system of references), models of the perception former times and people’s actions, the historian’s ideology.

A leading representative of the narrative philosophy of history, H. White²³, on the assumption that historical writing in many ways mirrors literature, challenged the traditional contrast between historiography and literature. By negating narrative writing guided by logical deduction, H. White digressed from analytical philosophy and approached structural analysis in which discursive tools were employed to endow past events with sense. When asked what he considered himself by profession, he said: „I am a writer [...] I don’t mind what anyone calls me. I don’t think labels are important. My view is this: don’t worry about labels or schools. Here is a book. Read it. If it helps you in your own work – good; if it doesn’t – forget it!”²⁴. F. R. Ankersmit²⁵ undertook and further developed H. White’s conception, striving to create the theoretical foundations for evolutionary narrativism. This author

²¹ Idem, *Dyskurs historii*, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 1984, v. 3, s. 234.

²² A. Radomski, op. cit., s. 3.

²³ H. White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Baltimore–London 1973.

²⁴ E. Domańska, op. cit., s. 62.

²⁵ F. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic. A Semantic of the Historian’s Language*, The Hague 1983.

questioned the traditional understanding of historiography as true knowledge, and put forth the following theses: historical narratives are not interpretations of the past but incidental stories which have their own beginning, middle and end; the past must be interpreted; narrative interpretations represent organization of knowledge; facts about the past could serve as arguments in favour or against narrative interpretations while interpretations can only verify interpretations²⁶. According to F. R. Ankersmit, these arguments create evidence showing that our attitude to the past has been 'privatized' and the whole work created so far has become the property of a historian.

The works written by F. R. Ankersmit have stirred up circles of history theorists. Initially, his ideas were ignored and even today his concept of historical experience is unacceptable to many. Nonetheless, the books and publications of this today's best-known history theorist leave no-one indifferent; conversely, they excite, amaze and force others to take a standpoint. A. Radomski²⁷ challenges the conception put forth by F. R. Ankersmit and looks at issues related to our cognition of history from 'own' perspective, which he refers to as 'culture cognitive'. Inspired by concepts proposed by contemporary pragmatists such as W. Van Orman Quine, D. Davidson, R. Rorty constructed a new, pragmatic vision of history. His conception grows from the foundation built by the claim that actions are implicated by specific values. R. Rorty perceives scientific practice not through the context of cognitive aims but with practical goals in mind, that is the ones associated with people's actions, because man is active and needs utilitarian knowledge to achieve specific aims. This author assumes that scientific research has some ethical dimension, which can be broadly described as ideological²⁸.

According to A. Radomski, formation of the above vision of science, including history, is promoted by the liberal society in which discourses and values are in abundance. He believes that „in this new Klio the key words could be:

- 1) 'writing about' instead of 'studying of' a certain subject which exists objectively,
- 2) 'text' as a word denoting what until now has been known as 'references', instead of accepting the latter as 'pieces of evidence' referring to objective facts (...),
- 3) 'stories' instead of forming scientific 'statements' which can be classified as true or false,
- 4) 'constructing' rather than 'reconstructing' (reproducing) the historical reality"²⁹.

Drawing on these assumption, it has been deemed advisable to replace the vision of a historian seen as an indifferent researcher by the concept of 'a guide' showing us around the world of history, someone who recounts various narratives

²⁶ Idem, *History and Tropology. The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1994.

²⁷ A. Radomski, op. cit., s. 64.

²⁸ Ibidem, s. 56.

²⁹ Ibidem, s. 59.

about past times and assists all novices in acquiring their individual and creative perception of the historical heritage of the human race.

There is another theoretical concept in the contemporary historical thought which I would like to mention. It is the idea elaborated by E. Domańska³⁰, which Mikołaj Szoltysek³¹ says: „In my opinion, this is an extremely original concept. Domańska takes the narrativist thought as a starting point, but transforms very creatively the concepts proposed by representatives of post-modernistic humanities and in fact creates one of the most courageous alternatives – and certainly the first one in the Polish research – to humanities after the linguistic turn.”

E. Domańska joins the ‘ethical turn’ which has reached history, and poses the question about ‘the history’s best interest’ and what it is. She proves that new history, which is labelled as alternative, speaks about „man who has been ‘thrown’ into the world, about human existence in the world, about the human experience of the universe and the ways in which man experiences it. It is therefore the history of experience, history of emotions, history of private micro-universes”³².

J. Topolski has presented his viewpoint on subjectivity and objectivity of the historical process. His attitude is both ontological and methodological because it is associated with the understanding of historical reality itself and the way it is studied. J. Topolski believes that ontology is not reality itself but a research construction, a linguistic interpretation of what is considered to be real³³. This author argues that a historian creates a specific image of the past reality, in the light of which he does the research. J. Topolski³⁴ calls it the minimum characterization of a historical process (the past), that is the construction of a relatively low level of interpretation. He includes in this interpretation the aspects of time and space, as well as human actions, that is the process of creating history by people.

J. Topolski also referred to post-modernism and its consequences to history as a science. Post-modernism manifested itself in a constructionism-based vision of history as a form of representation, which also inspired the local comprehension of history. The author does not believe it is necessary to absorb all consequences of post-modernism. He shows some progress in historical studies which is driven by the development of interpretation. „I think it is on the level of interpretation, its accuracy, comprehensibility, righteousness, etc., that it becomes possible to notice the most important indicator of the scientific aspect of history after post-modernism, or during the persisting presence of post-modernism”³⁵.

Progress in historical studies has affected historical narrative and facilitated search for new realms of knowledge. Historians have undertaken a different type

³⁰ E. Domańska, op. cit., s. 23.

³¹ M. Szoltysek, op. cit., s. 24.

³² E. Domańska, op. cit., s. 58.

³³ J. Topolski, *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię...*, s. 231.

³⁴ Idem, *Czy historyk ma dostęp do przeszłej rzeczywistości?*; w: E. Domańska (red.), *Historia: o jeden świat za daleko?*, Poznań 1997, s. 64.

³⁵ Idem, *Historia jako nauka...*, s. 34.

of historical narrative, the one which diverges from history dominated by political history or concepts derived from general ideals. Meta-narration, i.e. considerations stimulated by some grand concepts, has been replaced by other types of historical writing: for instance history of culture, feminist history, post-colonial history, multi-media history or micro-history.

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STRESZCZENIE

Prezentowany artykuł ma charakter ogólnych rozważań związanych z historiografią. Zarysowano tendencje społeczno-kulturowe współczesnego świata mające znaczenie dla rozumienia historiografii i edukacji historycznej. Wychodząc od modernistycznego podejście do nauki i edukacji historycznej analizowano czynniki mające wpływ na jego załamanie i zwrócenie się w stronę historiografii niekonwencjonalnej. Konsekwencją tego zwrotu stało się odkrywanie nowych obszarów badawczych oraz konstruowanie innych rodzajów narracji. W miejsce metanarracji, posługujących się wielkimi pojęciami, powstawało piarstwo historyczne typu: historia kultury, historia feministyczna, historia postkolonialna, historiografia multimedialna czy mikrohistoria, mówiąca o rzeczach mniej „ważnych” w skali makro, ale istotnych dla jakiejś grupy społecznej lub dla pojedynczych ludzi.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja historyczna, historiografia, historia.

SUMMARY

The following article contains general reflections on historiography, that is on what is written and said about historical times. An outline of contemporary social and cultural tendencies which are important for the comprehension of historiography and history teaching has been given. From the modernist approach to history as a science and subject in education, the author proceeds with her analysis towards the factors which have undermined modernism and contributed to the birth of unconventional historiography. As a result, new realms of knowledge have opened up and other types of narration have been created. Meta-narratives employing grand concepts have been replaced by other types of historical writing, for example history of culture, feminist history, post-colonial history, multi-media history or micro-history, which all speak about issues 'less important' on a macro-scale but essential for a given social group or even an individual.

Keywords: historical education, historiography, history.