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OUR TWENTIETH CENTURY

Although *A History of the Modern World* by Paul Johnson (born 1928)¹ was published in Polish six years ago, and the London edition appeared twelve years ago, it has not become outdated. It reads almost like a detective story, and many a historical situation of today becomes much easier to understand thanks to the perspective created by a reading of Johnson's book.

The main title of the book, *A History of the Modern World*, sounds a bit suspicious, but the subtitle – *From 1917 to the 1980s* – makes it clear that it covers the twentieth century. Nevertheless, reading this hefty volume, one may still find some justification for the main title, so broadly formulated. For our century seems to be both deeply rooted in the past, yet also open to the future. In spite of the many revolutions that have occurred during this century, there still live and find expression in the actions of peoples and nations archetypes and burning interests painstakingly cultivated through the centuries, so that the line from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* – “All time is eternally present” – reveals itself as surprising apt. Despite this specificity of the century, called “the atomic age,” “the age of scientific-technological revolution,”

“the age of totalitarianism” (Johnson himself calls the period *the age of politics*, p. 730), we find in it the operation of certain historical “invariables” through which man has defined himself in the course of history. Speaking most generally, this “eternal perspective” is constituted in history through the domain of moral values, through the repeated victory of disinterestedness, nobleness and devotion to truth in the course of history, and a simultaneous denunciation of violence, duplicity and cynicism. All these aspects are present in Johnson's book.

The author himself is a distinguished English historian of conservative make-up, well known throughout the world. From time to time he incites uproar in the predominantly leftist circles of historians by formulating hypotheses which go against the principles of relativism current in the interpretation of history today and progressivism. In Poland at the turn of 1989, Paul Johnson's book entered the market in which Marxist historians and their disciples prevailed like an antidote. Apart from the work here reviewed, there soon appeared more of his books, such as *A History of Christianity*, *History of the Jews* and *The Intellectuals*. Other translations are in progress.

¹ Paul Johnson, *Historia świata (od roku 1917)* ed. by “Polonia”, London 1989, 807 pp. [*A History of the Modern World (From 1917 to the 1980s)*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1983, 734 pp.]. All references are to the English version.

THE CONSERVATIVE OPTION

Johnson's book belongs in the category of political history, that is, it describes the dimension of the world in which the interests and powers of states, govern-

ments and ideologies interplay. In this type of historical writing, the central point of investigation is carried out by the analysis of data from the military, social and economic domains. The author pays special attention to the latter field, drawing from it conclusions of a strongly explicatory character. The demographic factor as well, so one-sidedly interpreted in leftist historiography, including Polish historical writings, becomes in Johnson explanatory of much that is considered historically significant today.

However, what seems to constitute the specificity of the book is its axiological and personalist aspect. Throughout Johnson's colourful and dramatic discourse, there breaks through the historiosophic message that history has an essentially moral character and that the loss of this character in the consciousness and acts of those responsible for the fate of the world constitutes the principal flaw and curse of our century. This main thesis – never formulated explicitly – runs throughout the book in the form of innumerable examples, both positive – such as the figure of Sir Winston Churchill and the political motives for the reconstruction of Western Europe by the governments of Adenauer, de Gasperi and de Gaulle, or the role of Poland in the events in the history of the modern world (the outbreak of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War) – and negative (which are more numerous), for instance in the operation of the amoral “Gresham rule,” the fathers of contemporary totalitarianism, or the transformations of the political ethos in America (from millenarianism to degradation).

Johnson convincingly unravels the axiological background of political, social and economic phenomena. One of the examples still actual today is the political instrumentalization of the human sense of

guilt, that “corrosive vice of the civilized during the twentieth century, which we shall meet in many forms” (p. 41). Throughout the century, the mass sense of guilt was being manipulated in order to win political concessions through a kind of blackmail that took advantage of concepts such as “colonialism,” “racism,” “imperialism” or (especially in Poland) “anti-Semitism.” There appear in *A History of the Modern World* examples indicating that significant progress in history always has a moral character. One such example is the period 1910-1929, the most prosperous period in the history of America (pp. 225-226) when, under the rules of such presidents as Harding and Coolidge, the citizens of the United States, on the basis of their faith in traditional values, achieved well-being and a peculiar harmony of democracy. (This example is discussed in a chapter entitled *The Last Arcadia*.)

Another significant feature of Johnson's methodology is the biographic approach which expresses a conviction that the human individual plays an important and often decisive role in history. In *A History of the Modern World*, the great “landmarks” are not socio-economic movements or great ideologies, but persons. The individuals who by their will and temper impose a direction on the course of history and who also constitute – to some extent – its reflections are “representatives of the spirit of the age.” There is hardly any need to offer arguments proving this assertion with respect to figures such as Lenin, Hitler, Stalin or Mao. But Johnson has something more in mind. His analysis often takes as its subject the culture of an epoch or a country. It is on the cultural climate that the fate of a nation often depends. It was so in the case of the anti-Semitic madness in Germany in the period of the Weimar

Republic (cf. pp. 116-123), or of the moral crisis in England produced by the decadent moods of circles such as the Bloomsbury group (Chapter IV). Participation in a given culture and the co-creation of this culture depend on the choices made by every man. In numerous examples, Johnson shows how interests, tempers, families and habits bred at home actually constitute historical facts. *A History of the Modern World* contains several scores of short, brilliantly sketched biographies of the people who determined the course of our century. In this book the profiles of J. M. Keynes, F. D. Roosevelt, M. Gandhi, M. Luther King, J. Nehru, J. F. Kennedy and others, show faces slightly or radically different from those we have thus far known from propaganda stereotypes or history handbooks.

SUCH HAS BEEN THIS CENTURY

The book is divided into twenty chapters, covering a total of 734 pages. Each chapter is provided with a rich choice of bibliographic references. The division into chapters is based on chronological-geographic criteria; each chapter covers some closed period and concerns a particular region of the world.

Chapter I, entitled *A Relativistic World*, outlines the presuppositions forming the climate of the whole century, in which the principle of relativity reigned supreme. The harbingers of this principle, prominent especially in political life, were by no means politicians, but a physicist, psychiatrist and a philosopher – Einstein, Freud and Marx. The last chapter carries the title *Palimpsests of Freedom*, and contains historical data from the beginning of the 1980's. It is a chapter abounding in question marks and speculative hypotheses. They concern, among

others, the phenomenon of religious revival, of the destiny of the Soviet Union ("the unsolved anomaly"), and of sociobiology, in which Johnson perceives the science of the future. And what does he find within these terms which circumscribe the borders within which the history the twentieth century will play itself out? What substitutes for the unknown variables in the work with which Johnson outlines the beginning of the age of relativity and timidly suggests its decline, or the breakdown of relativity? What has this century been like?

It opens with the Russian revolution of 1917 and the construction of the communist state whose first moves were the establishment of terror ("Cheka") and the destruction of democracy (Chap. II). Perhaps the most important feature of the totalitarian Communist state – the author claims on page 81 – is the proliferation of nomenclature. (The accuracy of this observation is confirmed by our situation today, for instance that of our economy.) The beginning of this century in Europe was connected with the radicalization of sentiments. In the next chapter (Chap. III) Johnson tries to understand how Hitler won the democratic elections in Germany. The transvaluations of the beginning of the century also disturbed the colonial order, especially those of France and England (Chap. IV). "Colonialism" has become a popular slogan in political fights. In itself, "Colonialism was important not for what it was, rather for what it was not" (p. 161). The relativism which was then the main instrument of breaking with the inherited order also revealed itself in the most radical form in the Far East. In Japan, political assassinations and "the shark instinct" ("attack the weaker!") prevailed as principles of ruling (Chap. V). The whole world was slowly reaching the state of desired disorder.

der and today, from some temporal distance, it is not surprising that war became the factor which restored order.

The history of the United States in that period is particularly fascinating. After a period of prosperity (Chap. VI), the great crash of 1929 brought Americans to the state of utter confusion (cf. title of Chap. VII). Although the crisis was subsequently overcome (Johnson undermines the myth of Roosevelt's merits in this respect), there still remained a sense of the relativity of values, eagerly fostered by leftist centres. In the thirties, the opinion-shaping circles made sympathy for the Soviet Union a trend, and the Five-Year plan became the most popular subject of intellectual conversation (Chap. VII). "America was and is a millenarian society where overweening expectations can easily oscillate into catastrophic loss of faith" (p. 260) – this statement from Chapter VII gives the modern reader much to think about.

Anyway, the moral chaos continued to spread. It constituted a realization of the "holistic principle" according to which "political events and moral tendencies have their consequences throughout the world" (p. 176-177). Johnson describes the surge of violence in the two totalitarian states, and the common inspirations of Stalin and Hitler in this respect. Both won great successes: the former – a propaganda success, the latter – an economic success (Germany was the first country to overcome the great crisis) (Chap. VIII). The growing tendency of the West not to look beyond one's own borders ("symptoms of decadence" p. 349) and the "splendid isolation" of America combined to generate moral acquiescence to the preponderance of violence. The decade of the thirties was a period of "international banditry" (p. 309). The victims of aggression are, in turn, China, Abyssinia, Spain,

Czechoslovakia, Austria, and – in 1939 – Poland (Chap. IX). It was a time of open proclamation of the principle *plus vis quam ratio* ("force is more important than reason") in political relations. Johnson's critique and moral sensitivity are manifested here too, in his recognizing as a manifestation of the moral collapse of old Europe in the order issued by Churchill in the summer 1940 to bomb German cities (Chap. X). Civilian population was thus turned into military hostages until the *hecatomb* of Dresden, Tokyo and other towns. The most upright civilizations had thus embraced the principle of terror.

The World War is discussed in three chapters. Hitler's victories (Chap. X) are followed by the year 1941, which the author regards as "pregnant" (Chap. XI). The events which Johnson perceives as turning points in this particular year, for the course of the war and of the world, provide an opportunity to consider the role of rationality in history, since the breakthroughs (Pearl Harbor was one of them) were largely determined by irrational decisions. And as far as the rational aspect is concerned, thanks to which the war was won, one cannot avoid mentioning economy and technology.

The postwar perspective of *A History of the Modern World* differs in many respects from that of the Polish reader; after all, postwar Poland is also a post-Yalta Poland. As Johnson writes, after the war "it was, indeed, all too easy to forget Poland" (p. 432). Two elements – as it turns out, by no means different from the sentiments prevailing then in Poland – predominate in the chapters that follow, namely, fear and expansion of Communism. There prevailed fear of war (Chap. XIII) and the expansion of the Left in various forms, which continued winning victories in spite of the cocky

assurances of Western governments about the “Cold War,” the “Iron Curtain,” etc. The long-lasting ideological work of conquering empires by means of the Leninist concept of “colonialism” was bearing fruit. The Kremlin quickly found accomplices in the bloc of the so-called non-involved states (Chap. XVI), while Africa was covered with a network of tiny states in which the Marxist phraseology of the new rulers disguised their incompetence and a “reborn barbarism” (Chap. XV; p. 536). A distinct and constant theme of these chapters is the *leit-motif* of the twentieth century – terror in its political function. It accompanied the process of decolonization (e.g. Algeria) and the beginnings of new states (e.g. India and Israel).

Against the background of this world insanity, which seems to be reinforcing the bad habits ingrained during the War, one is struck by the extraordinary return of Christian values to the political stage of Western Europe. The chapter about the reconstruction of Europe by Alcide de Gasperi (Italy), Konrad Adenauer (Germany) and Charles de Gaulle (France) (Chap. XVII) is one of the few chapters in this book which show the constructive dimension of history. At that time, political formations based on traditional values restored not only the economic and democratic order, but also the sense of life of their citizens. Perhaps this thesis shows most emphatically the difference in the perspectives which occurred after the war between Western societies and Polish society and those societies whose situation was similar to ours.

The last chapters of Johnson’s book are somewhat chaotic and marked with pessimism. They reflect the unresolved character of the main threads in the history of our century. Discussing the mistakes committed by presidents J. F. Ken-

nedy and J. Carter (Chaps. XVIII and XIX), the author – writing in 1983 – could not know anything about the terms of Ronald Reagan and George Bush, very prosperous for America. Nor could he know about the course of the agony of the colossus, the Soviet Union. Neither could he read the numerous signs of the importance of John Paul II’s pontificate for the world. And most certainly, the data from the last two decades are necessary to see what this century has been like.

From the temporal perspective covered by Johnson and with respect to the history of politics (“the age of politics” as he says on p. 730), the twentieth century is marked by certain specific features. Most of them Johnson simply calls “the plagues of the twentieth century”. We have identified six of them.

The first is the sanctioning of political violence – terror as an instrument of politics – precisely in this century.

The second is widespread manipulation of political language (for instance, “colonialism”). This is the century of the absolute debasement of language.

The third feature points to the caste of professional politicians that has been formed during this century, that is, people educated exclusively for the purpose of winning power and ruling.

The fourth feature concerns social engineering, widely applied (by professional politicians) in the Soviet Union, Republic of South Africa, Cambodia, China, Iran, Afghanistan and other countries, and the *hecatombs* of victims it entailed.

The fifth is statism, that is, the progressively all-pervasive role of the state.

The sixth feature concerns the domination of social sciences which – in the twentieth century – became infected with Marxist ideology.

AGAINST STEREOTYPES

Paul Johnson's *A History of the Modern World* makes one aware of the complexity of historical development and of the difficulty of passing judgements on particular figures and events or of formulating an estimate about the meaning of short periods of history. Johnson's book abounds in numerous revisions of historical stereotypes, questionings of the "dogmas" of historical writings, and queries about persons beloved by popular literature.

As a good example of Johnson's historical discourse one can use the brilliant analogy he sets up between the thirties and the seventies. In the latter decade, the Western world was experiencing a fairly precise repetition of economic depression, unemployment, armament and aggression; however, it failed to learn its lesson from the great crash of the thirties (p. 685 ff).

In turn, the greatest civilizational achievement of America in this century is perceived by Johnson in ... the use of the occupation of Japan after World War II (p. 719). Contrary to what is popularly regarded as Americanization of the country (McDonald, Micky Mouse and Rock'n'Roll), Johnson shows how America – General MacArthur was then the governor of Japan – managed to push Japan out of the age of irrationality and political chaos into the developed democracy and culture of the twentieth century.

From the books of Józef Mackiewicz we know of a chilling incident from the end of World War II, when the British handed over to Stalin the Cossack troops who had fought for Hitler and who, after their surrender, were seeking asylum under the wings of a humanitarian and democratic state. Johnson presents a similar crime of omission and abandonment

for political reasons, committed by the French who – after their withdrawal from Algeria in 1963 – left behind to certain death over one hundred thousand Moslems who had served them loyally in the war against the National Liberation Front (pp. 504-505).

Among the numerous figures who people the pages of *A History of the Modern World*, the Polish reader will encounter several gravely contested mythical reputations. The profiles of Gandhi, Nehru, Roosevelt or J. F. Kennedy, immaculate in our history handbooks, suffer considerable discredit. On the other hand, we also meet some statesmen, such as Churchill, General Franco or Adenauer, in a positive light – and we are not used to that.

The book also contains numerous Polish anecdotes. Johnson mentions Poland both positively and negatively. In the context of World War II – as he states – "Poland was the cause of the war ... and Poland terminated the war" (p. 432). (The latter sentence alludes to the "elections" in Poland which, according to the author, began the confrontation between the West and Russia.) But in the context of the reckoning which followed World War I, he notices with some irony that Poland proved most covetous. He mentions the participation of Poles in the deciphering of the "Enigma" (p. 400), the Polish Pope (pp. 699-700), and the Jewish pogrom in Kielce (p. 482,) and there are some other instances when Poland is mentioned. In *A History of the Modern World*, we are neither the Christ of the nations nor the "peacock and parrot" of the nations, but our existence has been quite significant in the course of the twentieth century – as participant, witness and factor in history.

STYLE

Finally, a few words should be said about the way in which the book is written. I have already said above that it reads like a detective story. This is not an exaggeration. Paul Johnson is an impressive writer. He feels the pace, metaphorical qualities and drama of modern language. Besides documents, accounts and monographs, the source materials in his study also include *belles-lettres* and works of culture. Among others, he makes use of the writings of the English novelist Evelyn Waugh (Polish translators have mistaken him for a woman, but on the whole they need not be ashamed of their work).

Here is one example. At the naval conference in Washington in 1922, the United States pushed for a treaty which practically meant the dismantling of the naval power of Great Britain. "When Admiral Beatty, the First Sea Lord, first heard the details, an eyewitness said he lurched forward in his chair «like a bulldog, sleeping on a sunny doorstep, who has been poked in the stomach by an impudent foot of an itinerant soap-canvasser»" (p. 174). The internal quotation

comes from an eye-witness present at the conference in 1922, which Johnson from a work on British-American relations published in 1959. This passage is very characteristic of the style of his book.

The characters in this history are authentic and red-blooded. Facts are good or frightening, consoling or sad, bringing hope or negating human dignity. They manifest rationality or raise suspicions that everything is in the state of chaos. The history described and interpreted by Johnson is alive.

This way of writing easily provokes objections against its emotionality and arbitrariness, and I have already heard such critiques. However correct in details, certainly *A History of the Modern World* is not a history to be numbered among the abstract schematizations of theory, as often happens in books that are still being issued. It is living history, vividly felt, while its message makes one place the task of the person known as *homo historicus*, that is, each of us, among the highest tasks that challenge man in every period.

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