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Chauvinism, Polish Style

The Case of Roman Dmowski
(Beginnings: 1886-1905)



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EDITION

Introduction

The period under review – the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries – is a particularly interesting time for the historian of ideas. Its most salient feature remains the complex political environment. This is hardly surprising. The accelerated democratization of public life, urbanization, industrialization, as well as other phenomena usually labelled “modernisation processes”, together contributed to a basic reconstruction of the political scene. It is to this aspect that scholars have drawn particular attention.

This work has been written from a slightly different perspective. It is not a history of a political grouping, or of an intellectual current, nor of some ideological movement examined in detail. Instead, the focus is on a broader view of the world that appeared around the year 1900. Although the object here is to attempt to examine intelligentsia radicalism at that time throughout the Polish lands, most of the issues studied will apply mainly to the Kingdom of Poland, where such radicalism was most strongly felt.

A certain type of ideological radicalism will be treated here in great detail: right-wing radicalism. In previous research into the history of Polish ideas and social thought this problem has not been thoroughly analysed. The issue has been reduced to research into twentieth-century social and political history, above all up to the cauldron of the thirties. To a certain extent, this work aims to redress this neglect as a whole.¹ This writer’s initial premise is the recognition that both right-wing radicalism, as well as its left-wing equivalent from the turn of the centuries, had (in the most general cultural sense) a similar ideological basis and came from a convergent social base. The birth of both of these radical trends, in Poland as well as in the whole of Europe, was linked to the crisis caused by the accelerated modernization of the second half of the 19th century.

In the Polish lands the radical attitudes that interest us spread for the most part among a new social class, which from the middle of the 19th century was called the intelligentsia. The situation of the Polish intelligentsia at the turn of the centuries exhibits many similar features to that of the educated classes in other European societies, thus the problem which interests us reveals its unique and individual character above all from a comparative perspective. This comparative perspective

1 See also G. Krzywiec, ‘Wokół genezy polskiego nacjonalizmu integralnego. Przypadek Romana Dmowskiego (1886–1904)’, *Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych*, 67, 2007, pp. 45–71.

refers to three geographical/political areas: the German and the Austro-Hungarian empires, and the territory of the Russian Empire. However, it will be essential from time to time to go beyond the area of Central Europe and evoke a broader European context.

As mentioned, the concept of political radicalism has not found a fitting place in research into the attitudes of the Polish intelligentsia in the second half of the 19th century and at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, at the outset of this book it needs to be explained that we understand radicalism here to be a current, a direction, an outlook aiming to introduce fundamental changes into social and political life. We must also distinguish radical attitudes from radical ideologies. A radical attitude can be defined as a certain determined and uncompromising approach when expressing views and in actions; in the case of radical ideology we are dealing too with a way of looking at politics, one whose aim is to introduce a fundamental rebuilding and redefinition of political and social life.

Polish views on turn-of-the-century radicalisms to a great extent boil down to a study of extremist views and attitudes aiming to implement specific policies. In line with this belief, radicals are those activists or intellectuals who resort to extremist measures to put their convictions into practice, or who also present a more or less convincing rationalization for such a *modus operandi*. This unintentional, probably not fully understood shift of emphasis from ideology, i.e. comprehensive perspectives with consistent pretensions, to attitudes, that is to say, certain external representations of one's views, means that research into radicalism in fact entails an analysis of style in politics. In other words, common sense suggests that the radicals are those activists or thinkers who see themselves, or are seen, as such. This is not, let me make it clear, an inherently false premise, but for analytical purposes, of which more anon, it is far from satisfactory.

A second substantive reservation deals with more general, ideological matters. In the second half of the 19th century, a conviction takes root – finding its fullest expression in the ideas of Karl Marx – which holds that radicalism has a progressive social dimension. Thus it will mean an extensive attempt at changing the social order. As Marx and his continuators argued, the ownership of the means of production stands at the source of historical mechanisms – those revolutionary wheels of History with a capital 'H' – and that only their transformation can lead to a radical change in humanity's condition on Earth. Progressive opinion has in principle adopted this way of seeing radicalism. Typical was the fact that the opposing side, i.e. the right in the broadest sense, also adopted this view. Rarely, however – if at all – does one come across in the 19th century someone describing him- or herself as a right-wing radical. In the vocabulary of the time 'right-wing radical' was an inherently contradictory concept.

Hence a sizeable fragment of socio-political reality escaped the writers of the time. For instance, writers from progressive and left-wing circles reduced the whole of nationalist thought, whatever its level, to instigating national hatred and antagonism, or to turning away from the path of progress – a path that had been blazed by the traditions of the Enlightenment. The more optimistic writers maintained that these were the dying strains of the past. From these same circles came the accusation of social opportunism towards nationalistic communities; a not infrequently true accusation after all, bearing in mind that most of the nationalists of the time had normal progressive, indeed socially radical credentials and were abandoning their ideas in favour of a hardly distinctive (at least in the eyes of the progressives) demand for social solidarity.

Groups of the traditional right, in turn, were also unable to deal with the issue of the developing extreme-nationalist movements. Thus, for instance, Polish conservative circles accused the antisemitic weekly *Rola*, edited by Jan Jeleński, of hating Jews more than they deserved.² Perhaps the most eloquent criticism of the developing Polish nationalist camp that came out of the conservative-liberal right – a work written by Erazm Piltz *Nasze Stronnictwa skrajne* (1902) – also dealt with tactical issues. The most fully-developed theme of the whole accusatory piece tackled an issue which was, from the point of view of contemporary nationalist élites, secondary; the criticism referred to the motif of *liberum conspiro*, known to conservative journalism, and attempts to foment another uprising. Another thing was that this new turn-of-the-century nationalism often grew out of populist social revolt and often assumed very heterogeneous forms, ones which are hard to classify unambiguously.

In any event, the Polish understanding of radicalism was similar to the Western one. Here we may recall the Dreyfus Affair in France, or the attitude towards Karl Lueger's administrations in Vienna, and earlier to Georg von Schönerer's activities in the same place, or the activities of Adolf Stöcker and the antisemitic leagues in German-speaking countries. The social right's attitudes towards new movements were, as we know, quite ambiguous and different in just about every case.

This mental confusion between the social left and the social right on the status of right-wing radicals has had a very significant influence on research into twentieth-century and later radicalism.

2 [A. Zalewski], *Towarzystwo warszawskie. Listy do przyjaciółki pisane przez baronową XYZ*, Warsaw 1881, p. 232.