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THE ETHOS OF SCHOLARS AND THE ROLE OF SCIENTIFIC SOCIETIES

I wish to discuss three points—first, the notion (and phenomenon) of the ethos* of scholars in its evolution up to the present; second, scientific societies as factors of integration and representatives of this ethos; and third, the specific case of the Polish Historical Society as the guardian and champion of the ethos of historians.

1. When we consider the first point we come across the question whether or not the ethos of people engaged in scholarly inquiry, which was relatively easy to identify in the 19th century and which has been evolving and decomposing since the beginning of the 20th century, does still exist now as the 20th century is drawing to a close. Doubtless, this is a debatable question. Those who say that this ethos now survives in a strongly deformed, if not degenerate, and, even more important, almost a residual shape, do seem to have a point. It is perhaps pertinent to recall the significant and doubtless remarkable title of a conference held at Cracow University in May 1985, which is “Scholars and Educators; the Ethos of Researchers”. This obviously cautious formulation is roughly midway between the “ethos of scholars” (which I think is the most accurate description, which also comes closest to the original meaning of “community”) and the “ethos of government-employed researchers”.

In the first decades of the 19th century, of course, inquiry used to be an individual and strictly private kind of pursuit. In his commitment to knowledge and in his pursuit of the truth about the visible and invisible

* In the present article the term “ethos” is almost as a rule used in the sense of “ethos community”, i.e. it designates a group of people who share a given ethos (understood as a set of norms and rules which govern their mores and behaviour; a set of prescriptions, injunctions and prohibitions valid for this group). The term will not therefore be used as ethos *sensu proprio*.

world, a scholar felt in himself a calling to a kind of work (more properly, to inquiry and creative activity) which he did not regard as a profession in the strict sense. Those dedicated men and amateurs of knowledge felt properly at home in one place only—namely, in the boundless realm of scientific inquiry. But that situation, which I present here in a simplified and somewhat idealized picture, soon began to change. Already late in the 19th century, but especially in our century, the status of scholarly inquiry as well as of the scholar (and thus of his ethos) changed radically. After all, the forms, methods and organization of research activity also were changing.

Several adjectives should be used to describe and explain the main drift of those changes. Namely, scientific inquiry was becoming increasingly professional, state-controlled (and hence bureaucratized), institutionalized, collectivized, ideological, and ritualized.

Research became a trade, a job like others, which was increasingly dependent on the state administration. As early as by the beginning of the 20th century, the vehement expansion of the sciences, at first of technical and the exact sciences and subsequently of the humanities, led to a situation in which research activities could be usefully (and widely) organized only by private and subsequently more and more often by government-sponsored institutions. The old university had to change because “the idea of science as an area of disinterested activity, along with the concomitant idea of the university, were adequate to the state of affairs which existed in the late 18th and in the early 19th centuries rather than to what was happening to science at the turn of the 19th to the 20th centuries and in our own times”.¹ Officially-appointed administrators as well as politicians, many of whom quite simply had no idea what scientific inquiry was about, began to formalize the planning of research activities, draw up meticulous procedures and forms of work for researches, list and subsequently curb academic liberties, and impose a different, increasingly bureaucratic model of management. Twentieth-century science has largely become one more state-controlled institution.

Individual research work is on the decline. Single-handed research undertakings are being sneered at, and instead collective endeavors are promoted, often in forms which serve no plausible interest of science in general and which are particularly out of place in some special disciplines. It is no coincidence that the term “the army of scientists”, which is clearly descended from military argot, even though the command staffs of these troops often come from outside the military community, should have come into use in the socialist countries.

Little has remained of the ancient enlightened and noble cosmopolitanism

¹ S. Amsterdamski, *Między historią a metodą. Spory o racjonalność nauki* [Between History and Method. Disputes over the Rationality of Science], Warsaw 1983, p. 107f.

of science. Nearly everything is submitted to a forceful state-and-national ideologization. Profound knowledge and truth are losing ground (admittedly, for a good price, because science is growing more and more costly and so it is the state which usually has to provide the necessary funds), especially in social sciences. This comes at a time when books are published in great amounts, while what is called the contributions of individual "national" or "state" sciences to the universal scientific heritage of mankind are increasingly extolled.

One more thing strikes the eye. Scientists are leaving their laboratories, studies and archives (some would maliciously say their ivory towers) to become public figures. Science's previous autonomy and "secrecy" are disappearing. Scientific research done for the state, the forceful popularization of scientific achievements within the framework of massive education and propaganda in return for "salaried" earnings, are now strongly reminiscent of show-biz practices (the massive turnout and ritual at scientific congresses, publicity "stunts" on television, etc.). Although few scientists are members of "the fourth tier of power", that is of the mass media, they render services to this sector of public authority, acting as something like its services department. Some of them believe that owing to their presence in the media they can influence the management of public life and politics. But most of them cherish no such illusions, only this awareness does not make them forgo the high royalties or the publicity television gives them.

These processes, which I present only in a brief outline here, are world-wide, partly inevitable (and welcome) developments. But there are considerable differences, both as concerns the rate of those processes and the degree to which they emerge as natural or artificial. It looks now as though they are just an offshoot of wider modernization processes (both in their capitalist and in their socialist versions) which in their general drift have been reinforcing the role of the state or, more exactly, of state administration. In the socialist community, the authorities are promoting such processes and also seeking to impart a strong ideological dimension to them (viz. the officially proclaimed subservient status of scientists in the more general group of the "working intelligentsia", vis-à-vis the leading role of the working class).

What about the ethos of scholars, then? Does it still exist? It does, and it does not. It certainly no longer exists in the sense given to it in the 19th century. But it does in the sense of a new type of community of scholars which is much less closed than it used to be. Inside the scientific community—and I am referring specifically to the situation in Poland—is composed roughly of three categories of people working in the science sector: (1) administrators and organizers of scientific research; (2) professional researchers; and (3) men of learning, or scholars. The first of these categories, in my opinion, is not (or nearly) embraced by the ethos of scholars, for it is a group which stands somewhat away from it. But the other two belong under the new ethos. A purely institutional presence in the world

of science, one which is based on one's name being mentioned on the payroll, by itself does not yet make a person belong to the ethos of scholars.

If you draw two circles, one representing scholars who are so, out of an inner calling, out of a passion and moral belief which are proper for those who seek the truth, and the other showing all people employed by research institutions, then the two circles will overlap only partly. As I see it, all of the first circle and the part of the other one which is covered by the former depict the modern ethos of scholars. However, many regard themselves both as scholars and as employees of "the science sector", and so it is hardly surprising that there must be several guardians and champions of the ethos (of "sub-ethoses"), specifically the relevant government agency (or state-owned research institution), the trade union, the college, and the relevant scientific society.

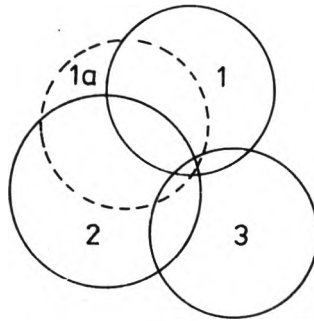


Fig. 1

- 1 and 1a – administrators and organizers of research operations
- 2 – professional researchers
- 3 – scholars

Early in the 19th century, the ethos of scholars was characterized by a commitment to freedom of inquiry as well as far-reaching autonomy in both the choice of topics and research procedures, in the moral as well as in financial aspects. But later the situation began to change. By now, both freedom and independence have become scarce commodities in the world of science. So we are trying hard to reconcile dependence with independence, and in the heart of each of us you will find moral standards and behavior patterns suitable for scholars which are in or out of step with those moral and behavioral patterns which befit state-employed salary seekers. As a result, we are part of two ethoses ("sub-ethoses"?) simultaneously, each of us has two faces and, probably, also two loyalties. All that is rather typical of situations of dependence. The administrative employee, of course, has a value pattern which differs from that of the scholar. Researchers and teachers for whom science is a vocation and a service to truth do feel an affiliation with their colleagues. This affiliation may be invisible in day-to-day life but

it is all the more visible at times of crisis, whatever dangers this may bring to these people or whatever qualms they may experience.²

But, since what we are facing now is a divided, flawed, and ambiguous ethos, then exactly what is it that universities— or, more widely, colleges and scientific societies— today stand for a guardians and champions (the later function, incidentally, may be the more important of the two recently?) As I see it, they stand for a possibly broad scope of freedom of study and publication, for traditional internal ties of their communities, for what still remains of the autonomy and self-government of the community, and for the community's prestige in society. Colleges and scientific societies defend not so much a ghetto of a chosen few but the entire commonwealth of science against that pushy and occasionally far-reaching interference by outside factors; they try to save at least a limited measure of independence in their resistance both to pressures from state administrators and from the "mob", that is, from unorganized and organized crowds of people from outside the ethos who, however unfamiliar they may be with the specific character of the world of science, seek to impose unacceptable goals and actions on the scientific community.

Let us be candid about one thing— there is no going back to the old ethos of science, the one of more than a hundred years ago, as this would plainly be a utopian bid. Besides, it would be wrong to demand that forces existing outside the academic community should be barred from any influence on it. Both the state through its organs and trade unions which by their statutes are entitled to organize all people employed in scientific institutions (not just scholars) will be constantly present in the world of science. But when it comes to significant issues or to specific intellectual and moral values implicit in the ethos of science, then these should be guarded by self-governing independent universities and scientific societies led by freely elected authorities whom scholars and educators trust.

2. The next point concerns scientific societies as factors integrating the ethos of scholars, and as its guardians and champions, along with the specific part they have to play in public life. I confine myself to Poland alone, as I do not wish to forfeit the very specific features of our situation.

Scientific societies, often calling themselves academies, emerged in Europe as far back as in the 15th and 16th centuries. Poland was slightly behind some other countries, but then scientific societies organizing scholars and friends of science began really to flourish in Europe only from the 18th century onwards.

It is remarkable that the foundation and bloom of scientific societies in Poland came shortly after Poland entered into the dependence era, that is,

² In his study of authorities and elites in the world of science, J. Goćkowski wrote not so much about an "invisible affiliation" as about an "invisible college". *Autorytety świata uczonych* [*Authorities in Science*], Warsaw 1984, p. 182–8.

since the beginning of the 18th century. The national enslavement at that time furnished singularly poor conditions for the defense of Polish scholars' interests and values. Scientific societies, especially those organizing people specializing in the humanities, rallied not only researchers and friends of science but also performed the difficult and important function of defending the national culture and its makers against the foreign powers holding Poland then and against other unwelcome protectors. In Poland, the ethos of scholars is not merely a component of the world-wide commonwealth of science but a major component of the national elite as well. This is why scholarly societies also had to open themselves to wider segments of the general public.

Let me briefly recall the basic historical facts of the 19th century: a Society of Friends of Science was founded in Warsaw in 1800, a Scientific Society in Cracow in 1816, and similar societies in Lublin and Płock in 1818 and 1820, respectively. Later came societies such as that of Poznań (1857) or Toruń (1875). Just what were those societies then? They were public organizations rallying scholars and friends of science. They sought to back, organize and conduct research, to popularize knowledge, and to take care of the interests of science and of scholars. It can safely be said that by their statutes they were to operate as guardians and champions of the ethos of scholars whose moral obligations included the injunction to work for the public interest. Those embraced by the ethos wanted to serve not only science, knowledge and truth, not only their own ethos, but also the cause of social development as well as the national identity, which was endangered by the foreign powers occupying Poland. The societies existing in the partitioned Poland were the guardians and champions of Polish culture's independence. A similar situation existed from time to time in the 20th century, but neither scholars nor their societies should be blamed for this. Following the rebirth of Poland as an independent nation, more precisely between 1918 and 1939, scientific societies in Poland came close in their functions and work to the model which exists in independent countries.

The general processes of scientific development I referred to above affected the role, structure and internal autonomy of these societies, or of the "public scientific movement" as this is called of official parlance today. After World War II, scientific societies, both general and special, national and regional, surged in number (in 1985, there were 193 such societies organizing some 600,000 people in Poland), but at the same time they lost a great deal of their financial and organizational independence and came increasingly under the control of administrative, political and fiscal government agencies, which occasionally even interfered in their purely research programs. Yet despite this, the societies are still less government-dominated than colleges or Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) institutes.³

³ *Towarzystwo naukowe a rozwój nauki polskiej w okresie 1973-85. Wnioski i perspektywy* [*Scientific Societies and the Growth of Polish Science 1973-85. Conclusions and Prospects*], Warsaw 1985. Mimeographed text of a report the Council for Scientific Societies prepared for the 3rd Congress of Polish Science.

During the recent decades the societies have undoubtedly been losing much of their standing as guardians and champions of the ethos of Polish scholars. In socialist Poland, scientific societies are second-rate components of the state-controlled world of science. This at least is the role accorded to them by the state as the sponsor and overlord of national science. Remarkably enough, it was PAN as the state-installed supervisor of these societies that began to circulate the above-quoted term "public scientific movement", or, more properly, to describe the societies as a public movement. This movement's activities are coordinated by a Council of Scientific Societies, but actually this job is done by no less than a special PAN Office (*sic*) for Public Scientific Activities (Biuro Społecznej Działalności Naukowej).

By their statutes, the societies are autonomous. But, first, their chief job is to present and spread knowledge about scientific accomplishments rather than to conduct research themselves (although the latter is also being done), and second, their financial possibilities are usually limited as decided from outside (precisely because they are second-rate factors). As they went through periods of ups and downs in socialist Poland, the excessively—and perhaps deliberately—dispersed scientific societies were gradually being institutionalized. Can the elected managing bodies of these societies stand up in defense of the ethos of scholars and of scholars themselves? Certainly they can. Sometimes, nay, even frequently, that is exactly what they do, but they are not always successful. However, PAN's own scientific committees which, except for the period between 1981 and 1983, were appointed by way of administrative decision to work in affiliation with PAN departments or the PAN Presidium, are expected to represent the ethos as official circles conceive of it. The administrative character of their hierarchy is unmistakable. The official administration will always prefer to view a state-appointed body, which is created solely according to administrative procedures, as a more reliable champion of the ethos than any self-elected nongovernmental body which is automatically regarded as a second-rate body. This is what usually happens in practice.

But scholars still regard the societies as something valuable. In elections of managing bodies and in designing procedures for their operation, it is still true that other or partly other criteria are applied than those used in the appointment of scientific committees. In a scientific society, a scholar feels precisely as scholar, whereas at a committee he feels more like a government employee. Community and personal ties, shared interests, respect for the moral code governing the community, a pluralistic community of people holding different world outlooks—all these make the societies champions of the ethos of scholars, admittedly, semiauthentic, subsidiary or auxiliary ones, but still champions of the ethos. It is remarkable that associations of men of learning rapidly increased their role in periods of public activation and broad political and intellectual freedom (as in 1956–58 or 1980–81). Many societies then not only fulfilled their government-imposed

“integrative” function but also became unchallenged champions of the ethos as they joined their efforts in the defense of scholars and of science.

3. Against this general backdrop of the history of scientific societies, let me outline the interesting case of the Polish Historical Society (PTH). In 1986, this society will be exactly 100 years old. The PTH, which called itself Historical Society till 1924, was created in Lwów, the capital of the Austrian-held province of Galicia. But even in that relatively liberal province its beginnings were anything but easy. Ever since its creation the society has been seeking to stimulate and support historical research (this has always been its statutory function), to integrate the community of historians, and to advance regional historical research. Soon, for in 1887, it founded its own quarterly journal *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, which promptly became the historical community’s unofficial yet widely recognized organ. It not only espoused community interests and stimulated research but also performed a patriotic function. In the Russian-held part of Poland, where it was heavily censored, the journal was clandestinely circulated by the booksellers Gebethner and Wolff in its unexpurgated versions but only among „well-known and trustworthy customers”.⁴ The society, a representation of the entire community of historians, could however organize only some professional and amateur historians, mainly in the Austrian-held part. The barriers set up by the foreign powers occupying Poland were still formidable at that time.

In 1880, to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of the great Polish chronicler Jan Długosz, the Academy of Sciences’ historical commission organized the First Historical Congress of Poland in Cracow. The scholars who convened for the congress resolved to meet every several years in order to establish contacts and to discuss key problems faced by Polish historians (interestingly enough, Polish historians seem to have understood the integrative function of congresses better than their German colleagues, who were then regarded as leading historians in Europe, for their first-ever congress was held only in 1892). Subsequent congresses of Polish historians were organized already by the Historical Society (the second congress was held in Lwów in 1890, the third in Cracow in 1900). With time, these meetings came to be called National Congresses of Polish Historians.

When Poland regained national independence in 1918, the PTH strongly expanded its activities. Among other things, it sought to help historians improve their research and teaching skills. It organized the vast majority of scholars in history as well as many secondary school teachers of history. Its membership in 1923 was around 400 people, but by 1939 it grew to 1,300 members. It staged three National Congresses (the fourth in Poznań in 1925, the fifth in Warsaw in 1930, the sixth in Wilno in 1935). The seventh

⁴ T. Kondracki, “Niełatwe dzieje Polskiego Towarzystwa Historycznego” [“The Polish Historical Society’s Difficult History”], *Mówią wieki* 1984, No. 7, p. 25.

congress, scheduled to be held in Lwów in 1940, fell out. On account of its accomplishments in research organization, in integrating the ethos of scholars, in the promotion of historical knowledge, especially as a school subject, and also in connection with the international contacts it established (the seventh International Congress of Historical Science was held in Poland in 1933), the PTH won high prestige in the eyes of the general public.

Needless to say, from the late 19th century through to this day the concept of PTH's role has been changing, but it was probably in the years between the two world wars that it developed its basic shape. It was also then that it worked out its own model of work. The core of the PTH, its key component, was the ethos of scholars in history worked out by the society. The ethos, in turn, rallied, organized and brought together a wider circle of members—teachers of history, amateur chroniclers working mostly on the history of individual regions, as well as friends of historical research. The broadest circle of people comprised those who attended the National Congress staged by the PTH, or, more precisely, by its core, that is, those who represented the organized ethos of historians.

Following World War II, the reborn society had its ups and downs, the latter more often than the former. The first postwar (yet prewar in spirit) congress in Wrocław in 1948 was followed by a period of government-imposed bureaucratization of the PTH, which became largely a propaganda institution in the drive toward a vehement domination of the world of science by the state and the institutional offensive of Marxism in historical research. The PTH itself and its *Kwartalnik Historyczny* became, at least formally, "conveyor belts" for official historiography, little more than an annex to the PAN Historical Institute, as its organizational and research activity stagnated. Yet even then, between 1949 and 1955, the ethos of historians was not destroyed. Leading scholars tried to organize themselves for work in the PTH whereas other scholars-turned-government-employees largely worked beyond the PTH and outside its ethos (they believed they existed over and above these).

The PTH worked well or badly, but it remained, in its bureaucratized form, on the fringe of official scholarly life. Official circles feared that otherwise the PTH might use a greater measure of influence on broader circles of the general public. Their distrust of many historians, along with a reluctance to let the PTH stage any major get-togethers, prevented the PTH from organizing National Congresses for a period of a whole ten years. They preferred to organize closely controlled conferences and meetings at which the turnout was small. The most notorious of those events was the ill-reputed Methodological Conference in Otwock at the turn of 1951 to 1952.

PTH's rebirth and democratization following the October of 1956 bore fruit in the form of a congress which proved to have been one of the most interesting congresses ever, namely the eighth congress which was held in Cracow in 1958. The PTH won enormous prestige among researchers and

teachers of history alike, becoming the true representative of this community.

Although the PTH organizes historians representing different historiographic schools and different schools of method, and although Marxists constitute a sizeable group among its members, the PTH, as the champion of the independent ethos, was not fully trusted by political or administrative circles. Accordingly, they tried to introduce certain changes into the PTH statutes (including a clause by which the statutory tenure of elected authorities would have been extended considerably) and also insisted that National Congresses, which were regarded as inconvenient because of the massive turnout at them, should be less frequent than before. While the former provision was approved, the latter failed at the PTH plenary session in Katowice in 1979.

The PTH became very active after the events of August 1980. A new book of statutes was approved at the PTH plenary session in Zielona Góra on September 22nd, 1980. The new statutes were open and democratic. What had long before been PTH's obvious goals and duties, namely research, guardianship and advocacy of the ethos of scholars, along with its public service, were included in the statutes ("The society seeks to deepen and disseminate historical knowledge, and also to represent Polish historians"—§ 6; "With a view to realizing the objectives specified in § 6, the society, (1) seeking to establish historical truth, inspires and organizes research of the past, especially in regional history, and disseminates knowledge of this history"—§ 7).⁵ The society's vigorous activity, both in research and in popularization, in education and public service, in its own ranks and outside them (among other things, at the Coordinating Committee for Scientific and Creative Associations) came to a halt with the imposition of martial law. The society was suspended from mid-December 1981 through to the beginnings of August 1982.

In the autumn of 1982, a plenary session of PTH delegates elected new authorities. The newly elected body tried to represent honestly the ethos of historians and to defend colleagues subjected to repressions. Despite many difficulties they managed to call the 13th National Congress of Polish Historians in Poznań in September 1984 within the statutory period. The turnout at that congress was the largest ever (more than 1,600 participants). The debates were held in a climate of dedication to the historical truth, of open discussions, tolerance and full freedom of expression.

PTH's long history⁶ is closely connected with Poland's own national history. Polish historiography played and still plays today a great public and

⁵ Statutes of the PTH, Poznań, 1981, p. 2 [in Polish].

⁶ T. Manteuffel, H. Serejski, "Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne (1886–1956)", in: *Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne 1886–1956. Księga pamiątkowa z okazji Zjazdu Jubileuszowego PTH w Warszawie 19–21 X 1956* [Proceedings of the PTH Jubilee Congress], Warsaw 1958, pp. 3–28. See also J. Serczyk, "Powszechnie Zjazdy Historyków Polskich i ich rola w przemianach nauki historycznej w Polsce" ["National Congresses of Polish Historians and their Role in the Development of Historical Research in Poland"], *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 1981, No. 4.

national role. The ethos of Polish historians is now much more open to the general public and to impulses that come from it than the ethoses of scholars representing other research disciplines. Its range is broad, its boundaries liberal and easy to pass. These factors determine PTH's shape and forms of activity today.

The ethos of scholars needs men with great professional and moral prestige. It is remarkable that the PTH used to be headed by outstanding scholars (among others, T. Wojciechowski, S. Kutrzeba, W. Konopczyński, T. Mantuffel, S. Herbst, H. Samsonowicz). The moral and professional prestige of those people was unquestionable, both inside the community of historians and elsewhere. PTH chairmen must be credited with much of the society's high prestige in the eyes of the academic community, of the general public and of society, both in the past and now.

It can safely be said the PTH is not just a formal advocate of the ethos of scholars. It authentically represents this ethos, naturally to the extent this is possible under present difficult circumstances. Knowing how the PTH worked in the past one can calmly look into the future, however difficult it may prove to be.