

The Common Roots of Europe

Review Number: 49

Publish date: Sunday, 1 March, 1998

Author: Bronislaw Geremek

ISBN: 9780745611211

Date of Publication: 1996

Pages: 194pp.

Publisher: Polity Press

Place of Publication: Cambridge

Reviewer: Gábor Klaniczay

Bronislaw Geremek needs no introduction to the international community of historians. In 1995, at the last congress of the International Association of Historians, in Montreal the first plenary session was opened by an hour long video recorded with him, how he sees history being both its expert analyst and also a prominent actor in the past decades.

As a medievalist, Geremek was a dedicated chronicler of medieval Paris craftsmen, of urban and rural marginals, vagabonds, of the mighty judicial machinery controlling this troublesome crowd throughout history (cf. his principal books: *Le salariat dans l'artisanat parisien aux XIIIe-XVe siècles* Paris: Mouton, 1968.; *Les marginaux parisiens aux XIVe et Xve siècles* Paris: Flammarion, 1976.; *Truands et misérables dans l'Europe moderne 1350-1600* Paris: Gallimard, 1980.; *La potence ou la pitié. L'Europe et ses pauvres du Moyen Age à nos jours* Paris: Gallimard, 1987.) At the same time he also stood for a methodological renewal of Polish historiography, adopting above all the novelties of the French „school of the Annales“, what they called „nouvelle histoire“. He inspired and directed the researches of a number of colleagues and pupils, producing a real renewal of Polish medieval studies, well reflected by the recently published synthesis: *Kultura Polski Średniowiecznej XIV-XV w.* (Polish medieval culture, 14th-15th centuries) (Warszawa: Semper, 1997), which was already achieved in the 1980s, but prevented from being published then because Geremek was its principal editor. For Geremek, as is well known, was not satisfied in only examining history, he wanted to make history as well. As another great medievalist, Marc Bloch before him, he did not hesitate to become actively involved in dangerous clandestine fights for the liberty, as one of the principal advisers of Walesa in the Solidarity movement, he became a symbol of intellectual resistance against the socialist system. And after the collapse of this system, where he again played a strategic role at the „round-table negotiations“, he continued to be involved into politics, assuming important positions in the Sejm, in various political parties, and recently becoming the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Polish Republic.

A Polish medievalist scholar, who made his fame by writing excellent works rather on the whole of medieval and early modern Europe than only on his closer homeland and his narrower field of expertise. A Polish politician, who is presently in charge of guiding the process of the reintegration of his country to Europe. His book *The Common Roots of Europe*, a collection of studies, which was first published in Italian in 1991 should have an appeal both for medievalists and experts of present political processes.

In the second half of the Eighties, when changes began to take shape, and the term "Europe" came to be used

to indicate a political trend rather than a geographical place, this is what Edgar Morin wrote about his colleagues of Eastern Europe in his book *Penser l'Europe*:

"Contrary to appearances, European culture is by no means on the decline in the East; it is there regenerating itself... It is necessary to be cut off from Europe, wrenched from it, to be as deeply aware of belonging to Europe as those Czechoslovak writers, emigres in New York after 1968, who, as they went on holiday, to France or to Italy, would say 'we're going home'". (quoted by Geremek, p. 3.)

For arriving to this recognition, in Western Europe it was probably indispensable to read Czeslaw Milosz or Milan Kundera. But in Eastern Europe all this needn't be explained or justified in a special way, we do share this common self-perception of being and remaining Europeans even in difficult times when this affiliation is endangered, challenged or even denied to us. On the other hand, it is less obvious how we relate to each other's more detailed conceptions about being European, and in a more specific manner, Central or Eastern European. The new book of Bronislaw Geremek gives a good opportunity for me to compare his broad conceptions with those of other Central European colleagues, and, above all the Hungarian point of view, which is the most familiar to me.

Hungarian evaluation of Europe, as represented foremost in the works of the political essayist István Bibó (1911-1979), and the historians István Hajnal (1892-1956), László Makkai (1914-1989) and Jeno Szűcs (1928-1988) has been trying to concentrate its attention above all to find and evaluate our own place within the history of our continent. For achieving this, it was relying upon the concept of the continuous change of borderlines between the various „historical regions" of Europe, on the insights gained from political, economic, social and cultural comparative analysis, on the examination of the different patterns of cultural transmission, on the problem of "backwardness" and on the conclusions coming from structurally elaborated general models of development. (Good examples in this case are: István Bibó: *Misere des petits Etats de l'Europe de l'Est*", written in 1946, published in French in 1986 /Paris: Harmattan/; Istvan Hajnal, *Az ujkor tortenete, The History of Early Modern Times* Budapest, 1939; László Makkai, *Les caracteres originaux de l'histoire economique et sociale de l'Europe orientale pendant le Moyen Age*, Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae, 16 /1970/ pp. 261-287.; Jeno Szűcs, *The three historical regions of Europe*, Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae, 29 /1983/ pp. 131-184.) If one takes Geremek's book in hand, what strikes the Hungarian reader at first is that Geremek (who knows and cites Bibó and Szűcs) starts his analysis exactly from the opposite point of view. For approaching the problematic of Poland's place in Europe, he makes an attempt first to define the place of the image of Western Europe in Polish historical writing.

Geremek's historiographic survey presents to the reader the range of topics examined by the Polish medievalists as well as their results since the pioneering works of Joachim Lelewel, since the second half of the last century. And what is perhaps even more important: we get an overall view showing us that the analysis of European and national history were not two segregated disciplines in university education and in practice, as has been the case in Hungary and many other East European countries. They had been investigated as two inseparable aspects of the same medieval world by Polish economic, social and cultural historians. This is equally true for Marcell Handelman dealing with the Europe of the Carolingians and the birth of Eastern Europe, or his disciple Oscar Halecki writing on *The Borderlands of Western Civilization. A History of East Central Europe* (Ronald, New York, 1952) or *The Millennium of Europe* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1963) or a number of subsequent Polish historians, such as Witold Kula (*Théorie économique du système féodal. Pour un modèle de l'économie polonaise XVIe—XVIIIe siècle*. Mouton, Paris—La Haye, 1970.) or Marian Malowist, studying economical relations at the end of the Middle Ages and Early Modern times, Henryk Samsonowicz dealing with urban history and the notion of Europe (*Miejsce Polski w Europie* [The Place of Poland in Europe], Bellona, Warszawa, 1995), great names of Art History like Jan Białostocki or Piotr Skubiszewski; or experts in intellectual and religious history such as Tadeusz Manteuffel, Aleksander Gieysztor (Alexander Gieysztor—Tadeusz Manteuffel /eds./, *L'Europe aux Xe-XIe siècles. Aux origines des Etats nationaux*. Warszawa, 1968.; Tadeusz Manteuffel, *La naissance d'une hérésie. Les adeptes de la pauvreté volontaire au moyen âge*. Mouton, Paris - La Haye, 1970.) or Jerzy

Kloczowski (*East-Central Europe in the Historiography of the Countries of the Region*, Lublin: Institute of East Central Europe, 1995.) On the whole the richness of the results of the Polish medieval studies concerning European topics is fascinating.

The second article in Geremek's book provides a concrete illustration, how medieval European and Polish subjects could be interwoven. He touches here one of the popular research subjects of the last decades, the genre of the exemplum as used in medieval sermons. The investigation of these exempla, situated on the margins between two cultures—the elite culture of the Church and the popular culture" of the lay people - provide a good opportunity to show how medieval European Christianity came to be unified by the mechanisms of the spread of culture. The richness of the Polish sources illustrating the characteristics of the medieval Christian folklore demonstrates without any further doubts that in the late Middle Ages people were brought up in the frames of a very similar international culture both in Western and Eastern Europe.

But did they really have this feeling? Or is it only a posterior classification forced by the searchers on the world partitioned in small, self-sustaining units, divided by ethnic groups, language, traditions and political dependence? The third study of the book "The Common Bond and the Feeling of Community in Medieval Europe" raises one of the most important questions. The historical syntheses treating the birth of Europe in the Middle Ages are not well justified until we don't know what medieval people thought of Europe and how they saw it: Europe as a geographical entity, Europe as a common cultural tradition and as a civilisation. What gives the principal line of the argumentation of Geremek's book is the detailed picture of the formation of self-evaluation in the Middle Ages.

The topics he passes in review are well-known, important moments of the evolution of medieval West: the question of the heritage of the Roman Empire (and within all this the works of Henri Pirenne dealing with the Mediterranean and the effects of the Arabic invasion); the political efforts of the Carolingian Empire to unite Europe (Charlemagne came to be called "king and father of Europe" - rex et pater Europae) which went together with a geographical vision in terms of large, continental units, as testified by Alcuin; the unifying force and expansion of Latin Christianitas, the missionary efforts, the pilgrimages and the crusades. But reading Geremek's work we have to marvel, how little common understanding or even history writing is aware of the importance of these historical factors in the formation of Europe as a community. Crusades for example, besides their political, religious and economic functions had a very strong effect on cultural homogenisation provoked by the mass migration of crusaders throughout Europe. Subsequently, from the 13th century, after the failure of the reconquest of the Holy Land, a more realistic expectation was formulated to the political leaders of the res publica christiana: the responsibility of the prevention of the Tartar and later on the Ottoman invasion threatening Europe.

The mobilisation all over Europe in connection with the „timor tartarorum" had little practical effect, negative experiences of the Polish and the Hungarian have much in common concerning this, not to mention the Eastern part of Europe. Useless to say, that the balance was similar in the case of the Ottoman expansion. But Geremek points to the fact that it was perhaps in connection with this trauma that in the 14th and 15th centuries there was more discussion of Europe than ever before. Due to their key position the Polish and the Hungarian were given a special role in the elaboration of a new concept of a Europe facing serious dangers from the outside. The evil forces threatening the world - that is European Christianity - are arranged into a specific geographic system in the apocalyptic discourse written around 1440 by the Polish Carthusian monk Jakub z Paradyza dealt with in a separate study by Geremek. The concept of the shield (scutum) and the ramparts (antemurale) protecting Christianity began to spread around that time as well and all this was accompanied by the re-evaluation of former Eastern identities, and the formation of ever-lasting debates concerning Scythian and Sarmatian self-consciousness, Orthodox Christianity, the recognition or non-recognition of the Russian territories expanding towards Asia, as parts of Europe. At the same time it is important to see that in the Western half of Europe this was the period when a new consensus took shape concerning a value and community bound understanding of European civilisation.

Geremek, the social historian does not fail to remind us that this community had to be based upon the socio-

economic structures present in Europe that time. Economic relations established between medieval towns, international networks of monastic and mendicant orders or those of the late medieval knightly orders, or even the international high society of aristocracy arranged in neat patterns within the institutions of courtly society and political representation. In the period of the fragmentation of medieval universalities - papacy and imperial power - the notion of Europe became the new organising frame. This is what we hear about in the reform-movements organising universal councils to solve ecclesiastic debates. It is at this time that European Christianity elaborated its modern self-perception as a community of nations with a diversity of traditions. This enrichment in contents can explain the fact that in the 15th century geographical reflection on various continents became so popular, and shown in the works of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini or Maciej Miechowita. Europe was ready to "discover" America and to shape the world to her own image.

It is only after analysing thoroughly the elaboration of the new concept of Europe that Geremek returns "home", to the "place of Poland in the cultural geography of Medieval Europe". The emerging picture fits neatly into the frames of the book elaborated earlier. After well taking into consideration the historical differentiation of Slavic cultures and the analysis of their inner divisions, Geremek points out the variety of new ties relating them more and more intensively to Europe. The enumeration could begin with the special political role of the Holy Roman Empire in the process of attaching Poland to the West, then continue with the summing up of all the cultural effects that reached the Polish through missionary German priests, German and French wandering knights fighting together with Polish soldiers, the German, Jewish and Walloon citizens of medieval Polish towns, and finally by paying a tribute to the Italian artists and humanists living in their princely courts. It was due to all these relations that the „latinisation" of Piast Poland led to the same synthesis as the one at the time of the romanisation and later on the Christianisation of Celtic Gaul in the West. Thus Poland became one of the pillars of the new Europe in formation.

At this point Geremek would have probably been very glad, had he been acquainted with the similar theses of Jenő Szűcs on the parallels between two processes of conversion and latinisation, that of the Western and of the Eastern Barbarians in the Middle Ages (Jenő Szűcs, *Nation und Geschichte. Studien*, Corvina, Budapest, 1981; idem, *A magyar nemzeti tudat kialakulása. Két tanulmány a kérdés elotörténetéből* (The formation of Hungarian National Consciousness) Szeged, 1992.; cf. Gábor Klaniczay *People and "Nation" : A unfinished inquiry into the genesis of two concepts*, Budapest Review of Books 4 /1994/ pp. 25-29.) The works of Szűcs, and other Hungarian historians could certainly have provided interesting material also for the problem of subsequent resurgence of the consciousness of Oriental origins, such as the myth of the descent of the Hungarians from the Huns (cf. Jenő Szűcs, *Theoretical Elements in master Simon of Kéza's Gesta Hungarorum 1282-1285 a.d.* Akadémiai, Budapest, 1975.)

The same could be said about the ample set of Hungarian studies concerning the problem of the fight against the Ottoman aggression (who are labelled in the book of Geremek the same way as "Turks" as in Hungarian historiography this erroneous designation belongs unfortunately to the terminological habits of both cultures). Just to mention a single example: Geremek makes a detailed reference to the famous account of Georgius de Hungaria, but he does not take into account its various Hungarian analyses such as the one by Florio Banfi (Fra Giorgio di Settecastelli O.P. detto Georgius de Hungaria", in *Memorie Domenicane*, 1939, pp. 130-141, 202-209); or Lajos Tardy (*Rabok, követek, kalmárok az oszmán birodalomról* (Prisoners, ambassadors, merchants on the Ottoman Empire), Budapest, Gondolat, 1977.) But these are really minor omissions, and testify rather to the linguistic difficulties we have to face here in Central Europe despite the close co-operation of our intellectuals and the common problematic we have to explain.

Looking at Geremek's synthetic view-for this is where we get after reading through his collection of studies, which are well concluded by a modern political essay where the medievalist who became a politician, speaks about The Nation-State in Twentieth Century Europe - the Hungarian historiography could learn from him a bit more self-confidence we generally show. While we are all too frequently stuck with complexes of inferiority expressed by the "delayed", "imperfect", "bastard" versions of Western civilisation in our region (a view partly shared by Bibó and Szűcs as well), Geremek presents a balanced parallel between the formation of Western and Eastern Europe with due elegance and respect for all its different varieties. Thus he is able to convince his readers that his own central European civilisation merits the same respect and

attention. In international history-writing there have been large-scale initiatives to investigate how Europe came to be what she is, and who "made" this Europe (such as the series *Faire l'Europe - The Birth of Europe* edited by Jacques Le Goff). But very few are those who managed to make such a convincing claim, that today's Europe is the common child of West and East.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/49#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/423> [2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>