

PASSION AND HISTORY. THE INFLUENCE OF ETHICAL VALUATION ON JERZY ŁOJEK'S HISTORICAL WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

In the article the Author presents the typology of alternative history and in its light he characterises the historical writings of Jerzy Łojek, in particular his approach towards history of November Uprising, 1830–1831.

Keywords: Jerzy Łojek, alternative history, hierarchy of values, chance in history.

I

The considerations on developmental alternatives in history do not raise the trust of professional historians. They have enough troubles with an explanation of what happened in history in order to additionally investigate what might happen. Earlier, in the time of domination of positivistic approach to history, the investigation of the type "what would have happened if..." was on the margin of scientific discourse. Nowadays, it is possible to recognise the change in historians' attitude. Therefore, one can find the books where the problem of alternative history investigated from the different points of view appears. In the Polish historiography, the pioneer of alternative approach to history was Jerzy Łojek, the author of book *The Chances of November Uprising* ('Szanse Powstania Listopadowego') published in 1966. On the methodological ground, the problem of alternatives in history was analysed by Jerzy Topolski in his book *Freedom and Coercion in the Creation of History* ('Wolność i przymus w tworzeniu historii') published in 1990. Later on, this scholar deepened his study on this topic distinguishing between two types of alternative history. According to him, this species of historical writing consists of:

KRZYSZTOF BRZECHCZYN
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1. the showing (realistic) historical alternatives (for example alternative of agreement on common voting and not-agreement on such voting by Louis XVI);
2. reflection on what would have happened if another (considered for realistic) alternative had occurred (for example if Louis XVI had agreed with common voting of three estates and had not supported the conservative reaction.¹

In this division, the criterion of distinguishing between these two kinds of alternative history is the way of examination of the possible course of events. On the base of this criterion, one can distinguish the “shallow” and “deep” analysis of alternative history. The shallow analysis is only pointing at the moments in history where alternative lines of development could occur. Instead, the deep analysis shows what would have happened if such a possible course of events had really occurred.

It seems to me that it is also possible to divide alternative history according to a different criterion. Namely, according to the purpose of alternative history analysis. On this base, one can distinguish between the explanatory and axiological analysis of alternative courses of occurrences. In the first kind of analysis, historian aims at purely explanatory purposes. In this kind of history, the possible courses of events are selected and analysed from the pool of alternatives which in the light of historian’s knowledge (it includes also the reconstruction of knowledge of agents acting in the past) have the highest likelihood of occurrence. Analysis what could have happened in history allows for better understanding what really happened in it. This kind of alternative history is represented by W. Fogel and D. North’s analysis.² He posed a question how the American economy had developed if in the XIXth century water transport would have replaced the railroad transport. According to his estimations, the influence of railroad transport on the growth of American economy was not so significant as it is commonly recognized.

In the axiological examination of alternative history there are quite different rules of selection of possible courses of events. Here, the point of departure is the state of affairs estimated in the highest way by the historian’s system of values. Therefore, our historian chooses and analyses (in the

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1 J. Topolski, “Refleksje na temat historii alternatywnej (‘Considerations on Alternative History’)”, *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, 43, 1999, no. 2–3, p. 6.

2 W. Fogel, *Railroads and American Economic Growth. Essays in Econometric History*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore-London 1970.

shallow or deep way) these alternative courses of events which would lead to the state of affairs occupied the highest position in his outlook. Or to put it in the different words, our scholar departing from the state of affairs estimated by him in the highest way, is considering what kind of conditions should be satisfied (what kind of action should be undertaken by historical agent) in order to achieve the state of affairs, desired by him. In this kind of alternative history the important role is played by ethics, the system of values and preferences accepted by historian, his or her generation or the whole nation. Crossing these two criteria, one can obtain four types of alternative history:

1. shallow explanatory history;
2. deep explanatory history;
3. shallow axiological history;
4. deep axiological history.

In the last type of alternative history, it is possible to distinguish two of its versions: utopian and realistic. The ideal social state of affairs assumed by historian (for example the independence of Poland) may be realistic — that is possible to achieve in the given historical conditions or utopian — impossible to achieve in a given historical condition in the light of the present knowledge.

II

Now, I would like to consider what kinds of alternative history may be found in the works of Jerzy Łojek, the pioneer of this species in Polish historiography. The basis of my analysis will be his book *The Chances of November Uprising*. It is obvious that the examination of historical alternatives requires the acceptance of a certain vision of historical process which performs the appearance of alternative paths of development. Therefore, firstly I attempt to reconstruct vision of history presupposed by Łojek. According to him, the alternative paths of development are not unusual in the historical process. They are — as Łojek proves — present in almost each turning point of history:

It is obvious that almost all, without exceptions, historical processes from the grand social- economical transformation to political events shaping the states or large regions of the world for the period of life of one or several generations, had at their beginnings and during their development clear alternatives. The beginning of each process, it is recognised the best

KRZYSZTOF BRZECHCZYN
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in the case of history of grand political and military conflicts, resembles the entering of a fork in the road. In the first phase, the historical paths of development coming from this fork in the road are close together but further are divided by more and more space. The momentum of the entering of the fork in the road was sometimes only evanescent moment in history, not always recognised by the historiography. Sometimes only coincidence of events, more often conscious his purposes but unconscious consequences of action, human decision directed the course of history in this or not another direction. But sometimes there was more than one possibility. Persistence in the investigation of this line of history which was actually realised, impoverishes the human knowledge.³

According to Łojek, the realisation of this and not another developmental path of history depends on the direction of human behaviour, action and relinquishment. In turn, human action is conditioned by state of social consciousness. The shape of this consciousness, decisive in direction of evolution of human history resulted from the coincidence of various sometimes entirely accidental factors and circumstances. Consequently, the accident is decisive in the realisation of this and not that historical alternative. Human history in its turning points — Łojek maintains — might have evolved in different direction. Therefore, the professional duty of historian — Łojek affirms — includes the investigation not only what happened but also investigation what might have happened. He wrote:

Honesty of historian relies not only on the exposing of all (he significant facts, although definition “significant” presupposes the subordination of the whole picture of the past to investigator’s own vision, his conviction what should be presented today. This honesty requires the understanding epistemological needs of society, requirements of the people towards historians. Public opinion of each epoch in different way formulates the questions towards past, it wants to know different things. Historian must answer or at least try to answer the questions posed to him by his contemporaries.⁴

This quotation confirms that Łojek’s work represents axiological type of writing of history. The needs and interests of society are sufficient criterion of investigation of developmental alternatives in history.

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³ J. Łojek, *Wokół sporów i polemik* (‘Around the Disputes and Polemics’), Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, Lublin 1991, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

III

In the book which is the subject of my study, one can find two kinds of alternative analysis: the deep and the shallow. Analysing the course of events during the November Uprising, Łojek notes down moments in which history might have evolved in different ways — better for interests of Poland who could gain the full state independence. What is interesting, in his reasoning are absent these developmental alternatives where course of events might have led to the worsening of Polish situation. There are examples of this kind of reasoning:

If great duke Konstanty had died on November 29, 1830, Polish leadership would not have negotiated with tsar Nicholas I and tsar would have immediately directed the Rosen's corps to Kingdom of Poland; later on, he presupposed that Russian troops would have defeated and Polish society would have been deprived of illusion of negotiations with tsar.⁵

Here is a second example:

If great duke Konstanty on November 29, 1830 had decided to put down the Polish uprising by force, he would have been defeated and Polish society would have radicalised and deprived the power of the conservatives.⁶

In Łojek's considerations, one can also find examples of deep analysis of alternative courses of development. Namely, Łojek considers the developmental perspectives of Kingdom of Poland after victory over Russia. Here is my reconstruction of his chain of reasoning:

If Skrzynecki had not been a commander of army, Polish troops might have defeated Russian army.

If Polish army had defeated Russian army, the Poles might have expanded an uprising on the lands of second partition.

If the Poles had conquered land of second partition (Lithuania, Belarussia, the Ukraine), the proportion of forces between Russia and Poland would have changed and uprising government would have been recognised by Great Britain, France and Austria.

If the Western superpowers had recognised new government of Poland, the tsar Nicholas I would have begun negotiations with Poland.

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⁵ J. Łojek, *Szanse Powstania Listopadowego* ('The Chances of November Uprising'), Pax, Warszawa 1986 (first edition: 1966), p. 13.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 16–18.

KRZYSZTOF BRZECHCZYN

If the negotiations with Russia had begun, Russia under influence of diplomatic support of Poland by Western countries and military successes of Polish army would have recognised the independence of Polish state possessing lands of second partition.

If Polish state at such borders had rise, the capitalistic and democratic transformation would have occurred in it earlier than Russia.

If Polish independent state had been strengthened by capitalistic transformations, thirty years later (1848–49) it might have reconquered Polish lands subordinated by Prussia and Austria.⁷

One can see that Łojek's analysis is steered by the system of values accepted by him. The state independence was the highest value in his outlook. It led to Łojek's prompts given to agents of historical events. For example, Łojek gives advises regarding the strategy which should been accepted by Polish diplomacy during the fictional negotiations with Russia:

On the European forum the matter of full recognition of Polish Kingdom would have been posed.

We should emphasise: Polish Kingdom — and not the whole pre-partition Commonwealth... Warsaw government must have declared in 1831 that he did not have any pretensions to the lands of Austrian and Prussian partition. It would have been necessary for calming down courts in Berlin and Vienna and for disabling the enemies of Polish independence who banded arguments that the recovered Poland is an enemy of all his three neighbours.⁸

IV

In summing up, we should affirm that Łojek's considerations on alternative history aroused from his system of value. In his outlook, the independence of Polish state was the one of the highest value. Łojek's writing represents axiological type of alternative history (in deep and shallow version). This is why, the author of *The Chances of November Uprising* considers so carefully the likelihood of victory of this war between Poland and Russia. I think that it is the principle motive which provides a clue in the interpretation of the whole writing of this historian, especially his books on the Constitution of 3 May 1791, the Soviet aggression on Poland at September 17th, 1939 and the Katyń massacre.

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⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 79–90.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 87–88.

Moreover, the admission of the realism of some developmental alternatives in history of Poland and attempt at giving answer — why they did not succeed — fulfills important didactic functions. In his answer, Łojek concentrates on so called subjective dimension of historical process. The reason of failure of November Uprising was the lack of courage, negligence and meanness of its participants. In this way, the contemporaries can take lessons from the past and learn how it is possible to achieve social and national goals which at first glance seem to be impossible for realisation and history may fulfill one of its fundamental social function — to be a truly *magistrae vitae*.

Summary

The Author undertakes the challenge of reconstructing Jerzy Łojek's explanatory vision of historical process. He constructs the typology of alternative history according to two criteria: the method and purpose of analysis. According to the first criterion, it is possible to distinguish shallow and deep alternative history. In shallow analysis historian is only pointing at turning periods in the history, in deep analysis — he considers the alternative paths of developments. According to the second criterion, it is possible to distinguish axiological and explanatory alternative history. In the explanatory kind of alternative history analysis what could have happened allows for better understanding what really happened in the past. In the axiological kind of alternative history historian departing from the state of affairs estimated in his outlook in the highest way, considers what kind of conditions should be satisfied in order to achieve this state of affairs. Crossing these criteria one can obtain shallow explanatory (I), deep explanatory (II), shallow axiological (III) and deep axiological history (IV). The alternative history developed by Łojek in his book: *The Chances of November Uprising* belongs to the axiological kind of this historical writings. In Łojek's outlook the independence of the Polish State was one of the highest values and he consequently considers what a political strategy should have been adopted by Polish leadership in years 1830–1831 in order to defeat Russia.