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Cultural Unity in the First Republic of Poland

Discussion Points on the Relevance and the Possibility of Taking a Holistic Approach to the Culture of Pre-Partition Poland

It is worth remembering the essential fact that until the time of partitions, Poland was the only European country of such size (and for a long period of corresponding strength) that carried the name of 'republic'. It was the only country which had a political system that was based on the direct participation of "the political nation" – the nobility – in matters that decided on issues of state and international relations. The First Republic's exceptional governmental system has already been recognised and described by many historians, who have pointed out those fixed elements which assured the stability and integrity of the country for several centuries. The historical changes that took place have also been described, showing, for example, how important systemic principles degenerated, leading to the weakening of the country at the turn of the 18th century. On the other hand, these changes resulted in reconstructive actions aimed at the reintroduction of basic political foundations.

Nevertheless, the following question is worth asking: was the stability of the parliamentary and republican system of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth accompanied by the historical unity of the type and character of its culture (understood as the system of communication between its participants and the organisation of their intellectual, artistic and spiritual life)? Is it possible to talk about the common features of

Polish–Lithuanian culture that developed in at least three – very different – epochs: the Renaissance, the Baroque and the Enlightenment (not to even mention the 15th century Autumn of the Middle Ages, when the tendencies important to the subsequent centuries began to appear)? Thus, is it justified to characterize Polish–Lithuanian culture as a whole to find the unity in an absolutely varied range of events typical of the future cultural formations of the First Republic?

The starting point for the description of this culture as a whole is the assumption that its development took place within a climate of constant tension between opposite and at the same time complementary tendencies. These tendencies determined the specific character of this culture's accomplishments, its role in public life and the style of private life. They also provided the foundation for Polish–Lithuanian participation in modern European culture, and determined the peculiarity of Polish achievements in this area.

1. The first sphere in which the essential features and tendencies of the culture of the First Republic become evident is that of relations between basic systems of signs and techniques to formulate and convey cultural messages: the word and the picture (iconic message). Obviously, a significant and defining event for modern culture was the invention of print and the gradual popularisation of the printed book, which quickly became the basic means for communicating and conveying the verbal message. The development of print, already recognised and quite thoroughly described in various regions (Krakow, Lviv and other cities) of 16th century Poland, changed the way people interacted with language, and created new conditions for its reception, especially among the political elites. This

process was stopped by the political and social events of the 17th century, a setback that was still evident in the 18th century.

However, Polish culture still used the written message in many fields of communication, both official and private. Often, important legal documents were handwritten, in particular letters of official, private, state and international correspondence. The domestic chronicles and journals of historical events for families of the nobility – the *silvae rerum* – (which also contained literary works and agricultural, medical and moral advice) were recorded in manuscript, not in printed, form. Moreover, some literary works found quite a large readership by being recorded, copied and distributed in handwritten form. This was not always due to the limited possibility of printing, but rather because a work was designated for circles where the manuscript was perceived as authentic and personal, and which were signed by the author or the person who deliberately chose to copy and popularise the text in his handwriting. Experts of Old Polish manuscripts have called the 17th century the ‘age of manuscripts’, as it was then that this phenomenon prevailed, although recording and distributing the written word in this form remained customary, for many reasons, until the end of the 18th century. A well-known example is the case of Warsaw horse-cab drivers who delivered handwritten copies of political papers, satires, and pamphlets when the Great Sejm [*parliament meeting*] took place in the city.

One of the most important means of communication, not only in private situations but also in public life, was the word itself, spoken to listeners at parliament meetings [*in Polish “sejm”*], local parliament meetings [*in Polish “sejmik”*], meetings with neighbours, gatherings, feasts, during church festivals and various celebrations. Mainly, these were speeches delivered during oratorical events. They were, therefore, of rhetorical character, based on the rules typical of that kind of linguistic

form, but at the same time they were aimed at dialogue and the participation of the listeners. The audience was meant to become convinced of the presented ideas, interested in and fascinated by the speaker's eloquence and encouraged to initiate a discussion with him. Old Polish theorists of oratory often emphasised the significance of the spoken word in a free country: responsibility for public matters was held by all society members, who were obliged to speak in public about their issues and to participate in reaching political decisions. The spoken word – uttered at various gatherings, and therefore present in the public sphere – was hence a consequence and an implementation of the rules of the Polish political system. It played a communicative role that was as important as that of the printed word (and sometimes a lot more important than the latter). Also, in less official situations, for example among neighbours or other social situations, spoken language, functioning as a means of dialogue and meant to provoke a direct response, was the main means of communication. The importance of the spoken word is proven also by the genre of noble histories, which were perceived as living narration. Addressing the audience directly, the narrator sought to astonish the audience through unbelievable events, his creative imagination, humorous and comic elements, jokes and anecdotes, and thereby to influence and amuse the listeners, while also encouraging them to compete with each other in creating their own tales for mutual entertainment.

Visual messages played a significant role both in pre-partition Poland, both in the public sphere, in which representatives of the political nation participated, as well as in people's private and social life. It frequently coexisted with a verbal message, but it also functioned independently as a means of communication. Thus, scholars talk of the 'staging of life' in Old Poland. They have referenced, on the one hand, the

role of school theatre – which introduced the students of convent schools (belonging to the Jesuit and Piarist orders) and their teachers to the world of art – and, on the other hand, the various ways in which public life was staged. Examples for this are the way in which (especially during the 17th century) church interior decorations (polychromies, paintings, sculptures, small architecture), weddings, funerals (the famous *castrum doloris*) and feasts (including spectacular worship processions in embellished surroundings) were meant to appeal visually to the participants of religious ceremonies. These are only the most typical examples of an ubiquitous tendency to visualise meaning by means of such occasions and events, and of the tendency to merge various means of communication, ranging from the written word (varied inscriptions, quotations) to oration and musical and vocal music forms. The purpose of setting public events (and in many cases less official ones as well) in such a way was to give the participants strong and peculiar impressions which were also designed to create bonds within the community and to strengthen a common sense of identity. It is also worth mentioning within this context theatrical behaviour such as the passion for gaudy clothes, ornamental coats of arms, interior decorations, an (often artificial) expressiveness of gestures and greeting manners, and other social customs. Theatricality and the constant reliance on visual means of showing prestige and social rank had a firm place within the lives of communities, and determined the shape and the framework of public ceremonies. Old memoirs contain countless entries of important people, and descriptions of how houses, streets, gates and other public places – where events important to all sections of society were celebrated – were decorated. This kind of cultural message reached a broader public than verbal messages recorded in books. The latter ones were more permanent than the momentary pictures and staged behaviours conveying significant

issues of community life, but they required a different, more personal type of reception, and their distribution and circulation were restricted by many factors, such as economic or technical ones. These factors limited the role of the printed word in the cultural sphere and caused the dominance of a culture based on visual reception, on watching and listening to the spoken word. This was a defining feature of the culture in the Republic of Poland until the end of the 18th century. Books and newspapers of the early 1790s contained vast descriptions of the celebrations surrounding the first anniversary of the Constitution of May 3rd. The iconic sphere played an important role within these celebrations and, as in previous periods, it conveyed certain ideas, and shaped the way in which attitudes and group experiences were shared.

Pageantry as a distinctive feature of communal life, as an iconographical sign and a living, highly important means of communication, and the constant coexistence and tension between the word (in many forms: speech or writing) and the image: these were the phenomena permanently present in the culture of the First Republic of Poland, and which defined its unity.

2. The second crucial factor which constructed the cultural continuity between the various pre-partition periods in Poland was a constant tension between, on the one hand, the tendency to develop and popularise the model of courtly and city life, and, on the other hand, the predominance of the model of country life. The culture of the noble class was, as we know, *ex definitione* that of a rural culture. The sphere in which life took place was determined by the borders of the residence and the estate, and was structured according to the requirements of utility, the needs and the most important activities of the residents. Time was reliant on nature and the

course of ceremonies. Everyday routines, customs and patterns of behaviour were subordinated to the needs of ensuring largely self-sufficient subsistence, and concentrated on cultivating tradition, and to developing family and social bonds and increasing the independence and self-reliance of the nobles' lives. The mythological home with its location, architecture, decor and lifestyle became the centre of life and an inalienable value. It was treated as a shelter protecting the inhabitants from the dangers of the outer world. The country house was an idyllic place, as described by Old Polish poets in numerous adaptations of Horace's epode *Beatus ille qui procul negotiis....* It was a place full of order and harmony of life which provided the necessary conditions for a person to perform his function within the family and the community. From the 16th to 18th century, works of literature often depicted country life, glorified it and described the cheerful moments when travellers, politicians or soldiers returned home. At the same time, however, the importance of both the royal court and the cities – the seats of the main administrative, cultural and religious institutions – was growing in many ways, and with varied intensity. The career opportunities and the life choices of nobles hovered somewhere between two poles. On the one hand, there was the quiet, free and pleasant country life which combined relaxation and entertainment. On the other hand, there was courtly life which was, on the one hand, ruled by courtroom etiquette, duties, restraints and frequently by the endeavour to gain the good will of the sovereign, but which, on the other hand, provided chances for social advancement. Such career opportunities also meant choosing different models of style and culture. It was not until the 18th century that the city became the main focal point for the nobility. Even then, it was perceived as a place full of dangers and inconveniences, even though making use of the political and cultural institutions located there (court,

parliament, offices, theatre, newspapers, bookshops or various centres of exchanging and creating public opinion) became highly attractive to nobles, of whom it was also expected of them to do so. A nobleman living in the second half of the 18th century in the capital city still treated his mansion as an asylum he could come back to, and where he could indulge in a different cultural reality and cherish a different lifestyle. The coexistence of these alternative, though axiologically unequal, cultural models – which were both subject to gradual change – in the period of the First Republic allows us to treat the culture of that time as a whole structure, defined by parallel tensions and tendencies.

3. Another characteristic phenomenon of the culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth is a tension between the tendency to isolation and enclosure, and the manifestation of openness and the incorporation of elements of foreign origin. The tendency to enclose communal life and to isolate it from the outer world is exemplified by the rural life-style led by noblemen, who satisfied their need for social contacts by keeping relationships only with the closest neighbours, treating all that was outside their estate as strange and potentially dangerous. The nobility's rigid attitude, resistant to change and innovation, also took a wide range of other forms: tradition was perceived as a value, novelties were shown to be disliked, traditional Polish and Lithuanian dress, customs, rules of family life and religion were cultivated, foreigners were distrusted and, most of all, the republican system which assured the freedom of estates of the realm and individuals (as well as privileges) was cherished. Nevertheless, these attitudes were accompanied by seemingly opposite phenomena which implied the need to use the culture and achievements of other nations. Of great importance in this respect was the fact that the polyethnic and

polyreligious society of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth had for many centuries lived in one country, had preserved individual features of the various cultures and religion and, in most cases, had been able to reconcile differences. Scholars emphasise the fact that people living in Old Poland liked travelling abroad for educational and other reasons. Records from those journeys make it possible to examine the persistence of attitudes and views acquired in the motherland, and the way they shaped the travellers' interests and expressions of curiosity and cognitive inquisitiveness, especially those about politics, social and economic matters. It was also common to send sons – also from the middle-ranking nobility – to schools abroad, not only during the 16th century, but also in the following century and in during the period of the Enlightenment.

The participation of foreigners in politics and particularly in culture during the period of the First Republic was a phenomenon of considerable significance. Patrons from baronial and church circles invited foreign artists (especially from Italy, but not only) to design and construct secular and sacred buildings. This meant that, even in the most distant regions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, artistic trends and currents developed at the same time as in the rest of Europe. What is more, the conditions and atmosphere of Polish life were so favourable that a great number of these foreign artists were polonized, and were even granted the rank of noblemen. Old Polish literature was likewise in close contact with European phenomena. This was expressed not only by the parallel development of the prevailing currents of thought and art, but also by many adaptations and translations of foreign works, mostly Italian and French, but German as well. A pronounced intensification of contacts with foreigners took place when foreign royal dynasties ruled, when the foreign kings were invited to ascend the Polish throne. This was despite the fact that these foreigners

often had isolationist plans for the Commonwealth. Nonetheless, the culture of the First Republic developed in an atmosphere of dialogue with the most important phenomena of European culture, and noticeably adopted various foreign forms in literature, architecture, in moral and in social thought. The phenomenon which requires thorough investigation is the degree of openness to neighbours to the Near East of the Commonwealth. With these countries, the Poland–Lithuanian state was at war, but also developed a peculiar form of cultural osmosis, visible in the strong element of exoticism in art (e.g. decorative art), in literature and in dress. The constant tension between native and foreign elements, expressed in many walks of life (e.g. customs, clothes, language, attitude towards foreigners, etc.) was an essential factor which shaped the character of the culture in the First Republic until the early decades of the 19th century.

4. An important sphere in which the integrity and unity of the culture displayed itself during the period under discussion was the Mediterranean tradition, mainly the ancient, but also the Christian one. It played a major role in all domains of artistic and ideological activity, and was constant importance to all intellectual and artistic activity. It therefore defined also the political system, acting as a blueprint for the ideal relationship between the republican system of the First Republic of Poland and ancient republics. It also supplied role models of leaders and statesmen, who lived by rules of their ancient political system, and who lived according to an ideal a brave man, who served society in word and deed. Of ancient origin was the exceptional role of speech and rhetoric in the public life of a free community, where it was necessary to form one's own opinion and take decisions while taking part in free discussions and presenting reasons and arguments. The idea of the "freedom of speech" – exemplified by the

endeavours of Greek and Roman orators – was of fundamental significance for the spoken word to function in the public sphere. Role models and ethical behaviour both in communal and individual ethics were established according to the stoic tradition (often interpreted through Christian thought), which was still alive and referred to in many areas – moral, educational and literary – of writing. The abundance of ancient elements, images and characters is observable in poetry even at first sight, the same applying to fine arts and architecture. Additionally, the theoretical reflection on the art and creation had its roots in the ancient tradition, in combination with the fundamental significance of Horace's and Aristotle's works for all deliberations on that subject. The many-sided existence of Latin in writing until the late 18th century was an example of the phenomenon described by researchers as the *latinitas* of the culture of the First Republic. This phenomenon was reflected in numerous instances of studies on the works of ancient philosophers, historians, poets and playwrights, and in translations of their works, the terminology of which was systematically adapted for the Polish language. The necessity of a constant contact with Latin and works written in that language was treated not only as the manifestation of eloquence, but mainly as the requirement to learn and consolidate all that is topical and contemporary for a man of the modern era. Feeling connected to and being deeply rooted in the ancient past confirmed the belief that it was crucial to preserve the ancient heritage as an inalienable value and the source of the spiritual unity of Europe, and that Polish culture belonged to that tradition.

5. The harmonious coexistence of secular and religious trends was also a distinct feature of the First Republic's culture. Religious freedom, present for so many years, was accompanied by the freedom to discuss religious and

doctrinal matters, which in turn stirred on intellectual activity and served as a stimulus to develop philosophical and ethical thought. The literary output of the epoch (especially poetry, which was the dominant literary form of the time, and which produced the most outstanding works) comprises, on the one hand, important writings that discuss issues of customs and ones of existential, moral, social and personal nature. On the other hand, works of confessional character were written, which made use of Biblical motives, including various religious practices (prayers, religious songs), and which served the spiritual needs of the worshippers (hagiographies, exemplary lives and moralistic literature). Moreover, religiosity – various forms of rites and religious behaviour – was not restricted only to people’s private lives. In fact, it was a firm component of the public sphere, and to a great extent specified its character. Efficient and to a large degree harmonious coexistence, even the complementation and the mutual support of those two spheres and methods of cultural manifestation and behaviours were typical features of the period of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

6. One of the significant phenomena describing the character of the Polish culture of that time was also the coexistence and the permeation of different cultural discourses and styles and genres of expression. The literary output of that time fulfilled, as we know, many functions: informative, cognitive, pragmatic and aesthetic, functions which most often intermingled and coexisted with each other within a single work. Thus, for instance, communication strategies typical of artistic creation frequently were combined with the styles of writing characteristic of parenetic, philosophical or historical literature. The features of scientific, philosophical and moralistic discourse occurred together with the features of artistic

expression. This phenomenon, which scholars have labelled “interdiscourse syncretism”, characterizes the peculiarity of many works of past times. A good example is the genre of dialogue: *Krótką rozprawą między panem, wójtem a plebanem* by Mikołaj Rej, which outlines the coexistence of aesthetic and persuasive elements; or *Żywot człowieka poczciwego*, where parenesis is supported by expressiveness, serviceability and cognitive orientation. Writings of multiple features, which scholars of interdiscourse have called ‘text hybrids’, might be found in the works of all literary periods prior to the partitions. They combine various elements of canonical genres, literary and practical orientation, different and sometimes opposite language and stylistic registers. Though their literary compositions often contain unresolved tension, these disparate elements help to construct the sense of a work’s central message. In contrast to this tendency, the literature of the 19th century developed in a direction which diversified discourses, and isolated them from each other.

7. The culture of the First Republic of Poland developed within an atmosphere of constant tension between the stability of its type and character, and the natural and obvious changeability of relations between its particular elements. Dynamics, directions and the development of these relations and changes constituted the factors which differentiated the various historical epochs from each other, and which formed the Commonwealth’s cultural integrity. It might be claimed, however, that the basic symptom and stimulus for the changeability within this integral area appeared due to the transformation of creative and communicative practices, and the formation of new institutions of cultural life, which arose from the progress of civilization and the political situation. These institutions, in addition to variable forms of patronage, bookselling, print

media, libraries and theatre, created new conditions and provided possibilities and methods to participate in culture. It is quite telling that the highest incidence of those changes occurred in the last historical epoch in Poland before the partitions and the Enlightenment. It was during this period that the previously formed, and still prevalent, means of cultural communication functioned simultaneously with the newly emerging means and channels of distributing and receiving the cultural message, and with new methods of broadcasting and receiving in the public sphere. For that reason, the Enlightenment can be described as a transitional period, one which could be perceived to represent a time when the symbolic threshold was processually crossed, and which paved the path towards modernity for Polish culture.

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