In this superbly written book, Jerzy Jedlicki presents the reader with a contribution to the increasingly rich literature devoted to the "intelligentsia". *A Suburb of Europe*, however, does not so much deal with the now all-too-familiar issues of social origin and political influence as it does with intellectual history. The author chooses as his theme the manner in which Polish intellectuals of all political stripes reacted to the twin issues of west-European style liberal progress and industrial civilization. In their attempts at understanding the changes being brought about across all of Europe by the rapidly advancing western economic systems of the post-Enlightenment period, and at finding a place for Poland in this emerging new world, these intellectuals often developed a critique of the west and constructed variegated images of a future world. Jedlicki attempts to put these thinkers and their ideas into the proper historical context and to map out for the reader an axiological grid, locating each thinker according to the manner of his critique of the west and attitude toward what we must call "modernization".

This book is the English language version of a longer Polish edition first published in 1988. Jedlicki’s preface is a model of what a preface ought to be: a clear, concise introduction to the subject and outline of the structure of the book. The prose is to the point and is as eminently understandable for the educated reader not conversant with Polish history as it is illuminating to the specialist. The author divides the book into two distinct sections. The first deals with the period 1760 to 1863. Even prior to the fall of the Commonwealth, the Polish educated elite took up the question of defining Poland’s relationship to the west. But it was after the partitions that this subject became most acute. In addition, a new twist was added to the equation; namely, clarifying the relative importance of the national question to that of modernization. The second time period deals with a shorter time span, from the January Rising to the 1890s – a dark period in Polish history. In both eras, Jedlicki correctly and astutely stresses that one must place all analyses published by Polish authors in a clearly described historical context. Although similarities and “ideological affinities” between western and Polish social
philosophies may certainly be found, it is necessary, in Jedlicki’s words, to “first of all present Polish approaches to Western civilization inasmuch as they were conditioned by specific historical circumstances, and were expressions of particular Polish viewpoints and complexes. After all, there is no denying that national history and cultural idiom played a role in shaping attitudes towards modernity and its literary precursors.” (p. x)

It is precisely this strong sense of the importance of context that informs Jedlicki’s book throughout and that makes it a persuasive piece of historical scholarship. He is adept at commenting upon various controversial themes in Polish history that often are difficult for non-Poles and non-specialists to grasp fully: the peculiar nature of the Polish intelligentsia, the position of the Roman church, and, not least, the “curious combination of collective inferiority complex and national megalomania.” (p. xiii)

In part one, entitled “Images of the Future from the 1780s to 1863”, Jedlicki sets up a number of themes which reverberate throughout Polish history. The first is the role played by the educated elite, a heterogeneous and difficult to define stratum. During the late eighteenth century, Polish elites were already struggling with the relationship of national identity, a specifically Polish way of life, with the cosmopolitan civilization increasingly associated with France and the Enlightenment. Both Jedlicki and many of the writers he analyzes appreciated the fact that “civilization” is an imprecise concept -- and that that very imprecision is what gives the notion its power. “Civilization” was a term used to describe a system of patterns, constantly in flux, and soon the word came to be inextricably bound up with the correlative notion of “progress”. The identification of “civilization” with “progress” and hence “modernization” forced Polish thinkers to look at their society and determine how and if Poland could contribute to these unfolding processes. Quite naturally, a variety of viewpoints emerged, many of them establishing stereotypes and modes of thought that persist to this day among Poles themselves, and among the attitudes of others who study Polish history and society.

Jozef K. Szaniawski provided the first essentially conservative and romantic response. One might call his view a defensive, ethnocentric one, for it rejected the rationalism of the Enlightenment and maintained that “in culture and tradition native features defined the historical identity of a nation and constituted a supreme, autonomous value that did not have to be rationally justified.” (p. 22) Jedlicki treats Szaniawski’s views, which became the foundation of a number of other thinker’s outlooks, gently, revealing a sympathetic understanding of the gnawing fear of those in this camp that ultimately the Poles would lose their national identity if they gave themselves over fully to the cold, abstract theories of reason. Here was born the remarkably long-lived and effective “defensive stereotype” of a homogeneous nation fighting against a basically heartless, yet allegedly superior, homogeneous civilization. For similar defensive reasons, Polish thinkers began to stress the “myth of being first”. Joachim Lelewel, the leading Polish historian of the first half of the nineteenth century, ascribed the idea of democracy to the ancient Slavic system of communes, as well as seeing eighteenth century notions of republicanism and egalitarianism as rooted in the Polish gentry Republic. Jan Pawel Woronicz would add to this mentality by stressing the function of the old Poland as Antemurale, the bulwark of Christendom against heretical, Asiatic outsiders.

All this is eminently understandable given the immense shock administered to the intellectual elites of Poland by the loss of their sovereignty and autonomy after the partitions. These views gave Poles hope. Jedlicki is not at all attempting here a facile defense of a “typically Polish” romantic view of history in the early nineteenth century. Far from it. Rather, he recognizes what one might
need to call the psychological aspects of a society – or at least one stratum in that society – fearful of what the future would bring. The debate on national identity among the Polish intelligentsia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was ultimately largely about tactics. These "romantic" attitudes, when combined with no progress in the sciences, the refusal to recognize Poland's economic backwardness, and the heady feeling produced by the dethronement of Nicholas I in 1830, meant that Poland was an actor rather than merely a subject acted upon.

Jedlicki’s concluding paragraph to a chapter devoted to national identity in this period is worth quoting in full. He writes, "From this point on, we have two histories of culture. One is the sacred history of the nation, the history found in its songs, in its prisons, and on the battlefields. The other is the history of society, the history of sowing and reaping. And there is also the history of political thought, helplessly caught between the archangelic vision of the past and the future, and the harsh reality of Polish daily life." (p. 46) In this passage the author captures the essence of both the romantic and the later positivistic approaches to Polish history, culture and society, as well as the importance of "the humdrum existence of everyday life".

Jedlicki then turns his attention to economic thought. Polish thinkers grappled with the theories of Adam Smith, Jean Charles Sismondi, Jean-Baptiste Say, and David Ricardo on the issue of natural and forced (artificial) development. Not surprisingly, the majority stressed the need to foster "home-grown" versions of development at a "native" pace, so as to avoid the British-style capitalism that produced such dynamic developments but at such a great social price. The debate, however, also forced Poles to examine the precise causes of Polish economic backwardness. Here they were not of one mind. While agreeing that feudalism and the gentry-serf economy were the cause of Poland’s poverty, what to do about it was problematic. Some advocated that Poland enter the industrial race of nations, while others viewed such a position as necessarily leading to disaster. Ultimately the debate revolved around the position of the relationship of agriculture to industry, whether capitalist development in towns would help raise the economic of the peasants or only worsen their condition. For most of the century the debate would continue.

The next chapter, provocatively entitled "The Gospel and Economy", introduces a major theme of the book: moralism, or the concern about what industrialization would do to society. In this regard, of course, Poles had a precursor. Jean Jacques Rousseau and his critique of intellectuals and rational society provided Poles who were worried about the inability of the new and alien industrial world to adequately address problems of human brutality with a model for a new critique of the west. Ignacy Krasicki, the best representative of eighteenth century classicism in Polish literature, may indeed be called Poland’s Rousseau. For him, rationalism led to a moral crisis by undermining faith – a basically Augustinian position always available to those questioning modernization.

The moralists espoused various utopian ideals, the most significant of which was some sort of idealized "home". "Home", of course, "represents an oasis of simplicity, of directness, and of transparency in human relations. One may not be free of worries there, but one will definitely be free of envy, and of all striving for sham values. The home as a retreat from the world, and the country as a retreat from the madding crowd of rapacious civilization: this is one of the great archetypes of literature, one which has been used again and again to express the longings of peoples and cultures weary of their won over-refinement." (p. 110) Of course, this notion is not confined to literature and has had a very strong and almost hallowed tradition in Polish history. "Polonia," those Poles and individuals of Polish descent
to reside abroad (i.e. outside the "motherland"), defines a specially designated group in Polish history and society, and one that makes extensive use of the notion of "going home again". Within Poland, once again the lifestyle of the provincial gentry was upheld as both a bastion of Polishness, and ultimately, of a more moral life and society. The pastoral ideal had once again appeared!

One must be careful not to accuse Jedlicki of being trite and steeped in age-old traditions of Polish traditionalism. The author, on the contrary, reveals a subtle and learned appreciation of how both individuals and societies tend to "remember". In a passage powerful in its descriptive capacity, Jedlicki writes about "the so-called different 'levels of consciousness,' or forms of articulation: common, everyday attitudes, and elitist doctrines, amateurish verses, sermons and philosophical disputes. All of these tend to merge and lodge in the human mind, or at least in unsophisticated minds, and it then becomes very difficult to decide what came from where in the popular view of the world." (p. 120) This is Jedlicki's justification for his methodology in the whole book, and the point is very well taken. Poland's response to industrialization and to the grudging recognition of its own backwardness was varied and often contradictory, and sometimes downright incomprehensible to outsiders. But its variations had parallels elsewhere. Just as Krasicki may be compared with Rousseau, so too may August Cieszkowski be viewed as a Polish St. Simon. The political disasters of 1846 and 1848 led moralists to come up with ethical utopias. Polish Slavophile thinkers repeatedly emphasized the supposed honesty of agricultural societies, and conservatives constantly exhorted landlords to "love their serfs". Feudalism, decried for various faults, was nonetheless somehow more "warm" and "human" than the cold rationalism of capitalism. As our own society enters a new millennium with new modes of communication and new ways of doing business, we are likely to witness a resurrection of similar attitudes.

The second part of the book is called "Ambiguities of Progress". Here Jedlicki returns to another fundamental characteristic of his historical writing, his insistence upon never losing sight of context. The chapter outlines how the by now familiar problem of an overproduction of educated persons led to serious socio-economic dislocation in late nineteenth century Polish society. Further, the inevitable decay of old gentry traditionalism and of the noble estate in the period following the failed January Insurrection forced the intelligentsia and nobles alike to come to terms with what was increasingly a middle class society. And when Polish political thought came to a screeching halt following the French disaster at Sedan in 1871, there was "no programmatic sociopolitical thought either on the left of the right". Poland, it seemed, was in a state comparable to a hangover. The only uniting force in society that reached across partition lines was the church — a church that offered "the only rallying point for the passive idea of survival". (p. 207) This insistence upon never losing sight of context is, perhaps, the underlying theme and value of the entire book. Jedlicki demonstrates convincingly how much Polish thought was conditioned by the peculiarities of the Polish past, but perhaps even more by the exigencies of the moment, the condition in which Poles found themselves forced to live in Russian Poland. All of which is not at all to say that the story of these Polish intellectuals was one of pointlessness. Jedlicki himself states it most forcefully and clearly, "Under the watchful eye of the censor, gendarme and police informer, they were arguing fiercely about the hierarchy of values, the sense of sacrifice, and the ethereal glimmer of hope without which a subdued nation stagnates in the humdrum of everyday existence." (p. 287)

As a contribution to Polish intellectual and social history, this work may well be the single best
published in English in the past decade. It is thoughtful, erudite, and convincing. The writing is lively and clear. Though the author chooses to analyze materials published only in the areas of Central Poland, that is, the area of the Russian partition not incorporated directly into the Russian empire and he therefore largely discounts the former Lithuanian territories, Galicia, and Poznania, one is not left with a sense of something incomplete. This is a common problem of all historians of Poland and only serves to underscore just how traumatic the partitions were for a unified Polish society.

In terms of mechanics the book is strong as well. The chapter notes are excellent. In particular, the short biographical notes on each of the Polish intellectuals Jedlicki introduces in the text are extremely useful to the non-specialist, providing as they do dates, a concise identification of the individual, and a useful guidepost for making associations of one thinker to another. The bibliography is a select list and, although useful, this reader would have preferred to see a more exhaustive, thematically ordered bibliography, perhaps along the lines of the bibliography in Piotr Wandycz’s *Lands of Partitioned Poland*. Although all Jedlicki does provide fuller bibliographic material in the notes, it is often inconvenient to pursue cross references. This objection, however, is exceedingly minor. The translation is superb, as is the editing. All serious students of Poland, of modernization, and of the nature of capitalism and how it interacts with poor, peripheral, agricultural societies must read this book.

Note

[1]. Witness the recent draft of a resolution of the Senate of the current republic of Poland adopted on April 22, 1999 concerning the “procedure of establishing the national status of persons of Polish nationality of Polish origin” for the purpose of creating “motherland privileges” and confirmation of “membership of the Polish Nation”.

This effort reveals the wish to bring back home, as it were, ex-patriots and their descendents.
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