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*Maciej Janowski*

**‘MULTIPLE SONDERWEGS’.  
THE SPECIFICITY OF HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT  
OF EAST CENTRAL EUROPE  
IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY  
(INTRODUCTORY REMARKS)**

**Abstract**

This introductory article offers intellectual frames and historical context to the subsequent collection of essays. There are two questions their authors try and answer: First, what discussions on the respective specificities of historical development were carried out in various countries of East Central Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Second, what was the scope of topics to be discussed, whereas their aim is to interweave this description or analysis of the debates with posing the question regarding the core of the matter – and this by showing a series of case studies where the approach connected, in some way or another, with the peculiar path concept might seem useful. For the purpose of this volume, the notion of peculiar path is approached in a possibly broad context. The structure of the nineteenth-century city, formation of a modern national awareness: such problems are suitable, according to the authors, for research in view of multiplicity of peculiar paths: rather than highways along which the *Zeitgeist* of a nation or humanity streaks, these would be medium-rank and medium-sized roads on which medium-scale processes and occurrences roll along.

**Key-words:** modernization, development, East Central Europe, protochronism, methodology

For many generations now, social thinkers have been posing the question: Is there any single, generalised, model of social development? And, if there is one, would it admit any exceptions? What kind of exceptions (if any)? The present considerations will omit the period before the age of Enlightenment: not because the problems of typicality, or specificity, of historical development had not attracted the thinkers' attention then, but because of a practical reason: rather than

proposing a general synthesised take of the issue, this essay is introductory, and it shall completely suffice that the argument to unfold be set within the confines of the last quarter of a millennium.

The Enlightenment epoch has built – in the works of philosophers, rather than historians, probably best visible in Antoine Condorcet – a pattern of the development of mankind, based upon the principles of secular social thought, albeit indebted, in many a fragment, to the traditional Christian image. Shortly afterwards, the pattern was taken over by the nineteenth-century evolutionistic anthropology.

In the Polish framework, Stanisław Staszic's *Ród ludzki* [The Human Race] (1791–7, publ. 1819–20) served as an excellent example of such developmental pattern. Later on, in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century, ever-new concepts were appearing. In the first place, the concept of dialectical progress, as disseminated by Hegel, should be evoked here. The concept had already been part of the Christian vision, as the *felix culpa* (Redemption required the original sin to have appeared), but now, it has appeared – probably, for the first time – in an extended, secular (though strongly metaphysical) historiosophical concept. Marxism, which replaced Spirit with Matter but did not alter the underlying metaphysical structure of history, was a version of Hegelian historiosophy.

In parallel with the concepts proposed by historians and sociologists, anthropology has been developing beginning with the Enlightenment (or, perhaps, even earlier – since the time of the Baroque and Renaissance travellers), contributing to the portrayal of a society that at some later stage would be termed 'traditional'. Such a concept is somewhat different from all the gradual or stage-by-stage development theories in that it introduces a primary dichotomy between a 'traditional' and a 'modern' society (whilst not quitting certain potential secondary categorisations). Such dichotomous division will prove particularly important for the most diverse modernisation theories.

The classical image of social development, rooted in the Enlightenment concepts, and its numerous continuations (in Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, or Ferdinand Tönnies – with his differentiation between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*) and other development patterns, be it dichotomous or ternary (savagery – barbarism – civilisation)<sup>1</sup>, or even more complicated ones, were devised, in principle,

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<sup>1</sup> See Jerzy Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej* (Warsaw, 1983<sup>1</sup>), 131–4.

as universal. Yet, all of them basically admitted – through the backdoor, as it were – a situation where development, being the subject of a given theory, would eventually not appear. Countries that have seen no development permanently remain at their lower stage; never joining the universal developmental trend, they quite literally turn into unhistorical countries and nations: a phrase that, as is known, had a great career in the scholarly and publicist language of the East Central Europe during the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth.

It is thus possible to stay off the track of development – in other words, outside history, within the everlasting *now*, as it were: a condition that is apparently characteristic of 'natural' peoples that undergo no change and accumulate no experiences whatsoever. The theories summarised above had, essentially, no alternative development potential inbuilt in them. A nation or country may be put off the game but cannot win it by applying an alternative method. (The concept of 'Asiatic mode of production' might possibly have been such an option in the Marxist theory of social-economic formations, but the concept has never become a central part of the doctrine.)

However, since the late eighteenth century, almost in parallel with all these developmental concepts, quite different ideas came out, challenging the essentially unidirectional development. Initially, in the Enlightenment time, they basically do not call the purpose of development into question, but present the possibility of a different road to the destination. All the concepts of enlightened absolutism from the eighteenth century (particularly, from its latter half) can be viewed in this context. The strife for catching up on the higher-developed regions is, in essence, tantamount with the conviction that there is an alternative path available: namely, intensified activity of the state. The Enlightenment reformers identified various elements of the specificity of their countries that called for action of a different sort than that pursued in the west of Europe. Hugo Kołłątaj's *Listy Anonima* (1789), probably the most important, and most complete, reformist programme of the Polish Enlightenment, may serve as an excellent example: the basic problem Kołłątaj wrestles with was to align the modernisation programme with the potential of the Commonwealth – a country then deprived of financial resources and administration staffs, as were otherwise present in the Habsburg monarchy or the Frederician Prussia, for instance.

Among the reformers in the enlightened-absolutism countries as well as among the reformers in Poland-Lithuania under King Stanislaus Augustus, the emphasis was placed on the contemporary situation rather than on the past. The problem of the possible specificity of a country's or nation's historical development was not placed in the spotlight yet, albeit historians (Adam Naruszewicz among them) had already begun detecting it.

The problem grew to a key point in the generations that followed. The reason was that all the gradual development concepts directly provoked the question: Would it be possible to overleap a stage? The point was no more about accelerating the civilizational development by way of intensified administrative action, which was the ambition – in a variety of ways – of Joseph II or Catherine the Great, as well as of Stanislaus Augustus. Now, a completely novel structural model of development was sought after. The romanticist intellectual climate, which was predominant in the first half of the nineteenth century, redirected the thoughts and likings towards aspects of local distinctiveness, rather than general principles. The interest in the specific ways of historical development was anchored in the same spiritual foundation as the enthusiasm for things folk, irregularities, genius, and other 'non-classical' elements of culture.

Contrary to the Enlightenment interest in the developmental specificity, the Romanticist version refocused on history. True, as was the case with the preceding epoch, or even more daringly than then, Romanticist authors conceived visions of future development of their nations – and of the humankind as a whole. But even if they marked a revolutionary break with the past, these visions were rooted in the past. Hence, it was Romanticism, rather than the Enlightenment, that has laid the foundations for the modern debate on the specificity of *historical* development – rather than 'development' as such. The earlier-mentioned question, 'Is it at all possible to overleap a grade?', has been among these foundations.

This question gains particular meaning when the aforementioned ideas of dialectic development are publicised and popularised. Dialectical development spirals upward. One phenomenon must give way to another, apparently antithetical one. As it is clearly visible from a distance, though, the antithetical phenomenon was required, in the longer run, exactly in order to provide conditions in which the former phenomenon could revive and achieve an unparalleled excellence.

The seed cast into the ground must wither to yield the crop. Such reasoning is exemplified by, say, the Marxist concept of polarised class structure of the society on the eve of a proletarian revolution. As the wealth and resources are increasingly concentrated in the hands of capitalists, the intermediary strata, such as peasants or artisans, tend to shrink, whilst workers are gradually driven to deepening poverty. This is necessary, however, in order that a proletarian revolution eventually breaks out, resulting from which the working class would gain a never-before-occupied position. Temporary oppression preconditions the future happiness. (The question readily comes to one's mind, to what extent it is actually a secularised version of the Christian vision of salvation; let us leave it aside as for now.) Another example of a dialectical interpretation – which better fits the issues under discussion, as it refers to the past, rather than a future – relates to the history of European representative institutions. The mediaeval estate-based parliamentarianism had to give way to the early-modern absolute monarchy; the latter, however, levelled the estate-related differences, thus preparing the ground for the triumph of modern parliamentarianism in the nineteenth century.

Both of these examples excellently illustrate the phenomenon under analysis, as they explicitly invite the question: Is a development other than dialectical – a direct one – possible at all? Would all the partial achievements of the working class, such as, for instance, the social legislation, end up in averting the final triumph of this class, as they delay the concentration of capital in the hands of capitalists, without which no proletarian revolution is conceivable? Or, perhaps, the working class rule could be actualised in a gradual fashion, through slowly increasing its influence, without passing through the annoying stage of class polarisation? This is how the reformist current within the Marxist social democracy occurred. Again, it can be asked whether a direct move could be made from the nobility's privileges to the modern parliamentary institutions, omitting the burdensome stage of enlightened absolutism? Elements of such reasoning are visible in Kollátaj as well as in some Hungarian liberals shortly before the 1848 revolution. Similar arguments are also found in numerous East- and Central European radicals who started with Marxism but ascertaining it was the peasantry, rather than the working class, that was the most powerful oppressed class. Marxist orthodoxy saw peasantry as doomed to fail: the affluent peasants tended to join the moneyed class

and become countryside capitalists, while the indigent ones slide into the urban or rural proletariat. Many radicals rejected this vision and strove for transforming Marxism so that peasants be regarded as a prospective class – a rural counterpart of the working class, one of the originators of a social revolution once to occur. This, again, implied that the class polarisation stage would be overleapt.

The possibility to omit a stage is potentially extendable in various directions. It is also possible to set the point of divergence at any moment of historical development. Joachim Lelewel and František Palacký emphasised the importance of the primeval Slavic freedom, whose development could have lead to the modern freedom. Probably the best known were the Russian concepts, evident in the thought of Alexander Herzen and, later on, the *narodniks* (to name just them): the ancient Slavic community of lands (*obshchina*) could have become the germ of a modern socialism in Russia. Thus, virtually the entire history could have been omitted – between the original system and a utopian system of the future. Images of ‘non-classical’ modernisation based upon rural resources and modern agriculture could be created to a much more modest extent.<sup>2</sup>

All these concepts, which positively valued their own developmental specificity, tended to ascribe their respective nation a historical primacy in one aspect or another. Let me quote an example from a later period: the Romanian communist propaganda in the time of Nicolae Ceaușescu used the notion of ‘protochronism’. While synchronism consists in the concurrent appearance of a phenomenon in two or more environments, protochronism analogically means a situation where a phenomenon appears somewhere earlier than elsewhere. Needless to add, the notion was always used to remark that here (in Romania) certain ideas or institutions appeared earlier than in the West, the illegitimate usurper of primacy. The notion was useful, and apparently deserved being extended to other countries and epochs: the phenomenon of ascribing primacy to one’s own country or nation, in whatever area, is commonplace.

Back in the nineteenth century: in its latter half, the picture of specific historical development increasingly abounded with newly-occurring (or, not as well identifiable before) ambiguities. East Central

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<sup>2</sup> See Jerzy Jedlicki, *A Suburb of Europe. Nineteenth-Century Polish Approaches to Western Civilization* (Budapest, 1999), 86–94 (the case of Fryderyk Skarbek).

European Romanticist historians and poets portrayed their own countries as superior to their Western peers. The following generation, however, resumed the perspective that had begun taking shape in the Enlightenment period. Comprehensive pictures as well as detailed studies began seeking for the moment of 'derailment', departing from the proper path. The most pioneering book in this respect was, perhaps, Michał Bobrzyński's outlined history of Poland – *Dzieje Polski w zarysie* (1879). The history of mediaeval and modern Poland is shown there within the framework of a typical pattern featuring stages of development defined, following the German model, in terms of legal institutions: the last stage, described as the 'modern state, of the rule-of-law' had failed in Poland. The country had quit the normal, Western path of building a modern bureaucratic state, and chose its own road instead, which appeared to be crowned by the partitions.

Andrzej Wierzbicki has aptly observed that, as a matter of fact, Lelewel and his disciples, as well as the Cracow historians, among whom Józef Szujski and Bobrzyński excelled, consistently described Poland as a country with a specific developmental path – but there was a major difference in their assessment of this fact.<sup>3</sup> The problem was somewhat different with Bohemian historiographers of the time. Resulting from intensified Habsburg absolutism, Bohemia had stayed on the track which Bobrzyński and his Cracow-based colleagues perceived as 'typical': namely, the nation's estate institutions were undermined by the early modern absolutist state. Then, if there were historians active in Bohemia who formed an intellectual counterpart of the Cracow school, and thus striving to challenge the Romanticist vision of their nation's path of development, their task would be different from the one pursued by the conservative historians from the Cracow hub. Rather than showing adverse consequences of their nation's peculiar development, they would do the opposite: show the positive outcomes of absolutism, thereby opposing the Romanticist image of history. The credit in this respect primarily goes to Václav Vladivoj Tomek and Antonín Rezek. The latter researched into the history of Czech peasantry, identifying the positive aspects of administrative reforms proceeding from the superior authority. The former, more involved in politics than Rezek and openly formulating worldview

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<sup>3</sup> Andrzej Wierzbicki, *Poczet historyków polskich. Historiografia polska doby podzaborowej* (Poznań, 2014), 14.



contents, maintained that the Habsburg rule of Bohemia saved the country from a Polish-style anarchy. Victorious estates, should that have ever happened, would have led Bohemia to a partition as well – which, in the specific Czech case, would have meant annexation of the territory by Prussia and frustration, in terms of political law, of the identity of the countries of the Crown of Saint Wenceslas. True, the Habsburg victory has weakened the Bohemian sovereignty, but in fact rescued it from annihilation, in the long term.<sup>4</sup>

Tomek's views in this respect were considered extreme. More important, in social terms, were the more moderate views of Josef Pekař, who never apotheosised the later absolutistic rule. He stressed, instead, that absolutism meant a severe fiscal burden for peasants – incomparably severer than any of the peasant's obligations toward their feudal lords. In parallel, however, a number of Pekař's studies showed an image of Bohemian history as basically normal, and structurally resembling the developmental model typical of Germany as well as of the East Central European countries neighbouring on Bohemia. Contrary to the prevalent Romanticist stereotype, he emphasised that the elements of Bohemian history that were stereotypically positively valued (such as Hussitism) as well as those evaluated as national disasters (Battle of White Mountain) essentially all formed part of a normal course of the history of a European country. With all its importance for Bohemia, which Pekař would not deny, Hussitism was one of the many heresies appearing in mediaeval Europe (Pekař analysed its similarities with Wycliffe's heresy in England). The defeat of the Bohemian estates in the Battle of White Mountain was, simply, part of the overall European trend to reinforce the monarch's position against the estates. Pekař compared the defeat with the Fronde in France, regarded as an analogous occurrence. The French king reasserted his position in relation to the estates, and so did the Bohemian king, which did not change the Bohemian Crown's situation with respect to the political law.

The generation of the first decades of the twentieth century – the years Pekař's main works were published – rebelled against the positivist trends and witnessed the resumption of discussions about the specificities of national courses of development. In Poland, Oswald

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<sup>4</sup> See Jaroslav Marek and František Kutnar, *Přehledné dějiny českého a slovenského dějepisectví* (Prague, 2009).



Balzer's book *Z zagadnień ustrojowych Polski* (1915) attempted to repel the Cracow school's arguments; rather than following Lelewel's path of emphasising the national specificity, Balzer endeavoured to demonstrate that what Bobrzyński and others considered anomalous was matter-of-factly typical, appearing across many other European countries. As Władysław Konopczyński later on commented, Balzer demonstrated that the deficiencies in Polish political system were analogous to those appearing in other countries; still, he failed to prove that such disadvantages had been as intense anywhere else.

Tomáš Masaryk renewed in Bohemia the former concepts of Palacký and his followers, imbuing them with new, morally and intellectually profounder, contents. Following up Palacký's idea of moral importance of Hussitism for the Bohemian history, and, drawing from the concepts of Johann Gottfried Herder and from elements of Mickiewiczian messianism, Masaryk expanded the Herderian conception of humanitarianism by incorporating it, in a sense, in the Czech history. He namely regarded humanitarianism as the primary trait, and universal aspect, of the nation's history. The game was worth the candle, since what it was after was, downright, provision of legitimate grounds for the existence of the Czech nation. Masaryk asked himself many a time about the sense of existence of such small a nation, and always responded to himself that his nation had the moral right to cultivate its Czech identity, to bring the children up as Czechs rather than Germans, to the extent that this nation can prove that it is through its 'Czechness' that it adds something to the world's cultural resource pool; something that is alien – not in such a form, at least – to the other, larger nations, and thus, cannot be contribute by any of them. This is what Masaryk needed his humanitarianism concept for.

In the Czech culture, the debate on the nation's purpose forms a separate, and very important, chapter; the phrase *smysl českých dějin* (i.e. the meaning of Czech history) has become a technical term used in determining a certain type of meta-historical considerations. Pekař and Masaryk have ranked in this debate among the leading-part actors. The peculiarity or typicality of Czech historical development was not the only thread in this debate, but it certainly was a major one.

One could continue with examples of various other national cultures. In the Bulgarian thought, we come across the discussion around the position of Bogomils in the history of Bulgarian culture and nation – a debate that features a number of parallelisms with the

Czech debate on Hussitism in the Czech national history. The point has been, were Bogomils merely one of the mediaeval heresies (this being a counterpart of Pekař's view on Hussites), or, do they, in some way, embody the Bulgarian national spirit (a counterpart of the views proposed by Palacký and Masaryk)?<sup>5</sup>

All the concepts discussed so far present, in a long timescale, the development patterns for the history of a country or region. However, the specificity of historical development can also be viewed in a different way – through the prism of pettier and repeating phenomena. Rather than a philosophy of history, a sociology of historical specificity – so to name it – is thus written, as mechanisms of social phenomena in a micro-scale are investigated and a certain deeper regularity sought after within these mechanisms. Such a manner of viewing things appeared at a later date, in the second half of the nineteenth century. There were new attempts made at a comprehensive interpretation of history – so many that none could anymore count on becoming popular. The Positivistic reflective climate encouraged research into facts and proposing generalisations showing more minutely certain phenomena of relevance, rather than striving for unveiling everything. Essays, publicist pieces, satire pieces, as well as scholarly texts more and more often proposed analyses – whether aspiringly erudite or in the guise of metaphor – which showed the specificity of various phenomena occurring in 'our' nation or country, as opposed to some dissimilar characteristics of the respective phenomena elsewhere. In relation to East Central Europe, *elsewhere* is usually a generalised picture of the West.

Such ordinariness of a peripheral world is shown in works of belles-lettres – either those belonging to the critical-realist current which prevailed in the second half of the nineteenth century or in an allegorical form, not infrequently displaying a satirical bent. The figure of alien traveller taking a fresh look on our country or region, unprejudiced by local stereotypes and unentangled with local coteries, had been known for a long time. Montesquieu had once made a pretty successful use of it in his *Persian Letters*. Now, it served to highlight the regional specificity in comparison with the West. Bolesław Prus's newspaper essays provide numerous examples; comparisons with the West offered by this author assumed, at times, quite a serious form –

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<sup>5</sup> Grażyna Szwat-Gyłybowa, *Haeresis Bulgarica w bułgarskiej świadomości kulturowej XIX i XX wieku* (Warsaw, 2005).

as in the confrontation between Paris and Warsaw in his major novel *Lalka* [The Doll] (1887–9). A similarly ironical view 'from the outside' is also found in pieces by Kálmán Mikszáth, Prus's kindred spirit in the type of sense of humour.

Along with literary utterances, often satirical ones, there have been more serious attempts to diagnose the characteristics of peculiar development. Putting it in the most general terms, for the sake of arranging the relevant material, two tendencies can be discerned which, obviously, blended in fact with one another in an indistinguishable manner. One seeks an answer to the question of how to accelerate the development and catch up with the developed countries; the other, in analysing the local state of affairs, places the main emphasis on the phenomenon that later on was named 'coexistence of asynchronicities'. The former is visible, primarily, in the economic thought which, beginning with the cameralists and Friedrich List, developed various concepts for leaving the backwardness – primarily by way of increased activity of the state in the economic field. The latter presents the specificity of the functioning of a peripheral society and the paths of its transformation under the pressure of external influence.

As part of the latter tendency, the most popular two attitudes can again be discerned; these can be tentatively named a theory of 'empty form' and a theory of 'itinerant ideas'. The best-known exemplification of the former is the broadly quoted text by Titu Maiorescu, according to which the new kingdom of Romania had provided itself with all the modern institutions before the social conditions appeared that made it possible to fill them with a content. As a result, there is an Academy of Sciences but there is no science; there is a National Gallery while no national painting exists, etc.<sup>6</sup> With regards to history, similar ideas were developed by Józef Szulski, who emphasised that nobility's parliamentarianism in the late Middle Ages and the modern time was one such empty form: contrary to the Western parliamentarianism, it did not contribute to a democratisation of Poland, Bohemia or Hungary but, through the reinforcement of the nobility estate, rendered harmonious development of the society, as a whole, impossible

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the Romanian debate about 'forms without substance', see Kazimierz Jurczak, *Dylematy zmiany. Pisarze rumuńscy XIX wieku wobec ideologii zachowawczej* (Cracow, 2011); Lucian Boia, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească* (Bucharest, 1997; English ed. *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* [Budapest, 2001]).

for a long time. In Hungary, Oszkár Jászi and other thinkers who were close to the social democratic movement in the early twentieth century criticised the showiness of Hungarian parliamentarianism from the contrary ideological positions, highlighting the strength of the relics of feudalism; albeit not specified in the legislation, these relics were visible every step of the way and causing that institutions of the modern state functioned differently than their Western counterparts. Similar problems were taken up in other countries (in Romania, by Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea and his analysis of the so-called neo-serfdom). On a broader level of generalisation, the like observations began arranging into a sort of theory of the specificity of peripheral capitalism (Zofia Daszyńska-Golińska), which were close to the later concepts of dependent capitalism. Karol Irzykowski's observations concerning a plagiarist nature of Polish literary life belonged to the same sphere. It has to be stressed that the point is not about uncovering the ostensibility of certain institutions' forms; the most interesting texts from the current in question transgress this ascertainment, trying to describe certain structural elements of the social-and-political system which causes that some transplants from the West turn into empty forms.

Flowing opposite to this one is, however, another current: one that emphasises a positive importance of ideological imports, in the end. French sociologist and philosopher Alfred Fouillée, author of the *idées-forces* concept whereby the specified ideas-forces creatively affected the inherited reality, exerted considerable influence on this trend in thinking. One local example is Ludwik Krzywicki's study *Idea i życie* (1888), which tried to combine, in an interesting fashion, the appreciation of the autonomous function of ideas in history with a Marxist perspective which, in general, tends to neglect the said function. Krzywicki introduced the notion of 'itinerant ideas', which, although they cannot revert the course development of a country or region (Krzywicki was too orthodox as a Marxist to admit such a possibility) can accelerate the change. In Romania, a similar reflective trend was represented in Eugen Lovinescu's studies (*Istoria civilizației române moderne* (1924–5), in particular), arguing that imported ideas can, under beneficial conditions, accelerate the development, the empty forms getting filled with content over time.

The interwar period saw a heyday of debate along the above-outlined lines; in parallel, national characterology was developing.

It began gaining a (para)scientific status during the First World War, as the scientists of all the fighting parties undertook comparative studies of physical and psychical types of various nations (their own nation, coincidentally, performing the best in the comparison).<sup>7</sup> Although characterology never came to the position of a commonly recognised science, it probably approximated such a status in the two interwar decades. Clearly, the popularity of this thinking current much reinforced the tendencies of seeing the history of one's own nation (and often, also, the neighbouring nations) in terms of developmental specificity. Although the research into national character seem to naturally benefit the development of nationalistic ideas (which means that they should have enjoyed special popularity to the right of the interwar political scene), it was more complex in reality. Also left-wing or centrist thinkers referred, quite often, to these categories: in Bulgaria, Ivan Hadzhiiski made an attempt, in the thirties, at building a national characterology upon the Marxist foundation. As remarked by an expert, his attempt came close to post-Romanticist idealisations of pre-capitalistic countryside, and thus it was, in effect, rather far from Marxism.<sup>8</sup> The idea of national character underwent an interesting transformation in Hungary, in the latter half of the 1930s: it namely became, to a degree, the weapon used by the moderate circles in their struggle with radical nationalists for whom national characterology was too 'soft' an idea, as it admitted exceptions and took into account the possibility of transformation of national characters, while radical nationalism was already turning its eye toward racial concepts. Gyula Szekfű, a conservative historian and, in the twenties, one of the chief ideologists of Admiral Horthy's government system, drifted toward a moderately liberal perspective in the late 1930s. He took up the idea to 'scientifically' investigate the Hungarian national character – in order to prove, in defiance of the radical Right, that it was tolerant and ready for peaceful coexistence with the neighbours, and for accepting the assimilating Jews or Germans as Hungarians.

There were other trends that prevailed, though. The search of a national character often (though not always) coincided with fascination

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<sup>7</sup> See Maciej Górny, *Wielka Wojna profesorów. Nauki o człowieku (1912–1923)* (Warsaw, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Balázs Trencsényi, *The Politics of 'National Character': A Study in Interwar East European Thought* (London and New York, 2012), 166–7.

with the folk culture. The path was paved, obviously, by the German fascination with the *Volk*; the notion, let us remark, has a nationalistic and conservative connotation in the German culture, as opposite to Poland where its counterpart, *lud*, was mostly used by leftist groups or factions. While it is hard to be conclusively established, it at least seems that such inclination achieved in Romania and Hungary a larger scale than in other East Central European countries. In Hungary, the 'folk' tradition existed in the interwar years in most various forms. On the one hand, there were overtly nationalistic authors, some of whom expressed ideas close to Hitlerism in the Second World War years; such was the case of the eminent historian Elemér Mályusz, who was Szekfű's main polemist as far as their views of history were concerned. This version of 'folk' worldview was close to the German 'Volk-ist' ideas. The ideas of Hungary's own development, based upon the folk forces – a development that formed its own freedom institutions, despite the destructive antinational Habsburg influence – were, in a way, similar to Joachim Lelewel's ideas advocated with respect to Poland a hundred years earlier. Nonetheless, the change in the intellectual, cultural and political situation was such that the ideas which in the Romanticist time were democratic, liberty-oriented, and internationalist, gained a definitely nationalistic overtone a hundred years later. Contrary to Mályusz, Szekfű was sceptical about Hungary's autonomous development, without Habsburg assistance, which otherwise ensured protection against the Turks and contact with the Western Europe, preeminent in terms of civilisational advancement. Szekfű identified elements of Hungarian peculiar path in a different point in time, and assessed them in definite negative terms. In the nineteenth century, the Hungarian elites took over a Western liberalism, which in the backward country meant striving for bureaucratic centralisation in order to create a homogenous nation-state, more or less after the French fashion. This liberalism, which, in Szekfű's opinion, expressed the Hungarian chauvinism and irresponsible anti-Habsburg demeanours, caused an escalation of attitudes and contributed, in effect, to the Trianon tragedy – apart from Mohács, the second severest defeat that has ever affected the Magyars.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Szekfű's dispute with Mályusz is analysed in Vilmos Erős, *A Szekfű-Mályusz vita* (Debrecen, 2000).

Back with the folk-related ideas: László Németh, the outstanding writer and best-known exponent of the folk-current, put emphasis on certain other aspects. Not a historian, he often dealt with historical issues in his essays. Németh's image of Hungary's situation took social conflicts more strongly into account, compared to Mályusz's; it furthermore exceeded the confines of nationalism, emphasising commonality of interests and philosophy-of-life amongst the folk strata of various nations. This was the reason why Németh and other like authors, of the 'folk' circle, pioneered in Hungary as those preoccupied with comparative history of East Central Europe – though these interests remained confined to essayistic considerations, often inspiring but based on no detailed studies. Németh's general picture of Hungarian history was basically similar to that painted by Mályusz – with the Habsburgs forming a power inhibiting the country's development, while the Kuruc insurgents, fighting against the Habsburgs and perceiving the Transylvanian duchy as the power capable of withstanding Vienna, were portrayed as the positive characters.

The interest in the folk as a repository of the most sublime national values translated in Hungary, as well as in Romania, into an enormous popularity of ethnography, whose influence on the national culture extremely surpassed anything known to us from the interwar Poland. In Hungary and, primarily, in Romania, sociological and ethnographic research contributed to gaining knowledge on traditional countryside communities at the threshold of their radical transformation – which marked the last moment it could be done. The folk was at the same time subject to mythologisation, turning into, as it were, a timeless concept of the national ideal. This ahistoricity mainly came into play in the Romanian thought, supporting the development of a national mythology whose varieties supplied an ideological foundation for the Romanian fascism. One easily discerns the echoes of that ahistorical attitude in the works of Mircea Eliade; at this point, however, we would transgress the actual topic of this essay. The specificity of ahistoricity – the eternal and timeless present of the Romanian folk – is no more a specificity of the path of historical development: no development or history can occur within it.

It was the folk-centred movement that provided the background for the thought of István Bibó, one of the most interesting twentieth-century intellectuals and historical thinkers. In his major works, he has reached beyond the context of his original current,



creating his own, original, image of the major vital points in the Hungarian history, set against a broader background of the Central (Eastern) Europe. From the 'folk' current authors, Bibó took over the resistance against the pro-Habsburg conservatives, along with the conviction about how important the ethnic element is in politics (specifically, he saw the rejection of the ethnographic border idea as one of the reasons for exacerbated ethnic and national disputes in Eastern Europe). Bibó moreover placed a strong emphasis on the necessity of democracy and civic freedoms, resolutely opposing the anti-Semitic inclination present in Mályusz's reflections, as well as in many other representatives of the current under discussion. The major difference lay, perhaps, in that Bibó took a ruthless stance on the history of his own nation. He would not idealise the folk strata; he pointed that degenerations inhibiting the appropriate development of Hungary extended to the entire culture and society. Contrary to a number of exponents of the 'folk' current, he would not say that Hungary's democratic development could be 'spontaneous', free of major Western influence. On the contrary: he considered participation in the democratic development of the West as the precondition for success and prosperity of his country.<sup>10</sup>

Bibó is one of the central figures with respect to the issues herein covered, as he very strongly highlighted the development specificity of the region he referred to as 'Eastern Europe', whilst putting an emphasis of the region's – and, primarily, Hungary's – parting from the West-style development, which was regarded as a standard. For instance, in a 'normal' situation, nationalism merges in the West with democracy, and only in a degenerated situation does it provide a breeding-ground for antidemocratic Right trends.<sup>11</sup> István Bibó's

<sup>10</sup> The figure of István Bibó, positioned between the 'folk' current and the conservatives (epitomised by László Németh and Gyula Szekfű, respectively), definitely closer to the former than the latter, is very interestingly portrayed in the monograph by Hungarian historian Iván Zoltán Dénes, *Eltorzult magyar alkat. Bibó István vitája Németh Lászlóval és Szekfű Gyulával* (Budapest, 1999). Another study by Dénes which is of relevance to the subject-matter hereof, also dealing with competitive visions of the Hungarian past and present, with respect to various currents in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hungarian culture, is: *Európai mintakövetés – Nemzeti öncélúság. Értékvilág és identitáskeresés a 19–20. századi Magyarországon* (Budapest, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> István Bibó, *Misère des petits États d'Europe de l'Est*, trans. György Kassai (Paris, 1993<sup>2</sup>) (I have used the Polish edition: 'Nędza małych państw wschodnio-

writings were not the first to propose a combination of the categories of 'normality' (vs 'abnormality') with the regional categories of Central and Eastern Europe; still, he was one of the first to have extended these concepts.

This leads us to an enormous topic: any and all concepts related to the notion of 'East Central Europe' and the various inspirations provided by this notion to the historical science. This is not to be the actual point here: the history of 'Central European' studies would call for a separate article; a book, perhaps. The terminological discussions between adherents of the notions such as Eastern, Central, East Central, Central-Eastern Europe, or other will not interest us here. Certain thematic circles could be pointed out instead within which interesting comparative research has been conducted on the Central-European region, understood in whatever terms. It namely seems, at least with respect to Polish post-war historiography, that there are two such major thematic circles, or research fields: the origins of the farm-and-villain system and the national movements of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Several other problem fields could be added to the picture, including: the origins of the Polish, Czech, and Hungarian states; the issue of confessionalisation (and the related major problem of the character of early modern state organisations); the emergence and development of capitalist economy in the conditions of backwardness; and, finally, the successfully developing comparative studies of various aspects of the history of Eastern Bloc countries between the Second World War and 1989.

Meanwhile, the latter half of the past century saw the notion of *Sonderweg*, describing the specifically German path of development, pursue an international career. An excellent anthology published in Poland in 2008 (edited by Hubert Orłowski)<sup>12</sup> has told us more about the vicissitudes of the idea. As was the case with the analogous ideas in any other national culture, *Sonderweg* had various social functions to it, not remaining a formation of scientific analysis. It was not a post-war product, as it had existed in German culture before the

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europiejskich', in *idem, Eseje polityczne*, trans. and ed. by Jerzy Snopek [Cracow, 2012], 31, 56).

<sup>12</sup> Hubert Orłowski (ed.), *Sonderweg. Spory o 'niemiecką drogę odrębną'*, trans. Jerzy Kałużny (Poznań, 2008).

First World War. In the works of Otto Hintze, one of the most outstanding German twentieth-century social historians, *Sonderweg* had a definitely positive undertone: Germany had developed a specific political-systemic type of monarchical constitutional state, equally dissimilar from parliamentary democracy typical of England or France as from the Russian-style despotism.

After 1945, the concept was evoked mainly by those who pondered how it was possible that Nazism had won in Germany; that the 'German catastrophe' had been brought about, to quote the title of Friedrich Meinecke's book. Since almost everyone was considering this question, looking for the premises of the Nazi disaster in the earlier German history, the *Sonderweg* concept also enjoyed popularity; however, past 1945, the concept's connotation was mostly leftist, liberal or Marxist.

Looking more broadly at the German *Sonderweg*, and seeing in it something more than a way to explain Hitlerism, it can be stated that it was a special case in a broader current of 'dependence' theories tackling the problem of backwardness and centre-periphery relations. Should this association be deemed apt, the versions of the separate path theory would include the Polish discussions and research on the secondary serfdom issue, along with the Latin-American considerations of dependent capitalism.

These great problems are not to be discussed within these introductory remarks. It is worth mentioning, though, how close to the present topic were those modernisation concepts which departed from a linear pattern and emphasised the peculiarity of modernisation processes in various regions of the world, depending on the prevalent conditions.<sup>13</sup> Worthy of note are also the concepts of Immanuel Wallerstein, who sees the development of the farm-and-villain system in East Central Europe as a part of the international capitalist system. A similar concept, related to the history of Romania, was developed by Henri Stahl, emphasising that serfdom would not have ever emerged in Romania if not for the external market stimuli (demand for cereals) from the developing European capitalist economy. This is a classical case of a *Sonderweg* pattern: serfdom, or dependence, combined with

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<sup>13</sup> Two classical studies are worth mentioning in this context: Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962); Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, 'Multiple Modernities', *Daedalus*, vol. 129, 1, *Multiple Modernities* (Winter, 2000), 1–29.

non-economic coercion to work, which under 'normal' circumstances is associated with a pre-modern feudal system, becomes a manifestation of a distorted form of modernity in a peripheral country.<sup>14</sup>

The years of fascination with social history, structures, and modernisation were followed by disillusionment with extensive patterns. Beginning with the 1980s, the intellectual atmosphere connected with postmodernism became reluctant toward great narratives. Thus, the idea in question fell into disgrace. Works by numerous scholars, Larry Wolff and Maria Todorova<sup>15</sup> in the first place, showed how the image of Eastern Europe or the Balkans has been formed: primarily, resulting from superstitions shared by travellers from the West. If one assumes that these researchers are right, and thus, there is no such thing as a society's development pattern whatsoever, then the problem whether the pattern is common for various societies or separate for each cannot even be posed, let alone solved. The idea of 'separate (or, distinct) path' gets disintegrated: there are no paths or roads anymore, whether separate or shared: what remains is an enormous number of separate phenomena, depictable and analysable, rather than generalisable. Numerous historians have remarked that looking for premises for Nazism in any manifestations of the earlier history of Germany – which were detected in phenomena such as the defeat of the 1848 revolution – is essentially an anachronous attitude.<sup>16</sup>

The dispute goes on. A *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 2013 questionnaire has shown that the historians' views on the usefulness of the regional categories such as 'Central Europe' and 'Eastern Europe', as well as on the specificity of historical development in the regions described by these categories, are quite diverse and make up a complete spectrum: from acceptance to rejection of such categories.

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<sup>14</sup> Henri H. Stahl, *Traditional Romanian Village Communities: The Transformation from the Communal to the Capitalist Mode of Production in the Danube Region*, trans. Daniel Chirot and Holley Coulter Chirot (Cambridge and Paris, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994); Maria N. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford and New York, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> For a now-classical critique of the concept of the peculiar German path, see David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford, 1984). As far as reinterpretation of the history of the German revolution of 1848 is concerned, in opposition to the earlier work by Lewis Namier, see Mike Rapport, *1848: Year of Revolution* (New York, 2009), 400–3.

As a side remark, one obvious thing is worthy of note, which had to remain outside the scope of interest (*non omnia possumus omnes!*) of the authors of the studies published in the volume *Drogi odrębne, drogi wspólne*<sup>17</sup>, comprising the articles reprinted in this issue of *Acta Poloniae Historica*. Discussions on exceptionality or typicality of historical development of a country or region are commonplace and are not limited to East Central Europe or Germany. Examples from all the countries could be quoted, perhaps; nineteenth-century England and, on the other side of the continent, Russia would provide enormous comparative material. The idea of American ‘exceptionalism’, exerting a significant influence on the United States’ culture, must not be completely neglected. A number of outstanding studies have been devoted to American developmental specificity, starting (quite clearly) from Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, through Werner Sombart’s considerations of the reasons for no socialist movement appearing in the U.S., up to the 1997 study by the outstanding sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset. A thing worthy of note is that Lipset, writing his study in the period of the strongest influence of postmodernist ideas, seriously approaches the concept heralded in the title and seeks to answer the question what it is, from a sociological standpoint, that the American specificity consists in. Since his is a sociologist’s, rather than a historian’s, study, its central subject is the specificity of the present-day state, rather than of a historical development; yet, even if the problem is so posed, one cannot neglect the historical perspective. Among the specific traits of American culture and society, Lipset draws our attention to the patriotism and optimism of the American nation. Like Sombart did less than a hundred years earlier, Lipset highlights that no socialist movement appears there; and, like Tocqueville more than 150 years earlier, how peculiar the American religiosity is (sects, rather than churches). He also stresses the historical perspective: as Friedrich Engels and Max Weber once observed, the United States is the only completely bourgeois country, without a feudal past. This, among other things, implies that socialism has not emerged there: no feudalism, no socialism. In sum, Lipset comes to the conclusion that of all the democratic societies, the American nation is the most reluctant

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<sup>17</sup> Maciej Janowski (ed.), *Drogi odrębne, drogi wspólne. Problem specyfiki rozwoju historycznego Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w XIX–XX w.* (Warsaw, 2014).

toward the state power and public authorities, in the spirit of the traditional (Whig) liberalism: "They continue to stand with Thomas Jefferson in believing that less government is better".<sup>18</sup>

These introductory remarks would not be in a position to resolve the disputes, its only purpose being to offer the reader some intellectual background for the series of articles comprised in this volume. Certain normative propositions are unavoidable, though – not to be imposed on the reader but to uncover the underlying reflective assumptions behind the collection *Drogi odrębne, drogi wspólne*. Hence, the present volume would not attempt to resolve historiosophical questions: the task we have posed to ourselves is more modest. There are two questions we shall try and answer: First, we should like to see what discussions on the respective specificities of historical development were carried out in various countries. This, clearly, would not call for assuming a position on a substantive basis. Second, in determining the scope of topics to be discussed, our aim would be to interweave this description or analysis of the debates with posing the question regarding the core of the matter – and this by showing a series of case studies where the approach connected, in some way or another, with the peculiar path concept might seem useful. For the purpose of this volume, we have decided to approach the notion of peculiar path in a possibly broad context. This would not limit our focus to a nation's, country's or region's development path over the ages or millennia, in its totality. We will tend to analyse certain medium-ranging processes and phenomena, so to put it; ones that would span over a shorter period in the history, and merely a part of the life, in its entirety, within such period. The structure of the nineteenth-century city, formation of a modern national awareness: such problems are suitable, according to the authors, for research in view of multiplicity of peculiar paths: rather than highways along which the *Zeitgeist* of a nation or humanity streaks, these would be medium-rank and medium-sized roads on which medium-scale processes and occurrences roll along. Examining the thing at such medium level of generalisation, one can start speculating whether the idea of peculiar path is as strict as it might have sometimes seemed, in its interrelation with 'normal' developmental path?

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<sup>18</sup> Seymour M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York and London, 1997), 46.

Perhaps the idea of specificity of historical development remains meaningful also when we assume that there is no standard or norm for development, and what exists is, merely, a variety of specific forms? The very fact that the notion in question has been harnessed to serve all sorts of ideologies, leftist and rightist, testifies that as such, the notion, or idea, is axiologically neutral. Hence, its usefulness for analytical purposes is worth considering.

Referring to the familiar dispute between German historians about the nature and origins of Nazism (so-called *Historikerstreit*), Jürgen Kocka presented in the 1980s an interesting attempt to limit the scope of the peculiar path concept, so as to save its analytical usefulness.<sup>19</sup> In his view, the concept ought not to be an all-encompassing notional framework enabling to understand the entire history of Germany; instead, it can be of use as one of the factors explaining the origins of Nazism. In other words, in researching these origins, one can, and indeed should, search for elements in the history of Germany which could support the development and the triumph of National Socialism; there are no grounds, though, for absolutising the significance of those elements in the history, and to use them to construct a general model of peculiar path. In this perspective, the ‘peculiar path’ concept becomes a heuristic instrument. The question now is not whether the peculiar path ‘has been peculiar indeed’, but whether the notion can prove instrumental with respect to certain research problems. I should think that such an approach is reasonable. The reasons behind Nazism and other phenomena too can be sought after (and thus the problem of the German *Historikerstreit* is quit), but the general approach would remain similar to that proposed by Kocka: whilst not offering a historical panacea for any and all research problems, the concept of peculiar path can prove to be a useful idea in researching certain phenomena.

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<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Kocka, ‘Deutsche Identität und historischer Vergleich. Nach dem “Historikerstreit”’, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 40–41 (1988), 15–28.



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