INTRODUCTION

“I CHASED AFTER POLISH GRAIN ALL OVER THE WORLD”

Jean Batou and Henryk Szlajfer

A two-volume translation of Josef Kulischer’s fact-loaded book Allgemeine Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit (an enlarged 1954 edition) appeared in Poland in 1961 on the initiative of Marian Małowist (1909–1988). Why did Małowist not choose the superb, problem-oriented short synthesis entitled Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe by Henri Pirenne, whom he valued highly? One of the reasons he gave was the inevitable obsolescence of great theoretical designs, “even those as excellent as Pirenne’s work.” As a result, he argued, these maintain their scientific value “only for a narrow circle of experts who are able to take a critical stand on the author’s line of argument.”¹ The other reason, however, was more weighty: it had to do with teaching Polish students. After years of being indoctrinated with Stalinist dogma, Kulischer’s work offered “an enormous amount of information” and “a wealth of historiographic material.” In the Polish edition, the bibliography in Kulischer’s book was supplemented and updated by a disciple of Małowist’s, young Dr. Bronisław Geremek.

Although he was skeptical about overambitious generalizations, Marian Małowist did not avoid asking key questions and putting forward—particularly in informal conversations—bold, even risky hypotheses. However, he was wary of constructing far-fetched theories. One of Małowist’s most talented disciples, the late Professor Antoni Mączak, wrote that “Małowist did not like theories. His daring lay in suggesting hypotheses, not in proclaiming them.” Mączak added that some of his interpretative ideas—as, for example, his idea of a negative impact of the serf-based economy in the Renaissance period (assessed as Poland’s “golden age”), “obvious to his regular interlocutors”—had been published by other people.² The fact that he did not evade key

questions, however, is directly linked to the subjects he dealt with: Flanders, and the expansion of its trade in the late Middle Ages, the rise of Sweden and its activities in the Baltic Sea area in the 15th–16th centuries, and then Kaffa, on the Crimean coast, and the Genoese trade in the period preceding the great discoveries and conquests. The next step was the study of that part of west Africa which in early modern times came under Europe’s expanding sphere of influence, particularly that of Portugal, and of the Dutch as well. But that was not all.

He never lost sight of central and eastern Europe, and of Poland in particular. As Immanuel Wallerstein accurately points out in the Preface to the present volume, that subject is not just an important part of Malowist’s reflections, it was part of his biography. He grew up and worked in a backward region. Consequently he not only searched for the inner causes of central and eastern Europe’s underdevelopment but also tried to precisely define its place in the general panorama of economic relations in Europe in the 13th–15th centuries. With the beginning of the Iberian countries’ expansion overseas in the 15th and 16th centuries, Poland’s and the region’s economic situation changed in a far-reaching manner. The book Wschód a Zachód Europy w XIII–XVI wieku. Konfrontacja struktur społeczno-gospodarczych [East and West Europe in the 13th–16th Centuries. Confrontation of Social and Economic Structures], published in 1973, was the result of his pioneering reflections and research.

He did not refer to such theory-loaded concepts as centre—periphery or, in the 1970s, to Wallerstein’s terminology, although one might infer such terminology from his studies. But, as already said, Marian Malowist avoided involvement in heated theoretical disputes. That is why we do not find in his works much of an echo of the famous “Dobb-Sweezy debate” of the 1950s or of the “Brenner debate” of the 1970s. Much earlier however, he had attempted an analysis of economic relations within the Baltic area presenting them as fitting in the category of “colonial” relations. Yet, owing to the historical inapplicability of the term “colonialism” to the region, he gave up such a radical perspective, even though in his handwritten changes to the final part of Wschód a Zachód Europy…he wrote about a sui generis economic colonization of Eastern Europe.³ Sui generis, because in his reflections on the back-

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³ Henryk Szlajfer has the copy of Wschód a Zachód Europy…with these handwritten changes.