

# PRO MEMORIA

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## JACEK KOCHANOWICZ 15 APRIL 1946 – 2 OCTOBER 2014

Jacek Kochanowicz was an economic historian whose field of research and expertise extended from peasant economy to Eastern European backwardness. In our time, when mathematised economics prevails and academic disciplines are limited to narrow specialisations, Kochanowicz's studies are exceptional as they run across historical epochs and cultural regions. They are unique in their erudition.

Kochanowicz's historical research 'shed light' (to follow Karl Popper's description of genuine interpretation in the humanities) on the Polish and East European current condition. It has presented the post-communist Europeanisation of East European societies as an attempt, yet another one in their history, at overcoming economic backwardness. It has added to the recognition of the peasant origins of the significant part of the contemporary Polish society. In this way, Kochanowicz's works have been an important contribution to the debates of sociologists and economists on the post-communist transition.

Here, I will focus on two currents of Jacek Kochanowicz's research that, to my mind, should be regarded important by historians – and not only economic historians – of Poland and Eastern Europe.

Peasant economy in the context of Eastern European economic backwardness is one of these two currents. Kochanowicz initiated his research in the field of peasant economy in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a doctoral student of Witold Kula. Over two decades of the research were concluded in his habilitation thesis *Spór o teorię gospodarki chłopskiej. Gospodarstwo chłopskie w teorii ekonomii i w historii gospodarczej* [A dispute over the theory of peasant economy. Peasant holding in the economic theory and economic history] (1992). It emphasised that peasant economy had several anthropologically universal features that occurred regardless of the period or cultural circle. One of its main characteristics is the orientation toward subsisting and surviving, whilst its intensity and efficiency are dependent on the size and needs of the household it provides for. Within the tradition of economic thinking of his intellectual mentor Witold Kula, Kochanowicz thus

indicated that economic calculations of a peasant holding were of different nature than as presumed by the classic economics or Marxism. Peasants are specific economic actors, driven in their doings by a certain rationality. Their purpose is not to maximise the profit through market expansion but rather, to reproduce the way of living and farming within the existing limited possibilities. The transformation of peasant into farmer in Western Europe occurring in the early modern era proved critical in the history of human economic activity. It should be perceived as a part of 'the European miracle' of the birth of capitalism and unprecedented economic growth in the North-Western Europe. This transformation made the rationality of farming similar to those characteristic of other types of entrepreneurship in modern economy. Kochanowicz pointed out that the conditions under which Eastern European, including Russian and Polish, peasant holdings functioned, differed – in this sense from farmer holdings in Western Europe in preindustrial period. Their situation was similar to that of non-European peasant economies, including those of Latin America and Asia, where land ownership was not guaranteed and economic freedom of peasants was limited.

To summarise the peasant-related area of Kochanowicz's research, I should like to emphasise the valuable and rare features of his attitude as a researcher of the past. First, it was the talent of synthesising his own archival discoveries and the existing research within the field. Kochanowicz's studies have contributed to the current academic discourse the conclusions from the dialogue between the voices from various generations of researchers. Referring to the classic Polish research on peasant economy, done by Franciszek Bujak, Jan Rutkowski, Witold Kula, Jerzy Topolski and Andrzej Wyczański, Kochanowicz's works renew – or rather should renew – the oldtimers' presence in the awareness of younger scholars. Second, Kochanowicz has applied to the historical data economic models as well as general interpretations worked out at the crossroads of economics, history and sociology, just to mention those developed by Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, Alfred Hirschman, or Witold Kula. He would do it in a non-dogmatic manner, with the ease of an expert in three domains of social sciences: history, economics and sociology.

Both these features are rooted in Kochanowicz's erudition in humanities, which extended even beyond the said three areas. A part of it, was Kochanowicz's benevolent interest in current intellectual trends in both general and economic historiography in particular – from the core-periphery approach since the 1980s, through postmodernism in the 1990s, up to cliometrics recently, the latter applying the economic theory and statistical methods to the research of the past. His texts on historiography (2011) and the autobiographical essay 'An Escape into History', presented at the CEU in June 2014, show this most clearly. Kochanowicz's interest in those trends was a distanced one, always accompanied with a certainty that they would be replaced by other ones one day.

The second important current in his research is the peripheral status of East Central Europe in a perspective of historical sociology. Kochanowicz argued that from the times of emergence of capitalism in Western European countries onwards, East Central economies ought to be approached in the context of the region's peripheral character. Beginning with his essay published as a part of the book *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe. Economics and Politics from the Middle Ages until the Early Twentieth Century* (1991), edited by Daniel Chirot, Kochanowicz emphasised the dissimilarity of modernisation paths between the centre of the capitalist world-system and its peripheries. In his numerous studies produced over the next twenty years, he argued that it was the dominant position of the nobility over other social actors (the peasantry and the merchants as well as over the state) – rather than the international commercial relations, unfavourable to peripheral territories – that prevented the development of capitalism in Polish, Bohemian and Hungarian areas. The nineteenth-century industrialisation in East-Central European countries was not accompanied by a thorough change in the social structure or the dominant type of mentality. As he pointed out in his article *Duch kapitalizmu na polskiej peryferii: perspektywa historyczna* [The spirit of capitalism in the Polish peripheries: a historical perspective] (2010), the lifestyle typical to nobility, with its contempt for trade and financial calculations of profits and losses, and with its fondness for lavishness and etiquette of social life, remained the model of a good life for the bourgeoisie (including Polonised aliens and Jews), as well as for the emerging intelligentsia and upwardly mobile peasants. According to this historical-sociological interpretation, the client–patron relations linking the magnates with the ‘naked’ (i.e. landless) nobility, called *gołota*, and ‘the peasant shrewdness’ in shunning to do their serfdom service, both shaped in the times of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, developed as a *longue durée* structure. They resulted in the difficulties with formation of a modern impersonal bureaucracy, the public officials’ propensity for corruption, and economic efficiency limited to small family business now that the country is into the twenty-first century.

Such a view of the history and the present of the region ought to be viewed in terms of a historical sociologist’s approach. This is how Kochanowicz himself determined the field of his studies, begun with the essay ‘Transformacja polska w świetle socjologii historycznej. Między Trzecim Światem a państwem opiekuńczym’ [The Polish transition in the light of historical sociology: Between the Third World and a welfare state], published 1998 in *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* quarterly. Kochanowicz’s other articles dealing with Polish post-communist systemic transformation (1991, 1992, 1994, 2006, 2010, plus his last studies, some of them forthcoming) have followed this approach. To use a Popperian metaphor again, typical of a historical sociological approach is a view of the past from a standpoint of relevance to the present time. The researcher sets the spotlight of the research question

so that it sheds light on those fragments of the past that help understand the phenomena of the present. The issues of peripheral status, backwardness of the economies of Poland and its Eastern European neighbours, and the economic culture of Poles were of primary rank.

Sociologists value these works highly as a unique contribution in the debate, showing the post-communist transition and Europeanisation as one among many projects of modernisation of peripheral countries including those in Latin America and Asia. Importantly not only for sociologists but for historians as well, Kochanowicz identified the post-communist transformation as yet another attempt at overcoming backwardness in Polish lands. The preceding attempts, in his view, included the limited industrialisation following the abolishment of serfdom in the second half of the nineteenth century and the modernisation projects patronised by the Polish government in the two decades between the world wars.

To sum up this particular current of his scholarly activity, it should be emphasised that Kochanowicz contributed to the Polish historical research by introducing problem-focused rather than fact-focused type of questions. His works are characterised with search for historical interpretations relevant for the present, and not only for professional historians. Moreover, they often formulate daring generalisations, which pose difficulties for historians whose minds are set on discovering sources and analysing them in detail – part of the reason being the environmental standards prevalent in history departments or institutes.

Throughout his professional life, Jacek Kochanowicz was associated with the Faculty of Economic Sciences, University of Warsaw, beginning with his basic tertiary studies and the subsequent doctoral studies tutored by Professor Witold Kula. His extensive scope of interests, erudition and intellectual openness have made him commonly known and valued in broader Warsaw humanities and social sciences milieus. Kochanowicz's works form part of the curricula in departments of history, sociology, and anthropology. Since 2000, Kochanowicz was also a professor at the Department of History, Central European University in Budapest. Since 1996, he was co-editor of *Roczniki Dziejów Społeczno-Gospodarczych* [Social and Economic History Annals]. Since the 1990s he collaborated on a regular basis with the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

Jacek Kochanowicz's major publications:

- 1991: 'The Polish Economy and Evolution of Dependency', in Daniel Chirot (ed.), *The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe: Economics and Politics from the Middle Ages until the Early Twentieth Century*, pp. 92–130
- 1992: *Spór o teorię gospodarki chłopskiej. Gospodarstwo chłopskie w teorii ekonomii i w historii gospodarczej* [A dispute over the theory of

- peasant economy: Peasant holding in the theory of economy and in the economic history]
- 1994: *The Market Meets Its Match: Restructuring the Economies of Eastern Europe* (co-authors: Alice Amsded and Lance Taylor)
- 1998: 'Transformacja polska w świetle socjologii historycznej. Między Trzecim Światem a państwem opiekuńczym' [The Polish transition in the light of historical sociology: Between the Third World and a welfare state], *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 1, pp. 23–37
- 2006: *Backwardness and Modernization: Poland and Eastern Europe in the 16th–20th Centuries*.
- 2010: 'Duch kapitalizmu na polskiej peryferii: perspektywa historyczna' [The spirit of capitalism in the Polish peripheries: a historical perspective], in Jacek Kochanowicz and Mirosława Marody (eds.), *Kultura i gospodarka*, pp. 21–51

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