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MARIA OSSOWSKA: AN INTELLECTUAL – SIMPLY

I would like to focus on a single theme that will constitute a continuation of what the speakers preceding me had to say. I would like to talk about independence as the trait of an intellectual in the context of historical experience or the historicity of this trait. Independence is of course an aspect of scientific work that has been demanded, in a less or more radical form, in almost every period of history. However, I believe that the specificity of her historical experience meant that, for Maria Ossowska, intellectual independence was something particularly important. This historicity of the virtue of independence is something I would like to consider in three aspects.

First of all would be the personality aspect. From the recollections of those who knew Maria Ossowska, as well as from published correspondence with her husband Stanisław Ossowski, there emerges a picture of an exceptional personality, strong and far from the ordinary. Autonomy, not only intellectual, was a quality characterising practically all of Ossowska's choices and her entire path through life. One may reflect on the extent to which this description refers to Ossowska as a person unique and standing out among her contemporaries, but we may assume that Ossowska and the type of personality she represented was characteristic of the cultural formation in which she lived and worked. At the most one could add that this was an intellectual formation created mainly by men and for men. For this formation, personal autonomy was an autotelic worth, valued and defended as a virtue in itself and fundamentally defining a person's relations with the outside world. For the present-day generation, and so for a generation of people Ossowska called 'people without edges', valuing harmonious relationships with other people frequently fusing with them and in some way conformised, the personality of Maria Ossowska and perhaps the personality of that generation is now something historical. Nonconformism, or possibly rather the absence of conformism, is not a trait that would best describe the modal personality of our times.

Secondly, intellectual independence as a trait of Maria Ossowska's scientific activity is tied to the historicity of the scientific paradigm, or – using a term coined by Stefan Amsterdamski – a certain now partially historical ideal of science. It would be exaggerating to state that the neo-positivistic program of the Lvov-Warsaw School of thought, which Ossowska was close to, today lies in ruins, but one cannot help but notice that the prevalence of this program in the social sciences is no longer so

overwhelming today. Postmodernist projects, and various types of proposals of hermeneutics and 'post-scientific' versions of the humanities and cultural anthropology are deconstructing the epistemological assumptions in the social sciences that guided Ossowska.

At this point let me cite those assumptions, originating from the keynote article by Maria Ossowska and Stanisław Ossowski, *The Science of Science*, from 1935: "There is only one scientific culture, absorbing all scientific achievements, wherever and by whomever they are attained. There are no competing scientific cultures, there are no competing sciences as there are competing religions or codes of law. All incongruity between various scientific theories is considered a provisional stage which has to be overcome in this or that direction. Our culture is also becoming universal in a geographic sense, it embraces the globe from pole to pole, penetrates the darkest corners of the jungle on radio waves, reaches the most isolated islands of the Pacific (...). A conflict has arisen on the ground of scientific culture between science and spheres that have survived in pre-scientific cultures. This conflict is revealed in diverse ways: intellect and the subconscious, rationalism and traditional habits of thought, science and religion. The future shall show whether this conflict is of a transitional character, or whether it is set to constantly characterise our new type of culture".

Today, this 'new type of culture' is – some would say unfortunately – now a former type of culture. The assumption that this type of culture is a scientific type in a universal sense is being questioned increasingly often. The phrase 'pre-scientific stage' is more and more often being replaced by the notion of an *alter* scientific or *post* scientific stage. Scientific programs formulated by postmodernist sociology and anthropology even demand that the notion of 'truth', so valued by both Maria and Stanisław Ossowski, be replaced by the concept of 'narratives', 'interpretations', 'multitude of truths' and 'stories', etc. The world, including the sphere of cognitive activity, is defined today as 'uncertain', 'fluid' and 'ambiguous'. In the meantime, the solvability of disputes, precision in linguistic definitions and an aspiration to determine 'unambiguous' truth constituted the epistemological foundation of Ossowska's scientific path. This program gave the persons carrying it out a sense of solvability of disputes regarding the shape of this world (with 'non-scientific' issues obviously excluded from these disputes, i.e. those of an ethical, religious or worldview nature, etc.). Maria Ossowska wrote much regarding moral relativism, and wrote about cultural relativism, yet she was a cognitive absolutist. For her, epistemological relativism was a notion characterising the pre-science or quasi-science phase. Thus it comes as no surprise to us that her belief in the ability to determine what is a truth and what is a falsity, not in normative and axiological but in cognitive terms, clearly obliged the scholar to defend what is 'objective' (and thus legitimate and supra-historical) scientific truth. For Maria Ossowska it was clear: because scientific truth is absolute in character, he who believes it is obliged to defend and convey this truth. Paradoxically, this manner of reasoning for and understanding the notion of truth –

but in a sense significantly broader than scientific – is seen very universally in public life today. I do not want here to multiply the examples illustrating what are sometimes very original eruptions of that categorical sense of certainty that characterises many Polish *homo politicus*. A great deal on this matter may be read in the newspapers, seen on television, and heard in parliamentary debates and broadcasts from various kinds of investigative committees. This is consonant with – and this is also a kind of historical paradox – an admission by Ossowska, who in a radio lecture broadcast in 1969 about the ‘person we value’, postulated as follows: “We need people with a strong backbone, of an inner fibre that does not sway with every change in the wind. The possession of some kind of hierarchy of values to which one is attached, and from which one has no intention of easily resigning, determines this inner fibre. Their unyielding defence determines the stance that we call dignity”. The axiological appeal of this statement is understandable when one remembers the social and historical context in which it was expressed by Ossowska. And contrarily, it loses its appeal when substituted by other historical experiences and individual cases: the impenitence of the Nazi criminals put on trial, former Stalinists entrenched in their views, or Islamic fundamentalists blinded by hatred and fanaticism. They undoubtedly have tough moral backbones, but do “we value such people”?

Maria Ossowska’s scientific and life agenda, based on the virtues of independence and dignity, was elite. It truly is not an agenda for everybody. And when taking into account the diversity of historical experiences it would be hard to say that it is universal and defensible in any ideological, worldview or religious context. The tragedy of 20th-century historical experience would rather demand restricting the universality of this agenda (if only through the cautious yet nevertheless possible and *de facto* practised introduction of criteria excluding certain content from the axiological *spectrum* of values and views treated on an equal bases in the world of today).

This historical context was something that Maria Ossowska ignored. Her field of attention embraced mainly the conformist, while a threat she opposed was opportunism. Interestingly, dogmatism, doctrinarianism and fanaticism were of much less interest to her as stances. Perhaps because these unintentional and subconscious forms of ‘partiality of thinking’ were less connected than intellectual opportunism to the issue of dignity and independence that was so important to her. It is also possible that the ‘sin’ of dogmatism and doctrinarianism seemed less important to her because it mainly applies to few, while the ‘sin’ of conformism tends on the whole to apply to most people (which is why intellectuals at least should be free of it).

In a paper dedicated to her tutor, Tadeusz Kotarbiński, she wrote of the unconditional obligation to defend the truth that is placed on the scholar: “When faced with the turmoil of history,” she wrote, citing this master, “you can behave in the fashion of a barometer’s needle, changing the weather as the pressure changes,

or you can behave in the fashion of a magnetic needle, pointing out a constant direction regardless of the circumstances". By using this metaphor, Ossowska criticised intellectuals changing their views like flags according to change in the political circumstances, and – let us add this from ourselves – in intellectual fashions. In the meantime, claimed Ossowska, a measure of an intellectual's worth is whether one knows how to defend one's views and not yield to the 'circumstances'. And once again it has to be said that this statement – generally valid – has certain limitations. Because what does not yielding to limitations mean? How can succumbing to certain views be separated from the 'valid' adoption of others' truths and the revision – even radical – of one's own views? The example of Polish intellectual life after the war indicates that fortunately not everybody was a 'compass' unwaveringly indicating a constant direction regardless of the circumstances. Fortunately – together with the crumbling of its systemic assumptions – many Polish sociologists and philosophers altered their bygone views. In answering Maria Ossowska metaphorically, we shall say: after all, we do not possess supra-historical knowledge, a meta-tool enabling us to unambiguously determine what is a compass indicating a constant direction precisely because it is a compass functioning well, and what is a compass indicating a constant direction only because its mechanism has jammed. After all constant does not mean right. Constancy itself, and likewise the very 'independence' of thinking, do not fully constitute the epistemological value of a judgment. Let us continue with the metaphor Ossowska introduced: if the 'constancy' of the direction indicated is a virtue, then from a cognitive point of view does its change signify an absence of virtue? Apart from the opportunism of the post-war intellectuals (those of the hypersensitivity of a 'barometer'), can one not – at least in certain cases – talk of their intellectual development, of the path they travelled or their intellectual conversion deserving respect?

Giving an answer to questions thus posed would demand a refined analysis of the motives behind their intellectual conduct. Between the 'compass' and the 'barometer', space would certainly be found for more complex and historically complicated courses of intellectual biographies.

The third aspect of historicity that I would like to point out is the historicity of the social experience that shaped Maria Ossowska's views. Hers were experiences of worldview pressure, even oppression, linked to the specific type of her religious and political experience.

The historicity of her religious experience applies especially to her pre-war experiences, to life largely dominated by a rigid and dogmatic Church, which still had a few decades to go before its post-conciliar opening, and which explicitly kept moral issues to be resolved within its domain. Regardless of these specific personal experiences with Polish pre-war parochial Catholicism, experiences we continue to know very little about, Ossowska achieved emancipation from the Church's influence

not as from a specific, historical institution, but as an intellectual who liberates herself from the influence of a religious system that she treated just like any other 'external' system, and thus as a potential threat to her own independence. She did not explicitly determine that religion had to influence a person's intellectual and moral independence, but indicated that such influence is possible. "Faith in the immortality of the soul," she wrote, quoting Mandeville in her paper on the influence of religion on morality, "does not influence a person's moral standard any more than the number of the house or street on which one lives". Although she was free of religious assumptions in terms of her agenda, I do not believe that a historical, specific type of religious experience related to the specificity of the pre-war Church in Poland had a decisive impact here. With the knowledge we possess, we could say that it accelerated the process of her intellectual autonomisation rather than evoked it. Maria Ossowska was intellectually independent in the fullest sense of this word, and therefore independence from religion was in her case something natural, just as it was natural for her to take a stance of independence in regard to political restrictions, scientific fashions, and opinions within her community.

The situation that the social sciences were in after the war was not conducive to achieving the agenda she was propagating, of intellectual and civic independence. For her, intellectual servility was unacceptable both for scientific reasons and in terms of dignity, but the political context meant that in the Polish People's Republic the virtue of objectivism required not only intellectual prowess and virtuosity, but also the virtue of civic courage. As Ossowska wrote, the totalitarian system "is about citizens in constant servility becoming accustomed to lowering the flight of their thoughts (...) Being an ordinary, decent person begins to require heroism. And here it's worth quoting B. Brecht, who cursed a world requiring heroes".

Maria Ossowska realised that independence from religious, worldview and political assumptions is, on its own, but one of the conditions for fulfilling the calling of a scholar, and in itself does not guarantee the achievement of the 'highest flights of one's thoughts'. On the other hand, though, she was convinced that such dependence does not automatically restrict one's scientific calling. It certainly is restrictive when science is party-oriented or religious, subordinate to theses established in advance.

Maria Ossowska lived and worked in a specific period of history, in conditions of powerful moral, religious and political pressures. In order to be an intellectual, she had to be an extraordinarily independent person; such was the specificity of the situation that Polish science was in. Had she lived her life in today's times, or had she lived in a society she so loved, in English society, then perhaps the threads highlighting the aspect of independence would not have had to appear so evidently in her biography. She would have been an intellectual, simply.