

Liberal Education in Selected Polish Pedagogical Concepts – in Comparison to English-language Concepts – with Particular Reference to the Enlightenment (Period1)

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Introduction¹

In areas influenced by the English language, the term *liberal education* carries a complex semantic network of meanings, with new meanings continuously added to it. The idea refers to ancient and medieval models of education within a framework of liberal arts (*artes liberales*), expanded in the Enlightenment through philosophical theories that promoted knowledge and critical thinking as the way to individual freedom and social progress. In the past the idea used to create a sense of civilisational unity through its engagement in passing on a common cultural heritage to future generations; today it still seems to support a sense of European identity. What is the reception, un-

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derstanding and representation of the idea in the history of Polish philosophical and pedagogical theory? In contemporary Poland if the term is translated literally as ‘liberal education’, it has limited connotations, associated less with freedom and progress than with one of the doctrines, which provokes an ideological dispute. Consequently, the term ‘general education’ is usually used. It does not, however, reflect the entire meaning of the term *liberal education* as it fails to encompass the relation between knowledge or cognition and freedom, a critical attitude and openness to multiple reasons, independence, tolerance of different views and models of a good life.

The aim of this paper is to review selected Polish pedagogical concepts from the 18th century to the interwar period against a background of British theories and projects, taking into consideration the presence of *liberal education* elements in the form developed in the Enlightenment. It will discuss unquestionable and widely discussed achievements of writers and activists of the 18th century such as Stanisław Konarski, Grzegorz Piramowicz, Hugo Kołłątaj and Stanisław Staszic, who were devoted to the area of education. It will also focus on the less familiar Stefan Garczyński included in *Anatomia Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* from 1751. Selected works of Jan Władysław Dawid and Iza Moszczeńska in defence of humanistic education (polemic against H. Spencer’s views) will be reviewed and, finally, more contemporary work will be covered, namely the concepts of Bogdan

Nawroczyński and Sergiusz Hessen from the interwar period. Numerous other educational ideas need to remain outside the framework of this paper, to be discussed elsewhere; such ideas address the issues of difficult history of Poland during the times of the Partitions of Poland and the Polish People's Republic, including contemporary challenges generated by globalisation, economic crisis and multiculturalism of Europe. In order to analyse selected positions, we firstly need to clarify the idea; the suggestion is to use the original meaning as given to it by the British. What is the meaning of the term and how has it changed throughout the history of educational theory and practice in Europe? Did it have its equivalents and representations in Polish philosophical and pedagogical reflections, especially in the Enlightenment period harmonised with liberal trends? Who contributed to it and what ideas did these contributions include; to what extent did they accommodate the European movement of the idea and to what extent did they constitute a manifestation of domestic ideas that reflected the Polish situation? How did the idea resurface in the interwar period; a time when Poland had regained independence and embraced European ideological movements? Is there, in contemporary Poland, 20 years after another historical turn and joining the union of free nations of Europe, a favourable climate for *liberal education*? Could it exist under the aegis of 'liberal education' as opposed to 'general education'? Perhaps, regardless of the deficiency of liberal components in the Polish educational system, it would be possible to single out a quality that could contribute the idea of *liberal education* and enrich it? It is possible that the idea, deprived of its classical sense and viewed from a free-market perspective, could

benefit from models that, whilst not necessarily being based on the same sources and provenance, nonetheless acknowledge the same principles; the protection of the value of education, truth, cognition and learning. The value of freedom that brings them together is a guarantee of sustained unity in diversity, which is a distinguishing feature of contemporary *liberal education*.

On the idea of liberal education and its history

The origin of the idea is associated with *artes liberales*, the seven liberated arts divided into *trivium* and *quadrivium*, which have been taught since the end of the antiquity, particularly during the Middle Ages, in a version adjusted to and compliant with the doctrine of Christianity. Their message was clear from the very beginning; they were to constitute the knowledge and a set of skills worthy of a free man. The scope of knowledge they provided allowed higher education to be pursued at university level. Along with the provided skills, it formed a basis for self-development and self-improvement, taking into consideration one's already formed character and a proper use of reason. If the idea of *liberal education* is based on such foundations, it seems likely that the values it advocates (analogically to *artes liberales*) cannot be evaluated in terms of their utility. The focus of this form of education was placed on knowledge and skills that were not designed to prepare one for a specific job, were not related to the needs and requirements of everyday life, were not practical or specialist in nature, nor even strictly scientific². Their importance was related to the universal character of cultural transmission, aimed at rais-

² Cf.: Hirst P. (1973), *Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge* [in:] Peters R.S. (ed.), *Philosophy of Education*, Oxford, p. 87.

ing individuals in their humanity and liberating them to ensure a free and good life. For centuries this meant that liberal education was restricted to social elites, people with free time, the independently wealthy and not obliged to struggle laboriously for resources to survive; activity that leaves one no time for self-improvement, which requires a detachment from the obligations and needs of everyday life³.

The Enlightenment transformations added new motifs to the idea of *liberal education*, supplementing its former classical meaning with values that distinguished the whole ideological movement of the Enlightenment along with associated liberalism. The 18th century is generally described as the age of reason, civilisational progress, enlightened political order, education, knowledge and freedom; an era of struggle against superstition, narrow views, backwardness and poverty. Progressive ideas created favourable conditions for social uprisings and revolutions, yet social divisions and diversity as a cultural mechanism were also supported at the time, with writers and thinkers of that era playing an important role in sustaining it. The educated elite were to promote reform and transformation; they were the recipients of new educational programs that, in addition to the classic programmes of liberated arts, also included the

³ There is a question to what extent is this restriction and consent to it, still relevant today; to what extent have we inherited and passed along the understanding of knowledge as a value which – especially on some level and within the humanities – should remain restricted, exclusive and not suited for ‘simple people’, or even seen as riotous for the minds of the masses? Let us see how art subjects are taught in Poland and to what extent the humanities are treated as essentially the study of spirit? Are students allowed to freely interpret cultural works and phenomena or history? We keep rationing knowledge as a value in itself, inhibit access to it and if we teach – we do it in a canonical, encyclopedic, reproductive way, that is against the purpose of education as a liberating, perfecting and two-sided form of transmission, harmonised with expression and feeling.

output of modern sciences along with the study of European languages and history and the law of one’s country. It was advocated that basic education should be provided to the common people; with improved salaried workers’ literacy levels they would be able to take care of themselves and their families and learn the habits of neatness and piety as well as respect for upper classes. At the time the idea of *liberal education* could be found in the works of George Turnbull in Scotland, Charles Rollin in France, Benjamin Franklin in America (all three included the ideas of John Locke in their programmes of educational reforms), whilst in Poland it could be encountered mainly in the works of Stanisław Konarski, Hugo Kołłątaj and Grzegorz Piramowicz; we shall see whether or not the already mentioned Stefan Garczyński also belongs to the group.

The newer interpretation of *liberal education* in English-speaking countries was provided in the 19th century. It promoted education in a form that focused mainly on the output of positive sciences concerned in the qualities of mind, as a continuation of the Enlightenment ideas e.g. through radical utilitarian movement (represented among others by Jeremy Bentham and James Mill), which would expand to its radical form symbolised by the position of Herbert Spencer who emphasised the supremacy of scientific education (scientism) over classical education. Conversely and, in a way, in opposition to them, there would be a turn towards the classical understanding of the idea as advocated by John Stuart Mill, Henry Newman and other academics who would offer arguments that, whilst frequently dissimilar, would nonetheless work in favour of education understood not as a means to achieve priorities but as a humanising value, i.e. one that would improve the learner as a whole.

The criticism of Spencer's concept would also be revived in Poland (in the views of J.W. Dawid and I. Moszczeńska, for instance, as discussed later), whilst ideology that was closer to positivism and utilitarianism would be discussed by Stanisław Staszic.

The two-track approach to knowledge and education that was assumed by British liberal writers seems to accompany this intellectual orientation from the very beginning i.e. from the moment of Locke's formulation of the concept of the education of gentlemen. If we wish to include his ideas in the output of liberal theory then we should also include this original utilitarian approach to knowledge as a good, subjected to the primary objectives of a man's education as a moral, reasonable and responsible individual who is capable of controlling his life and, as far as his capacity and social position allow, engaged in activities serving the others and one's country. However, to ascribe this single interpretation of understanding and assessment of education to liberalism as such would be an oversimplification; along with the writings of A.A.C. Shaftesbury and later thanks to a lecture given by J.S. Mill, education also came to be seen in the context of improvement of a man through contacts with broadly understood cultural heritage.

For J.S. Mill, *liberal education* was an education that followed the first stage, i.e. elementary education and preceded university education in the chosen area of expertise or, otherwise, was conducted concurrently with it⁴. It was supposed to include elements of exact sciences, including natural sciences, as well as the humanities and

social studies, in order to meet the major goals of education, namely the promotion of the comprehensive development of an individual (his intellect, will and emotions) through the three areas of education: intellectual, moral and aesthetic⁵. For Newman, *liberal education* was an educational process through which intellect, rather than being formed or used for some specific or secondary purpose, some precise craft or occupation, the area of studies or learning, becomes implemented in a certain discipline, the goal of the discipline being associated with intellect as such, with the perception of its subject and with its highest culture⁶. Mill's interpretation anticipates yet another later turn towards the understanding of *liberal education* as *general education*⁷. He viewed the general character of education not only as providing access to different areas of knowledge, but also as an attempt to apprehend knowledge as a whole, consisting of different ways of recognition and perception of reality by a man striving for truth about the world and about himself⁸.

According to the authors of *Philosophy of Education*, this idea developed in two directions in the 19th century. One centred on individual development in connection with high culture to be cultivated in one's free time; the other focused directly on the formation of character. Accordingly, the former placed an emphasis on knowledge in the area of classical literature, history, philosophy and mathematics at the expense of natural sciences,

⁴ Cf. Mill J.S. (1931), *The Inaugural Address at St. Andrews* [in:] Cavenagh F.A. (ed.), *James & John Stuart Mill on Education*, Cambridge, p. 133–137 and also Garforth F.W. (1979), *John Stuart Mill's Theory of Education*, Oxford, p. 203–206.

⁵ Cf. Mill J.S., *The Inaugural Address at St. Andrews*.

⁶ Newman H. (1996), *The Idea of a University*, Yale University Press.

⁷ The interpretation can be found in the 20th century work *General Education in a Free Society*. Report of the Harvard Committee (1945), Cambridge, Massachusetts.

⁸ Cf. Garforth F.W., *John Stuart Mill's Theory of Education*.

applied science and even contemporary literature. The aim of education was to encounter and become familiar with great theories developed throughout human history and the greatest achievements of scholars, thinkers and creators. The latter trend of *liberal education* focused on the formation of character, discipline, restraint, physical exercise and the strengthening of one's body in a harsh environment as well as on team sports that fostered competitiveness, cooperation, stamina and other virtues, even at the expense of academic skills and achievements, as a form of educating elites⁹. This form of education was criticised by Spencer, who insisted that the education of young people should allow for more positive and practical knowledge that would serve individuals and promote social progress. High culture, including classical languages, was not so much restricted to the area of the spare time afforded only by people who were free of restricting and necessary labour obligations, as was the case in the times of Aristotle, as it became of secondary importance to primary existential goals in accordance with his evolutionist concept of man¹⁰. Polish scholars and political writers joined the dispute, thanks to which we can distinguish several significant positions supporting a classical, humanistic or comprehensive formula of educating youth against the designs of the utilitarian wing in the philosophy of education and within the circles of educational politicians.

The 20th century brought further interpretations of *liberal education* within the framework of English-language theory that significantly affected the development of the concept. One of the

⁹ Cf. Winch C., Gingell J. (2008), *Philosophy of Education. The Key Concepts*, 2nd Edition, London and New York.

¹⁰ Cf. Kazamias A.M. (ed.), (1966), *Herbert Spencer on Education*, New York, *passim*.

approaches that originated in the late 1960s and is nowadays perceived as classical, which shaped the standard ideas of good education and philosophy in Great Britain was the one assumed by Richard Stanley Peters and later by Paul Hirst. The other was the Harvard interpretation formulated by American scholars in 1945 and included in the previously mentioned report on general education in a free society that was widely discussed in the UK. These works were supplemented with publications that presented a set of source texts to be included in the educational programme at American college level¹¹. In brief, Peters' approach advocated three major criteria to be employed at every stage of education, the aim of which was to justify the undertaking of educational activities: 1) Education should have a valuable content (worth engaging one's mind because of its inherent value and not because it is useful, beneficial and required for external purposes as a means to attain material goods, work or occupation); 2) Education should ensure a broad cognitive perspective that, together with a scientific approach, would also allow for a historical perspective, social meaning or aesthetic dimension of any given material, as well as other possible interpretations and meanings of the material; 3) The education process should not be coercive or dogmatic but should instead take into consideration the subjectivity and activity of the learner i.e. education based on critical discussion of the material being analysed¹². Each of them encompasses one of the meanings of 'liberal' education. The Harvard report consciously justified the

¹¹ Cf. e.g., Locke L., Gibson W., Arms G. (ed.), (1952), *Toward Liberal Education*, 2nd amended edition, New York. For each of the 7 parts (*Learning, Reading and Writing, Thinking, The Arts, Science, Society, Philosophy and Religion*) there is a selection of source texts attached.

¹² Cf. Peters R.S. (1970), *Ethics and Education*, London, p. 43–45.

turn from *liberal* to *general education*, thus wishing to emphasise a general, as opposed to elitist, character of comprehensive education that, alongside exact sciences, also included knowledge in areas such as history, philosophy, literature and art. Its wide range of influence followed directly from the goal assumed by the authors of the report when formulating a model of contemporary American education in the second half of the 20th century; the aim was to familiarise American society with liberal and human tradition so that it could view itself as a society of free and responsible citizens who with certain rights¹³.

Poland at that time was subject to the indoctrination of the current Marxist philosophical pedagogy and was isolated from the major trends in Western theory¹⁴. We may only refer to the concepts of educational standards that were formulated in the interwar period, formed in open cooperation with Western theory. The approaches presented by Bogdan Nawroczyński and Sergiusz Hessen are also worthy of mention at this point. Contemporary disputes and debates on education in Poland that would be adequate for the 21st century are open to similar discussions taking place across the entire civilised world and allow references to significant historical arguments in favour of a good education and therefore they reach the public arena and the attention of the authorities with their ideas concerning the advantages of investing in (general) education as a universal value that liberates people from all forms of subjection. These arguments resonate with references to the heritage of Classicism, Enlightenment and liberalism.

¹³ Cf. *General Education in a Free Society*, p. V–X, XIV–XV.

¹⁴ Cf. Berner H. (2006), *Współczesne kierunki pedagogiczne* [in:] Śliwerski B. (ed.), *Pedagogika. Podstawy nauk o wychowaniu*, Vol. 1, Gdańsk, p. 195–275.

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Abstract

In the English language, although the term *liberal education* has multiple semantic meanings, it may still be interpreted in the new sense of the meaning. The idea refers to an ancient and medieval model of education within the liberal arts (*artes liberales*), developed in the era of Enlightenment philosophers' theory to promote knowledge, self-dependent and critical thinking as a path to individual freedom, political and civil liberty and social progress. It seems that this is one of the ideas that could build the European identity. What is its perception and understanding in Polish philosophical and pedagogical theory? In Poland, this term, if it is translated directly as "edukacja liberalna", directly evokes liberalism as political and social doctrine. Thus, "kształcenie ogólne" is more often used but fails to reflect the meaning of *liberal education* in its entirety. It ignores in fact the relation between knowledge, understanding and freedom/liberty, critical attitude, openness to the plurality of reasons, independence, tolerance for diversity of views and models of good life. The main objective of this presentation is to trace selected Polish educational concepts and the presence of elements of Anglo-Saxon tradition of liberal education in them, with particular reference to the Enlightenment.

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