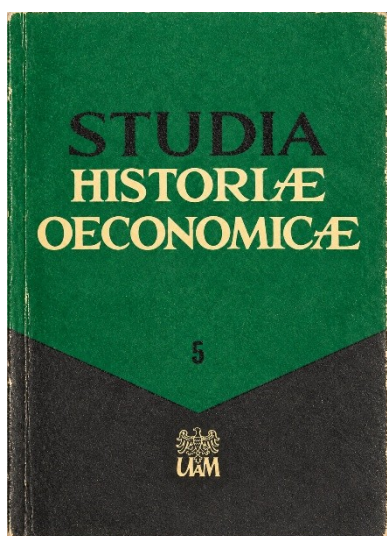




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HISTORY OF MATERIAL CULTURE AND ECONOMIC HISTORY

One of the characteristic features of the Polish post-war historiography is a development of investigations in the field of history of material culture. This development, connected with the inspiring influence of the theory of historical materialism¹, was quickened by the founding of both the Institute of History of Material Culture of the Polish Academy of Sciences and a special "Quarterly of History of Material Culture". There appeared the problem of defining the scope of investigations of the Institute and the problem of the approach to economic history. The National Academy of History of Material Culture established by Vladimir Lenin in 1919 was also significant for the scholars. Because of absence of any experience in this field of investigation it was not possible to choose a starting point for theoretical considerations or to verify theories by experimental results. Archaeologists of primeval Poland, archaeologists of antiquity, ethnographers and a group of historians specializing in social, economic and technical problems were all members of one institution.

Social and technical aspects of production, exchange and consumption,

¹ Numerous arguments stressing the need for the investigation of the productive forces were taken from the classics of Marxism by Prof. Kazimierz Majewski: *Historia kultury materialnej (History of Material Culture)*. In: *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej*, Yearbook 1: 1953; No. 1, pp. 3 - 24; as well as J. Kulczycki: *Założenia teoretyczne historii kultury materialnej (Theoretical Assumptions of the History of Material Culture)* and some of the participants in a discussion at the conference, organized on May 18th 1953 by I Department of Polish Academy of Sciences, concerning the history of material culture — Wł. Hołubowicz: *Uwagi o historii kultury materialnej jako nauce (Remarks concerning the History of Material Culture as a Science)*, H. Łowmiański, H. Dunajewski, T. Manteuffel, E. Olszewski, B. Biliński, K. Michałowski, Wł. Antoniewicz, L. Sawicki, T. Kotarbiński, St. Lorentz, W. Hensel. *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej*, Yearbook 3, 1955, No. 3, pp. 519 - 620. There were quoted: K. Marx: *Kapitał (The Capital)* Vol. 1, Warszawa 1951, pp. 191 - 400; F. Engels: *Anti-Dühring*. Warszawa 1948, p. 144; J. Stalin: *Ekonomiczne problemy socjalizmu w ZSRR (Economic Problems of Socialism in the Soviet Union)*. Warszawa 1952, pp. 69 and 77, and O materializmie dialektycznym i historycznym (*On Dialectic and Historical Materialism*). Warszawa 1949, p. 33.

considered also as "material living conditions"² were accepted as the subject of investigations of the Institute of History of Material Culture. This would include the geographic environment as a complex of factors conditioning material existence and a range of human activities as well as settlement conditions (in spatial and demographic respects). The basic subject of this new branch was "first of all an investigation of productive forces and material goods produced by these forces"³. As a result, the investigations would cover raw materials, production tools and mechanisms, the whole branch of technology and organization of production, and goods. Consequently the means of transport and communication together with the conditions required for their exploitation were included into the history of material culture. As for consumption, no clear classification instructions were given by the theorists of Marxism and Leninism for including this branch into the history of material culture. Nevertheless according to the principles of Marxism, political economy, production, distribution, exchange and consumption do not exist, each of them autonomously but "all of them are members of one unit, different things contained in one whole"⁴. That is why it was necessary to include communal arrangements, accommodation, clothes and food, understood as forms of consumption, in the field of investigation of the historians of material culture.

In this way it was realized how many things were neglected in the state of investigation into some large fields of human activities from the borderland of economic history, the history of technology, art, culture and even of the history of the military system. Due to this realization it was possible to justify and integrate in Marxist methodology a consistent plan of investigation. Nevertheless, it did not mean that a new branch of historiography was established because science cannot be "made up". The discovered omissions of a programme of investigation can be always divided among specialists of related branches of science. In the case of the subject of investigation suggested for the history of material culture, first of all historians — specialists in social economic and technical problems — were taken into consideration. The highly developed efficiency of the investigation system of economic history, based in Poland on the methodological achievements of such outstanding scholars as Franciszek Bujak, Jan Rutkowski and Roman Rybarski as well as on factographic achievements of other scholars⁵, required

² A. Gieysztor: *Niektóre potrzeby badań nad materialnymi warunkami bytu we wczesnym średniowieczu polskim (Some Suggestions for Research on Material Living Conditions in the Early Middle Ages in Poland)*. In: *Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej*, Yearbook 2, 1954, pp. 599 - 618.

³ J. Kulezycki: *Założenia...*, p. 528.

⁴ K. Marx: *Przyczynek do krytyki ekonomii politycznej (Contribution to Criticism of Political Economy)*. Warszawa 1953, pp. 245 - 246.

⁵ This problem was discussed by W. Kula: *Problemy i metody historii gospodarczej (Problems and Methods of History of Economy)*. Warszawa 1963, pp. 44 - 52.

only an increase in the number of scholars in order to cover some insufficiently examined problems of industrial production and of the development of towns. According to the modern approaches to economics, the historians of economics could also investigate the field, so far almost untouched by the Polish scholars, of the technical equipment of workshops and commercial businesses and companies, as well as the problems of methods of administration and evaluation of these methods in the development of economy in particular historical, social and political conditions. The investigation of the aims other than economic sought by the administrator man and society practically engaged in economic affairs is also very important. These aims are different during particular economic stages. Each step in technical and economic progress, besides the influence of an objective state of development of productive forces, contains an element of social consciousness. The impact of this element on practical individual activities can be negligible.

Ideological elements are especially distinct in the contemporary scientific, technical and industrial changes. This time it concerns not only contemporary energetics, and plastic and technological processes based on automation. This whole phenomenon is characterized by a tendency to abolish the distinction between work and effort on the one side and consumption and rest on the other side, which adds humanitarian features to the contemporary changes. These features are stronger in the socialist system because in a realization of this problem there are engaged not only planners and owners of the capital as inventors, but also all people who devote their good intentions to the production of the new creations of technology and industry⁶. All these matters cannot be neglected by the history of economics but they should certainly be on the margin of the main subjects of investigation. Interpreted in this way, industrial change, as well as any expression of historical activities of an industrial kind, is a cultural phenomenon. The characteristic features of its technical, economic and sociological details make possible the examination of this phenomenon by the historians of culture. Only they can tell whether a complex of new means of production will bring the expected better future to a society and whether it really worth sacrificing for this future a part of the present fruits of work but also everyday hours of our leisure time.

In order to pass from an example to more general conclusions material culture has to be clearly defined. It is possible to do it now in both a normative

⁶ B. Biegeleisen-Żelazowski: *Zarys psychologii pracy (Outline of Psychology of Work)*. Warszawa 1968, ed. 3; and N. D. Lewitow: *Psychologia pracy (Psychology of Work)*, translated by D. Barzach. Warszawa 1965; J. Okoń and L. Paluszkiewicz: *Psychologia inżynierska (Psychology of Engineering)*. Warszawa 1963. In these works there are discussed the principles of the appropriate initiation of man in the process of work and the physical environment of work with regard to the requirements of the nervous system.

and empirical way thanks to the abundant attempts to fit all sorts of problems into the theoretical assumptions dating back 16 years and collected in the publications of the Institute of History of Material Culture of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) and especially in the *Quarterly of the History of Material Culture*⁷. This question may be answered both from the prescriptive and empirical standpoint. In any case a definition of material culture has to become a starting point for further discussions.

Material culture is a part of culture which can be at any time expressed on the one hand by the actual state of possession in the form of material products of work being in individual or social usage, and, on the other hand, by all habits defining the attitudes of people using those goods and in their efficiency in multiplying them. The history of material culture is a branch of historiography dealing with processes of accumulation and differentiation of material products and methods of work, and changes of individual and social material living conditions. In the subject of the history of material culture we can find two levels: one containing all the problems of work and the other containing all the problems of consumption. Material culture may be understood as a relation index of dynamism of both levels. This index is measurable.

The most general regularity noticed in the historical processes occurring on the work level is a tendency to repeat activities and to multiply the same products. The most general regularity of the consumption level is a tendency to set the idea of differentiation against the ideas of normalization and uniformization. A state of tension between those values means a particular level of the material culture and, at the same time, its power of development. Historical significance should be attributed equally to both of them although either of them can be prevailing for some time. They both co-exist and it is useful to deal with them only on condition that knowledge of the history of material culture is the aim of the investigators. Studying the full course of production and consumption entitles the scholar to cultivate the history of both economics and material culture, according to his interests.

First of the basic questions of the historian of material culture in the field of processes of production and exchange is the problem of dependence of man on forces of nature and the progress in building an artificial social environment with the complex of physical and biological conditions based on the knowledge of the laws of nature. This is a question including technical progress as well as economic development. In order to find a proper answer, a historian of material culture has to remember three auxiliary questions. The first one concerns knowledge of matter. The second — sources of energy. The third — means of travel across space. For the sake of explanation of the first question I should

⁷ "Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej" was edited from 1953 to 1968 by Prof. Aleksander Gieysztor and since 1969 by Prof. Kazimierz Majewski, the first director of the Institute of the History of Material Culture of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

add that it concerns not so much the chemical or atomic structure of cells but some mineral and organic compounds occurring in nature as raw materials. The number of kinds of raw materials provided by nature as well as the number of elements is limited. As far as elements are concerned it is even closed⁸. Each new raw material discovered by man becomes an obvious step towards the mastering of matter for practical purposes. Although possibilities of discovering new natural raw materials are rather small, the possibilities of applying them for many various purposes are almost unlimited. That is why the way covered by man from the state of original dependence on the fruits and forces of nature of the artificial environment should be measured by the range of their applications. The first link of this change is connected with the discovery of a raw material. The example of the history of zinc shows that the importance of this first link is not the greatest. For many centuries calamine was used only for the production of Chinese white and it was not before the invention of the muffle furnace by the Silesian metallurgists about the year 1800 that zinc was used in the metal industry⁹.

A different principle of evaluation has to be used for studying the stages of development of the power engineering industry. Each new source of power is more significant in the time of its discovery than any of its succeeding particular uses. Differentiation of uses of the same source of power results mainly from the progress of mechanics which is a part of a power engineering system operating between power and work. Mechanics plays here such a significant role that any changes in it can be considered as an expression of progress in the application of the same source of power. The processes of mastering power and space converge here. Overcoming difficulties in this field is of vital importance for the material culture. The stage of progress in this field conditions still the increasing command of man over matter, power and space which defines the ability of concentration and conditions the circulation of all products of work in their material and abstract form.

The second basic question framed by the historians of material culture in the field of production and exchange refers to the co-existence of the elements of work understood as a materialized creative thought in the contemporary state of material culture of all periods and, above all, of the present age. The basis for this question is provided by the assumption of the unity of thought and action, that is, of the principle of universality of the working people's contribution to the argumentation and popularization of the achievements of material culture. Man's efficiency in the course of work is determined by his

⁸ J. Newton Friend: *Człowiek i pierwiastki chemiczne (Man and Chemical Elements)*, Warszawa 1959, p. 295.

⁹ Ch. Hollunder: *Ausführliche Beschreibung des in Oberschlesien, dem Königreich Polen und dem Gebiete der Republik Krakau gewöhnlichen Zinkhütte-Prozesses*, Leipzig 1824, p. 96.

ability to adapt to changeable conditions dictated by the technical, economic, and ideological programme. Hence it always includes a portion of his invention apart from his habits and skill acquired in order to reproduce. Yet it would be hardly possible to estimate how large that portion is. It can become apparent either in mass or in a retrospective view. However, it is worthwhile observing the resistance of some products of work which exist and function in the same form many thousand years without any modifications, performing their original tasks remarkably well. How to account for the fact that a hammer, an axe, a comb or many other objects do not humiliate the twentieth century civilization despite their obvious Stone Age origin¹⁰. In what proportion is the number of these survivals to that of well known archaisms of modern language which have been developing together with work itself? If some idea based on the knowledge of a given law or a group of laws of nature is expressed in a perfect form, its activity will be ensured until it is superseded by some new achievement of material culture accomplished by means of a more helpful formulation of other theoretical assumptions. The examples of man's perfect achievements in the field of material culture are characterized not only by their vitality but also by an extraordinary productivity. They deserve our interest because in the course of their existence they adapt themselves to an increasing number of highly specialized functions and respectively assume multivarious forms. It is enough to mention the principle of resilience of matter applied to the construction of a hunting bow or the technique of space formation applied in constructing vessels and all kinds of chambers used in production.

The third question posed by the history of material culture, equal in significance to the two former ones, refers to the regularity in the development of consumption, in the broad meaning of this word. As it was mentioned above, consumption shows a continuing tendency to the increase of requirements in respect to quantity and quality. It is obvious that we cannot discuss it in isolation from the second fact, that is the increase of the social character of consumption. In this field the degree of man's subordination to the laws of nature is much higher than it is in the sphere of production since biological needs outline a distinctive set of indispensable living conditions for each individual. This constraint is not present in the process of work or production. The phenomenon of differentiated needs, though it undergoes the increasing processes of assimilation due to intervention of social organization, is based on the necessity of individual consumption. The above processes operate by way of an indirect satisfying individual needs by means of public services. Material culture includes, first of all, public utilities, road system, energy supplies, means of transport and communication, land reclamation and irri-

¹⁰ I dealt with this problem more broadly in the work: *L'héritage du Néolithique dans la technique du XX^e siècle*. In: *Etudes d'histoire de la science et de la technique*. Varsovie 1968, pp. 229 - 234.

gation in agriculture, standard weights and measures and symbols of assessment. All of them were meant to normalize, by way of convention, the trade turnover of work produce. The progress in this field is directed at the diminishing of differences which resulted from a spontaneous distribution of material goods. The distribution is economically justified and it is, as a result, much cheaper. Its value consists in higher utility and hence it belongs to the area of progress in material culture.

The fourth question offers to the historian of the material culture reflections and inferences emerging from the comparison of the advantages and disadvantages that accompany the growth of civilization. A scholar firstly comes across the sphere of material living conditions comprising conditions of work as well as of expenditure of work products during leisure time. He wants to find there two processes that would represent the social and technical organization of work in production, exchange and consumption. One of the processes consists in changes resulting from the differentiation between the adoption of raw materials and tools and the consumers' likes and dislikes. The change in the number of skills from the state of primitive self-sufficiency to that of modern complexity and of task distribution among mechanisms, and man's own share provide the main item in the characterization of material existence. It also expresses the social meaning of the progress of the material culture determining the perspectives of civilization. The second case consists in the confrontation of impulses of satisfaction and dissatisfaction arising in the course of the processes of changeability taking place on the social and technical level of the organization of production, exchange and consumption. The confrontation allows for the presentation of how the opposition between the notions of work and consumption do diminish as a result of the progress of material culture. A scholar faces here the untouched problems of changes in social consciousness, materially recorded. He observes the changeability of views on work as well as the changeability of consumers' likes and dislikes, notions of indigence, prosperity and luxury, and all the systems of external phenomena connected with these notions and contributing toward a wider range of meaning, colourfulness and intensity in the forms of social life.

The disadvantages of man's separation from primitive passive co-existence with nature are reflected, first of all, in the health conditions. Personal hygiene is quite helpless faced with the unsanitary conditions of man's surrounding. Similarly, personal thrift and forethought cannot protect one in densely populated areas against such disasters as famine, fire, epidemic or unemployment. Inconsiderate and wasteful exploitation brings other consequences of people's harmful activity such as the disappearance or poisoning of the ground and running water, the impoverishment of soil, the erosion of deforested areas, the dustiness and gas-poisoning of the atmosphere, noise, and, recently, even radiation. Progress in that branch of material culture aimed at prevent-

ing the consequences rather than overcoming them. Athletic and sport arrangements, system of preservation of water and atmosphere, the re-cultivation of the exploited areas — these are, apart from the system of public utilities, the chief means of compensation included in the real costs of the social milieu on a high level of material culture.

Finally, there is one thing constituting the fifth basic question of the history of material culture. It refers to expressing abstract notions by means of material symbols. All kinds of authorities were especially interested in it in order to create the most effective apparatus for reaching definite ends. The symbolic representation of church ceremonies is one of the best examples of this phenomenon in our times. Neither do common people disregard those means when they want to express what they think of themselves. Hence the specific function of clothes, ornaments, etc. Symbols on seals and all kinds of heraldic arms and marks of profession are of considerable significance, too. The appearance of elements of labour in works of art is in itself full of expression indispensable for the comprehension of certain notions referring to that aspect of human existence. Symbols with their various forms lead the research worker of the history of material culture to the sphere of abstraction and allow for investigating the modifications of professional consciousness. It is worthwhile mentioning one of these symbols. It is the image of a flame above an earthenware pot widely known as "the torch of education"; it represents the element conquered by man. Yet hardly anybody, while making use of that material ideogram, realizes the significance of man's contribution until the role of fire, light and ceramics was expressed in such a simple way in the history of material culture in order to serve as a constant appeal to study the mysteries of the reality. The example may serve to dispel all doubts as to whether the history of material culture supplies the basis for the original, synthetic formation of ideas. Such doubts have been entertained by some scholars¹¹. The aim of the above considerations was, among others, to show that these doubts are unjustified.

Translated by:
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¹¹ J. Kuleczycki: *Założenia...*, p. 562; and W. Kula: *Problemy...*, p. 66.