DOVE VA LA STORIA ECONOMICA?
METODI E PROSPETTIVE
SECC. XIII-XVIII

WHERE IS ECONOMIC HISTORY GOING?
METHODS AND PROSPECTS
FROM THE 13TH TO THE 18TH CENTURIES

Atti della “Quarantaduesima Settimana di Studi”
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a cura di Francesco Ammannati

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**Giovedì 22 aprile – Dove va la storia economica? Metodi e prospettive (secc. XIII-XVIII) / Where is economic history going? Methods and Prospects (from the 13th to the 18th centuries)**

**Tavola Rotonda Conclusiva**

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**Abstracts** 549
Jacek Kochanowicz, Anna Sosnowska

Economic History of Pre-industrial Poland: An Obsolete Subject?

1. Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s, despite the cold war division of the world and the relative isolation of Poland and the rest of East-Central Europe from the West, economic history research by Poles, particularly that focusing on the pre-industrial period, was visible on the international forum. This was partly due to the work of historians such as Marian Malowist and Witold Kula, to name only two.¹ This visibility reflected the relatively broad interest of Polish historians in the study of the economic past, with numerous publications of primary sources and hundreds of monographs – all this despite the limited resources a relatively poor country could devote to research in this field.

At present, the situation is quite different. Very little is currently being done in this field, and the international visibility of what is happening is very restricted, to say the least. This produces the paradox of a discipline which flourished and managed to stay in touch with what was going in the world in the adverse conditions of ideological pressure and the overall drab conditions of state socialism, but fell into crisis and disregard after the fall of that system and Poland’s integration into the Western world. While it would be an exaggeration to say that economic history was ever central to historical science in Poland, today it is certainly marginal, attracting only limited attention among both researchers and the public at large.

When talking about the “past” and the “present,” we take as the watershed the year 1989, which seems an obvious choice in the case of a country in East-Central Europe. The political changes – the demise of state socialism, the beginnings of democratic politics, the end of the cold war, the lifting of the Iron Curtain, and the gradual incorporation of the countries of the region into the Western world – changed significantly the objective conditions for research and academic work. All this also led to the re-thinking of the issues of collective memory and identity so important for the work of historians. Moreover, the political changes were followed immediately by economic change, in the Polish case a rapid transition to a market economy according to a neoliberal recipe – commonly referred to as “shock therapy.” All this prompts examination of the nature of the post-1989 period.

Our first observation (also reflected in the title of this paper) is that little research is being done on pre-industrial Poland, and the key question this

¹ The latter was one of the founders of the International Economic History Association.
observation begs is why that should be so. If we are to answer this question we must set the story of Polish economic historiography against a broader context and longer-term trends in historical sciences in both Poland and other countries. We shall attempt to do this below, starting with an overview of the tendencies in historical research in the world at large, then reviewing Polish economic historiography of the pre-1989 period, and subsequently taking stock of what is currently being done. We have adopted a traditional understanding of economic history, as being concerned primarily with production and distribution, or – in the words of Douglass C. North – with “structure and performance of economies through time.”

In a similar vein, the leading Polish authority in the field of economic history methodology, Witold Kula, considered the subject matter of economics to be identical with that of economic history. Thus, when taking stock of what has been accomplished in the last two decades, we look primarily for works which have attempted either to assess these issues in quantifiable ways or to analyze institutions and organizations with connections to them on macro and micro levels.

A very strong caveat is necessary. What we say is inevitably very subjective and tentative. Historical output today is enormous. A general bibliography of Polish history lists about 8,000 new publications every year, and this is multiplied many times on the global scale. The picture one forms of the discipline is thus a result of one’s own interests and readings.

2. World trends

What seems characteristic for economic history against the backdrop of historical study in general is a certain divergence of routes of development during the last thirty years or so. While history has always been “narrative” and, as one field of the humanities, has always striven to offer reconstructions of contexts and meanings, the period since World War II has been characterized by close encounters between many disciplines of study of the human past and the social sciences, and also their flirtation with the (hard) science approach of seeking “explanation” and causality. These trends, new at the time, were a reaction to the dominant paradigm of late 19th- and early 20th-century historiography, which was predominantly the political history of “nations” and “states.” Postwar historiography, on the other hand, became more interested in large social groups other than nations and in mass processes other than national awakenings.

Historical research thus responded in its own way to the challenges and opportunities offered by the developments in sociology (particularly the structuralist-functionalist approach) and other social sciences, by theories of modernization, and by Marxist theories and interpretations. A visible model of how history, particularly that of the pre-industrial period, could be practiced, had been offered by the

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4 *Bibliografia historii polskiej za rok…* [Bibliography of Polish history for the year…], a continuous publication by the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences.
French Annales school, particularly its first and second generations: history informed by the social sciences, treated in “totality” and in the long durée, with the stress on “structure” and underlying tendencies more than on individual human agency and events.\(^5\) The Marxist, or Marxism-inspired approach, taken particularly by many historians in continental Western Europe and in Britain, had been similar in treating the past, to quote Charles Tilly, in terms of “big structures, large processes,”\(^6\) although it had focused much more strongly than the Annales on tensions and contradictions within societies. Social history had been an important stream of research during this period, and one that overlapped with economic history. The popularity of two scholarly journals, Annales. E.S.C. and Past and Present, may be symbolic for these trends. A nascent, even more scientific approach, although of a different kind, was the American “new economic history,” or cliometrics, with its origin at the turn of the 1960s.\(^7\)

The late 1970s signify the beginning of the eclipse of this “scientific” approach, and are marked by the “literary turn.” The publication date of Hayden White’s Metahistory (1973) may be treated as symbolic of this turning point. Explanation and causality as dominant tools fade out, to be replaced by “discourse,” “narrative” and “metaphor,” and historians look for inspiration much less towards the social sciences, and more towards literary criticism, and cultural, colonial, and subaltern studies. They also become critical of “master narratives,” whether the traditional nation-building paradigm or the more recent paradigms of “big structures, large processes.” “History” becomes fractalized into myriad “histories” of various groups and minorities, of which women’s history was one of the particularly important fields.

This process is particularly characteristic for the Annales school. While it never confined itself to economic history alone, the economic past stood as one of its most important pillars since at least the classical studies of Marc Bloch on French rural life, and through the great regional monographs produced in the 1960s and 1970s. Braudel’s La Méditerranée (1949) was a model of this, and his Civilisation Matérielle, Économie, et Capitalisme (1979), which spanned the whole globe, was perhaps as much a culmination as a termination of the “total history” approach with the economy as a focal point. Later, the Annalists turned their attention to other matters, particularly to socio-cultural history. The trajectory of interests of Emmanuel Le Roy-Ladurie is characteristic in this respect: he is the author of perhaps the most impressive regional long durée monograph, Les paysans de Languedoc (1966), but also of Montaillou (1975), one of the works that were instrumental in creating the new approach, then called “microhistory.”

It would be presumptuous to try to determine why these changes occurred; it is enough to say that they went hand in hand with wider trends unfolding in the hu-


\(^6\) Ch. Tilly, Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons, New York 1984.

manities and even to a degree in the social sciences (particularly anthropology and sociology), which in turn were witnessing a change in perception of the world from — simplistically speaking — “modern” to “postmodern.” But economic history, like economics (and perhaps rational choice-oriented political science and statistically-oriented sociology), has been different to the other social sciences. Economic historians, with a few exceptions — most notably Deirdre McCloskey — pretend not to have noticed the post-modern turn.

Economics after the Second World War became formalized, turning from verbal to mathematical reasoning. From the 1970s, the revolution in data processing changed economic science into mass-scale number crunching and the discipline became very technical. The approach of economists is to explain events and processes that go on in the real world through the use of mathematical models, to test econometrically the validity of these models, to predict possible scenarios on the basis of the models believed to be the most accurate given the state of the arts, and to offer policy recommendations accordingly. The basic behavioral assumption of these models is utility maximization. The whole conceptual apparatus is an abstraction of the workings of markets, and the theories and models built by economists show how market coordination of economic activity leads to efficient allocation of resources on both the micro and macro scales (Pareto optimality). An important branch of the discipline, the new institutional economics, shows why not all economic activity is organized as individual market transactions, and what the reasons and consequences are of various institutional arrangements of economic activity.

These developments within economics strongly influenced economic history, particularly in the United States. Economic historians increasingly looked to neoclassical models for explanation and to econometric methods as ways of testing their hypotheses. Thus the new economic history, or cliometrics, was indeed an important epistemological shift. This trend became visible in the US with the birth of cliometrics around the end of the 1950s. The new approach, with neoclassical economics as an analytical framework and econometrics as an empirical tool, was initially marginal but quickly came to dominance in the US, its visibility greatly enhanced by the awarding of the Nobel Prize in economics (1993) to its two leading practitioners, Robert W. Fogel and Douglass C. North. Economic history became a subject now taken by economics graduates, and thus migrated from the history to the economics departments of American universities, becoming almost extinct in the former.

These new developments led to the redefinition of the major ongoing debates in economic history, the most important of them being about the origins of the modern industrial world and about global inequalities in economic development. Marxists tended to conceptualize these problems in terms of socio-economic formations, modes of production, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, original accumulation of capital, exploitation, imperialism, and later the core-periphery opposition.8 Neoclassically oriented economic historians focused on the

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8 Cf. the famous Dobb-Sweezy debate, or the works of I. WALLERSTEIN, The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century, New York 1974
development of more efficiency-prone economic institutions, particularly markets, and/or on the role of innovation and human capital as the foundations of the rise in productivity of factors of production and long-term economic growth.\(^9\)

Globalization turned the attention of economic historians toward the world-scale economic processes of the past and led to the emergence of a “world history” paradigm. This paradigm consists in assessing the roles of various parts of the world and interdependencies among them in overall development.\(^10\) The debate on the reasons for the “great divergence” is a particular case in point.\(^11\) These regions are often treated supra-nationally, such as “Latin America” or “South-East Asia,” and are usually constructed from elements of geography, culture, and political power. Not surprisingly, of these various regions China’s economic past has attracted particular interest in recent periods, as Japan’s did three decades ago. Economic success by regions previously backward provokes attempts at explaining the causes of this success. As Central Europe is not a case of particular success (though neither is it a failure), it is not an area that has attracted any special attention worldwide. (The case was different with Russia as long as the cold war lasted, but here the reasons were more geopolitical than strictly economic.) Neither has the accession of Central Europe to the European Union triggered any special interest in the economic past of this region. As far as it is the focus of any attention, it is mostly in the eyes of area specialists: the economic historians of the Habsburg, Romanov, or Ottoman empires.\(^12\)

It would probably be an exaggeration to say that this new approach has dominated economic history all over the world – in any case, the authors of this paper have neither knowledge nor competencies to make such a claim – but at the same time the role of the Americans as the trendsetters cannot be ignored. It is symbolic that the keynote speaker at the 15th World Economic History Congress in Utrecht (2009) was Daron Acemoglu, a prominent MIT economist known also for his interpretative work on economic history. Insofar as more locally-oriented historiographies attempt to gain broader visibility, they are forced to use international means of communication and platforms of encounter, such as the English language, international congresses and conferences, high-visibility journals, electronic publications, etc., and all these are very much influenced by the Anglo-Saxon style of doing science. In a more meta-epistemological way, making one’s own local

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\(^10\) In these terms Findlay and O’Rourke, both economists by training and historians by interest, analyze world trade during the last millennium: R. Findley, K.H. O’Rourke, *Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the World Economy in the Second Millennium*, Princeton 2007.


\(^12\) Thus, economic growth respectively in the Habsburg and Ottoman empires is the focus of interest of David Root and Sevket Pamuk.
research interesting for a broader audience demands relation to on-going debates and expressing argument in the idiom used by the contemporary international scholarly community.

3. The “golden age”

The period from the 1950s to the 1970s was the “golden age” of economic history in Poland. It was a time of lively debate on the roots of the economic weakness of the Polish, and, more broadly, Eastern European societies. The terms of the debate were defined by Polish historiography and only in the 1970s did the debate enter international historiography. It was also time of intensive contacts between Polish economic historians and their foreign colleagues. The movement was centered mainly, although not exclusively, on the academic schools and personalities of Marian Malowist, Witold Kula, Andrzej Wyczkański, and Jerzy Topolski. While Wallerstein credited Malowist alongside Braudel as a source of inspiration in his seminal *The Modern World System I* (1974), Braudel referred to Kula’s research on the 16th–18th-century feudal economy in Poland in the *Civilisation matérielle* chapters on peripheral capitalism. All four of the abovementioned Polish scholars participated in international congresses on economic history and published in world-class journals such as *Annales, Past and Present, European Journal of Economic History*, and *Economic History Review*.

The research on the pre-industrial past in this golden age was vast and diverse, and its practitioners also included many scholars who had not necessarily belonged to the “four schools” related to the scholars mentioned above. It covered first and foremost agriculture, but also non-agricultural production, as well as trade. The introduction of state socialism changed the situation of the discipline not only by increasing the number of posts for economic historians and with the availability of funds for publications. The radical agrarian reform of 1944 led to the nationalization of the archives of landed estates, which gave researchers access to mountains of previously untapped primary sources. Topolski started his career studying the archives of the Gniezno archbishops’ estate, while Kula’s major area

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14 The term “Eastern Europe”, roughly denoting the cold-war European satellite countries of the USSR and used in the 1950s and after, was replaced in the late 1970s by “East-Central Europe”, “Central and Eastern Europe”, or sometimes “Central Europe”, denoting societies subjected to communism, but remaining within the orbit of Western culture. The fascinating debate on the ideological shifts in symbolic geography related to these terminology changes is outside the scope of this paper.

15 Malowist, Kula and Wyczkański worked in Warsaw, Wyczkański also in Białystok, where he had many students and followers. Topolski was a professor at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, where he continued the pre-war tradition of Jan Rutkowski (1886-1949). Another strong center of economic history was the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, which followed the pre-war tradition of Franciszek Bujak (1875-1953), the founder of the economic history department at the university in Lviv, which after WWII fell beyond the Polish border.
The popularity of economic history in the post-war period was no doubt related to the imposition of state socialism as the political system and Marxism as the official ideology, with its economic determinism and doctrine of historical materialism. Studies on economic history were thus encouraged “from above,” which offered a window of opportunity for gifted young scholars at a time when honest research in, say, political history was more difficult. However, some of the slightly older scholars, particularly Małowist and Kula, were already close to Marxism in their views and approach before the Stalinist period. As for many members of their generation, the fact that their formative years had fallen during the Great Depression had left them with mixed feelings towards capitalism. Many others simply accepted the Marxist terminology of “base” and “superstructure” and its materialist assumption on the economic roots of political relations as the jargon of the day, absorbed along with the position in academic circles. As one historian observed, because of its ideological priority, the discipline paradoxically enjoyed more intellectual freedom than other social sciences – as if involvement in economic history research was a guarantee of ideological correctness. As a result, economic historians “could do their research more or less without disturbance and without paying substantial political tributes.”

For Małowist, Kula and Topolski the Marxist approach was attractive for its theory of social development. They might have been close to Marxism in the ways they posed questions, however, but this was not necessarily the case in all the answers they provided. Kula and Topolski made the transition from feudalism to capitalism central to their research, as recommended by the classical Marxist vision of history. Kula and Małowist were interested in how economic relations shaped class conflict and political power structures and cultural ideals. For Małowist an important departure from the Marxist orthodoxy of the time was his view that it

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16 None of them could be labeled communist in any sense, however, and none ever belonged to the communist party.

was commerce and trade rather than production that determined the positions of various regions of Europe. Kula’s initial presumption that feudalism had to give way to capitalism did not stop him from arriving at a theory of a unique Eastern European brand of late feudalism (combining the market and non-market sectors), devoid of any internal dynamics leading to capitalism. Topolski interpreted the dynamics of late feudalism in Europe in terms of a gentry mentality predisposing this class to certain economic activities stimulated by its consumption aspirations, imitating those of the Western upper classes. Malowist and Kula stressed the impact of what can be termed “dependency” mechanisms locking Eastern Europe in a backward status. Topolski, and Wyczarski in particular (who, unlike the three other leading figures here, cannot be classified as close to Marxism) noticed above all a dynamism in the region and similarities with Western Europe – perhaps because both of them were specialists in the 16th century, the true Golden Age of the Polish economy.

The Poles had strong connections with Annales, mostly through scholarships awarded by the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) and the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme (MSH), but did not carbon-copy the French approach. Their stays in Paris enabled them to keep in touch with what was going on in the wider world. In those pre-internet days, and with even good Polish research libraries having extremely limited funds for foreign publications, that was truly a lifeline for ambitious scholars. Poles addressed similar problems to the Annalists, but analyzed them in different ways. There were no large, regional, long-durée monographs that attempted to encompass “total history.” The typical product was rather a period-specific monograph of an estate, a town, or an institution, focused on either economic or socio-economic history. Historical demography, which gained momentum in the 1970s, was – unlike the Annales approach – rather loosely connected with a “total” way of analyzing the past.

This latter-day “golden age” witnessed enlivened methodological and substantive debates among Polish economic historians. Kula and Topolski produced different models of the development and demise of the manorial economy, as well as differing assessments of Polish/Western terms of trade. Malowist argued that in the long run the semi-colonial character of the Polish economy was detrimental, while according to Topolski the share of trade in overall output had been too small to be of decisive importance. He also was much more positive in his assessment of the second half of the 18th century than Kula was. The most lively debate on the role of

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the manorial economy also engaged foreign scholars, particularly Braudel and Wallerstein. Competing schools of thought produced sophisticated synthetic visions of the differences between Eastern and Western Europe and their relations in the early modern period, thus placing the Polish pre-industrial economy in a broader comparative European context. These debates also engaged a wider public, as they were related to the ongoing issue of the Polish discourse on history: why the old Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania ultimately collapsed in 1795 and Poland disappeared from the map of Europe for over one hundred years.

Irrespective of the differences between the schools, their synthetic works offer a convincing image of the Polish pre-industrial economic past. Some of these works emphasized and all of them accepted the divergence of the developmental paths of Western and Eastern Europe in the early modern period. In the late Middle Ages, the region narrowed the gap separating it from the post-Roman Europe. In the 16th century, however, the whole region east of the Elbe river and north of the Danube experienced a reintroduction of serfdom, which had numerous economic consequences, all of them destructive in the long run. Once the peasants were deprived of their economic freedom to produce, sell and buy, local craftsmanship lost much of the market. As the nobles bypassed the Polish towns, selling grain to the West through Gdańsk and importing Western luxury goods the same way, the urban sector also deteriorated. Agricultural productivity also stagnated. Serfs were not interested in or capable of agricultural innovation that would increase efficiency and output. Neither were the nobles pressed to innovate, as they could increase their incomes either by expanding their estates or by exploiting the peasantry even more. The magnates – owners of latifundia extending over hundreds of villages – benefited for many decades from terms of trade favorable to grain exports, and thus consolidated their economic as well as political power at the expense of the monarchy. In the longer run, however, the self-destructive tendencies of the serf-based manorial economy – the decreasing productivity of land and labor – undercut the viability of the system, and this was further exacerbated by the reversal of the terms of trade.

The flourishing of economic history and its international visibility in the post-war period cannot be explained solely in terms of the internal factors of the encouragement from above and the Marxist leanings of some of its practitioners. There was parallel interest from the West, particularly from French historians, and from Fernand Braudel personally. At the same time, while the communist system was authoritarian, with political and police controls over intellectual life, travel restrictions, censorship and the like, its Polish variant after 1956 was relatively lax. This favorable climate for Polish-Western research contacts survived even the vicious official anti-intellectual and anti-Semitic campaign which shook Poland in 1968. Historians interested in 16th-century agriculture and similar topics, if they did not otherwise provoke the regime, were left in peace and even allowed to travel, teach, and publish in the West. On the other side, Braudel – at that time at the helm of both EHESS and MSH, and also a personal friend of two Polish historians, Bronisław Geremek and Witold Kula – wanted to include Eastern Europe in his world-encompassing vision of the evolution of the world economy and was as
eager for contacts with Polish or Hungarian researchers as he was for those with historians from Latin America and Asia.

The foreign-language publications of Polish economic historians (but also of their Hungarian colleagues, the most notable among them being Iván Berend and Györgi Ránki) attracted attention also outside the strict Annales circle. Once Eastern Europe’s history became recognized as a relevant topic for leftist historians studying the origins of Western capitalism, the region experienced in the 1970s unprecedented coverage in British and American scholarship. Robert Brenner, who argued that modern capitalism emerged within the exceptional British agrarian class structure, made Eastern Europe a counterpart for his English case. Perry Anderson’s study of the origins of absolutism synthesized the research on Eastern Europe and associated Eastern absolutism with serfdom. Thus, the Western social science interest in Eastern Europe was a part of a broader leftist concern with developing, allegedly exploited and often postcolonial areas. The dependency school of Latin American economists, another peripheral research community, became appreciated in the West in the 1970s as well. The results of these studies were incorporated into leftist scholarship along with Polish and Hungarian work. The Eastern Europe-Latin America parallel, first fully pronounced in Wallerstein’s *The Modern World System I*, resonated well with the interpretations of Braudel and Kula. They all saw these regions as similar due to being caught up in a dependency trap. Anti-capitalist attitudes, as well as a certain neglect of cultural differences, made this parallel more attractive than it seems today. Now, with a neoclassical economic paradigm dominating the discipline academically and ideologically, economic historians are more interested in the winners of the “great transformation.” What nowadays stands in contrast with periods of a different ideological climate, such as that of the 1960s and 1970s, is the relative lack of interest in the losers of modernity. East-Central Europe has additionally lost its position of a contrast area for Western Europe because of the gradual incorporation of the former into the latter. Brenner’s debate comparing several European regions would not happen now that Europe as a whole is just one of the world regions being compared within the “world history” paradigm.

4. **The routes of departure**

Taking stock of recent developments in the economic historiography of Poland in the pre-industrial period is not easy because of the very fragmented character of this academic production. There are two professional journals, *Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych* (Yearbooks of Social and Economic History) and *Studiae Historiae Oeconomica*, but many contributions are also to be found in general history journals, and in journals produced by provincial universities and regional historical associations. Book publication also became very dispersed after 1989, and many works have been produced by small, sometimes ephemeral houses. Moreover, there is no professional organization of Polish economic historians, though at the Congresses of Polish Historians held every five years one session is usually devoted
to economic issues.\textsuperscript{21} True, there are yearly meetings of the economic history sections of economics departments, but their members deal predominantly, if not exclusively, with contemporary and recent economic history. (This, by the way, appears to be a much more vibrant field than research into the pre-industrial period.) The deployment of researchers by department is not without its consequences: those who deal with the pre-industrial period are usually employed by history, and not by economics departments, which makes for much less institutional pressure to stick to research on the economic past, and makes exit into other fields of study easy.

For the purposes of this paper, we reviewed three historical journals – two most influential general ones, and one specializing in economic and social history: \textit{Kwartalnik Historyczny} (Historical Quarterly), \textit{Przegląd Historyczny} (Historical Review) and the abovementioned \textit{Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych}. Additionally, we checked the general syntheses of Polish history published over the last 20 years, and their bibliographies.\textsuperscript{22} The impression given by this review is clear: little has been written in the field of economic history in the last 20 years, at least when compared with the subject’s “golden age.” Our observation confirms the opinion of Andrzej Wyrobisz, a social and economic historian himself: economic history has lost its lure in the past couple of decades, and researchers have turned to other fields.\textsuperscript{23} His own departure from the history of urban crafts toward the social and cultural history of towns and the history of sexual behavior is a case in point. Our review of bibliographies, journals, and publications in search of works more or less explicitly concerned with property, production and distribution on the macro and micro levels did not throw up many items. We say “more or less explicitly” for a reason. The boundaries between economic and social history are blurred, and economic issues are often of interest only for their role in explaining social ones.

The most recent works of a general nature, comparing Polish development with broader European patterns, were published at the turn of the 1990s, on the eve of the post-communist change.\textsuperscript{24} Certain clusters of interests are discernible in what has been produced since then, but each of them contains just a few names or works. Not surprisingly, one such clearly recognizable cluster is rural economy: noble and church estates, and the peasant economy.\textsuperscript{25} However, in works on the

\textsuperscript{21} At the IEHA, Poland is represented by the Committee of Economic History of the Polish Academy of Sciences.


landed gentry and clergy, the focus of research is often on their ideas, mentality and life style, including clothes, food, residences, patterns of inheritance and gender division of property or sponsorship of arts. The economic dimension is addressed only insofar as it is indispensable for understanding these focal issues. By contrast, the exploitation of the peasantry, treated so extensively several decades ago, has faded from the picture, as relations between nobility and peasantry have become a rare topic of study. Researchers have also retreated from the debate on the extent to which the international grain trade influenced the development of the manorial economy.


28 B. Wachowiak, Gospodarka folwarczna w domenach, cit., is exceptional in referring to the debate on manorial economy.
One relatively new field of study that has had an important (although not central) economic dimension is that on clientage within the noble class. A paternalism linked a rich and powerful aristocrat with numerous poorer members of the nobility. This included employment in the estate management and financial support that the former might offer to the latter. A fresh collection of studies of the estates belonging to one of the most powerful princely families of the Lithuanian part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Radziwills, makes no reference to Witold Kula’s work on the 18th-century beginnings of manufacturing on one of their estates. As the new publication cites a voluminous bibliography of earlier works on this well-researched aristocratic family, we treat the lack of a reference to Kula’s work as a symbol of a radical break with the 1950s and 1960s tradition of manorial economy research. Once this disappeared from the mandatory canon of literature, new ways of thinking on aristocratic estates dominated scholarship and by now have been transmitted to a second generation of scholars.

The debate on clientage nowadays plays a role of similar importance to that of the debate on manorial economy 50 years ago. It has brought together scholars specializing in both microhistory (e.g. the history of funeral rituals) and macrohistory (clientage versus modernization), scholars of several periods from the Middle Ages to the 18th century. It links conceptually the economy with the political system and social stratification, and allows comparisons across historical periods. Studying Polish clientage has become also an occasion to compare Polish society with its European counterparts: Italian, Spanish, Scottish or English, for instance. In a fashion resembling the debate on manorial economy, the clientage polemic has raised macrosocial (and, in the background, macroeconomic) issues related to specific characteristics of Polish feudalism, the weakness of royal power, and the impact of patron-client relations on modernization processes. It also seems that there is one more indirect reference that the clientage research makes to postwar historiography despite the otherwise radical break in the literature. This link is the inspiration by the Annales school. Although contemporary researchers stress politics and culture more than economy, they nevertheless observe the interconnection between them that says something about each of the three. The concept of mentality as understood by the Annales school has been cherished by researchers from the Wyczański, Topolski and Małowist schools as well as those who have come into contact with them through focusing on this problem area.


30 Administracja i życie codzienne, cit.


A number of works on peasant economy border on demographic history, with a focus on the relations between economic and demographic characteristics. A specific interest of one scholar is the economic role of the castles of the Teutonic Knights and their place in the broader context of the economic activities of this military-religious organization.

A significant remnant of the “golden age” is research into economic and socio-economic aspects of urban history. Here also the contrast with pre-1989 interests is striking. While studies on crafts and trade are rare, researchers have become interested in “softer” issues, such as the financial aspects of activities of a primarily social character, such as charity — hospitals, poorhouses, orphanages, dowry and funeral funds, and the like. Otherwise, urban pre-industrial history has been dominated by monographs of towns and inter-town trade relations. Regional East-Central European or comparative urban studies have been rare. History of women and ethnic minorities in the urban setting, and history of mentalities and life styles referring – more or less loosely – to the economic context, have developed since 1989 in parallel with new fields in manorial economy studies.

Trade is a third cluster, with works on relations between the Polish lands and the Orient, and relations with the West, on the network of fairs, or on the horse

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36 M. Goliński, Socjotopografia późnośredniowiecznego Wrocławia (przestronno-podatniczy-rzemiosło), Wrocław 1997; D. Moleń, Rachunki krakowskiej wagi wielkiej jako źródło do dziejów handlu złotem i srebrą w Polsce w XVI-XII w., in “Przegląd Historyczny”, 90, 1999, n. 4, pp. 433-444.
trade. The macroeconomic research on international trade initiated by Malowist has been continued by others including Henryk Samsonowicz and Danuta Molen-
da. Other works focus on interstate trade agreements. Yet another recognizable cluster centers on state revenues and public finance. Otherwise publications are thematically scattered.

A clear and striking deficit is a quantitative treatment of the economic past. This is perhaps not surprising given the character of Polish early modern history: the weak central administration accomplished little in terms of regular data collection. Moreover, many of the archival records of the early modern period perished during the war. The late Andrzej Jeziorski’s and Andrzej Wyczański’s efforts at making the study of the past more number-oriented resulted in the Polish Central Statistical Office recently putting together a large publication on historical statistics. In the practice of research, however, little effort is being put into new data gathering and, in particular, into making them easily available through electronic databases, something that is increasingly being done in other countries. In the field of analysis, there are no efforts at generating estimates on past output volumes, national income or GDP. Neither there are any studies on productivity.

There are exceptions on a micro scale – A. MIODUSZEWSKA, Historia Polski w liczbach, cit.; A. WYROBISZ, Review, cit.


45 There are exceptions on a micro scale – A. MIODUSZEWSKA, Trendy w produkcji zbożowej na Podlasiu w okresie nowożytnym na podstawie choroskiej księgi dziesięcin, in “Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych”, 61, 2001, pp. 59-91.

46 Historia Polski w liczbach, cit.; A. WYROBISZ, Review, cit.

economic history is far behind its sister discipline, demographic history, on which much more is done, and the state of which has been recently summarized in a large study by Cezary Kukło. Thus, demographic history is balancing between the quantifiable and the cultural. Interest in sexuality, gender, aging and the demography of the family are on the rise, but both material culture and household economics are marginalized.

The limited amount of new research means that the dominant interpretation of the Polish economic past as characterized in the previous section has barely been challenged. There have been very few papers trying to give a synthetic assessment of the pre-industrial period. The lack of any large-scale revisionism is reflected by the picture of the Polish economic past painted in recently published general works. A new textbook of Polish economic history aimed at students of economics devotes a quarter of its space (about 120 pages) to the medieval and early modern periods. Its (unfortunately very limited) bibliography cites no works on this period published since 1989. The chapters on the medieval and early modern periods basically summarize the research done up to the 1970s, and do not refer to the redefinitions of the economic history research agenda that have been going on in the West over the last 20 years. Almost the same might be said of another very good textbook, this time of general Polish history, but only of the 1572–1975 period. It is 1,000 pages long, but it devotes only 36 pages to economic matters. Many more – over 100 – are on social history. The economic part is fairly traditional and again does not go beyond the state of knowledge of the pre-1989 period, neither does it attempt to provide any statistical indicators. The number of works on economic history in the strict sense of the word contained in the very extensive bibliography of this book, does not exceed five, all on treasury matters.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the departure from economic history was already beginning in the 1970s. The direction of the march was primarily social, and increasingly cultural history. This is the case with a number of distinguished former students of Marian Małowist. Antoni Mączak, after parting with economic history, wrote books on sixteenth-century travelers, on the systems of power in Europe in

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52 U. AUGUSTYNIK, Historia Polski, ct.
53 To be fair, the author of this textbook specializes in the history of ideas and in political history.
this period, and on patron-client relations. True, he remained faithful to the vision of the “Malowist school,” conceptualizing Europe in terms of zones of various degrees of development. Henryk Samsonowicz and Maria Bogucka researched and wrote on early Polish urbanism, Bogucka increasingly turning towards women’s history. Outside this circle of people related to Malowist, Andrzej Wyczanski initiated studies on early modern social structures in Poland. Jerzy Topolski became interested in the methodology of history and wrote a number of important books on the topic. In the 1960s and 1970s Witold Kula led the field in research on the changing social structures in Poland in the 19th century – true, an extension of his earlier interests in the origins of capitalism, but this time analyzed from the social history perspective. Most of his collaborators in this major project were his former doctoral students, who in the 1950s had done research on the beginnings of Polish industrialization. Most subsequently moved into social history, and one of the most gifted, Jerzy Jedlicki, to the history of ideas. Kula’s own last major work, *Men and Measures* (1970), is difficult to classify, but certainly goes beyond economic history in any traditional sense of the term.

The names mentioned above are those of the main figures of the “golden age” of economic history in postwar Poland and their immediate followers. Economic history lost its attraction for some of them already well before the 1989 political change, so the natural reasons for their disappearance from the scene (Malowist and Kula died in 1988, Topolski in 1998, Mączak in 2003, and Wyczanski in 2008) are of no importance for understanding the changes. As historians of the economy they do not seem to have many followers today either. An analysis of the other fields that attracted new entrants into the historical profession in the late 1980s, the 1990s and the first decade of this century would go much beyond the scope of this paper and the competencies of its authors, but it seems that social history and cultural history were prominent among them. Some became attracted by the approaches triggered by the postmodernist shift in the humanities. This is, for example, the case for Ewa Domanska, a student of Topolski’s who began her career with a study of Jan Rutkowski, a prominent pre-war historian of rural economy and Topolski’s mentor. Later, however, Domanska’s interest shifted toward microhistory, on which she wrote a book, and toward non-traditional, post-modern ways of doing history.

5. *Concluding Remarks*

There are three conclusions that come out of our review and assessment of economic history research as it is currently practiced in Poland.

The first relates to the reasons for what we consider the near-extinction of the discipline. One reason is the fading of the Marxist paradigm of doing economic history. This has been a broad process, but in the post-communist countries it has been exacerbated by an understandable allergy towards Marxism. Marxism came to be associated with the imposed official ideology of state socialism, irrespective of either its substantive merits or the shortcomings of the theories and methodologies which it inspired. For the new, upcoming generations of historians, following the
old paths thus became intellectually and emotionally unattractive. Another reason is that the alternative – the neoclassical framework for analysis – is not readily available to history graduates, as it demands economic training. Economics departments have accepted the new framework, but they do not encourage historical research, particularly on the pre-modern era. What thus remains is the work done within history departments with no commitment to economy.

The second conclusion is that the lack of new research is resulting in a process whereby even existing knowledge is being relegated to oblivion. The considerable body of previous studies, the product of dozens of historians’ work, is gathering dust in libraries. Old monographs and syntheses are rarely consulted, challenged or debated, while current historians of other aspects of the past – political, cultural, even social – know less and less about the economy. Historical demography and clientage studies, the two dynamic fields of study that encompass issues of distribution and consumption, have developed with only loose reference to the research of the “golden age.” They broke with the assumption of economic determinism and see economic activity as only one of the elements of the social system, alongside politics and culture. The various routes of departure have brought historians to new disciplines, quite often via the Annales school methodology introduced in the “golden age.” However, Polish historians have turned eagerly to Annales authors less interested in economic history than Fernand Braudel.

The third conclusion is that this lack of research and debate is causing the discourse on the Polish economic past (or whatever remains of it) to lose touch with the ways of thinking prevalent in economic history as it is being practiced today. In the 1960s and 1970s, the way of talking about the Polish economic past was compatible with the ways broader European and world issues were being discussed by economic historians or historical sociologists. What was at issue then were modes of production, surplus extraction, large structures, transition from feudalism to capitalism, and the possible exploitation of the periphery by the core. Today, the mainstream discourse is different. It is dominated by neoclassical macroeconomists interested in the leading economies of the world, and not leftist historians looking for the causes of peripheral backwardness. Today, the key questions are those about the sources of economic growth, the role of demography, human capital, and innovation, and the ways in which institutions shape the behavior of economic actors. The reasons for the differences in economic prosperity of various regions or countries are sought not in exploitation, but rather in circumstances of an institutional and cultural nature, which either stimulate or block economic development. Of course, the neoclassical approach as currently prevailing in the analysis of economic life past and present is not God-given and does not have to be accepted wholesale. But ignoring it leads to a lack of communication between the local and the broader scholarly community.

These three conclusions also highlight the challenges facing future researchers of the Polish economic past. Let us name just two. One of them is to rethink the body of knowledge produced in the “golden age,” in particular the interpretation of backwardness as a result of dependency, and of manorial economy as a developmental trap. The second is the challenge of doing more quantitative research, without which it is next to impossible to make an assessment of the
relative successes and failures of an economy. True, this is a formidable task, bearing in mind the incomplete and scattered nature of the surviving primary sources. But the bold attempts at quantitative estimates made recently by many historical economists all over the world show that this task is not an impossible one.