

**Wojciech SŁOMSKI**

## **THE PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE AND EUROPEAN IDENTITY**

The problem of identity at least these days, is not a directly philosophical problem, but rather the subject of disputes in the well-known newspapers. Identity is rarely the subject of modern famous thinkers' speeches. This is because in the present process of uniting Europe, the main debate centres around the economic and political aspects of the process, whilst the cultural aspects are put to one side. It is worth mentioning here C. Adenauer's assertion: „The ground of European unity is an idea of Christian community, culture and European civilization.” In this context we can also mention the previous chairman of the European Commission, J. Delors, who states: „If Europe does not have its own soul, it will not define itself as cultural, it will not be Europe. But if it is only a political or economical community, it will not absolutely fulfil its task.” It is not difficult to notice the difference between these two statements; the first highlights the problem of cultural unity, formulated as a postulate, a kind of program which must be carried out in the future. We can interpret Delors' thought as a kind of warning against neglecting the problem of cultural identity.

Modern societies and states face tasks which are no easier than those faced by Europeans at the beginning of integration: Europe must make a stand against the process of economic and cultural globalisation, growing nationalistic tendencies, and commercialisation, and at the same time Europe must keep its own identity. Therefore, the philosophy of culture seems to be in a peculiar situation; creating a theoretical basis for the process of strengthening the feeling of belonging to a common cultural tradition depends on this discipline. To make the situation of the philosophy of culture clear, it is necessary to examine some basic terms and to lay down methodological opinions. In this piece

of work I will try to draw your attention to the problems connected with the idea of „culture” and of the „philosophy of culture.” I think that the concept of cultural identity establishes one of the basic, if not the most basic, idea, without which it is impossible to understand the recent processes in the range of European culture.

The problem with defining „culture” precisely is rooted in the fact that this idea has recently become popular, is now used with various meanings, and also includes culture as a theoretical collection of human products in its definition, and is thereby opposed to the „nature” idea, as well as containing particular cultures. In this second group one should remember that when we talk about European culture, we assume the existence of many cultures, from which European culture differs in certain ways which are typical of it. However if we speak of European cultures as nations or as characteristic of a particular historical epoch, we presume the existence of particular features, differing one from the other, and also the existence of common features, and we can therefore use the „European cultures” definition.<sup>1</sup> Here, the „culture” idea will only be used with the second meaning; it means concrete culture, existing now, differing from other cultures, definable through highlighting its differences and similarities to other cultures, not through its opposite.

The idea of the philosophy of culture also has many meanings. The idea of culture didn't belong to basic philosophical thought until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and the popularity it gained in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century along with the contemporary renaissance of its popularity now, does not prove that the philosophy of culture is not only an intellectual fashion, and there are certain difficulties in separating it from the other culture sciences. The main problem is connected with the fact that no culture reflection can stop at theoretical consideration – it must then refer to experience. So one of the most important tasks of culture, if it wants to be a philosophical discipline, is to define its own character, to mark out its own place in the range of cultural sciences. Primarily, it must lay down the tasks relating to culture. The statement that the philosophy of culture has its own tasks to fulfil, and is therefore a sphere which constantly revolves around its own object, does not appear clear at first sight. However, it comes from the fact that the philosophy of culture is a kind of criticism, and criticism, by its very definition, aspires to define something of worth, and that activity naturally influences various cultural forms.

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<sup>1</sup> See H. Schnädelbach, *Kultura* [Culture], in: *Filozofia. Podstawowe pytania*, Ed. by E. Martens, H. Schnädelbach, Warszawa 1995, p. 546 and following.

One of the main problems with the philosophy of culture is a question: can it define something of worth in the case of a cultural form of life?<sup>2</sup> This question is itself connected to another: is a general culture idea necessary, that is, is the essence of culture a concrete realisation of a certain kind of human existing in a material and spiritual world, or do we stop at the assertion that a variety of cultures exist? This is not an abstract idea of culture, through which you can research and describe different cultures, without being restricted to the culture which you came from. In other words, the main culture idea can serve to describe, can be an instrument able to understand various cultures (which could lead to a deeper comprehension than simply „being in” a culture), and can also function as an ideal culture model.<sup>3</sup>

The connection between the philosophy of culture (understood as a test for finding an answer to the above-mentioned questions) and the creation and evaluation of the feeling of belonging to a common European tradition, seems to be obvious. This is because the idea of Europe or the idea of European identity is a kind of idea or program of an „over-state”, an „over-national” and „over-confessional” community, so it is also a kind of culture form.<sup>4</sup> Europe as an idea becomes an object of philosophical dispute like any other culture form. Of course you can doubt the possibility of referring to Europe as a peculiar culture totality<sup>5</sup>, but you cannot deny that it is a fact that Europe exists as an idea.

F. Znaniecki's thoughts concerning perception are essential to culture perception. In Znaniecki's opinion every subject of perception, from nature to symbols, is always an activity creation; it is always *somebody's* subject.<sup>6</sup> This means that it is impossible to understand what is outside the range of definite cultural background: all thought research is dependent on the group of symbols understood by a definite group of people, sharing common values and ideas. Recognising and transforming

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<sup>2</sup> Although this question is one of fundamental problems with the philosophy of culture, the fact, that it is an object of dispute, proves that the philosophy of culture needs to define value in a natural way and to stoop approaching „freedom” from the perspective of „value” or „worth”. It requires many premises which would oppose the traditional values of European culture. However, it seems that it has not yet been possible to uphold such premises and take their consequences into consideration.

<sup>3</sup> See: *Filozofia...* [Philosophy...], p. 553.

<sup>4</sup> See: K. Pomian, *Europa i jej narody* [Europe and Its Nations], Warszawa 1992.

<sup>5</sup> See: B. Skarga, *Kultura europejska i jej imperatywy* [European Culture and Its Imperatives], in: B. Skarga, *O filozofię bać się nie musimy* [We Do Not Have To Be Anxious for Philosophy], Warszawa 1999, p. 101.

<sup>6</sup> See: F. Znaniecki, *Wstęp do socjologii* [An Introduction to Sociology], Poznań 1922, p. 32.

the subjects which make up culture, we assume that they have their own ontological status, coming from their symbolic and „thinking” nature. The acknowledgement of the theory that culture or cultures could be formulated as a factual reality would be a misunderstanding. You can think of culture as something which exists objectively, independent of a subject aspiring to understand it, however every description is a formulation of a subject in its symbolic character.<sup>7</sup>

The philosophy of culture does not, therefore, differ in any way from other areas of perception, including science. The philosophy of culture does not oppose other philosophical disciplines or the natural sciences, wherein a subject can also be formulated as perceptual, acting as a symbol of objective reality. Philosophy and science do not oppose one another, rather, along with many other elements, they form an entirety defined as a culture.<sup>8</sup> Philosophical culture criticism is also a part of this culture and independent of the consequences of cultural European unity, it is not something that you can consider separately from the other processes occurring in culture.<sup>9</sup>

There is another connection between philosophy and European culture, which E. Husserl commented on. In Hesserl's opinion Europe was born of philosophy, and strictly speaking from the ancient Greek philosophical tradition. The main difference between European civilisation and others which are older (for example Chinese or Hindu), consists of the disparity in their manner of asking questions. While China and India were focused on the question „how?”, that is, how to achieve an aim, in Greece people were asking not only „how?” but also „why?”. The question „why?” contains a query as to the essence of matters. So European philosophy asks what a phenomenon is, what is man, what is a nation or a society, but it also asks why this phenomenon, nation or society exists. According to Husserl, this particular sort of question-asking, distances Europe from other parts of the world and explains the continuity of her identity in spite of historical and geographical changeability.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See: P. Kawiecki, *Filozofia kultury a wartości awangardowe i estetyczne* [Philosophy of Culture and Vanguard and Aesthetical Values], „Edukacja Filozoficzna”, vol. 10, 1990, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> See: P. Kawiecki, *Sztuka i nauka* [Arts and Science], „Studia Filozoficzne”, 1988, No. 8.

<sup>9</sup> See: S. Sarnowski, *Przyczynek do dyskusji o jedności Europy* [A Contribution to the Dispute about European Unity], „Edukacja Filozoficzna”, vol. 16, 1994, p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> See: B. Pogonowska, *Podstawy tożsamości kultury europejskiej w ujęciu Ajdukiewicza i Husserla* [Basis of European Culture Identity in Ajdukiewicz and Husserl Expression], „Edukacja Filozoficzna”, vol. 20, 1995, p. 177.

Due to theoretical thinking on the highest level of generality, the way of human living has changed, so it seems that Husserl's opinions concerning the function of philosophy in the formation of European identity can also be referred to the function which philosophy should perform in a conscious way as a philosophy of culture. Husserl's opinions concerning culture are constitutive from the point of view of forming modern European identity. Husserl, like Heidegger, was afraid of the naturalization of European culture and warned others of it. Pragmatism, (which only values that which is directly useful) is spreading throughout Europe, and it is really alien, contradictory and even dangerous for European culture itself precisely because European culture is an intellectual and philosophical culture.

Culture ought to face the conditions and challenges of present-day Europe, and from this point of view, Husserl's opinions ought to be seen as only partly reasonable, given that Europe did not fall victim to pragmatism and naturalism to the degree expected by Husserl. It is worth noting here that no science, neither the „practical” sciences (those concerned with the technical possibilities of activity in the world), nor the „theoretical” sciences, are quite innocent. Science enables us to reign over the world, but European culture is in its nature, expensive culture; it aims not only at an explanation of reality through ideas, but also at prevalence over such a reality. This concerns not only physical reality but social and cultural reality as well: Europe has spent centuries destroying every difference within itself and within other cultures. „Keeping Europe in the centre” writes B. Skarga „is still our sin, we did not get rid of the conviction that we have a monopoly on the fullest truth, our domination over the world is really justified... Becoming prevalent over the whole political and social life means not only becoming prevalent over institutional organization, internal and external policy and so on, it also means becoming prevalent over ways of thinking, over citizens' opinions, cultural pieces of work, over the totality of life; it is intellectual and moral slavery.”<sup>11</sup>

L. Kołakowski<sup>12</sup> maintains that „tendencies to monopolization are in European culture”, as that culture is able to submit to continuous critical reflection, so one of the basic functions of the philosophy of culture is and should be to discover forms and tendencies to monopolize, as well as examining itself and its cultural surroundings. Kmita represents a similar way of thinking, defining this practical function –

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<sup>11</sup> See: B. Skarga, *Kultura europejska...* [European Culture...], p. 107.

<sup>12</sup> L. Kołakowski, *Cywilizacja na tawie oskarżonych...* [Civilisation between The Accused...], p. 78.

not only the philosophy of culture but all the humanistic sciences as well – as social regulation. In Kmita's opinion, the philosophy of culture should serve to recognise „every type of condition in concrete social activity”, because only in this way will it be able to reveal values and lay down rules for its achievement.<sup>13</sup>

We should remember that the philosophical criticism of culture is not the only form of culture defence that has tendencies that are both dangerous and complex. The philosophy of culture does not only pose the question of what is a potential danger for European culture, but it also highlights the problem of this culture defined as a certain, general unity. This criticism also concerns European identity and is so important, from the perspective of identity, that it immediately meets with facts which oppose its existence. First of all this criticism shows that looking for individual identity is difficult enough. In comparison with the difficulties connected to the self-defining of an individual man, finding a common denominator for national, ethnic, linguistic, political and religious diversity, appears unfeasible. Sometimes it is said that up to now the idea of identity has brought more disadvantages than advantages – it has been the source of wars, ethnic cleansing and colonial conquests. The idea of cultural identity is becoming more doubtful in the face of increasing acquaintance with other cultures and science concerning past European culture.<sup>14</sup>

The consciousness of the philosophy and civilisation crisis, which has accompanied philosophical reflection for three ages, seems to be stronger now than ever before, maybe because the question of identity (on a cultural level as well as on an individual level), has become more difficult than ever. Not only the crisis but also its consciousness has a huge influence on the course of social and political processes, therefore philosophical reflection on culture should lead to the formation of the consciousness of identity on the two above-mentioned levels, so that, as J. Derrida said, the end of culture, humanism and even humanity in its cultural and European surroundings would not appear as prophecy.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, one should reflect on the consequences connected to the possible resignation of the idea of cultural identity. It seems that throwing away this idea would not only be a danger for economic and political European integration, but would primarily be a negation of

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<sup>13</sup> See: *Rozmowa z J. Kmitą o filozofii i kulturze* [A Conversation with J. Kmita about Philosophy and Culture], in: *Filozofie*, Poznań 1991, p. 79-95.

<sup>14</sup> See: E. Levinas, *Filozoficzne określenie idei kultury* [Philosophical definition of Culture Ideal], „*Studia Filozoficzne*” 1984, No. 9, p. 28.

<sup>15</sup> See: J. Derrida, *Kres człowieka* [The End of Man], in: *Pismo filozofii*, Kraków 1992, p. 136.

human subjectivity: cultural identity is ultimately a kind of sense proper for the individual, it is also a common conviction about membership, not only in a particular „over-national” community, but it also involves the acceptance of „over-national” and „over-religious” values. Moreover, because every culture criticism belongs to a culture itself, maintaining that you can differentiate between what is profitable for culture and what is a potential danger for culture (and tracking dangers in criticisms seems problematic in culture) – is also turning against the culture itself.<sup>16</sup> According to these conclusions, the theory that European identity criticism is also an indispensable element of the forming process of that identity, would appear to be justified.

We ought to also mention the various kinds of culture „projects” recently embarked upon by the philosophy of Postmodernism. As B. Truchlińska observes: „'Project' is a favourite word of the postmodernist thinkers and their followers, and is surely the opposite of the once fashionable 'model' word.”<sup>17</sup> In spite of the apparent attractiveness of postmodernist „projects” expanding from the weakness of their ideas, it seems that all „projects” declared by philosophy or culture „models”, are utopian programs, independent of whether they resign from the identity idea or try to find a firm basis. In spite of that, the identity idea seems to be as fundamental for the philosophy of culture as rationality is for the theory of perception, although all you can do in the face of consciousness of the identity crisis is to stop at the critical analysis of the identity idea. The existence of certain kinds of mutual influence between thinkers' opinions of culture and individual consciousness seems to be a completely incontestable problem, however it does not mean that philosophy is able to arbitrarily model the way of identifying individuals with cultural tradition. If it tries to do that, then it stops being philosophy and becomes a part of some political doctrine.

Consequently, one should recognise (and this task should be fulfilled only by philosophers) the differing meaning of the identity idea as a basis for defining projects, (it does not matter if these projects will be realised in politics, philosophy, art or any science) from the meaning of that idea as a theoretical idea, serving to define objective, social and cultural reality. In this case, the philosophy of culture cannot be separated from reality, the philosophy of culture cannot deny that it enters into various bilateral relationships with reality, because in doing so it would become a sort of utopia. However, the philosophy of culture

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<sup>16</sup> See: H. Schnädelbach, *Kultura...* [Culture...], p. 555.

<sup>17</sup> See: B. Truchlińska, *Postmodernistyczny „projekt” kultury* [The Postmodernist „Project” of the Culture], „Edukacja Filozoficzna”, vol. 20, 1995, p. 119.

cannot treat the idea of identity as an absolute value, realised with no regard for circumstances. If it happens so, the philosophy of culture will be opposed to the other fundamental values of European culture, namely to the idea of objective truth. Since, as I have tried to show, truth as a value is the basis of European culture dissimilarity with other cultures. Finally, any attempt to build a new cultural and social utopia would be in conflict over which utopia to build.

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### **Streszczenie**

Świadomość kryzysu filozofii i cywilizacji, która towarzyszy refleksji filozoficznej od trzech stuleci, jest chyba obecnie silniejsza niż kiedykolwiek, być może również dlatego, że pytanie o tożsamość – tak na płaszczyźnie indywidualnej, jak i na płaszczyźnie całej kultury, stało się trudniejsze niż dotychczas. Ponieważ jednak nie tyle sam kryzys, ile jego świadomość, ma ogromny, jeżeli nie decydujący wpływ na przebieg procesów społecznych i politycznych, zatem filozoficzny namysł nad kulturą nie tylko może, ale i powinien prowadzić do takiego kształtowania świadomości własnej tożsamości na wspomnianych dwóch płaszczyznach, aby postulowany przez J. Derridę kres kultury, humanizmu i tym samym człowieczeństwa w jego uwarunkowanym kulturowo, europejskim pojmowaniu nie okazał się samospełniającym się prorocstwem.

Z drugiej jednakże strony zastanowić się należy nad konsekwencjami związanymi z ewentualną rezygnacją z idei tożsamości kulturowej. Odrzucenie tej idei bowiem zapewne stanowiłoby nie tylko zagrożenie dla ekonomicznej i politycznej integracji Europy, lecz przede wszystkim byłoby zaprzeczeniem podmiotowości człowieka: tożsamość kulturowa jest w ostatecznym rozrachunku rodzajem poczucia właściwego jednostkom, jest wspólnym przeświadczeniem o przynależności nie tylko do pewnej ponadnarodowej wspólnoty, lecz także o akceptowaniu wspólnych, ponadnarodowych i ponadreligijnych wartości. Ponadto, ponieważ wszelka krytyka kultury należy także do kultury, zatem utrzymywanie, iż potrafi się odróżnić to, co jest dla kultury korzystne, od tego, co stanowi dla niej potencjalne zagrożenie, oraz upatrywanie zagrożeń



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w krytyce tego, co wydaje się w kulturze problematyczne, jest także w pewnym sensie zwróceniem się przeciwko kulturze. W świetle tych uwag uzasadnione jawi się wysunięcie tezy, że również krytyka tożsamości europejskiej jest nieodzownym składnikiem procesu kształtowania się tej tożsamości, podobnie jak i pozytywne dążenie do jej określenia.

Wspomnieć także trzeba o różnego rodzaju „projektach” kultury, wysuwanych w ostatnich latach przez filozofię postmodernistyczną. „Projekt” jest ulubionym słowem postmodernistów i ich zwolenników, zapewne przeciwstawionym kiedyś również modnemu „modelowi”. Mimo pozornej atrakcyjności postmodernistycznych „projektów”, wynikającej w dużej mierze z niejasności samego ich pojęcia, wszelkie zgłaszane przez filozofię „projekty” czy też „modele” kultury, niezależnie od tego, czy rezygnują z pojęcia tożsamości, czy też usiłują znaleźć dla niego pewne podstawy, są zapewne programami utopijnymi. Mimo że pojęcie tożsamości bywa dla filozofii kultury tak samo zasadnicze, jak np. pojęcie racjonalności dla teorii poznania, to jednak jedyne, co wobec świadomości kryzysu tożsamości filozofia kultury może uczynić, to poprzestać na krytycznej analizie idei tożsamości. Istnienie pewnego rodzaju sprzeczności zwrotnego pomiędzy formułowanymi przez filozofów poglądami na kulturę a świadomością jednostek jest chyba sprawą bezsporną, to jednak nie oznacza to, iż filozofia potrafi dowolnie modelować sposób identyfikowania się jednostek z tradycją kulturową. Jeżeli stara się to czynić, wówczas przestaje być filozofią, a staje się częścią tej czy innej doktryny politycznej.

Dlatego też za celowe uznać należy – i zadania tego podjąć się powinni właśnie filozofowie – konsekwentne odróżnianie znaczenia pojęcia tożsamości jako podstawy określonych projektów (nie ma przy tym znaczenia, czy projekty te będą realizowane na obszarze polityki, filozofii, sztuki czy jakiegokolwiek innej) od znaczenia tego pojęcia jako pojęcia teoretycznego, służącego do opisu obiektywnej rzeczywistości społecznej i kulturowej. W tym drugim przypadku filozofia kultury również nie może oderwać się od rzeczywistości i nie może nie wchodzić w różnorodne dwustronne relacje z nią. Gdyby postępowała inaczej, stałaby się także rodzajem utopii. Nie może jednak traktować idei tożsamości jako wartości bezwzględnej, realizowanej bez względu na okoliczności. W przeciwnym razie filozofia ta popaść by musiała w konflikt z inną podstawową, a może nawet nadrzędną wartością kultury europejskiej, mianowicie z ideą prawdy obiektywnej. Ponieważ zaś prawda jako wartość stanowi podstawę odmienności kultury europejskiej wobec innych kultur, zatem próba zbudowania kolejnych kulturowych i społecznych utopii ostatecznie popadłaby w konflikt z celem, dla którego by utopie te stworzono.