

**OBITUARY FOR AN EDUCATIONAL HUMANIST:
BOGDAN SUCHODOLSKI, 1903–1992**

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Bogdan Suchodolski, who died on 2nd October 1992, had a worldwide influence through his writings and lectures. In his own lifetime he was recognised as an educationalist who attempted, in a spirit of humanism, to give educational meaning and historical continuity to modern endeavours in Western education. He was one of the leading proponents of socialism who sought to give socialist ideas their educational expression.

Suchodolski, born on 27th December 1903, studied in Warsaw, Cracow, Berlin and Paris. His early encounters with different cultures led him to consider himself, and to act and speak as, a European, his love of his own country notwithstanding. His concept of cultural education, inspired by Eduard Spranger in Berlin, became one of his essential tenets: seeing a person's roots in one culture as the natural precondition for access to an understanding of others, with the aim of education for world citizenship.

In 1938 he became Professor at the University of Lwow, and in 1946 at Warsaw. A high point of his career was his election in 1969 to the Presidium of the Polish Academy of Sciences. During these years he invited colleagues from various countries to lecture to the Academy, in order to strengthen the international exchange of educational ideas. Whoever had the privilege to be a guest of Suchodolski in Warsaw at this time (as happened several times to this author), met a cultivated host who turned every situation – the lecture hall, conversations in his private house or on a car journey through Poland – into a small symposium which illuminated the minor events of everyday life with the light of the profoundest of life's questions.

Suchodolski's work reveals several major concerns. On the one hand, he addresses the philosophical justification and the educational embodiment of socialism, in the books *Grundlagen der marxistischen Erziehungstheorie* (German version 1961) and *Theorie der sozialistischen Bildung* (German version 1974). On the other hand, he saw a wider duty to interpret the relationship between man and culture, and the place of education as the medium between the two. His lectures gave preference to these philosophical and anthropological questions, but they are also to be found in his books: *Die polnische Kultur in der Zeit der Renaissance* (German version 1958), *Anthropologie philosophique de la Renaissance* (1976) and *Education permanente en profondeur*.¹

A further concern is the history of mankind, which is seen as a struggle for understanding and self-realisation. In this process Suchodolski accords a

significant role to education as well as to philosophy and anthropology, since self-realisation is only possible in association with education. In the Renaissance and the Enlightenment he finds one of the high points of the development of mankind, so that he repeatedly takes up this theme. As examples may be cited *Origins of Modern Philosophy of Man* (Warsaw 1963, 1968) and *Development of Modern Philosophy of Man* (Warsaw 1967).

The late work *A History of Polish Culture* (Warsaw: Interpress 1986), which has been translated into several languages, may be regarded as typifying the concept of cultural education of Suchodolski, the man and the thinker. Some comments on this publication are therefore appropriate.

The introduction offered by *A History of Polish Culture* to the culture of a people which has given the world Copernicus and Chopin is seen as a search for cultural roots, for *colere* and *cultus*, as well as for the interrelationships within world culture. The attempt to illuminate the dialectical relationship between Polish culture, world civilisation and European culture, runs as a *leitmotiv* through the entire book. This, together with the goal of understanding 'the history of Polish culture as the development of social consciousness', as is said in the Foreword, determines the methodological approach.

The work gives insights, in comprehensible language, into the cultural particularities of the six great historical epochs: the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque, Enlightenment, suppression of national liberty, and independent Poland. A rich and well-integrated selection of pictorial material (made by Maria Suchodolska) assures a visual depth and adds decisively to the understanding of the content. Culture is seen as the evolution of a people's consciousness and self-awareness through their historical-cultural development, to which work and the arrangement of everyday life contribute as much as literature, art and philosophy.

The first powerful cultural centres arose through the enlargement and embellishment of the palaces and castles of the king and nobility, and through the building of Christian churches and monasteries. Education was linked to the religious foundations, which spread from the 11th century. The foundation of the University of Cracow in 1364 provided an intellectual centre of major significance for all social classes which attracted professors and students from the whole of Europe.

The subsequent spread of culture throughout society was largely attributable to the influence of newly created schools and colleges, among which the School of the Polish Brothers in Rakow may be mentioned. Rakow was often referred to as the Sarmatian Athens because even in distant parts of Europe it was valued as an intellectual centre, not least on account of the Rakow Press. It is difficult to provide objective evidence of the spread of popular culture, as is the case in other European cultural units: it is seen, as Suchodolski suggests, in the number of schools and the spread of writing, as well as in individual diary entries.

The most severe suppression of freedom and rights was suffered by the Polish people under National Socialist aggression and occupation. The act of

Janusz Korczak in deciding to leave the Warsaw Ghetto with his children to face death in a concentration camp, is a symbol of human greatness during this time of violence which is known worldwide; it is commemorated in sculpture by Xawery Dunikowski and in poetry by Antoni Słonimski. At this time of extreme misery, culture became a sign of the potential for purposeful life. 'These years taught the apparently paradoxical lesson that one can remain true to oneself and history by re-creating oneself and the world in defiance of oneself and reality', says Suchodolski of the telos of that time.

Re-creation of the world – political, human and cultural – was the overriding task of the period following liberation in 1945. In numerous works of art, in literature, painting, music and films, the sufferings of the occupation, the camps and forced labour found their expression. As examples we may cite the bronze by Franciszek Strykiewicz, *Auschwitz*, Tadeusz Kuliscewicz's *The Ruins of Warsaw* or the oratorio *Dies Irae* by Krzysztof Penderecki. Literary analysis of Poland's national inadequacies complemented this artistic representation, in order to give a perspective for future development.

Suchodolski's work *A History of Polish Culture* offers a broad and always reasoned insight into Polish culture, its historical development and transformations, and its place in world civilisation. Education and schools are seen in this context as constituents of culture, not as its passive appendix and compliant tools, but rather as the congenial members which provide the necessary conditions for the acceptance, preservation and further development of culture. Thus this book lays the foundations for an understanding of the social and human responsibility of culture as a creative world open to all, which comes to life only if it accepts this role. The book serves to spread knowledge of Polish culture and thereby to contribute to international understanding between people, who cannot but have as their starting point the environment of their own culture.

Suchodolski's part in the founding of international organisations deserves to be acknowledged. In 1945, for example, he was among the founders of UNESCO in London. He was also one of the founder members of the Comparative Education Society in Europe and of the World Association for Educational Research. Suchodolski belongs to the ranks of the great Polish humanists, whose word carries weight throughout the intellectual world: this became clear at international conferences, especially at the congresses which he organised himself in Warsaw in 1969 and 1986. A high point was reached by the Congrès des intellectuels pour l'avenir paisible du monde in 1986. This demonstrated the great respect in which Bogdan Suchodolski was held by the intellectual representatives of very diverse cultural fields.

Suchodolski recognised early in his career that educational plans and actions are only realised in a political context. It was in this light that he saw his work as President of the National Cultural Council in 1983 under General Jaruzelski, and indeed that he sought to act. In this endeavour, at the dawn of democratisation, he ran a risk which provided grounds for the political criticism which overshadowed the last years of his life.

In Bogdan Suchodolski international education loses a critical member and good friend who enriched international conferences through his presence and his contributions. He received recognition in many forms: through honorary membership of the Comparative Education Society in Europe, an honorary doctorate of the University of Padua and the award of the Comenius Medal. He honoured us by his balanced judgment and his modest manner; he will be sorely missed, as a person and a scholar.

Note

1. Cette oeuvre, peut-être la dernière de Suchodolski, a été publiée en 1993 par l'Institut de l'Unesco pour l'Education (ISBN 92 820 2063 0, DM 14, -) et est disponible auprès des Editions de l'UNESCO:

L'auteur s'adresse à la question du choix moral, qui est devenu de plus en plus difficile à notre époque marquée par l'ébranlement de toutes les valeurs. Malgré les moyens de communication de masse, la 'cité éducative' ne diffuse pas de messages profonds. La conciliation de l'éducation instrumentale et de l'éducation "désintéressée" est l'une des tâches nécessaires pour que nous puissions comprendre et accepter les finalités de notre vie.