

STORIA DELLA STORIOGRAFIA  
HISTOIRE DE L'HISTORIOGRAPHIE  
HISTORY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY  
GESCHICHTE DER GESCHICHTSSCHREIBUNG

1983, 3

Jan Rutkowski (1886-1949)  
and His Conception of Synthesis  
in Historical Science

Jerzy Topolski

Jaca Book

# Jan Rutkowski (1886-1949) and His Conception of Synthesis in Historical Science

Jerzy Topolski

1. *Principles of the development of historical science.  
Rutkowski's place in the development of historiography in the  
first half of the 20th century*

Historical science has certain peculiarities that mark its development. It has not developed cumulatively, as historians usually imagine it does, nor has it developed anticumulatively, through revolutions of paradigms, as, e.g., Th. Kuhn claims science as a whole has done. It may be said in most general terms that the various elements of historical knowledge pass from one system to another in various ways in doing which they behave either cumulatively or anticumulatively. Statements on relatively simple historical facts, if based on a critical interpretation of sources, do cumulate, but explanatory hypotheses are usually accepted or rejected *in toto*. The same applies to larger fragments of the past and their synthetic representations. Hence, while statements on single historical facts are all the time being taken over by one model of historiography from another, narrative wholes of which such statements are parts are often rejected in a new model of historiography.

The same holds approximately for such principal elements of methodological consciousness of historians as principles (norms, directives) which guide historical research and narration. Single methodological principles pass from one model of historical science to another, but sets of such principles, which are characteristic of a given model, function only as specified wholes. They are characteristic of a given school of historiography or a given model of historiography precisely as sets of principles.

Further, methodological principles do evolve and develop. They gradually set historians more and more difficult tasks, even though those tasks are of the same kind. But the problem which is the most essential for the evolution of historiography consists in the transformation of those principles from the point of view of their acceptance by historians. They change their status: from non-standard principles, at first accepted by few historians who strive to change a given model of historiography, they change into standard

ones, i.e., such whose acceptance and application in practice are necessary if a person is to be treated as a professional historian in a given period (or in a given place).

In the early 20th century the set of those methodological principles which marked the emerging new model of historiography absorbed the non-standard principle of theoretical conceptualization. It is still a non-standard one, but during the last 50 years it has become deeply rooted in the methodological consciousness of historians. That principle imposes upon historians the duty of looking for (and formulating) theoretical foundations of historical narration. Those foundations are to replace the direct guidance of narration by current knowledge, ideological and political opinions, which has been characteristic of traditional history writing, by scientific theories.

Jan Rutkowski (1886-1949), the most eminent Polish historian in the first half of the 20th century, was one of the pioneers of the said linking of historical research and narration with theories. Like Max Weber (1864-1920), he not only postulated theoretical conceptualization, but constructed such conceptualizations himself and made use of them in his research. Rutkowski as an economic historian was in the leading group of those historians who gave new foundations to traditional economic history. Next to stressing the fact that theory is necessary for historical research and conceptualization in historiography, Rutkowski called for an extension of the sources on which economic history is based (so that they should include mass sources) and for a more modern approach to statistical methods.

Rutkowski was the main founder of research on Polish economic history. His plan, outlined in the early 20th century, envisaged parallel empirical and theoretical studies. He intended in that way not only to reconstruct economic history as a discipline, but also to provide a picture of Polish economy in modern times, based on comparative studies. The main axis of that picture consisted in the explanation of changes in agrarian relations, namely the transition from the money rent system to that of demesnes based on serf labour, and the consequences of that process.

It would be a loss of time to look for any direct influence upon Rutkowski on the part of a historical school or an eminent historian. He was well versed in social science of his times, especially economics and sociology (and owed much to the Marxist theory), but did not accept any statements just because they were backed by an authority.

Rutkowski took his doctoral degree at Lvov University in 1909, his doctoral thesis being concerned with the Polish fiscal system under the rule of King Alexander of the Jagellonian dynasty. In 1909-12 he stayed in Italy and in France, where he studied at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (1910-11). He had contacts with many French historians, in particular with H. Sée (1864-1936), but he did not consider himself a member of his school. Rutkowski's works—many of his papers were published in France—were highly praised by M. Bloch. The year 1927 saw the appearance in France of his book *Histoire économique de la Pologne avant les partages*,

which has not been replaced to this day by any similar work.

His theoretical and historical conceptions formed a consistent system at different levels of generality. His reflections on historical syntheses belong to the general level. He published many studies and papers on the subject, including "Le problème de la synthèse historique dans l'histoire économique", which appeared in the *Revue de Synthèse Historique* in 1927.

## 2. Organic-humanistic syntheses. Critique of causal and typological syntheses.

Rutkowski ascribed to synthetic studies the principal role in the promotion of historical research. Syntheses were for him the means that made it possible to grasp historical reality as a whole and in its inner links, and at the same time the mirrors of the state of historical knowledge of a given fragment of the past. Syntheses, he used to emphasize, show in full light the needs to be satisfied by research and allow one to formulate the most urgent research problems.

Rutkowski realized that success in constructing syntheses, i.e., integrated approaches to various historical problems, depends on many factors, and that the mere desire to offer such an integrated approach is not enough. He gave the pride of place to the following two factors:

(I) methodologically adequate conception of synthesis-formation in historical research (theory of syntheses);

(II) adequate theory that makes synthetic conceptualization possible, i.e., allows one a real, and not merely apparent, linking together of facts and relations in the past (theory of reality).

In our opinion, the greatest methodological and theoretical (and also empirical) achievement of Rutkowski consisted in suggesting answers to questions related to the issues indicated above.

Concerning problem (I) Rutkowski formed his opinion already at the time of preparing his first papers. He had been predominantly inspired in that respect by numerous sociological and philosophical works studied in the perspective of the Marxist theory, with which Rutkowski came to be acquainted even when he stayed with his parents in Warsaw. His ideas matured during World War I, when he planned a synthetic study of Polish economic history, and found an extended formulation in his paper read at the Fourth Congress of Polish Historians, held in Poznan in 1925<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> J. Rutkowski, "Zagadnienie syntezy w historii gospodarczej" (The Problem of Synthesis in Economic History), in: *Pamiętnik IV Powszechnego Zjazdu Historyków Polskich w Poznaniu 6-8 grudnia 1925* (Proceedings of the 4th Congress of Polish Historians, held in Poznań on December 6th to 8th), Lvov 1925; reprinted in: J. Rutkowski, *Wokół teorii ustroju feudalnego* (On the Theory of the Feudal System) ed. J. Topolski, Warsaw 1982, pp. 455-62 (further references are to the last-named edition).

Next to his conception of "organic" syntheses Rutkowski singled out syntheses of three other kinds, which function in the consciousness of researchers working in the field of the humanities, and of history in particular:

(a) directly source-based mechanical syntheses which are simply expositions "of historical facts extracted from the sources by a historical analysis and systematized in some way"<sup>2</sup>;

(b) indirectly source-based mechanical syntheses, which are "major wholes usually based on monographic studies made by other authors, which in a sense synthesize the results of their research"<sup>3</sup>;

(c) philosophical syntheses, intended "to describe the fundamental historical phenomena and to find out the regularities of their occurrence and progress"<sup>4</sup>.

Type (a) and type (b) syntheses are, in Rutkowski's opinion, no syntheses at all, even if they pertain to the universal history of mankind. They continue to be analytical constructions. On the contrary, type (c) syntheses are outside the sphere of genuine historical research since the latter is required to start from empirical research—even be it guided by "general ideas" (i.e., in the way Rutkowski interpreted historical research in general)—and not to be confined to theory construction. Since the historian must formulate syntheses based on historical data which are not free from specifically historical linkings and also deviations from pure regularities, the problem of synthesis construction requires special reflection.

The basic problem consists in arriving at an "organic whole", that is, at showing historical facts in their "inner connections". Rutkowski says that "there are various ways of that organic linking of the results of analytic studies", i.e., various methods of preparing syntheses proper. He was not satisfied with some of them because they yield syntheses that are not necessarily organically coherent "and also do not show the course of historical development", which is to say that they do not comply with the principle which might be termed the principle of historicism. Note also that by organic syntheses Rutkowski meant not only the description of the inner linkings among facts but also (which was indispensable) the explanation of those facts. In his opinion only synthetic presentations, which need not pertain to large fragments of the past but may be concerned with minor issue, enable us to comprehend history.

Rutkowski was satisfied neither with syntheses which might be termed causal nor those which might be termed typological. The former, which are eventually possible in the case of monographic studies dedicated to a single fact or a complex of homogeneous facts, would have to be connected with the adoption of a radically deterministic interpretation of history, in the light of which one would have to point to a single factor that causally conditions

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 455.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

the entire process of history. Rutkowski was of the opinion that reality is much too complex to allow us to interpret history in such a way. By proceeding along that path one can at most arrive at "partial syntheses" if one succeeds in demonstrating that there is such an unambiguous causal nexus which starts from the operation of a principal efficient cause. That was why Rutkowski critically assessed such radically deterministic-and-causal interpretation of the theory of historical materialism, and also all other conceptions that recommended a similar monistic interpretation of history, regardless of which facts be taken as the cause that linearly conditions the course of history. It must be noted that at the time when Rutkowski formulated his theory of historical syntheses, the dominant interpretation of the theory of historical materialism (due to positivistic influences) was just the deterministic one, which Rutkowski did not accept.

While causal syntheses, in Rutkowski opinion, make the picture of the past poorer by eliminating from it functional relations, that is, linkings among the various sequences of causes, typological syntheses do not observe the principle of historicism. Rutkowski voiced his opinion on that issue on several occasions. In his review of *Wirtschaftsgeschichte* by Max Weber, whom he called "an eminent German historian and, primarily, sociologist"<sup>5</sup>. Rutkowski wrote disapprovingly about the value of typological approaches for historical syntheses, even though he did not preclude the importance of such approaches for theoretical studies and also for making use of historical science for the verification of the results of research. He was also critical of the approaches of W. Sombart (1863-1941) and A.A. Bogdanov (1873-1928), because their syntheses lacked a historical linking of facts.

The type of historical synthesis to which Rutkowski gave his preference might be termed organic-humanistic. Its construction does not reject causal relationships, but also depends on the simultaneous bringing out of functional relations (synchronic interrelationships), that is, reconstruction of both causal sequences and structural relations, combined — which is very important from the methodological and theoretical point of view—with analysing those relations in the perspective of human actions.

It is only in this way that Rutkowski conception can be interpreted. He did not expand it with reference to the whole of history, but did so only with reference to social and economic history. Now when it comes to socio-economic history Rutkowski was of the opinion that we have first to reconstruct that activity from the point of view of the attainment of that goal. Thus Rutkowski saw the possibility of a historical synthesis primarily

<sup>5</sup> J. Rutkowski, review of M. Weber's *Abriss einer universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, München-Leipzig 1923 (2nd ed 1924), in: *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny*, Vol. v, 1925, pp. 1084-7; reprinted in: J. Rutkowski, *Wokół teorii ustroju feudalnego*, pp. 463-6.

from the point of view of how men make their own history. It may be assumed that, as in the case of economic activity, reconstruction of goals should take place when syntheses are attempted of other branches of history and of the totality of human history as well. For instance, in the case of political history Rutkowski would probably see such a goal in the wielding of power and in the struggle for power. The totality of human history would have to be a *sui generis* reconstruction of the various planes of human actions that would reveal interconnections among them (e.g., search for the economic conditionings of the struggle for power, etc.). Rutkowski's opinion was that while the economic factor is of fundamental importance in the shaping of human history its impact on the various planes of history is more indirect and weaker if they are more remote from the material conditions of human life. The issue will be discussed later.

3. *Distribution of social income as the axis of the synthesis of socio-economic history and as the foundation of the theoretical approach to economic history*

As we have shown, in his search for the axis (inner links) of historical syntheses Rutkowski strove to reach the very sources of the process of history. He found them in the process whereby men make their history by striving for their goals. He accordingly thought that in each field of human activity one has to single out some primary goal(s) and the actions connected with the attainment of those goals, wherefrom increasingly numerous and increasingly variegated links among historical facts emerge.

With reference to economic activity Rutkowski pointed to the fact that such a primary goal is to be seen in the acquisition by men "of an adequate amount of economic goods" with which they can meet their needs<sup>6</sup>. The existence of those goods is, of course, primarily a result of production, but if economic activity (production and distribution of goods) "takes place within society, the goal of that activity—from the point of view of the whole—appears to us in the form of the distribution of social income"<sup>7</sup>. Men thus acquire an adequate amount of economic goods that enable them to satisfy their needs (and they do so by producing such goods), but they do not link that directly to production: their goal is to obtain—through the intermediary of a complex social and economic system—the income that is necessary for the satisfaction of their needs; they do so by carving in out—through the process of distribution—from the total amount of social income.

Rutkowski wrote that "A closer analysis of the elements of a given economic system and their relation to the issue of the distribution of social

<sup>6</sup> J. Rutkowski, "Zagadnienie syntezy w historii gospodarczej", p. 459.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

income reveals that all those elements are directly or indirectly related to the distribution of that income. It follows therefrom that if we want exhaustively to show the distribution of the social income in a given country at a given stage of its economic development we have to take into consideration all the elements of its socio-economic system at that time, that is, its entire economic history up to that period. It follows further therefrom that by taking the issue of the social income as the fundamental problem of economic history we can arrive at a complete synthetic interpretation of the whole socio-economic history"<sup>8</sup>.

We thus first have a close linking of social history with economic history because, as Rutkowski claims, one cannot analyse the distribution of the social income without a simultaneous disclosure of the differentiation of society into socio-economic groups "which differ from one another by the sources of their incomes". As Rutkowski pointed out, the problem looks differently in each socio-economic system, i.e., within each mode of production (such as feudalism and capitalism). He studied the issue in greater detail with respect to feudalism, in particular that phase of feudalism in Poland which was marked by the predominance of demesnes based on serf labour (16th to 18th centuries). He understood his task in two ways: to show the real distribution of incomes under that system and thus to arrive at an organically synthetic interpretation of the economic history of Poland in modern times, and to contribute to the theory of the feudal system, which was necessary for all fruitful and not merely factographica study of that system.

The advancement by Rutkowski of his conception of a synthesis based on the study of income distribution had been preceded by the thinking over of the entire issue not only in the sphere of economic history but also in that of political economy. He found much inspiration in theoretical economics since there the issue of income distribution is one of the most important problems. In some approaches it is even the fundamental problem on which the entire system of theoretical economics is based<sup>9</sup>.

The income distribution which Rutkowski had in mind was not that according to factors of production (land, capital, labour), i.e., a functional distribution, which has been more extensively analysed in theoretical economics, but distribution among persons and social groups. Let it be noted that the theory of such income distribution is even now still in its initial stage<sup>10</sup>. Rutkowski accordingly postulated the adoption of a path that was theoretically new and, when it comes to historical studies, one of the most

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 560.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. E. Schlicht, *Einführung in die Verteilungstheorie*, Reinbeck bei Hamburg 1976; see also B. Külpe, *Verteilungstheorie*, Freiburg/Brag 1974; J. Marchal, B. Ducros (eds.), *The Distribution of National Income*, London, Melbourne, Toronto, New York 1968.



difficult methodologically. But he was convinced that that was necessary if we were to acquire an adequate knowledge of the past.

His theoretical reflections were accompanied—as usual in his case—by empirical studies. He conducted them primarily with reference to the rural population engaged in agricultural production, because the essence of the feudal system was to be found there, but his first empirical study of income distribution was concerned with the production of salt: he analysed income distribution in Ruthenian salt mines under the rule of King Sigismund Augustus (d. 1572)<sup>11</sup>.

Rutkowski's opinion was that the study of income distribution cannot at first cover an entire country but "should begin with the lowest units of the socio-economic system, i.e., with the individual economic units"<sup>12</sup>. The point is above all to establish the categories of income and the social groups (types of participants) which participate in income distribution. "It is only on the basis of such monographic studies, completed with statistical analyses of the numerical strength of the said types of participants, that one can arrive at establishing the presumable total amount of social income and the way it is distributed among those who participate in the process"<sup>13</sup>.

Rutkowski singled out three stages of such research. The first is intended to reproduce the model (in Rutkowski's formulation: the general characteristic) of the socio-economic system in which income distribution is investigated. The second should be statistical in character and consist in establishing the numerical data pertaining to the various elements of the socio-economic system concerned (such as the social structure, property relations, etc.), while the third is to consist in reconstructing the incomes and expenditure of the individual economic units (usually, of course, extant accounts and/or account books).

His study concerned with Ruthenian salt mines covered all those stages, and it is to this day exemplary in its precision. Every line of Rutkowski's text and every numerical datum quoted reflects the general task Rutkowski had set himself on both the empirical and the theoretical plane.

Rutkowski says that "the study of income distribution must begin with the value of production, i.e., the amount of income"<sup>14</sup>. He adds that "that problem links most strongly technological-economic history to socio-economic history"<sup>15</sup>. Thus, in his opinion, "enquiry into income distribution must

<sup>11</sup> J. Rutkowski, "Podział dochodów w zupach ruskich za Zygmunta Augusta" (Income Distribution in Ruthenian Salt Mines under the Reign of Sigismund Augustus), *Prace Komisji Historycznej PTPN*, Vol. v, Poznań 1928, pp. 1-153.

<sup>12</sup> J. Rutkowski, "Podział dochodów w zupach ruskich...", p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

begin with the study of purely material questions and natural conditions, techniques and size production”<sup>16</sup>.

The size of production (income) together with production techniques, while by assumption inseparably connected with income distribution, are not, in Rutkowski's interpretation, treated as the axis of the synthesis, because the category of distribution more strongly reflects economic and social problems than do the categories of size of production and amount of income. The category of (income) distribution covers not only those problems which are directly and indirectly linked to the amount of income, but also all the problems of aspirations of social groups and classes and individuals in relation to the shaping of income distribution.

Transition from the study of material economic conditions to that of socio-economic problems takes place when one proceeds to establish the value of the previously fixed volume of production (i.e., in the course of the study of material economic conditions). In the Ruthenian salt mines the annual production (1565) amounted to ca. 70,000 barrels of salt, valued at ca. 36,000 Zlotys; the gross income was split into three principal parts: one of them was passed to other enterprises as the price of what the salt mines needed from them in the process of production; the other constituted the wages paid in cash or in kind; the third was the income of the royal treasury (in the case of the mines owned by the king) or of the private enterprises (which produced about one-half of the salt); in the last named case that income amounted to the income of those enterprises (less certain sums paid to the royal treasury). Rutkowski found out how large those three parts were and what was their share in the total income from the salt mines.

Following a detailed analysis Rutkowski found that the following elements participated in the distribution of the income from the Ruthenian salt mines (in the 16th century): (1) the royal treasury, (2) tenants of the salt mines owned by the king, (3) tenants of privately-owned salt mines, (4) entrepreneurs who did not lease their salt mines but did not work in them personally, (5) owners of salt mines who themselves supervised hired labour or leased their salt mines, (6) clerical personnel, (7) serfs who brewed salt, (8) hired labour pay on the *per diem* or piece-work basis, (9) journeymen fed at the cost of the salt mines, (10) hired labour, primarily craftsmen and carters, (11) serfs doing auxiliary work (primary timber transport).

Rutkowski further emphasized that income distribution depended on the form of the socio-economic system. That is why that system must fully be taken into consideration when income distribution is studied. Otherwise one is unable to reconstruct the process of distribution. Nor is there any single element of the socio-economic system of the salt mines on which

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

income distribution did not depend in some way<sup>17</sup>.

Rutkowski stated that the study of the Ruthenian salt mines could not signally "contribute to the explanation of the entire process of socio-economic development" under the feudal system<sup>18</sup>. That goal could be achieved only by the study of the conditions prevailing in the rural areas. "Examination of the influence which the transition from the land rent economy to the system of demesnes based on serf labour had upon the distribution of the income from agricultural production and other branches of rural economy into the part falling to the peasant population and that falling to estate owners will explain in greater detail the economic foundations of the political power of the gentry"<sup>19</sup>.

Rutkowski's opinion was that "interpretation of the entire economic development from the point of view of income distribution will help us better to understand the links between economic history and theoretical economics and thereby contribute to improve studies in the sphere of the latter discipline"<sup>20</sup>. That would be to the advantage of both economic history and (theoretical) economics. "Historians of economic relations, who often lack sufficient theoretical training, usually treat lightly the results obtained by theorists. They explain their attitude by the fact that present-day economic theory, based almost exclusively on the data obtained from the economic development of the Western civilization in the recent period of less than two hundred years, has not formulated concepts, not to speak about laws, in terms of which we could interpret so widely different forms of economic development in the remoter past, especially in the Middle Ages, when economy was based primarily on feudal foundations, and in Antiquity, when the predominant role of slavery shaped the economic system into forms that differ so much from those observable today"<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand, theorists do not take the results of historical studies into consideration, and explain that by "referring to the fact that studies in economic history conducted so far have mainly been limited to simple statement and systematization of more or less loosely treated details from the economic past"<sup>22</sup>. "Both", Rutkowski wrote, "are largely right. The general concepts used in present-day economics do not suffice to cover the entire economic development, and historical studies in the form of purely analytic constructions are of no great value for theoretical analyses"<sup>23</sup>. Rutkowski accordingly postulated that both types of research be brought closer to one another,

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

which could make it easier to interpret the economic past in terms of income distribution.

The study of the distribution of the incomes from the salt mines in the region of Lvov, Przemyśl, and Drohobycz was for Rutkowski merely an introduction to the study of income distribution that was to cover agricultural production. The results of his research, planned to fill several volumes and to cover the period from the 16th to the 18th century, were published in part in 1938 in *Badania nad podziałem dochodów w czasach nowożytnych* (Studies in Income Distribution in Modern Times). Vol. I, which appeared then, covered theoretical analysis and a classification of the incomes of large estate owners. The next volume, prepared for publication, was lost during World War II. The only traces of his results are to be found in Rutkowski paper prepared for the 7th Congress of Polish Historians, held in Wrocław in 1948.

Rutkowski found that in the feudal period the burdens imposed upon peasant farms had "an immense influence" on the distribution of incomes. He referred to the impact of the feudal system in this connection. The impact of capitalism was observable only in those cases in which production was to some extent based on hired labour.

He wrote that "The first stage of the study of income distribution must consist in the study of the incomes of representatives of the various social strata in different economic situations"<sup>24</sup>. In the course of his study of the income of estate owners under the system of demesnes based on serf labour Rutkowski divided those incomes into those received from one's own land (mainly the said demesnes) and from the burden imposed upon other people's land (peasant farms), which procedure made it possible to establish the degree of development and the importance of the demesnes. The division into incomes from one's own economic activity and from the burdens imposed upon other people's farms (the feudal rent) did not mean that the income from one's own activity was not due to the work of the serfs. It turned out in practice that the division into incomes from "one's own" estate and those from "other people's" farms was vague, which required a penetrating analysis and a very large number of decisions (also in the sense of estimates) to be made during research work.

Establishing the pure income from the various estates and the division of that income into the income from the demesnes and that from the burdens imposed upon peasant farms does not conclude the study of the share of the owners of big estates in the social income. The further fortunes of that income are important. This includes the incomes of workers and the clerical personnel paid to them by the estate owner in specie, in kind, and in the form

<sup>24</sup> J. Rutkowski, "Zagadnienie podziału dochodu społecznego do XVIII wieku" (The Problem of the Distribution of Social Income up to the 18th Century), in: J. Rutkowski, *Wokół teorii ustroju feudalnego*, p. 571.

of usufructuary rights, and also similar incomes of the clerical personnel and servants who performed public functions in a given estate. Likewise, we have to single out the amounts spent on public purposes not directly related to a given estate but a more general character. In the case of the royal estates the further division of the pure income from those estates, as outlined above, was particularly complicated. In the Poznań region in the first half of the 17th century the average income of one person working on the demesne amounted to (as mentioned by Rutkowski) only one-thirtieth of the average income from one demesne.

When it comes to the incomes of those peasants who had farms Rutkowski wrote that in view of a lack of adequate sources we have to resort to a reconstruction of peasant budgets which would enable us to estimate the incomes and expenditure of peasant farms in the various categories. But in the later period he did not declare himself in favour of that method. Kniat obtained the percentage value of the burdens imposed by the demesne (rent, contributions, serf labour) in proportion to the pure income from peasant farms, while Rutkowski was concerned with finding the share (in percentages) of the lord of the demesne in the total income from the estate (i.e., both demesnes and peasant farms). Kniat established how much the peasants had to give to the lord of the demesne from their incomes while Rutkowski (like S. Grabski before him) wanted to know how the total income from the estate was divided between the lord and the peasants.

Rutkowski pointed out that establishing the income of town dwellers was even more difficult than reconstructing peasant incomes, and that because of the differentiation of industrial production. On the whole, he concluded, the distribution of property was the most important factor that affected the distribution of incomes, which is to say that a greater share in property was accompanied by a correspondingly greater participation in income.

While ownership determined the degree of participation in total incomes, changes in the distribution of incomes in the course of time depended primarily on the phenomenon which, as Rutkowski wrote, "might be termed feudal opportunities"<sup>25</sup>. "We mean by that term", he wrote, "the totality of those conditions which account for the fact that big landed estates could, in certain regions and in certain periods, exploit peasant labour to a greater extent, whereas in other places and/or in other periods that was possible only on a smaller scale. That depended on production techniques, legislation, effectiveness of courts and administrative authorities that stood guard over that legislation, density of population, and other circumstances. From the end of the Middle Ages those opportunities deteriorated more and more for the Polish estate owners, and the process continued to the

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 579.

rule of King Stanislaus Augustus" in the second half of the 18th century<sup>26</sup>.

The influence of both groups of factors (which affected income distribution and its change in the course of time) should let itself be grasped in terms of the percentage participation of the big landed estates in the total income. That was fairly simple in the case of rent-based feudal system: the distribution of incomes between the lord and the peasants was reflected in the ratio of the pure income from a peasant farm to the lord's income from the rent. "We can speak here about the lord's per cent. share in the social income produced by a given peasant farm"<sup>27</sup>.

In the case of the economy based on serf labour the problem is more complex, because "distribution covers not only the income from the peasant farm; it covers that income taken together with the income from the demesne". In the "pure" system based on serf labour "the lord's per cent. share in the results of peasant work is defined by the ratio of the lord's income from the demesne to the sum of the incomes from the farms of the peasants who work as serfs on that demesne". Only such a number, Rutkowski claimed, is comparable with the number characteristic of the rent system. He pointed out that the calculations cannot be made for the peasant farms separately, but for the demesne jointly with the peasant farms attached to it.

As has been said, in his work on income distribution in modern times he was concerned solely with the classification of incomes of owners of large estates primarily from the point of view of the division of those incomes into those obtained from demesnes (held by the landowners themselves) and from peasant farms (i.e., from land held by people other than the lords of the demesnes). But his comprehensive theoretical reflections covered the totality of his planned studies intended "to grasp in the form of numerical data the division of social income into the lords and the peasants"<sup>28</sup>, i.e., to find out how much went to the lord of the demesne and how much was left to the peasants, and how these proportions were changing in time. In his opinion "that division was the most important problem in the history of the agrarian system based on feudal foundations"<sup>29</sup>. That is so because in its dynamic interpretation it enables one to comprehend the mechanisms of the making of economic decision by the persons concerned, with the resulting explanation of economic processes (such as transition to the system of demesnes based on serf labour) and agrarian reforms (i.e. transition from serf labour to rent). Changes in the incomes of

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 580.

<sup>28</sup> J. Rutkowski, "Badania nad podziałem dochodów w Polsce w czasach nowożytnych" (Studies in Income Distribution in Poland in Modern Times), in: J. Rutkowski, *Wokół teorii ustroju feudalnego*, p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

the various social classes and groups were the motives of their actions; Rutkowski saw in them, in the long run, the principal motive of action.

This was how Rutkowski understood the operation of the economic factor in human history. There was no determinism in it. Changes in income distribution were to be presented in the further volumes of his work.

Rutkowski carried out his analysis by resorting to the method of models, i.e., by passing gradually "from simplest situations to increasingly complex ones". "We shall first", he wrote, "analyse the functioning of income distribution under the closed feudal system, that is such in which there are no economic relations among the landed estates" while within each estate there are only such economic relations which are essential for the systems he had singled out, namely, the rent system, the serf labour system, and the hired labour system, treated as models. Those systems are analysed separately and later, when the models are brought closer to real conditions, in their combinations; further, in the process of concretization credit and exchange relations between the demesnes of a single estate and the complications due to the economic contacts with the external world are taken into consideration.

In the closed feudal system only the lords and the peasants participate in the distribution of income, the totality of income being produced by the peasants. The share of the lords in that income consists of two parts: (I) the rent and contributions collected from the peasants, (II) the pure income from the demesne. On the other hand, the peasants participate in the income they produce in the following way: (i) the consumed part of the incomes from their respective farms, (II) the hired labour done for the lord (if they had such opportunities, and also if their serf labour was accompanied by certain performances on the part of the lord).

In the cases of larger estates the tenants also participated in the lord's income. The same applied, in Rutkowski's opinion, to the top administrators of the demesne (if they could afford to live like the gentry).

In the pure rent-based system, Rutkowski claimed, all income was produced by the peasants on their farms (because demesnes did not exist under that system). One part of the income went to the lord in the form of the rent and contributions, and the other, to the peasant in the form of the income from his farm (after the deduction of the needs of production). If the peasants had their own servants (in his first simplified model Rutkowski did not consider the labourers hired by peasants), the additional problem emerged, namely that of their participation in the incomes from peasant farms. If, the total income being constant, the incomes of the lords increased as a result of harsher exploitation, the incomes of the peasants decreased. Rutkowski called it a change in "the rate of exploitation of the rural population".

The situation is more complex, even in a "pure" feudal system, "if serf labour is the only burden imposed by the lord and serfs are the only workers on the demesnes"<sup>30</sup>. Rutkowski was one of the first to show the

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

differences between the economic function of the rent and that of serf labour. In the case of the rent, i.e., under the rent system, the burdens imposed upon the peasants equal the income of the lord. But when it comes to serf labour one cannot apply to it such categories as the pay for analogous work (which is typical of the capitalist system and the hired labour model under the feudal system). Hence the possible value of the serf labour contributed by the peasants to the demesne, fixed on the basis of the pay for analogous work (if there is a labour market and if the price of labour can be established), "is something entirely different than the income received by the lord owing to serf labour"<sup>31</sup>.

"It follows therefrom", Rutkowski wrote, "that in the system based on serf labour the study of income distribution confined to peasant farms does not give the proper idea of the role of serf labour in the real distribution of income between the peasants and the lord"<sup>32</sup>.

One has therefore to cover by the study both peasant farms and demesnes in order to find out how the peasants and the lords participated in the total income obtained from the economic units of those two kinds. Such calculation must cover the entire peasant population and not only the farm owners; it also dispenses one from the embarrassing establishing of the number of work days really contributed by the serfs, instead of the number of the days during which they were obliged to work (which data are usually known). Some forms of serf labour, Rutkowski wrote, can be (in exceptional cases) treated as the freeing of the lord from his duty to pay for work (for instance when peasants from town-owned villages cleared streets in towns).

In the feudal system based on hired labour, i.e., when large estates consist of a number of demesnes each, all agricultural income is produced on the demesnes and is later divided into the income of the owners of large estates and the income (in specie or in kind) of the peasants employed on the demesnes.

Rutkowski emphasized that these three models of the socio-economic system (rent-based, serf-labour-based, and hired-labour-based) very rarely occurred in their pure forms. They usually occurred in various combinations, which Rutkowski analysed by resorting to appropriate concretizations on the basis of his findings pertaining to pure models. A model is particularly difficult to concretize if it includes exchanges that covers means of production<sup>33</sup>. Obviously, already changes in prices complicate the models (for instance, if peasant farms and demesnes differ in the amount of marketable production). Trends in prices, Rutkowski demonstrated, were co-efficients of income distribution, that co-efficient being fixed outside the agrarian system itself. When it comes to the prices of the agricultural produce sold, price trends

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> J. Rutkowski, "Zagadnienie podziału dochodu...", p. 582.



manifested themselves in the pure income of both groups, established on the basis of prices. "It is only in the case of exchange economy and the formation of such prices that one can bring the various items of income in kind to a common denominator... actually in money, as their common measure, the pure incomes of the peasants from their own farms and from hired labour, and of the demesnes from rents and their own production" <sup>34</sup>. When it comes to trends of the prices of consumer goods that had to be bought "every change results, *ceteris paribus*, in a change in living standards, and hence in the share in income distribution" <sup>35</sup>. Definite modifications in income distribution were also introduced by the various public agencies such as the State, the Church, and the commune. In the periods when the upper estates enjoyed tax privileges such burdens changed income distribution to the disadvantage of the peasants.

The distinction made by Rutkowski between peasant farms and demesnes as economic units which obtain income was closely connected with the reference he made to concepts of enterprise and entrepreneur. But he did not take these concepts with their capitalist connotations but developed original ideas of applying them to the feudal system. "That entire problem must be thought over against the background of the distinctive structure of that system (i.e., feudalism)" <sup>36</sup>. He arrived at the conclusion that he would use the term *enterprise* in a broader sense than usual, namely in the sense "which covers not only the capitalist enterprise but also all non-capitalist forms of organization of production, not excluding peasant farms, craftsmen's workshops, etc., which are sometimes opposed to enterprises" <sup>37</sup>. Unlike under the capitalist system, in the feudal system it usually does not occur that one and the same person is the owner of means of production and organizer and supervisor of production, covers production costs and carries the risk connected therewith, and disposes of the goods produced by the enterprise. While he thus outlined a conception of entrepreneur and enterprise in the feudal system Rutkowski did not try to define them because "that would require very vast studies" which exceeded the limits of his analyses of income distribution.

Rutkowski's novel proposal of giving the picture of the past its dynamics and inner connections and of explaining many fundamental processes by focussing one's attention on income distribution was not grasped, it may said in most general terms by historians (except few of them), and after World War II was an object of criticism, full of misunderstandings, on the part of the vulgar interpreters of Marxism. In both cases Rutkowski outgrew

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

his critics and the sceptics by the profound comprehension of the mechanisms of the process of history and by breaking away from its simplified positivistic interpretation. It must, therefore, be emphasized that Rutkowski's conception (together with his empirical studies of the problem) is still a challenge to the students of the socio-economic past.

University of Poznań

Der Verfasser untersucht die theoretischen und methodologischen Grundlagen des Werkes des polnischen Wirtschaftshistorikers Jan Rutkowski, wobei er besonders auf dessen kontinuierliche Beschäftigung mit dem Problem der «Synthese» eingeht. Rutkowski hielt dieses nicht nur für das zentrale Problem für die Wirtschaftshistoriker, sondern er war auch der Meinung, daß man es nicht behandeln könne, ohne Forschung und historische Beschreibung mit dem theoretischen Konzept zu verbinden.

Rutkowski hält die Untersuchungen zur Synthese für ganz wesentlich, um die historische Realität in ihrer Gesamtheit zu beschreiben. Dabei arbeitet er auch die verborgensten Zusammenhänge heraus, zeigt den Stand der Forschung zu einem speziellen Problem auf und weist den Weg für die weitere Forschung.

Um jedoch zu einer wirklichen Synthese zu gelangen (die von Rutkowski als «organisch-humanistisch» definiert und von der rein «mechanisch-darstellerischen» oder der «philosophisch-typologischen» abgegrenzt wird) braucht man eine methodologisch geeignete Theorie zur Bildung dieser Synthesen, die es erlaubt, eine konkrete Verbindung zwischen den Tatsachen und den Zusammenhängen herzustellen, Dazu genügt nicht die reine Beschreibung der verborgenen Zusammenhänge der Tatsachen, sondern sie müssen auch erklärt werden, und das ist nur möglich, wenn man neben den reinen Kausalzusammenhängen gleichzeitig auch die strukturellen berücksichtigt.

Der Verfasser untersucht weiterhin, wie Rutkowski seine methodologischen Voraussetzungen konkret auf seine wirtschaftshistorischen Forschungen angewendet hat, und er stößt dabei wieder auf den organischen Begriff der historischen Synthese in der engen Verbindung, die nach Rutkowski zwischen Wirtschaftsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte besteht.

Rutkowski hat sich in seiner Untersuchungen besonders dem Problem der Einkommensverteilung gewidmet, die das Bindeglied zwischen dem Bereich der Produktion (und hier kommen die technologischen Faktoren ins Spiel) und dem sozialen System darstellt, das allein im wirtschaftlichen Bereich entscheidend ist.

Von den ersten Teiluntersuchungen über die Salzbergwerke in Ruthenien bis zu seiner Agrargeschichte des heutigen Polen hat das Problem der Einkommensverteilung für Rutkowski immer im Mittelpunkt gestanden. Durch die Beschäftigung mit dieser Frage ist er zur Unterscheidung zwischen Einkommen in Form von Feudalabgaben und dem System von Herrschaftsprivilegien gelangt. So erklärt sich auch, warum man bei der Analyse dieser Form von Feudalgesellschaft nicht die Begriffe aus der Kapitalismusforschung anwenden kann. Die Beschäftigung Rutkowski mit dieser Thematik führt auch zum Verständnis der Dynamik des Wirtschaftssystems. Seine theoretisch-methodologischen Auffassungen sind noch heute für Wirtschafts- und Sozialwissenschaftler gültig.

L'auteur examine les fondements théoriques et méthodologiques de l'oeuvre

Redazione: c/o Istituto di Storia Medioevale e Moderna, via Chiaravalle 7, 20122 Milano, Italia  
Sede editoriale: Editoriale Jaca Book, via Rovani 7, 20123 Milano, tel. 498.23.41