

Federico Trocini and Davide Artico, eds., *Gli scritti giovanili di Ludwig Gumplowicz. Questione ebraica e questione nazionale in Polonia (1864-1875)* (Modena: Mucchi Editore, 2021), pp. 296.

by *Marco Bresciani*

Ludwig Gumplowicz (1838-1909) played a pioneering role in the European sociological tradition and catalysed significant international attention between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Yet later scholarship has neglected or almost forgotten his works, and today he is still considered “extremely controversial” (p. 5). Now this book, edited by Federico Trocini and Davide Artico, aims to call attention to his figure and thought, starting from the little-known writings of his youth. In his foreword, Trocini explains why it is important to renew scientific interest in Gumplowicz’s works and investigate his overall intellectual trajectory. In his afterword, Artico, translator of his yearly essays from Polish to Italian, focuses on some critical aspects of his research during “the Krakow period” (1864-1875). This refers to his time as a student in the capital city of Austrian Galicia, that ended when he moved to the University of Graz and started working on his main work, *Rassenkampf* (1883). Gumplowicz’s controversial interpretation of the struggle between “races” (or better, “peoples”) in Central Europe was accused of entailing a racist philosophy of history (*à la* Gobineau). A closer look, though, shows that his arguments disregarded any rigid historical or sociological determinism, let alone cultural or even biological racism, contrary to what the mainstream reading of his work might suggest.

This anthology of Gumplowicz’s early works include: a brief reflection on the philosophy of history, based on the universal rule of law (*Le ultime volontà nel progresso della storia e dei saperi. Sunto di storia del diritto*, 1864); a survey of the Polish laws on Jews from Casimir III the Great to Stanisław II August (*La legislazione polacca sugli ebrei*, 1867); an inquiry into the political, social and cultural situation in the multicultural capital of the Habsburg Empire (*Otto lettere da Vienna*, 1867); an analysis of the Confederation of Bar as a significant but ultimately failed answer to the institutional paralysis of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (*La Confederazione di Bar. Corrispondenza tra Stanislao Augusto e Xavier Branicki, venator Regni nell’anno 1768*, 1872); and an analysis of

the project of Jewish reformation put forward by the last ruler of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Stanisław II August, after the first partition of 1772 (*Il progetto di riforma ebraica di Stanislao Augusto*, 1875).

History was thus the starting point of Gumplowicz's sociological research. At the core of his early writings was the centrality of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (or *Rzeczpospolita*, a Republic based on the primacy of the Polish-speaking aristocracy) in the modern European era, up to the Polish partitions of 1772-1795. All of them were conceived and written in the aftermath of the Polish uprising of 1863-1864 against the Russian Empire (the so-called January Uprising). In his mind, the institutions of the now vanished Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were characterized by unusual freedom of thought and tolerance towards a plurality of different linguistic and religious communities, as opposed to the increasingly centralized and potentially uniform model of the nation-state in Western Europe. In this regard, Trocini rightly argues, reading Gumplowicz help us overcome "that consolidated paradigm on the basis of which the history of modern statehood has been long interpreted only in relation to the French and English models" (p. 7).

The debate about the juridical status and economic function of the Jewish communities was at the core of these reflections on the relations, tensions, and contradictions between assimilation and emancipation. The sociologist-historian saw a dynamic at play that opposed a political, inclusive understanding of the nation, cultivated by the Polish nobles, and a religious, exclusive vision, supported by the Catholic Church: only the former could then guarantee the civil and political rights of the Jews and their integration in the Polish community, by putting aside the power of the Catholic Church. The outcome was the very important project of Jewish reform elaborated by the Polish Parliament (*Sejm*) in 1764. "That project – Gumplowicz insightfully commented – anticipated by several years the French Revolution, which is usually credited with being the first to eliminate confessional discrimination in the state body. It was thus the four-year *Sejm* that was the first in Europe to have enunciated the principle of the total equality of Jews" (p. 124).

After reading these essays, it is possible to conclude that Gumplowicz questioned historical narratives on the decline and collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and maintained that it formed a lively ground for institutional

and legal experiments up to its very end through the partitions. As Artico claims in his afterword, the critical problem here is to establish what the young Jewish Gumplowicz meant by “Polish,” and to what extent he claimed a Polish identity for himself. His writings shed unexpected light on the complexities and ambiguities of national identification in the multilinguistic, multicultural and multireligious lands of East-Central Europe, and critically assess nationalist narratives that argued for the metahistorical existence of homogeneous national communities. As Gumplowicz explained: “In Poland, a ‘nation’ in the true sense of the term has never been and still is not, because a feeling of blood lineage and of caste still prevails in our society, while that of nation is only false and artificial” (p. 266).

Together, these writings, accurately translated and commented, are a valid contribution to the understanding of Gumplowicz’s intellectual biography and offer new insights on the development of some apparently marginal, but actually crucial aspects of the political and legal history of modern statehood in Europe. However, it is important to specify that his intellectual trajectory was tightly intertwined with the political and cultural trends of the Habsburg Empire (more than with “Poland” and “Austria” as such, as the book sometimes seems to suggest). As a matter of fact, the “Jewish question and the national question in Poland” intersected a wider web of “questions” that concerned the whole of the Habsburg Empire, and beyond. In this regard Gumplowicz’s argument can be really understood, beyond any stereotype or prejudice, through an analysis of the broader synchronic circulation of ideas, as well as of the intense transfer of academic and scientific knowledge within the entire imperial space of East-Central Europe.

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