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Sociological and Anthropological Inspirations to Research into the Identity of Early Medieval European Societies. Around the works of Walter Pohl

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Errata corrige:

a p. 180, riga 21, “of so less importance as” diventa “of no less importance than”

a p. 186, riga 30, “perceives” diventa “perceived”

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SOCIOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSPIRATIONS TO RESEARCH INTO THE IDENTITY OF EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN SOCIETIES. AROUND THE WORKS OF WALTER POHL

The period of the decline of the Roman Empire, and especially its downfall, the intensive migration movements (usually called the Migration Period) outside and within the limes, as well as the rise of “barbarian kingdoms” in the western part of the Roman world, were events that left their strong mark on the historical memory of our Continent, and have frequently been described in various ways by historiography. What significantly bore upon the interpretation of these phenomena, and the meaning they were endowed with, was the concept of “the Middle Ages”. The above-mentioned events became thus a turning-point between two epochs, and their assessment changed in accordance with the attitude of individual authors, milieux or even societies to “Antiquity” and “the Middle Ages”. However in recent decades, and especially since the 1980s, a serious reevaluation can be observed, at least in historical studies, in the approach to these problems. The period in question is no longer characterized as an opposition between ancient civilization — barbarians, or the invaded — the invaders. “Barbarian tribes”, together with their chiefs and kings, are now perceived rather as an element, or even, to a certain extent, a product of the Roman world¹.

¹ See e.g. W. Pohl, *Invasori e invasivi*, in: *Le invasioni barbariche nel meridione dell'impero: Visigoti, Vandali, Ostrogoti. Atti del Convegno svoltosi alla Casa delle Culture di Cosenza dal 24 al 26 luglio 1998*, ed. P. De Logu, Cosenza, 2001, p. 8 ff.

It is not my aim to discuss the changes in historiography in all their aspects. I would only like to focus on the new approach to the problem of ethnicity and to the concomitant question of the identity of the “barbarian” migrant communities that settled within the Roman Empire and built their kingdoms there. This approach has been inspired by the studies of contemporary researchers in other branches of the humanities, especially cultural anthropology and sociology, who have recently grown much more interested in ethnic problems. I will present this approach on the basis of the works of Walter Pohl, the Austrian medievalist, director of the Institut für Mittelalterforschung of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and lecturer at the University of Vienna. I consider his research to be especially representative of the trend in research I am interested in. Pohl represents the traditions of two milieux. On the one hand, as a pupil of Herwig Wolfram he continues the studies of the Germanic tribes developed by German and Austrian medievalists after World War II. On the other, as an unusually active researcher who publishes not only in his native German but also, and even more often, in English and Italian, he played one of the principal roles in “The Transformation of the Roman World” (1993–1998, henceforward TRW) project that brought together about 150 researchers of late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The project, financed by the European Science Foundation, produced a number of studies; since 1997, 13 volumes have appeared devoted to various aspects of this period, including ethnic issues.

I will concentrate on a selection of the works of Pohl, published in recent years. Some of these are theoretical, wholesome present the results of research on specific issues (although this is not a very precise division). This is also the order in which I will discuss the problem under consideration: I will first characterize Pohl's stance toward the categories of ethnicity and collective identity, the theoretical assumptions which he makes in order to study the groupings of early medieval Europe. Then I will show how the changes in the approach to these problems influence the general picture of that period as well as what conclusions Pohl draws from the sociological and anthropological reflections upon ethnicity and how he applies them to the practice of historical research. As I have said, I treat Walter Pohl's works as representative of a definite tendency in research into these problems,

hence I will sometimes confront them with the studies of other researchers.

It should be pointed out from the beginning that Pohl constructs his paradigm of ethnicity in opposition to those researchers who treated tribes/peoples as given, that is biologically and culturally quite homogeneous, almost unchanging groups. Side by side with this traditional approach, long dominating among the representatives of various branches of the humanities, there also appeared other proposals of approach to ethnic matters. Pohl gives the credit for initiating the discussion of ethnicity to Reinhard Wenskus. The latter, in his work *Stammesbildung und Verfassung*, published in 1961, showed that late Antique and early medieval tribes were linked not by their common origins, but only by a belief they were common, and consequently he undermined the significance of such criteria of ethnic ascription as language, culture, law, and attributed decisive importance to the sense of belonging to a given collectivity shared by the members of a given group. Reinhard Wenskus' proposal did not, of course, emerge *ex nihilo*, in his theoretical assumptions he referred to the works of ethnologist Wilhelm Mühlmann, and hence to Serge M. Shirokogoroff. On his part, Pohl observed that similar reflections upon ethnicity appeared earlier on. He points to Ernest Renan who in 1882 in his famous lecture *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* considered consensus and the common wish of the members as principal factors that constitute a nation² and to Max Weber who defined an ethnic group as one marked by "a subjective belief in their common origin"³.

Pohl says that research into the ethnic relations in early medieval Europe had for a long time developed in the direction

² E. Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?", in: *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. I, Paris 1947, pp. 887–906.

³ W. Pohl, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa. Barbari e Romani tra antichità e medioevo*, Roma 2001 (1st ed. 2000), p. 5 ff. refers to the passage *Entstehung ethnischen Gemeinsamkeitsglaubens. Sprach- und Kultgemeinschaft*, in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, 5th ed., Tübingen 1976, 1/2, ch. IV, par. 2, pp. 235–240 (first published in 1922, already after Weber's death). It should be noted that the assessment of the significance of Wenskus' works continues to be the subject of lively debate, see e.g. P. Geary, *Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages*, "Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien" 113, 1983, p. 17 ff., as well as A. C. Murray, *Reinhard Wenskus on 'Ethnogenesis', Ethnicity, and the Origin of the Franks*, in: *On Barbarian Identity. Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. A. Gille, Turnhout 2002, pp. 39–68.

proposed by Reinhard Wenskus almost exclusively in German-speaking centres, and was taken up in other countries with much delay. Thus Pohl, educated in the Viennese milieu, has been from the very beginning sensitive to these issues. While arguing with the particular theses of Wenskus⁴ he accepts the latter's position as a point of departure and treats ethnic groups not as unchangeable, biological or ontological entities, but as historical formations⁵. We must remember that this "burden" doubtless influences his reading of ethnological and sociological works, and makes him accept some intuitions and reject others. At any rate, he himself formulates a clear criterion of his approach to them: since the search for a definition and criteria of the ethnic or national inclusion is of little use and it is better to define individual groups separately, hence from the point of view of this method the only valuable theoretical instruments are such sociological and ethnological models which allow treating group formations as cultural constructions specific to individual societies⁶.

Pohl is acquainted with the latest sociological and anthropological studies and refers the reader to them, but his main point of reference is Fredrik Barth's study published in 1969 and devoted to the identity of the Pathans (Afghans), which he considers as pioneering for the perspective that he adopts⁷. Barth

⁴ W. Pohl criticizes the concept of the "core of tradition" (*Traditionskern*) — a narrow elite that preserved tribal traditions over the ages and attracted groups of various origin which created one *gens* (see e.g. W. Pohl, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, pp. 6–9). Nevertheless, Pohl happens to be treated as the third, besides R. Wenskus and H. Wolfram, main adherent of this model of ethnogenesis, see A. C. Murray, *Reinhard Wenskus on 'Ethnogenesis'* (as well as the texts by A. Gillet, W. Goffart and M. Kulikowski, in the same volume *On Barbarian Identity*) and Pohl's response, *Ethnicity, Theory and Tradition: A Response*, in: *ibidem*, pp. 224 ff. and 231 ff. On this subject also see below.

⁵ W. Pohl, *Conception of Ethnicity in Early Medieval Studies*, "Archaeologia Polona" 29, 1991, p. 40; *idem*, *Introduction: Strategies of Distinction*, in: *Strategies of Distinction. The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800*, ed. W. Pohl, H. Reimitz, Leiden 1998, TRW vol. 2, p. 8.

⁶ *Idem*, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, p. 14 ff. Pohl demonstrates the uselessness of objective criteria in the definition of a group by example of the Lombards, *Le identità etniche nei ducati di Spoleto e Benevento*, in: *I Longobardi dei ducati di Spoleto e Benevento. Atti del 16^o Congresso internazionale di studi sull'alto medioevo (Spoleto, 20–23 ottobre 2002 — Benevento, 24–27 ottobre 2002)*, Spoleto 2003, vol. 1, see esp. pp. 79–83.

⁷ F. Barth, *Pathan Identity and its Maintenance*, in: *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*, ed. *idem*, Bergen–Oslo–London 1969, pp. 117–134.

has shown that ethnic identities are cultural constructions which are not given once for ever, but must be constantly brought up to date, while ethnic differences are not inborn, but are the effects of some experience. This is how Pohl briefly characterizes Barth's position⁸, but it is worthwhile devoting a few more words to the work of Barth. In fact we are faced with two of his texts, included in the volume that he edited. His *Introduction* (pp. 9–38) presents the theoretical assumptions common to the authors of the essays included in the book. Barth criticizes the traditional manner of defining ethnic groups, because it imposes constant criteria which give the impression that variety is simply the result of biological and cultural differences, social separation and language barriers. Instead, he proposes to look for “socially effective” criteria, that is such features which are considered significant by the persons “concerned”. In *Pathan Identity and its Maintenance* (pp. 117–134) he describes the case of the Pathans. Barth emphasizes that differences in the way of life of individual Pathan communities that strike the researcher “do not provide criteria for differentiating persons in terms of ethnic identity” (p. 119). In the opinion of Pathans themselves, their identity springs from their common origins, the Islamic faith and observance of Pathan custom (“He is a Pathan who does ‘Pashto’, not [merely] who speaks ‘Pashto’”, p. 119). Barth emphasizes the superior role of custom and describes it by three institutions: hospitality (the honourable use of material goods), councils (the honourable pursuit of public affairs), and privacy (the honourable organization of family life). There is no need to discuss these institutions here, it should, however, be stressed that they constitute the crucial component of the Pathans’ self-image, and at the same time they are values discerned by non-Pathans. However, the Pathan identity is not only the subject of imaginary, but also of practice. Consequently, in some circumstances — this phenomenon is discussed by Barth in relation to marginal areas of Pathan country — the observance of values that are fundamental to the Pathans, that is also to the maintenance of the Pathan identity, may turn out to be impossible or unfavourable to them. I was interested in developing the reference to Barth, since apart from the acceptance of his general conclusions by Pohl, the particular intuitions contained in the two texts under analysis can be

⁸ W. Pohl, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, p. 15.

perceived in Pohl's texts also when he does not refer directly to Barth.

Calling into question the absolute character of an ethnic group also leads to the relative treatment of the category of difference. Pohl refers here to the sociological reflections of Pierre Bourdieu where the relative approach plays the principal role (what actually exists in social world are relations: *le réel est relationnel*)⁹. Bourdieu emphasizes, among other things — and this remark is reiterated by Pohl — that difference becomes conspicuous, perceptible and significant only when there is somebody who can notice it¹⁰. Therefore what gains supreme importance is the problem of communication — both the members of a group and those who do not belong to it have to be convinced of the strategy of distinction, and hence also of the identity of the group¹¹. Part of this strategy are texts to which Pohl ascribes the crucial role in constructing the identity of a community. The creation and maintenance of ethnic groups require the production of texts, since “long-term memory is not a natural process automatically shared by the members of a community”¹². While referring to the changes in the approach to texts caused by the “linguistic turn” (among the theorists, to Hyden White), but distancing himself from too far-reaching consequences of such a position — Pohl emphasizes at the same time the “constructive” character of text¹³. I will return to this problem later, since it is of great importance to the methodology of history, and especially to the source criticism.

⁹ P. Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques. Sur la théorie de l'action*, Paris 1994, pp. 17–25.

¹⁰ P. Bourdieu, *op. cit.*, p. 24; W. Pohl, *Telling the Difference: Signs of Ethnic Identity*, in: *Strategies of Distinction*, p. 21. It is worth comparing this standpoint with the proposal of Florian Znaniecki of the beginning of the 1930s, to introduce the “human coefficient/factor” to the definition of an alien, that is to treat as aliens not those who seem to be such to the researcher-observer on the basis of their objective features, but those whom a given individual or group experiences as alien at a given moment; *Studia nad antagonizmem do obcych (Studies in the Antagonism with the Aliens)*, “Przegląd Socjologiczny” vol. 1, 1931, p. 173.

¹¹ W. Pohl, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, p. 35.

¹² *Idem*, *Memory, Identity and Power in Lombard Italy*, in: *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Y. Hen, M. Innes, Cambridge 2000, p. 16; cf. *idem*, *Telling the Difference*, p. 21.

¹³ *Idem*, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, p. 16 ff.

Having presented the theoretical assumptions of Pohl, it is worthwhile returning to the new view of the late Antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages which was briefly characterized in the Introduction, in order to show what vision of this period is presented by Pohl. It can be said, that his picture is much more colourful than the one to which we had grown accustomed to. Pohl emphasizes the instability and complexity of ethnic boundaries, he describes “barbarian peoples” as much less homogeneous than they seemed to be¹⁴. We must understand — he says — that large ethnic communities which the Romans called Franks, Goths, etc., were the means of cultural categorization of the people who might differ strongly from one another, but also differ very little¹⁵. This classical (and at the same time biblical) manner of dividing mankind into *ethne/gentes* was, at any rate, adopted by the elites of the new kingdoms¹⁶ (and also by the successive generations of modern historians), since the ethnic discourse turned out to be useful in the construction and consolidation of the power of these elites in internally diversified barbarian states¹⁷. Moreover, the Romans themselves took an active part in this process. A very eloquent example is that of Cassiodorus, the author of the Latin history of the Goths¹⁸. In this sense Pohl agrees with the brilliant statement by Patrick Geary that barbarian kingdoms were perhaps the greatest and the most solid creation of the Roman political and military genius¹⁹. Thus the early–medieval ethnicity served the separation

¹⁴ Idem, *Conception of Ethnicity*, p. 40 ff.

¹⁵ Idem, *Introduction: Strategies of Distinction*, p. 4.

¹⁶ P. Geary states: “already from late antiquity it was impossible for the Goths, Burgundians, Franks, and other “peoples” who had become masters in the Western Roman Empire to understand themselves and their past apart from Roman categories of ethnography, politics and custom”, P. Geary, *Before France and Germany. The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World*, New York 1988, p. VI.

¹⁷ Pohl, pointing to the biblical and classical origin of the ethnic discourse does not deny, however, that its framework encompassed also non-Roman traditions. (*Ethnicity, Theory, and Tradition*, pp. 233, 237).

¹⁸ W. Pohl, *Introduction: Strategies of Distinction*, p. 2 ff.; idem, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, p. 31. Cf. A. Gilliet, *Was Ethnicity Politicized in the Earliest Medieval Kingdoms?*, in: *On Barbarian Identity*, pp. 85–121, he analyses the extent of use of ethnic titles by the rulers of “barbarian” kingdoms and denies that ethnicity played the role of an important political ideology. Cf., the balanced view of Pohl in: *Ethnicity, Theory, and Tradition*, pp. 232–235.

¹⁹ P. Geary, *Before France and Germany*, p. VI; W. Pohl, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, p. 31.

and delineation of the boundaries of a group (group identity with its attendant definite social position was not to be accessible to everybody) and at the same time the integration and assimilation of frequently very different people (a total closing up of a group was not favourable to it, either). In communities which were so diversified the criteria of inclusion in a group could not be too strict²⁰. This relates also to such “criteria” as language, clothes, arms or appearance in general — the identities of the communities of that period were not systematically connected to a clear set of outward signs, the significant features varied and changed²¹. The identity was based primarily on the myth of common origin, or, more generally, on a definite tradition, acknowledged as pertaining to the group, and practiced by it — but above all — handed down — recounted, and from a certain moment — also written down²². Such a standpoint is close to ethno-symbolism as proposed by John Armstrong, and developed by Anthony D. Smith, according to whom what constitutes an ethnic community is a sense of continuity, shared memory and collective destiny, that is the ties of cultural affinity expressed in myths, memories, symbols and values²³.

Of so less importance as the new view of this era is the question how the new paradigm of ethnicity affects the practice

²⁰ W. Pohl, *Introduction: Strategies of Distinction*, p. 5 ff.; *idem*, *Telling the Difference*, p. 67 ff.; *idem*, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, p. 37.

²¹ *Idem*, *Introduction: Strategies of Distinction*, pp. 5–9; *idem*, *Telling the Difference*, *passim*.

²² Among the Polish medievalists who have taken up a study of “tribal” traditions as instruments of the construction of collective identity there is Jacek Banaszkiewicz who is inspired mainly by the works of earlier German scholars, including R. Wenskus, and among the younger H. Wolfram; Jacek Banaszkiewicz, *Origo et religio — wersja słowiańska (O sposobach budowania tożsamości wspólnotowej w społecznościach wcześniejszego średniowiecza — “wzorotwórcze” pamiątki i opowieści o nich) (Origo et religio — the Slavonic Version [On the Ways of Construction of Collective Identities in Early Medieval Communities — the “Model-Creative” Mementoes and Stories about Them])*, “Res Historica” 1998, fasc. 3, pp. 37–62.

²³ A. D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism. A critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nation and Nationalism*, London–New York 2000 (1st ed. 1998), pp. 181–198. Cf. W. Pohl, *The Construction of Communities and the Persistence of Paradox: an Introduction*, in: *The Construction of Communities in the Early Middle Ages. Texts, Resources and Artefacts*, ed. R. Corradini, M. Diesenberger, H. Reimitz, Leiden 2002, TRW vol. 12, p. 3 ff. See also *idem*, *Conception of Ethnicity*, p. 40 ff., as well as *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, pp. 15, 20, where Pohl, while speaking of the significance of tradition, refers among other conceptions (as e.g. R. Wenskus's *Traditionskern*) also to the notion of *mythomoteur* used by A. D. Smith.

of historical research. The most general conclusion drawn by Pohl from the assumptions he accepted, also when he outlines the comprehensive picture of this period, is the need to be cautious and reluctant to look for a universal model. He proposes describing each case separately rather than simplifying at all cost what is complicated and explain what is ambiguous. He warns against overhasty reduction of complex relations between ethnic groups and ethnonyms and against identifying archeological cultures with ethnic groups²⁴.

What seems uppermost, however, is the problem of the use of late Antique and early medieval texts. Historians had long treated the sources as a reflection of reality and mostly sought information about the past events there. The most important task they faced was to distinguish credible information from false one, and this purpose was served by the systematically developed principles of source criticism. Given such an approach, myths or hagiographical accounts of miracles were to be discarded by the researcher. In the past century, and especially in its second half, much had changed in this respect. On the one hand there appeared new interests, new questions were posed to the old sources, on the other the methodology of history (especially from the perspective of the “linguistic turn”) denied the existence of a direct connection between the sources and the reality they described, that is their value for the “reconstruction” of the past. Consequently, what became the main object of interest were texts, and not reality, and the sources ceased to be treated as a simple reflection of the past, but became the means of creation of new past for the present (‘constructing the past’ approach)²⁵. As I have said, Pohl emphasizes that from the point of view of ethnic studies of principal importance is the constructive character of text, since it is mainly texts that construct the identity of a group²⁶. This does not mean that they do not relate to the past

²⁴ W. Pohl, *Conception of Ethnicity*, pp. 42–47; i d e m, *Social Language, Identities and the Control of Discourse*, in: *East and West: Modes of Communication. Proceedings of the First Plenary Conference at Merida*, ed. E. C h r y s o s, I. W o o d, Leiden 1999, TRW, vol. 5, p. 140 ff.; i d e m, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, p. 35 ff.

²⁵ I d e m, *History in fragments: Montecassino's politics of memory*, “Early Medieval Europe” 10, 2001, 3, p. 349.

²⁶ The fact that Pohl ascribes such an important role to texts requires some additional comment. In my opinion this should not suggest that texts were in the communities of that era the only or the most important instruments of the manifestation and construction of collective identities (the same role might have been fulfilled by oral tradition, rituals, symbols and elements of material culture).

reality or that they become literary fiction. It is precisely because they played such an important social role that they could not be absolutely arbitrary: their production and distribution depended on the centres of power (secular or religious), they were addressed to a specific public, and, last but not least, they depended on the earlier “links” of tradition²⁷. This issue is aptly handled by Stefano Maria Cingolani who — taking up the discussion of the usefulness of medieval sources in researching the origins and migrations of the Lombards, in response to the difficulties encountered by anybody who would like to reconstruct these processes on the basis of those sources — says that the written traditions at our disposal rather met the necessities of the moment than were meant to tell the truth of the past²⁸. In a similar way although Walter Pohl gives attention to the non-Roman and pre-Christian traditions in the records of the origins or the mythical past of the Lombards or Goths, he treats these records as significant for the given community at the moment when they were written. However, he raises doubts as to the possibility of describing on this basis the history or identity of the earlier communities that bore the same name²⁹. Hence we have to pose the question “In what way did the texts construct identity and to what conclusions can this lead?”

Let's confine ourselves to the example of the Lombards, recently taken up also by Pohl, who described the phenomenon we are interested in on the basis of the body of texts, mainly historiographical, written down in the Kingdom of the Lombards

Pohl's emphasis results, it seems, from the fact that among the range of instruments used at that time this is the only one “accessible” to the modern researcher. On the other hand, this approach also finds support in the studies which confirm the important role of the written word in the life of early medieval Europe, especially in the territory of the former Empire (see among others: A. Petrucci, C. Romeo, *Scrittura e alfabetismo nella Salerno del IX secolo*, “Scrittura e civiltà” 7 (1983), pp. 51–112; R. McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word*, Cambridge University Press 1995, 1st ed. 1989; as well as N. Everett, *Literacy in Lombard Italy, c. 568–774*, Cambridge University Press 2003).

²⁷ W. Pohl, *Memory, Identity and Power*, pp. 23–27; idem, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, pp. 16–21.

²⁸ S. M. Cingolani, *Le Storie dei Longobardi. Dall'Origine a Paolo Diacono*, Roma 1995, p. 25 ff.

²⁹ W. Pohl, *Ethnicity, Theory, and Tradition*, pp. 228–230. One can say that in comparison to Wenskus and Wolfram, Pohl moved his subject of interest from the ethnogenesis of individual tribes in the territory of Barbaricum to studies of the identity of the new societies that arose in the territory of the Empire and started to produce their own texts.

and — after its downfall — in the southern principalities between the 7th and 10th centuries. On the one hand they explained the place of the Lombards' origin, the etymology of their name, and the way they captured Italy, at the same time arguing that the tribe remained under divine protection beginning with the mythical moment of giving it a new name by Wodan until the historical era when the role of guardians was taken over by Archangel Michael and St. John the Baptist. On the other, *explicite* or *implicite*, they recommended for some kinds of behaviour, such as courage in battle, obedience to law, love of freedom, or veneration of the above-mentioned saints. All these — though not “reserved” for Lombards — were in the opinion of the authors to serve the maintenance of the group's position³⁰.

The problem becomes more complicated if we take into consideration that various texts, both written at the same time and at different times, offer different explanations and different patterns. These differences may be minute, but sometimes they are so serious that we may speak of different projects of identity. Pohl treats the transmission of texts (that is their writing, copying and re-working) as a process where the memory of a given community is cultivated and transformed, while successive generations establish anew what they hold important and worthy of memorizing. The advantage of such an approach to the sources is that on the one hand it allows to better understand the text, and on the other to say something about the collectivity where and for which it arose³¹.

³⁰ W. Pohl, *Memory, Identity and Power*, p. 25 ff. In the characterization of those functions of the text in a given community, of great convenience seems to be the slightly extended category of “canon” in the sense used by Jan Assmann. In his understanding, a canonical text is the embodiment of formative and normative values of a community, that is it answers two basic questions: who are we? (myth), and what should we do? how should we act? (wisdom); J. Assmann, *La memoria culturale. Scrittura, ricordo e identità politica nelle grandi civiltà antiche*, Torino 1997 (1st ed. in German 1992) part I, chap. 2–3; see also J. Banaszkievicz, *op. cit.*

³¹ W. Pohl, *Paolo Diacono e la costruzione dell'identità longobarda*, in: *Paolo Diacono. Uno scrittore fra tradizione longobarda e rinnovamento carolingio. Convegno internazionale di studi*, ed. P. Chiesa, Udine 2000, p. 415, *idem*, *La costituzione di una memoria storica: il caso dei Longobardi*, in: *Studi sulle società e le culture del medioevo per Girolamo Arnaldi*, ed. L. Gatto, P. Supino Martini, Roma 2002, p. 564. In this way the above-cited S. M. Cingolani explains some differences between particular traditions of the origins of the Lombards (*op. cit.*, p. 67 ff.)

What are the consequences of adopting such a perspective? In the first place, the manuscript tradition of a given text gains a new dimension. So far — and such were the principles of editing sources, e.g. in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* — if the autograph had not survived, efforts were made to establish on the basis of surviving manuscripts a version that would be the closest to the original, that would also be the closest to the presented facts. As a result, the edited text was frequently a hypothetical reconstruction composed of the editing of various manuscripts. At present, more and more frequently, all manuscripts are treated as autonomous “realizations” of the text. For it is only thus that we can assess with any precision the degree of interest given to the text; the differences between various versions might result from various needs of the communities where the copy was prepared. We should also analyse individual records in the context of the codices in which they were written, since these were frequently collections prepared with a definite purpose³². From this perspective, Pohl analysed the three southern-Italian codices (written between the 10th and 13th/14th centuries); all of them, in his opinion, were connected with the abbey of Monte Cassino or monasteries that were dependent upon it. Treating their contents and composition as by no means accidental, he tried to show what were the needs, concerns and interests of the Benedictine community, operating in the milieu which was full of political antagonisms, but at the same time how this community perceived itself³³.

Another consequence is that we attach more value to later records and that our research has gained a much wider perspective. So far, a researcher studying the history of the Lombards has valued the most the earliest records, written in the period of their independent state. The sources that arose in Italy under the Carolingian rule, and even more so the later ones, were treated as useless. It is characteristic that a few short *Lombard histories*

³² W. Pohl, *Memory, Identity and Power*, p. 11; *idem*, *Paolo Diacono*, p. 415; *idem*, *History in fragments*, pp. 348–351.

³³ *Idem*, *Werkstätte der Erinnerung: Montecassino und die Gestaltung der langobardischen Vergangenheit*, Wien–München 2001. The results of this analysis were also summed up by Pohl in his two articles: *History in Fragments*, pp. 361–374, and *Testi e identità in manoscritti cassinesi dei secc. IX–XI*, in: *Le scritture dai monasteri. I^o Seminario Internazionale di Studio 'I Monasteri nell'Alto Medioevo'*, ed. F. de Rubeis, C. Kroetzl, W. Pohl (Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae, vol. 29), Roma 2003, pp. 197–206.

written in the 12th–14th centuries were published by the 19th century editor under the common name *Historiae Langobardorum fabulosae*³⁴. Actually, what is worthy of attention is how the Lombard traditions or Lombard texts functioned a few centuries after the downfall of their kingdom. This is the argument of Pohl, who has shown the various uses made of Paul the Deacon's *History of the Lombards* written towards the end of the 8th century. In the 9th–10th centuries it was the model and point of departure for writing its continuation by the Lombard authors from the principalities of southern Italy that had not been conquered by the Carolingians; in the 12th–13th centuries it was used by the communes of Lombardy for constructing their identity in their conflict with emperors; and outside Italy it served as a manual of universal history. Pohl emphasizes the open character of the text of this chronicle, which did not propose a strictly defined Lombard identity (it rather conveyed various minor “texts of identity”), and hence at various times and by various communities it could be “used” for various purposes. This also explains the extent of its dissemination (about a hundred manuscripts survive to this day)³⁵.

Finally, after presenting both the theoretical assumptions of Walter Pohl, and their practical significance for a historian, we have to relate his position not so much to concrete authors as — more broadly — to various approaches to the issue of ethnicity in the social sciences. Currently, the debate is developing principally at two levels³⁶. On the one hand there is a discussion about the “birth date” of the phenomenon of a nation. Modernists, who oppose the view about the natural and almost timeless existence

³⁴ Ed. G. Waitz, *MGH Scriptores rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum saec. VI–IX*, Hannoverae 1878, pp. 591–602.

³⁵ W. Pohl, *Paolo Diacono*, passim.

³⁶ I relate this discussion on the basis of two works by A. D. Smith: *National Identities: Modern and Medieval?*, in: *Concepts of National Identity in the Middle Ages*, ed. S. Forde, L. Johnson, A. Murray, Leeds 1995, pp. 22–46, and *Nationalism and Modernism*. The Polish authors who related it are among others: Wojciech J. Burszta, *Antropologia kultury. Tematy, teorie, interpretacje (Anthropology of Culture. Themes, Theories, Interpretations)*, Poznań 1998, chap. 7, and Aleksander Posern-Zieliński, *Etniczność. Kategorie. Procesy etniczne (Ethnicity. Categories. Ethnic Processes)*, Mała Biblioteka PTPN 14, Poznań 2005. An attempt at a comprehensive outline of the discussion of ethnicity was also made by Walter Żelazny, *Etniczność w naukach społecznych. Zarys problematyki (Ethnicity in Social Sciences. An Outline of Problems)*, “Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria nowa”, fasc. 20, 2002, pp. 57–85.

of nations, characteristic of nationalist ideologies, maintain that the rise of nations and nationalisms was possible only after the French and the Industrial Revolutions, and go even so far as to say that it was an answer to the needs of societies at the stage of modernization. However, many researchers are inclined to place the beginnings of nations in the much more remote past, in the Middle Ages, and even in Antiquity (the adherents of this view are defined as “perennialists”). At a more general level, the debate concerns two different paradigms of ethnicity: the primordialist and instrumentalist one. If we treat ethnic ties as primordial (the term primordial was introduced by Edward S h i l s, and extended by Clifford G e e r t z) then everybody is born into some ethnic features (such as ethnonym, language, religion, norms of behaviour) and remains bound up with them for ever. The ethnic ties are considered as basic and most resistant to change, and at the same time strongly emotional, while the group — handing down its values from generation to generation — remains stable and unchanged. On the other hand, the ethnic ties can be treated as the object of an individual's choice, an instrument realising definite purposes and interests, both individual and collective ones. Thus ethnic ties are not inherited, but chosen, acquired, constructed, in some situations they gain crucial significance, but in others they recede into the background, and the group, in such an approach, becomes dynamic, changeable, historical. The second approach does not completely rule out the first — the ethnic ties cannot be chosen at will, we have to reckon with the necessity of acceptance on the part of others (in other words, to “convince” them of our identity). Ethnic ascription — even if chosen, imagined — is not subjective in the sense that it is not usually perceived as such by the actors themselves. Hence, Wojciech J. B u r s z t a is right in observing that both approaches may be treated as complementary³⁷. Nor do all the modernists take an instrumentalist view, or all the adherents of the nation's perenniality are primordialists. Although both controversies (modernism vs “perennialism” and primordialism vs instrumentalism) can be regarded as akin, we come across various combinations of these standpoints³⁸.

³⁷ W. J. B u r s z t a, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

³⁸ See A. D. S m i t h, *Nationalism and Modernism*, p. 159.

Walter Pohl is aware of this controversy and refers to it at both levels described above³⁹. One may say that ultimately he takes the position between two extremes. He accepts the constructivist approach: he speaks openly of identity as a “situational construct” — the anthropological category introduced to the studies of the early Middle Ages by P. Geary⁴⁰. Ethnicity, according to him, is not a “primordial category”, but a “negotiated system of social classification”⁴¹. This does not mean, however, that he denies the existence of strong collective identities before the rise of modern nations, or that, identity is completely a matter of choice — identity requires recognition, consent, it also makes use of real phenomena (e.g. the language), although it may endow them with various significance. Attention should also be drawn here to the character of Pohl’s references to anthropological or sociological works. He does not claim to take part in debate, but only reads, evaluates and takes up the thoughts, intuitions and conclusions which he regards as useful for his own studies.

The selected works of Walter Pohl have served me to show how the paradigm of ethnicity has changed in the studies of late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (however, I certainly do not exhaust either the issue of Pohl’s achievements as a researcher or various ways of describing ethnic relations and collective identities in current historiography dealing with that era). To sum up, it is worth asking why it was precisely in the second half of the 20th century, and, on a larger scale, in the last score of years, that not only in the social sciences, but also in the medieval studies, the biological conception of a people, *ethnos*, has been called into question in favour of a historical, that is dynamic and changeable concept. This is probably connected with the new proposals, emerging in the discussion of the future of history in general, which suggest that instead of continuity and linear purposeful development, historical studies should indicate the moments of discontinuity and breach, that they should treat identities and interpretations historically⁴². In the case of medie-

³⁹ W. Pohl, *Conception of Ethnicity*, p. 40; *idem*, *Le origini etniche dell’Europa*, p. 13 ff.

⁴⁰ P. Geary, *Ethnic identity as a situational construct*; see e.g. W. Pohl, *Social Language*, p. 131.

⁴¹ W. Pohl, *Telling the Difference*, p. 21.

⁴² J. W. Scott, *After History?*, “Common Knowledge” 5 (1996), N° 3, pp. 1–32; cf. H. White, *The Burden of History*, “History and Theory” 5 (1966), N° 2, p. 134.

val studies these proposals gain special significance in face of the fact that the political and nationalist discourse continues to seek the roots of modern national identities precisely in the Middle Ages; history is continually used for justifying modern ethnic claims and divisions, as if there was continuity between that past and the present day⁴³. In this sense, the new vision of that period is aimed against the European nationalisms and the still widespread current ideas of nations that correspond with them. On the other hand — and this aspect is emphasized by Paolo De log u, another participant of TRW — this vision, and especially the annulment of the earlier opposition between the ancient and Germanic (or, more broadly, barbarian) civilizations, suits the problems of the developed modern Western societies, which become multi-ethnic and look for hope in overcoming civilization divisions⁴⁴. Although also today's historiography is conditioned historically and ideologically, the reevaluations in the studies of ethnicity in early-medieval Europe have produced many interpretations with a firm basis in the sources; among them are those contained in the works by Walter Pohl.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

⁴³ W. Pohl, *Conception of Ethnicity*, p. 39; *idem*, *Introduction: Strategies of Distinction*, pp. 7, 15; *idem*, *Telling the Difference*, p. 20; *idem*, *Le origini etniche dell'Europa*, pp. 3–5; *idem*, *The Politics of Change. Reflections on the Transformation of the Roman World*, in: *Integration und Herrschaft. Etnische Identitäten und Soziale Organisation im Frühmittelalter*, ed. W. Pohl, M. Diesenberger, Wien 2002, p. 277 ff. P. Geary also draws attention to the vitality of the 19th century nationalist discourse of ethnicity, and the need to oppose it with a new understanding of “peoples”, especially in relation to the Middle Ages (*The Myth of Nations. The Medieval Origins of Europe*, Princeton University Press 2002, p. 13. The contemporary conditioning of the TRW “ideology” is discussed by P. De log u, *Transformation of the Roman World. Reflections on Current Research*, in: *East and West: Modes of Communication*, pp. 243–257.

⁴⁴ P. De log u, *L'Editto di Rotari e la società del VII secolo*, in: *Visigoti e Longobardi. Atti del seminario (Roma 28–29 aprile 1997)*, ed. J. Arce, P. De log u, Firenze 2001, p. 330 ff.