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Calvin O. Schrag's Concept of Transversal Rationality: An Interpretive Framework and Its Relevance to Polish Cultural and Communication Studies

**Koncepcja racjonalności transwersalnej
Calvina O. Schraga: ramy interpretacyjne i ich
znaczenie dla polskich studiów kulturowych
i komunikacyjnych**

Abstract

This article seeks to formulate a processual concept of subjectivity in response to the crisis of traditional identity paradigms brought about by the radical pluralization of the axiological sphere in the era of globalization. Its primary objective is to apply Calvin O. Schrag's concept of transversal rationality within the field of Polish cultural and communication studies. The author argues that transversality – understood as the capacity to integrate heterogeneous spheres of existence (corporeal, ethical, and agentic) – constitutes an essential tool for preserving individual autonomy under conditions of liquid modernity. The analysis is conducted through an interdisciplinary dialogue between Schrag's thought and the works of

prominent Polish scholars. By juxtaposing it with Józef Kozielecki's theory of transgressive psychology, the subject is defined as an inherently expansive being whose development is driven by hubristic motivation and the continual transcendence of symbolic boundaries. This perspective is further complemented by Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration, which makes it possible to interpret identity crises as constructive stages in the formation of a hierarchical system of values. In contrast to Zygmunt Bauman's diagnoses concerning the erosion of stable social structures, the proposed processual concept of subjectivity emphasizes agency and ethical responsiveness to the Other as the foundations for maintaining ontological coherence.

Keywords: Calvin O. Schrag, Józef Kozielecki, Kazimierz Dąbrowski, Zygmunt Bauman, transversal rationality, transgression, positive disintegration, liquid modernity, subjectivity.

Abstrakt

Artykuł podejmuje próbę sformułowania procesualnego modelu podmiotowości jako odpowiedzi na kryzys tradycyjnych paradygmatów tożsamościowych, wywołany radykalną pluralizacją sfery aksjologicznej w dobie globalizacji. Jego głównym celem jest zastosowanie koncepcji transversalnej racjonalności Calvina O. Schraga na gruncie polskich studiów kulturowych i komunikacyjnych. Autorka dowodzi, że transversalność – rozumiana jako zdolność integrowania heterogenicznych wymiarów egzystencji (cielesnego, etycznego i sprawczego) – stanowi istotne narzędzie umożliwiające zachowanie autonomii jednostki w warunkach płynnej nowoczesności. Analiza prowadzona jest w formie interdyscyplinarnego dialogu pomiędzy myślą Schraga a dorobkiem wybitnych polskich uczonych. Zestawienie jego koncepcji z teorią psychologii transgresyjnej Józefa Kozieleckiego pozwala określić podmiot jako byt z natury ekspansywny, którego rozwój napędzany jest przez motywację hubrystyczną oraz nieustanne przekraczanie granic symbolicznych. Perspektywę tę uzupełnia teoria dezintegracji pozytywnej Kazimierza Dąbrowskiego, umożliwiającą interpretację kryzysów tożsamości jako konstruktywnych etapów kształtowania się hierarchicznego systemu wartości. W przeciwieństwie do diagnoz Zygmunta Baumana dotyczących erozji stabilnych struktur społecznych zaproponowany procesualny koncept podmiotowości akcentuje sprawczość jednostki oraz etyczną odpowiedzialność wobec Innego jako fundamenty zachowania spójności ontologicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: Calvin O. Schrag, Józef Kozielecki, Kazimierz Dąbrowski, Zygmunt Bauman, transversalna racjonalność, transgresja, pozytywna dezintegracja, płynna nowoczesność, podmiotowość.

Ongoing globalization processes, which drive rapid cultural transformations, present the humanities with the challenge of developing new conceptual frameworks. It has become imperative to find a paradigm capable of safeguarding national and individual identities amid the radical pluralization of the axiological, religious, and moral spheres. A potential response to this crisis can be found in the concept of transversal rationality formulated by the American philosopher Calvin O. Schrag. Although this concept originates in philosophy, its interpretative potential extends far beyond its primary discipline, offering valuable analytical tools for cultural and communication studies. It not only preserves the relative autonomy of diverse perspectives across the various domains of human existence but also broadens the horizons of intercultural dialogue. These considerations provide sufficient grounds for introducing the notion of transversal rationality into the field of cultural studies.

To date, Schrag's philosophy has been discussed primarily within the American discourse and has received little attention in Polish scholarship. This article seeks to introduce his concept of transversal rationality into Polish cultural and communication studies. The analysis is conducted through a dialogue between Schrag's thought and the works of prominent Polish scholars, thereby situating his ideas within a broader Polish intellectual context. To this end, Schrag's key theses are examined alongside Józef Koźmielecki's concept of transgression, which highlights the subject's tendency to transcend existing cultural limitations; Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration, which enables an interpretation of cultural crisis as a necessary stage in the formation of a new, multidimensional identity; and Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, which provides a useful point of reference for assessing the capacity of transversal rationality to withstand the disintegrative tendencies of contemporary society. Such an approach not only contributes to a deeper understanding of Schrag's philosophical project but also demonstrates the potential applicability of his ideas to the analysis of Polish and European intercultural discourse. The aim of this article is not to provide a comprehensive comparison of these four theoretical perspectives, but rather to identify selected points of convergence and divergence in their understanding of subjectivity in contemporary culture.

Contemporary reflection on subjectivity calls for a departure from substantialist conceptions of human nature in favor of dynamic approaches that place transgression at the center of human development. In this respect, a productive correlation emerges between Calvin Schrag's philosophical concept of transversal rationality and Józef Koźmielecki's psychological theory of transgression. The latter defines transgression

as the crossing of boundaries within the realms of thought, symbols and imagination rather than within physical reality. Both perspectives, despite their differing points of departure, converge on the thesis of the inherent multidimensionality of the human being, who is defined not by static permanence, but by continuous process of becoming and questioning established boundaries.

In Józef Kozielecki's concept, known as transgressive psychology, the dynamics of the subject are based on the assumption that the human being is an expansive and creative entity rather than merely a reactive one. In contrast to traditional currents (such as behaviorism or psychoanalysis), Kozielecki emphasizes that humans possess a natural need to go beyond what they already know and have. Schrag develops a theory of subjectivity in which the corporeal, ethical, and agentive spheres permeate each other in a transversal manner, creating a mechanism responsive to shifting socio-political conditions. In his conception, the subjective layer constitutes the domain of freedom and initiative, enabling the individuals to participate in the universal dimension of existence, while the objective layer embeds them within a specific community that generates certain ethical requirements. Such a delineated structure finds a direct reference in Kozielecki's concept, which identifies transgression as a fundamental anthropic trait. In this view, the human being as an agent realizes their potential by moving beyond existing material and symbolic boundaries, which renders any attempt to reduce human existence to a fixed set of characteristics ontologically insufficient.

The analysis proves that the subject is not a static entity but a dynamic one, constituting itself in the act of responding to external and internal calls. Schrag's "response-ability" finds its psychological complement in Kozielecki's transgression, which assumes that the dynamics of the subject are driven by so-called "hubristic motivation" – a powerful need to confirm one's own value, significance, and agency. It is this motivation that ensures a person does not settle for stabilization but takes risks to achieve more. In turn, in Schrag's thought, the individual is propelled by the dynamism of transversal rationality. This implies that one does not "possess" an identity as a permanent resource but constantly "expands" it by entering into relationships with that which is other and unknown. Although self-improvement processes may initiate within the individual, it is only the "Other" that becomes an indispensable element completing the transversal structure. This "convergence without coincidence" forces the subject to move beyond their own egocentrism and enter the realm of ethical engagement, which protects them from the one-dimensionality inherent in the postmodern consumer condition.

An essential element linking both systems is the redefinition of the role of culture, which ceases to be perceived as a system of deterministic constraints and becomes a space for the manifestation of human agency. For Koziński, culture constitutes a catalyst for civilizational changes, provoking the individual to break taboos and expand their own possibilities; he wrote: "A nation is not a monolith. Within it, there are common and ineradicable differences between individuals, groups, and strata." Similarly, in Schrag's view, it is within the communal sphere that individual attitudes gain meaningful depth, and freedom manifests not in the arbitrariness of choices, but in the ability to confront the prevailing order.

Referring to the category of freedom, Koziński wrote: "Freedom of choice is potential transgression, and transgression is realized external freedom." Koziński indicates that freedom is not a state of possession, but an act. Symbolic transgression (crossing boundaries in thought and imagination) constitutes a necessary condition for the expansion of individual agency. This comparison proves that culture does not have to be a deterministic barrier; it can function as a catalyst that provokes the individual to question the established order.

In the context of the growing crisis of universalist paradigms, Schrag's concept offers a path toward understanding that does not require the unification of cultural codes. Transversal communication, arising from the recognition of radical alterity (otherness) and ideological heterogeneity, allows for the search for commonalities while simultaneously preserving diversity. This process, supported by symbolic transgression in the spheres of thought and ethics, portrays the human being as a creature integrally connected to the structures of the world, yet possessing an autonomous power to transform them. Ultimately, the synthesis of Schrag's and Koziński's thought leads to the formulation of a processual anthropology, in which identity is constituted at the intersection of contextual embeddedness and the constant striving to transcend one's own limitations.

In Poland, issues indirectly related to transversality were also explored by Kazimierz Dąbrowski. Schrag's concept of transversal rationality shows significant similarities to his Theory of Positive Disintegration. A key premise of Dąbrowski's theory is that authentic personality development does not occur through harmonious growth, but through a painful process of breaking down the existing psychological structure, termed positive disintegration. The author argues that the state of primary integration – where intelligence merely serves to satisfy drives and adapt to social stereotypes – constitutes a limitation from the perspective of individual evolution. True progress thus requires the loosening of these

automatisms under the influence of the developmental instinct, allowing for the transformation of primitive drives into higher moral values. Transitioning through a phase of internal fragmentation and crisis becomes the foundation for constructing a new, conscious identity at a higher level, where the individual transcends the purely biological cycle and begins to perceive reality in a multilevel and hierarchical manner.

Dąbrowski suggested that developmental sequences unfold within a horizontal perspective, naturally linking these levels of development with a vertical perspective. The Polish researcher posited that throughout individual development, one reaches specific levels not assigned to a particular age. Each subsequent level involves a distinct structure and a specific dynamism that shapes individual experience and behavior. The term “level” served to define the existence of characteristic dynamisms. Structures associated with these dynamisms can intersect and overlap. Given the passage of time, this process is actually diagonal – developmental – much like in Schrag’s framework. It does not follow a straight line but a constantly curved trajectory that is essentially transversal. In Schrag’s thought, this dynamism is driven by successive levels of individual development that emerge not only from different areas of personality but also from the community.

For Dąbrowski, the sense of identity is not found in logical self-identity but in relation to another person. Similarly, for Schrag, the transversal subject is constituted “between” the textures of culture. Identity is a “process of continuous becoming” through dialogue. In the work of both authors, the “Other” is not a threat but a necessary catalyst that compels a correction of one’s own attitudes and enables the achievement of ontological fullness (personality). Individuals engaged in a specific community attempt its interpretation; All actions, judgments, and views are subject to ethical evaluation, which is inextricably linked to valuation. This process gives rise to a moral-ethical structure encompassing the conscience – an element of particular importance in disciplines such as philosophy, literature, or the history of religion. Conscience occupies a pivotal position in managing habits, customs, and conventions that complement cultural forms in the lives of both individuals and communities. This principle organizes concepts within the discourse about the world, acknowledging their diversity. Simultaneously, it does not lead to the establishment of any dominant sphere of discourse over human activity.

In Dąbrowski’s thought, conscience works closely with the so-called third factor – an instance of conscious choice and the selection of values. Through it, the individual decides which traits within themselves

to develop and which to reject. Conscience, in Schrag's view, is akin to the Socratic daimonion, responsible for correcting human behavior within the context of the general social and cultural forms into which an individual is born, as well as in relation to habits acquired through socialization. For Schrag, conscience is a way of finding one's own path in moral situations or a form of practical wisdom – one that accounts for the possibilities and limitations of our human nature. A person “entangled” in the space of intercultural discourses becomes a multidimensional individual who, guided by this principle, is able to overcome encountered dichotomies. Meanwhile, Dąbrowski writes:

A complex and differentiated internal psychic environment reflects the fact that an individual's inner life becomes more significant than their activity in the everyday world. Authentic and autonomous dynamisms gain importance (“subject-object” in oneself, the “third factor,” self-awareness and understanding of others at a higher level, conscious self-identification, and individual and social essences).

Dąbrowski supplements the horizontal view of man (biological-social) with a vertical dimension – a hierarchy of values toward which the individual strives through the “third factor.” Schrag's transversal approach also possesses this vector: communication is not merely a horizontal exchange of information but a process opening toward higher values (dignity, goodness, responsibility). Transversality in this context carries a profound significance, as it illustrates the individual's deep-rootedness in the structures of culture and history. In both systems, identity is not a given but is “tasked” as a vertical goal, achieved by transcending boundary states (suffering, anxiety, internal conflict).

The juxtaposition of Calvin Schrag and Zygmunt Bauman – who, alongside Leszek Kołakowski, is considered the most renowned Polish sociologist and philosopher – is exceptionally interesting, as both scholars examined the human condition in a world deprived of traditional ontological anchors. In Calvin O. Schrag's view, culture is defined as a dynamic relational space situated “between” established social structures. The author rejects a substantialist understanding of culture in favor of a communicative process. The key construct here is transversal rationality, understood as the ability to mediate between different traditions and conceptual systems. Schrag employs the metaphor of “texture”; culture is a weave of many threads (historical, linguistic, social). It is not a “mirror” reflecting the world, but a way in which we communicate with one another and with the past. In this sense, culture is always “on the way” – it is a process of continuous becoming.

Conversely, Zygmunt Bauman employs an evolutionary perspective, tracing the transformation of culture's function from modernity to post-modernity. In the "solid" phase, culture fulfilled a regulatory and selective function (realized through the metaphor of "gardening culture"), the goal of which was to establish order and eliminate elements that did not fit the system. In the era of "liquid modernity," culture undergoes commercialization, transforming into a sphere of free-market offerings where mechanisms of coercion are replaced by techniques of seduction and the consumerist volatility of forms.

One might argue that while Bauman diagnoses the condition of post-modernity – characterized by the dissolution of structures, pervasive anxiety, and the hegemony of the market – Schrag offers a remedy for these difficulties. Schragian transversality allows the individual to avoid losing themselves in Bauman's liquid world; instead, it enables the discovery of a distinct, multidimensional meaning through ethical engagement.

In Schrag's universe, the human being is an acting subject guided by transversal reason, understood as a cognitive competence. Within the theory of transculturality, such a subject is termed a transversal subject – a dynamic individual who is constantly changing, evolving, interpreting, and creating. Their reason is likewise multidimensional and cross-cutting, capable of engaging in communicative practices at every level of consciousness and in every cultural sphere. Schrag's concept of transversal rationality carries the premise that through communication – by participating in dialogue – one transcends their subjectivity and opens up to new axiological values such as dignity, goodness, beauty, truth, love, excellence, responsibility, and selflessness. Both thinkers converge on a fundamental assumption: the human being is not a static entity. In Bauman's concept, the individual remains an "unfinished task," whereas for Schrag, humanity is a "process of continuous becoming"; a person cast into the whirlpool of communicative practices is shaped and defined by multifaceted discourse. Bauman argued that postmodernity is defined by the breakdown of stable structures such as family, class, or nation. In this state of constant uncertainty, identity becomes a "project requiring continuous revision." Although Schrag admitted that traditional definitions of the subject had collapsed, he proposed a distinct way forward through the concept of transversal rationality. While in Bauman's thought the individual often seems lost in "liquidity," Schrag's subject possesses an agency that allows for the active integration of different dimensions of existence – bodily, ethical, and operational – thereby maintaining coherence despite the surrounding chaos.

In Bauman's view, the subject is a tourist or a vagabond; culture does not so much offer them dialogue as it forces flexibility upon them, he writes: "The tourist devours the world without being devoured by the world; they assimilate without being assimilated; they 'tame' the strangeness of others while proudly parading their own strangeness." Identity here is a task that never concludes in success, and liquid culture generates an anxiety of exclusion and of becoming waste. Bauman criticized the way the contemporary world transforms the citizen into a consumer, arguing that choice is a necessity and freedom is man's fate; his concept of freedom constitutes merely "market freedom" – a superficial choice between products that masks a lack of real impact on reality. Conversely, Schrag emphasizes that subjectivity is rooted in initiative. What Bauman identifies as a "threat of reduction to the role of consumer," Schrag frames as a challenge to the human "response mechanism." Schrag maintains that we possess the capacity to say "no" to the economic conditions described by Bauman, affirming the subject's ability to transcend systemic constraints.

Both Schrag and Bauman are not typical theorists; they are rather thinkers attuned to the voice of the Other, which constitutes a common denominator that aligns them with Levinasian ethics. For Schrag, the Other is a partner in the transversal process – it is through the Other that a correction of our own beliefs occurs. For Bauman (especially in his later works), contemporary culture often attempts to "neutralize" the Other through distance or aestheticization, leading to the erosion of true moral responsibility. Bauman's sociology is a discursive formation rather than a defined discipline. Sociology is not merely a "mirror" reflecting reality, but an active way of speaking and thinking that co-creates this reality. In Calvin Orville Schrag's philosophy, sociology is not treated as a separate, technical discipline, but as an essential component of the broadly understood human sciences, which should be based on so-called radical reflection.

A comparative analysis of Calvin Schrag's position on transversal rationality and Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity serves to delineate the key theoretical tensions within the contemporary debate on the transition from the classical project of modernity to postmodern pluralism. In this view, transversality emerges as a methodological and existential response to the challenges of liquid everyday life. This juxtaposition allows for capturing the relationship between a critical diagnosis of contemporary society and an attempt to salvage the possibility of human understanding. Zygmunt Bauman reconstructs a reality stripped of its former, stable anchor points. Liquid modernity entails institutional

instability, the fragmentation of human biographies, and a crisis of social bonds. Traditional grand narratives lose their legitimising power, forcing the individual to function under conditions of perpetual uncertainty. In such a world, classical Enlightenment rationality – oriented toward constructing closed systems and pursuing a single, objective truth – proves insufficient for describing human experience. It is at this juncture that the fundamental theoretical problem addressed by Calvin Schrag comes to light. The American philosopher, however, does not advocate a return to obsolete dogmas, nor does he accept the radical relativism frequently attributed to postmodernism. His transversal rationality provides criteria for orientation amid Bauman's liquidity. Indeed, transversality presupposes the capacity to transition between different discourses and forms of life without seeking their forced unification. Reason is treated here not as a rigid structure, but as an ongoing process of communication, interpretation, and mutual critique. A comparison of both positions leads to the conclusion that Schrag's perspective complements Bauman's sociological diagnosis with a hitherto missing epistemological dimension. Where the Polish sociologist emphasises disintegration and atomisation, Schrag points to the possibility of understanding grounded in relationality and dialogue. Consequently, this analysis demonstrates that contemporary philosophical thought seeks an alternative to both outdated universalism and extreme pluralism, proposing instead the concept of cross-cutting different rationalities.

In summary, contemporary reflection on the condition of the subject requires a radical departure from substantialist accounts of human nature in favor of processual dynamic models. The foundation of this redefinition is the Schragian concept of transversal rationality, which defines culture as a relational texture – that is, a dynamic weave of historical, linguistic, and social threads. In this view, culture ceases to be a static mirror reflecting the world and becomes a communicative process in which the subject is constituted through constant responsiveness to the ethical call of the Other. Schrag constructs a concept of transversal subjectivity that enables the individual to integrate the bodily, ethical, and agentic spheres without falling into totalizing paradigms. This philosophical field finds its direct complement in Kazimierz Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration. The Polish psychological perspective shows that authentic personality development does not occur through harmonious growth, but through a painful process of breaking down existing psychological structures. This mechanism shows a profound similarity to Schragian transversal dynamics, as both processes are diagonal and vertical in nature, leading the individual from biological automatism

toward autonomy based on higher values. A key role is played here by Dąbrowski's third factor and the instance of conscience, which, as practical wisdom, allow for navigation in a heterogeneous reality without the loss of internal coherence.

Reference to Zygmunt Bauman's concepts allows for the collision of positive disintegration with Schrag's transversality and highlights the threats flowing from the space of erosion of stable structures, in which gardening culture has been replaced by market mechanisms of seduction that reduce the citizen to the role of consumer, tourist, or vagabond. In this context, Schragian transversality and Dąbrowski's disintegration appear as the only effective tools for protecting the subject from one-dimensionality. They allow for the transformation of the fear of exclusion into a developmental dynamism, in which freedom is not merely a superficial choice of a product, but an act of ethical engagement and resistance against systemic reductions. A complement to this processual anthropology is Józef Koźmielecki's theory of transgression, which identifies the capacity to go beyond material and symbolic boundaries as a fundamental species characteristic. Transgression constitutes the practical dimension of Schrag's response mechanism, in which the human being as an agent realizes their potential through the constant questioning of established orders. In Koźmielecki's view, culture ceases to be a system of deterministic constraints, becoming instead a catalyst for the expansion of individual possibilities. The synthesis of these four authors' thought leads to the formulation of a concept of identity as an unfinished task, realized at the intersection of contextual embeddedness and the autonomous power to transform the world. Ultimately, maintaining the transversal character of existence proves to be a necessary condition for finding meaning in a reality deprived of traditional ontological anchors. The processual conception of the subject, although a significant step towards overcoming Cartesian essentialism, faces serious ontological and ethical objections. The main axis of criticism concerns the problem of diachronic identity. Indeed, abandoning a stable, substantial core of the self in favour of a permanent "becoming" makes it difficult to explain what precisely guarantees the continuity of human experience over time. If the subject is reduced solely to a fluid stream of relations and variable discursive configurations, the category of identity loses its ontological grounding, giving way to radical fragmentation. The consequences of this stance extend beyond epistemology and generate significant dilemmas within moral philosophy and law. Traditional normative systems are predicated on the postulate of an autonomous, agentic, and temporally stable ethical subject. Under conditions of extreme processuality,

attributing responsibility to an individual for past actions or enforcing long-term obligations becomes problematic. Since the subject at the point of departure differs from the subject at the point of arrival, the very institutions of guilt, punishment, and promise undergo relativisation. In this context, critics accuse processual concepts of reductionism which, by over-identifying subjectivity with fluid external factors, deprives the individual of personal agency and the psychological stability necessary to function within social structures.

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RECENZJE



