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## Serfdom as the Matrix of Contemporary Poland, Critically Revisited

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule.

Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*

This large and important book combines several strategies and tactics. Its title, announces *Ludowa historia Polski* (“The People’s History of Poland”), thus making a reference to the official name of the communist Poland, until 1990: “People’s Republic of Poland” (now it is just “The Republic of Poland”—*Rzeczpospolita Polska*). The shift in the name of the Polish state shows, what has really changed in 1989. Leszczyński’s book title also references the famous work of Howard Zinn, *People’s History of the United States*. It also makes an appeal to the “history of oppression and resistance” (this is the second part of the book’s title) and the “mythology of lordship” (the third part of the book’s title). Spoiler alert—yes, Leszczyński indeed discusses all these matters in his large analysis of Polish history. Following Zinn and other versions of critical historiography, he positions serfdom, which occupied almost 1000 years of Polish history, at the center of his understanding of how today’s Poland was built on the exploitation and exclusion of the peasant

masses. This is the first effort to address Poland's history from such perspective, and as such, this book definitely revolutionized the approach to history as a discipline within Polish history research. Let's just mention that in the last century, as well as after 2000 the only consistent matrix of the Polish history applied by historians was Christianity, which also shaped Poland's past for a thousand years. The Marxist research from the 1960s and 1970s was swept under the pretext of "de-ideologization," and any effort to discuss class dynamic, as well as gender, colonial and ethnic divisions, was only possible in a positivist way. Leszczyński's book accounts for this paradigm shift, tracing it back to the Stalinist era and other repressive moments of Poland's recent history.

Leszczyński only reveals his methodological inspirations in the closing chapters of the book, where we read about Nietzsche, Hayden White and Michel Foucault as well as a slightly mockingly styled small chapter on Howard Zinn. We all know that without the incessant involvement of the latter, we would never see such books as that of Leszczyński, and thus, such positioning of Zinn's work in Leszczyński's books obliges us to ask: What is possible in the field of history in Poland? How would his new analysis be received if Leszczyński openly claimed Zinn's legacy? How would it be received if the author used feminist methodology, Gayatri Spivak's theory of the "subaltern" or other intersectional, interdisciplinary and politically engaged tools? Poland's current historical research, predominantly petrified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century positivist methodologies of "grasping the facts" with one's bare hands. Such astonishingly a-scientific method is widely practiced by Poland's academic historians as if the scientific obligation to choose and explain the method, evident in other disciplines, was obsolete in the specific field of analyzing past events. It can easily be deduced that Leszczyński's choices to apply Hayden White, but not Spivak, to discuss Zinn, but without fully affiliating with his method, was a strategic choice. The times when Bronisław Geremek read the history of France at the dawn of Europe's modernity by means of analyzing those excluded and marginalized from it are already long forgotten, and history methodology conveniently returned to mere positivist factography. It seems that as some other countries' histories can be read by its exclusions, the analysis of Poland's history has been petrified as being defined by a thousand years of Christianity, depicted by heroic victories and no failures, and approached solely from the perspective of the upper classes, the elitist view of nobles and *intelligentsia*. What Leszczyński does, introducing another factor, serfdom, which materially shaped the reality of Poland for a period of time as long as the presence of Christianity, was for decades a dirty secret, and

now comes to light by means of his book. Leszczyński succeeded in consequently depicting the situation of women and ethnic minorities, especially Jews and Ukrainians, which also is a novelty in Polish historiography. While the notion of “gender” does not make an appearance in the book’s method, the care with which the archive materials are selected in order to reveal the women’s situation throughout the depicted thousand years is inspiring.

Obviously, a thousand years is a long time, hardly conforming to a complete account in one book, even a large one. But Leszczyński’s task was of a more critical than archivist nature. His aim—to introduce serfdom as a grey eminence of the history of Poland, as a factor overdetermining its past and present; that purpose of the monumental book—was accomplished. A good question would be, however, whether the history of serfdom is the same as “The People’s History of Poland”? Were “the people” only a passive, disorganized receiver of the historical necessity expressed from the hands of the serfdom’s functionaries? The answer is obviously negative, and the servant’s resistance was never reduced solely reduced to individual gestures of vengeful atrocity against the masters. Peasant and proletarian revolts and uprisings had organized structures, long term aims and elaborate claims, thus undermining the supposed passivity of the people. Jacques Ranciere dismantles the philosopher’s image of “his poor” on multiple occasions, as do Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt in their *Public Sphere and Experience*. Gayatri Spivak on the other hand aptly demonstrates, how “the poor woman of India” might neither be poor nor fulfilling the stereotypical Western codes of orientalised femininity. These are just some of the multiple references absent in Leszczyński’s book, thus making his vision of “the people” to some extent more stereotypical than he intended it to be.

Leszczyński’s book was criticized by several commentators for insufficient precision in addressing the gender issues and ethnic diversity of Poland throughout its history. I would like to partially agree with such assessments—but only on a methodological level—and thus, as I explained above, such perspective would make this book inaccessible for the mainstream historians in Poland, and thus would make it impossible to finally undermine the current state of Poland’s historical research in a mainstream, mediatized debate. It should nevertheless be emphasized that on the factographic level Leszczyński’s book embraces the gender and ethnicity based inequalities in ways which sometimes really are inspiring. I believe his choice of discussed archive materials depicting the lives and deaths of peasants in Poland addresses women’s distinct suffering inflicted by the land owners and feudal aristocracy. Further-

more, the Jewish and Ukrainian questions are consequently analyzed throughout the book to build up the suggestion that, even without the Shoah, we would probably witness some dramatic cumulation of anti-semitic resentment in Poland in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This becomes clear when Leszczyński meticulously recapitulates the clashes between Poles and Jews built up within serfdom mechanisms while discussing particularly rich archive materials. The same holds for the Ukrainian question and the contemporary ambivalent sentiments and behaviors of Polish people towards our Ukrainian neighbors, who today constitute some 500,000 people's diaspora in Poland, (working mainly in low-income jobs and paid less than the citizens of Poland). Today's ambiguous relations Poles have with the Ukrainians, sometimes declaring brotherhood, and most often just serving prejudice and exploitative work conditions, finds its detailed explanation in Leszczyński's book. The archive material discussed by Leszczyński, particularly that from times after the 15<sup>th</sup> century, amounts to a systemic mix of colonial and exploitative abuse of Ukraine's population by the Polish upper classes.

These racist and misogynist aspects of Polish history analyzed, as Leszczyński does, from the perspective of the systemic mechanisms of serfdom, would gain far more visibility if the author decided to signalize them directly, within his methodological apparatus, in the book. Without such generalized, methodological highlights, they sometimes evaporate from view and thus open ways to the—unjust, as I tried to explain above—criticisms concerning supposed gender or ethnicity based blind-spots. As we see in chapters concerning the method, Leszczyński clearly tries to address the current state of history research in Poland to undermine and change it. He begins with Nietzsche's demand of the need to practice critical history, neither based on blind affirmation of historical figures nor solely on archivist precision, but on the desire to understand the contemporary times of the historian better by approaching the past events with a clear conscience that such grasping of the past is always conditioned by the current situation of the researcher.

This important book engages with several stakes on different levels. This makes it a fascinating combination of a impressively large archive research summary, an invitation to historical debate, and a war Leszczyński declares against positivist methodology of the historical studies dominant in contemporary Polish academia. It is also an introduction of poststructuralism into the methodology of historical studies, which might sound surprising after the work of Bronisław Geremek from the 1970s but is indeed still necessary. Leszczyński engages with the uses and misuses of Marxism in Polish historical studies throughout the 20<sup>th</sup>

and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, rightly pointing to the commonly observed phenomena—namely, that if you kill dialectics, both emancipation and the quality of your research die as well, which indeed happened in a large cluster of Polish historical academic work. After 1989, anything that could be associated with Marxism—criticality, engagement and non-conformism in particular, made the Polish historical research return to the sad positivist practice of “collecting and organizing data,” an approach abandoned even by the police as it became obvious that the psychological and subjective motifs, unexpected shifts, external conditioning, class, race and gender, long processes of trauma and exploitation and other factors need to be considered and methodologically explained in order to understand “facts.” Polish historians forgot this in the Stalinist era, as Leszczyński rightly pointed, but this large blind spot continues in historical scholarship after 1989 as well, now legitimized by the supposed necessity to “abandon Marxism” as a politically incorrect methodology. Leszczyński brilliantly connects the two large returns of the positivist muting of context and diversity in historical sciences—that from the 1950s and that of 1989, thus bringing us to the understanding of how Poland’s impossibility of understanding history directly translates into forms of petrified feudal remnants of serfdom in contemporary socio-political relations. He also mentions other critical historical authors of the current time; however, he does not engage with them throughout the book.

Leszczyński’s book responds to the perfectly pertinent problem of today’s state of exception applications by conservative governments to the immediacy of the contemporary relations between the executive power and the bare lives of individuals in Poland. Although the “contemporary grange” and “remnants of feudal relations today” are mentioned in his book, Leszczyński builds a convincing explanation of the ease with which the authoritarian power structures persist in Poland and how they make it possible to ignore the political agency of those whose invisibility, shaped by the lack of privilege, is today maintained by the “positivist” historical (lack of) method. I tried to approach this issue of methodological erasure of the workers from the Polish accounts of anti-state opposition after WWII in the book *Feminist Antifascism: Counterpublics of the Common*. Leszczyński did something very similar, and more, as he asked the fundamental question concerning the privilege of the supposedly “descriptive” rather than “critical” method in the historical studies. Both our books discuss Howard Zinn, but while I fully embrace his revisionist attitude to the traditionalist, *de facto* conservative making of history, Leszczyński takes some (rhetorical, I believe) “metho-

dological distance.” This results in mild comments of conservative historians praising Leszczyński for “not being a leftist radical” as if there was something principally wrong with having political opinions and—more importantly—as if the majority of Polish historians were not radical conservatives in their scholarly practice. Leszczyński not only undermines the hegemony of the conservative perspective in Polish historiography, but he also proves to what extent the supposedly “direct access” to “data” consists, in fact, in cementing the past without discussion or revision.

Perhaps the greatest value of this book is the legitimization and, in fact, perpetuation of a methodological *coup*, after which the supposed neutrality of the traditionalist, positivist “direct access” of historians to “facts” will forever be over. This tacitly conducted operation is a strategic masterpiece, and the eventual flaws of the book can therefore, in my opinion, be forgiven. The detailed and methodologically consistent introduction of another historical Matrix of Poland’s development—the serfdom—is another important aspect of this book.

Another merit of Leszczyński’s project is his ability to combine the struggles of the peasants, with constant attention to their gender and ethnic/national belonging, which—although I already expressed some doubts concerning the methodological choices of the author—is a novelty in Polish historical scholarship, generally divided between the mainstream, gender-blind “descriptions” of the “facts” and its counterpart—the unfortunately positivist as well—supplementing of data concerning women, practiced widely in Polish “feminist” historical scholarship, such as that of the school of Anna Żarnowska and other academics.

As I suggested earlier, the magnitude of Leszczyński’s book, which promises to cover over a thousand years of Poland’s history in 669 pages, obviously exposes him to easy criticism of this or that omission. Obviously, it was impossible to write about everything, and, for instance, the history of women’s or peasants’ movements could have been discussed more extensively. The perplexed mechanisms of “subalternation” could also have been discussed in a more complex theoretical framework. But in comparisons with the gains this book brought, and as the wide discussion of this and other books, research and artistic projects, as well as media debates largely prove, the book managed to transform the Polish debates about the past, the method of researching history, as well as the discussions of the current identity of the society of Poland with all its conflicted interests, past remnants and contemporary modes of exploitation and rebellion. For this, I am truly grateful to the author of “The People’s History of Poland.”

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