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Whiteness and Polishness

In 2019, the *New York Times* launched a series of articles entitled “The 1619 Project,” which argued that we should reorient our understanding of American history by using as a starting point the year when the first African slaves were sold in the territory that would become the United States.¹ Not surprisingly, Donald Trump immediately countered by sponsoring “The 1776 Project,” which attempts to position the libertarian right as the heir to a long tradition of American greatness.² A furious battle over historical memory is now being fought around these two texts, with school districts mandating that one or the other be adopted into the curriculum, depending on the political orientation dominating in any particular district.³

This was the backdrop for me when I read Adam Leszczyński’s *Ludowa historia Polski* (“The People’s History of Poland”), so the book felt familiar even before I noticed the references to Howard Zinn’s (1980) *A People’s History of the United States*. The country of my birth and the country that I study as a historian are rarely so explicitly aligned. Both

1 See <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>.

2 See <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>.

3 Some conservative state legislators have attempted to ban the use of “The 1619 Project.” For example, see Schwartz 2021.

Americans and Poles are experiencing a parallel moment of historical reassessment. Zinn's book is forty years old, so there's nothing new about seeing US history from the "bottom up." But most Americans were, until recently, taught to perceive slavery as a tragic moment in our past, a vanquished evil whose legacy we must transcend. Even those of us who think of ourselves as progressive saw racism as a stain on our nation—something that needed to be cleaned off so that the ideals of the Revolution could be more fully realized. These past few years have opened many eyes to the fact that bigotry has an enormous constituency in this country, and (more important) that it is not a mere stain—it is woven into the very fabric of our country. The term "structural racism" is no longer an obscure concept used by historians and social scientists, but instead a regular component in our public discourse. With "The 1619 Project" and the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, we White Americans have been forced to recognize that racism is not a mere character flaw embodied by a small group of bad people.⁴ It is, instead, something so deeply rooted in our politics, culture, and society that it is perpetuated even among those who sincerely renounce prejudice.

Adam Leszczyński's contribution is quite similar. Explicitly, his theoretical models are Zinn, Hayden White, Michel Foucault, and most of all, James C. Scott.⁵ Yet to cite those authors is misleading, because it makes Leszczyński seem behind the times, as if Poles are only now ready to consider arguments that were made in the US and Western Europe many decades ago. It is true that the trends that reshaped the discipline of history in the 1980s and 1990s had less resonance among scholars in Poland at the time—but how could it have been otherwise, given everything that was going on back then? Leszczyński's most impor-

4 A recent change in standard capitalization rules in American English has been to capitalize Black when referring to a racial identity. The canonical Associated Press Style Guide accepted this in June of last year, see: <https://apnews.com/article/71386b46dbff8190e71493a763e8f45a>. It has remained controversial whether to capitalize White or not, and there are good arguments on both sides. In my opinion, Whiteness needs to be marked in the same way as any other ethnic/national/racial identity, precisely because it has for so long been the unmarked, normative, privileged condition. I am not "white," but a sort of pinkish-beige. I am, however, undeniably White.

5 Scott's work might be less widely known than the others. His most important books are *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States* (Scott 2017); *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (Scott 1976); *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Scott 1998); *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Scott 1985).

tant contribution is not to help Polish historians “catch up” with the West; instead, this book is momentous because it is a Polish instantiation of a dramatic and much-needed shock that is now happening in many different countries: the difficult recognition that *structures* of oppression and exploitation exist in our societies that cannot be easily eradicated by individual commitments to think nice thoughts and treat others with respect. In country after country, people are coming to realize that the point of discussing historical injustice is not (at least, not only) to reconcile previously hostile communities or come to terms with the wrongs that our grandparents committed. In fact, those conversations can easily be led astray, deflected by the insistence that the sins of the parents not be passed on to the children. Much more important are the ways in which engrained patterns of thought, institutional discrimination, unacknowledged privilege, and inherited “cultural capital” perpetuate those past wrongs into the present. In this regard, in Poland, the power of the nobility over the peasantry is at least as important as the history of violence and discrimination against “minorities” (Jews, Ukrainians, etc.).

This is why there is, and must be, a productive presentism in Leszczyński’s book. The last line of his conclusion reminds us that “Polska zaś zmienia się przez stulecia w znacznie mniejszym stopniu, niż się Polakom wydaje.” The historian is usually the one who pops into every argument in order to say “It’s more complicated than you think” and “Don’t forget that the past was very different from the present.” We tend to be professionally allergic to generalizations, and that’s a good thing. Every so often, however, we need to step back and notice that despite all the shifting specifics, there really are some continuities that merit explanation. In this case, these persistent themes involve the cultural attitudes, social hierarchies, political institutions, and economic practices that *systematically* disadvantage some and privilege others. It is banal to say that there have always been poor and oppressed people while others enjoy wealth and privilege. Jesus said it (Matthew 26:11), and so have countless others before and after. The analytical challenge is to push deeper and discover the structures and forms through which power is exerted and maintained, and trace how and why those change. This is what Karl Marx, and Adam Smith before him, did by outlining a theory of historical stages of development characterized by different forms of authority. Our moment, however, is more difficult than theirs, because it is much harder to believe in capital-H-History. In 2021, few can sustain a faith that “progress” will make everything better.

One alternative to placing our trust in historical progress is to relocate our ideals from a future time to a geographical space. This tendency

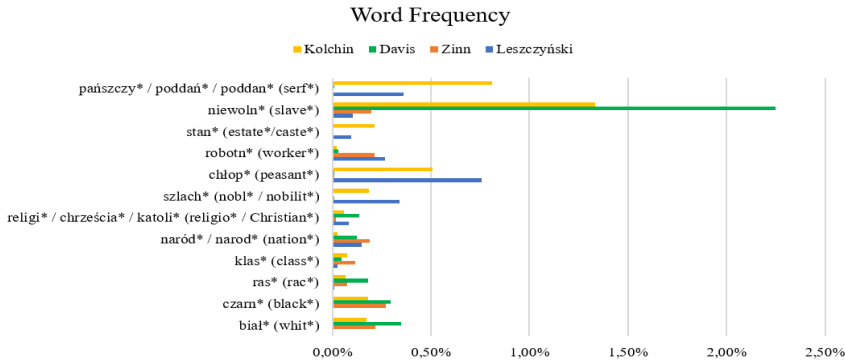
is particularly common along the European periphery, and it is exemplified in “The People’s History of Poland.” While Leszczyński eschews a faith in progress, he still seems to believe in Europe. The book is punctuated by references to how badly Poland looks when compared to the “kraje cywilizacyjnego centrum,” and how much “oriental barbarism” or “oriental cruelty” can be found along the Vistula. Leszczyński is familiar with Larry Wolff’s argument that 18th century West Europeans were engaging in an ideological project by constructing an “oriental mirror” that concealed their own flaws—yet he concludes that those observers were nonetheless basing their projection on a realistic portrait of the East.⁶

They probably were. But the point of Wolff’s book, like the canonical writing of Edward Said that inspired it, was not that the orientalists were misrepresenting what they saw—rather, the problem was that they were describing it in a way that deflected attention from the injustices and flaws in their own societies (Said 1978). They depicted a barbaric racial and geographical other which could be marked, so that their own status as racially White and geographically Western could be rendered invisible, as the taken-for-granted “normal” against which all others should be measured. This left Eastern Europe in a strange transitional zone, and ensured that the specter of Whiteness would haunt the way we write about the region. For far too long, those of us who study this part of the world have acted as if we don’t have to think seriously about race, given that nearly everyone in the area we study is White. Although racialized hostility towards Jews and Roma was a major issue for many decades, post-WWII Poland is reflexively described as racially (and ethnically, religiously, and linguistically) homogeneous. This has allowed us to forget that in the modern world, race is of central importance even where it cannot be seen.

While recognizing that chattel slavery and serfdom were not the same, Leszczyński nonetheless argues that “mimo tych zasadniczych różnic istniały także strukturalne podobieństwa między tymi oboma systemami społecznymi.” These structural parallels are indeed as numerous as they are obvious, but I think one particular similarity noted by Leszczyński deserves attention here: „W USA miał on rasowy charakter, ale w Europie Wschodniej (...) różnicę pomiędzy chłopem a szlachcicem uważano za równie wrodzoną, jak kolor skóry w Stanach Zjednoczonych.”

6 The canonical reference here is Larry Wolff (1994) *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Less well known, but also worthy of attention, is the more recent book *The Idea of Galicia: History and Fantasy in Habsburg Political Culture* (Wolff 2010).

It is quite striking how American and Polish scholars use different terminology to talk about structures of oppression. Let's compare "The People's History of Poland" to three similar works from this side of the Atlantic: the aforementioned book by Howard Zinn; a canonical history of slavery, David Davis' (2006) *Inhuman Bondage*; and the only book I'm aware of that systematically compared slavery and serfdom, Peter Kolchin's (1987) masterpiece *Unfree Labor*. I ran a textual analysis on all four books, and the terminological variations were revealing:⁷



The differences between these texts might seem so obvious that they don't even warrant mention: after all, race does not appear to be a salient category of analysis in Poland, while in the US we have "farmers" rather than "peasants." And for all that Leszczyński compares serfdom and slavery, he is mostly discussing the former. Yet I think we should think seriously about his claim that the apparent differences between US slavery and Polish serfdom are not as great as they might appear, because we Americans describe as "racial" a form of exploitation that is categorized otherwise in Poland, but is nonetheless quite comparable. The first section of "The People's History of Poland" is devoted to the various attempts to describe a separate genealogy for *szlachta* and peasants. This is, in fact, a very old story. At least as early as Aristotle, we can find the myth of the "natural slave."

All men who differ from one another by as much as the soul differs from the body or man from a wild beast (and that is the state of those who work by using their bodies, and for whom that is the best they can do)—these people

⁷ The analysis was performed on the main body of each volume, excluding the notes, bibliography, and index. I used the apps available at <https://voyant-tools.org/>. The asterisk in each search term indicates variable letters in order to capture alternative word forms. I manually reviewed the findings to catch false positives.

are slaves by nature, and it is better for them to be subject to this kind of control (...). Nature must therefore have intended to make the bodies of free men and of slaves different also; slaves' bodies strong for the services they have to do, those of free men upright and not much use for that kind of work, but instead useful for community life (...). It is clear that there are certain people who are free and certain who are slaves by nature, and it is both to their advantage, and just, for them to be slaves. (Aristotle, *Politics*, chap. 5)

Aristotle made the idea of the “natural slave” central to his vision of the ideal polity: one in which the work would be done by those created for that purpose, thus enabling others to have the leisure needed to attend to public affairs. For Aristotle, a world without slaves would be necessarily a world without citizens, for that latter depended on the former. From the *δημοκρατία* to the *res publica* to the *rzeczpospolita*, participatory government was linked to unfree labor. It is thus no coincidence that the word *obywatel* was a synonym for *szlachcic* as late as the early 20th century.

With this in mind, we understand more clearly why “The 1619 Project” could argue that slavery was at the core of the American project. One of the most powerful US politicians of the 19th century, John C. Calhoun, said this in a speech from 1849:

With us the two great divisions of society are not the rich and the poor, but White and Black, and all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals, if honest and industrious, and hence have a position and pride of character of which neither poverty nor misfortune can deprive them. (Calhoun 1883, 505–506)

No defender of the *złota wolność* could have put it better. The parallels between the America republic and the *Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodów* are clear. We can see how serfdom/slavery was more than just a bad thing that existed *alongside* the proto-democratic institutions of the First Republic or the American Revolution. Instead, the system was one integral whole. It is highly relevant that the timelines leading to the Nihil Novi constitution and the establishment of a mandatory minimum *pańszczyzna* are almost exactly aligned.

Yet if this parallel between America and Poland is so apt, then why is there such a significant terminological differentiation in how we talk about the two locations? The *concept* of race does indeed flow through both stories, but the term “race” does not. Perhaps it should.

I found one tiny misstatement in “The People’s History of Poland”—something so trivial that it would not on its own be worth mentioning.

Leszczyński writes that the flow of emigrants from Poland to the US declined because of restrictions put in place in response to the mass unemployment of the Great Depression. This is off by a few years. The stream of émigrés from Eastern Europe was slowed to a trickle by the “Emergency Quota Act” of 1921, and then nearly entirely closed with the immigration act of 1924. Both of these were explicitly racial in nature, designed to keep White hegemony secure in the United States. Immigration from Asia was shut off entirely, but so was the flow from southern and eastern Europe. Reading the congressional transcripts from the debates surrounding these laws, it is clear that the primary concern was racial supremacy. Those who could fit into the American racial structure could be welcomed in a controlled way: thus, seasonal farm-worker programs for Mexicans could be retained. But the growing urban areas with enclaves of Poles, Chinese, Jews, Japanese, Greeks, Italians, etc. were seen as dangerous to White hegemony. The Asians were blocked because they had no recognized place in the White-Black-Brown triumvirate of the American racial system. The Eastern and Southern Europeans were blocked because they were simultaneously too White and not White enough. The very potential of assimilation was the fear in this case, because there was no way to immediately differentiate a White protestant of English ancestry from a White Catholic of Polish ancestry. The peripheral Europeans, in other words, could “pass,” which was a great concern in the American racial ideology of that time.

Leszczyński tells us that peasants who emigrated to America would write home with stories about how easy it was to succeed in the States, where only their skill mattered. It was irrelevant to the Americans, they wrote, whether someone was peasant or noble. Poles could establish a much higher standard of living and even advance socially in the still thinly populated American Midwest during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. What they did not see—what Polish immigrants in the US or Western Europe often fail to see even today—is that their ability to “pass” as White was crucial to their success. They could prosper in the US not because America was so very different than Poland in the rigidity of its hierarchies, but because the categories were drawn differently. As the American cities grew and racial fears of diversity grew with them, Europe’s Catholics got temporarily re-racialized as non-White, and thus grouped together with Asians in the prohibitions of the 1921–1924 laws. Later, the dynamics of the Cold War made Polish-Americans (and Catholics, more broadly) White once again. Race is a mutable category in this way, but that fluidity is limited. It can become more or less

capacious in the definition of precisely who is considered White, and in this sense, race works just like nationality or ethnicity. But whereas the opposite of “Polish” can be lots of different things depending on the context, the opposite of “White” is always “Black.”

The fear of not being White sits very deeply in Polish culture, even though it is virtually never expressed as such. Leszczyński tells us about the nicknames used in the 1950s to denigrate Nowa Huta: *Dziki Mek-syk* and *Kożedo* (the latter referring to a POW camp from the Korean War). The power of those labels rested precisely on the perceived scandal of Poles being treated in a way that they considered unsuitable to their identity as White Europeans. The poverty and abuse of the *lud* throughout Polish history is awful, and deserves to be analyzed alongside other regimes of unfree labor. But race enters this story in two pernicious ways. First, in the outrage generated by the fact that Poland appears so much worse than the (White) European world to which it is assumed to properly belong. Second, in the invisible power and privilege that comes with Whiteness even for those with peasant ancestry.

Inside Poland, the lack of enduring racial differentiation made it harder to sustain the old divisions once the institutional structure of subordination was gone. It is undeniable that the cultural capital of those with *szlachta* ancestry continues to exist. “The People’s History of Poland” would not even be a controversial book were it not for the fact that a historical narrative designed by and for the nobility defines Polish history, even now.⁸ Nonetheless, the fluidity allowing people to assimilate into this elite is vastly greater than that of those designated as a racial other in the United States or Western Europe (or Poland, for that matter). Yes, we did have an African-American President for eight years, but the fierce backlash brought us Donald Trump. How many Poles even know which of the III Republic’s Prime Ministers were from peasant and which from noble background? The enduring *cultural* power of *szlachta* identity means that all of them acted as if they were from “good families,” but the porousness of this category allowed them to do so. No matter how hard he tried, President Obama could never *not* be Black. There is a flexibility surrounding nonracial hierarchies that is missing when they are racially marked. More importantly, I think, the concept of race exists for Poles themselves, for whom “Whiteness” is unseen but vital. It is evident every time someone in Poland worries about declining

8 Leszczyński cites Smoczyński and Zarycki 2017. I would add a magnificent book on this topic that has not garnered the attention it deserves: Jakubowska 2012.

birth rates yet cannot even imagine that immigration could resolve that problem. It is evident when Poles see a deep injustice in the economic gap between Poland and Germany, but take as self-evident the (*much* larger) gap between Poland and Nigeria, or Vietnam, or Guatemala. And most of all, it is evident as soon as we notice the countless ways in which Poles can, under the right circumstances, take advantage of the same White privilege that any other European has access to.⁹ Just consider the social dynamics at play the moment any Pole comes into contact with anyone from outside Europe or North America—in the emigration, on vacation in Egypt or Turkey, or when dealing with the small but growing population of non-White immigrants in Poland itself.

Two things are simultaneously true: 1) the Sarmatian mythology is an example of how the *szlachta* constructed a cultural-political-economic regime that in many ways looked quite similar to the racialized slavery of the Western hemisphere; 2) although those social divides remain “sticky” a century and a half after the abolition of serfdom, there can be no real comparison to the enduring power of Whiteness around the world—including in places where virtually everyone is perceived as White.

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⁹ The history of this phenomenon has been brilliantly explored in Valerio 2019.

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