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Was the Enlightenment Progress?

Enlightenment or Barbarism

We often assume the connection between the Enlightenment and social progress to be something evident. It is to the Enlightenment philosophy that we owe the ideas of emancipation, equality, democracy, while the mobility of classes and the abolition of feudal despotism are seen as achievements of the modern states. Even if we do not mix the relationship of this new order with racism, slavery, colonization, the birth of nationalism, and the rise of fossil-fuel-based capitalism (Haraway 2016; Mignolo 2011; Buck-Morss 2014; Moore 2015; Tsing 2012; Federici 2009), it still seems that since the 18th century, the Enlightenment has been the only possible political choice—either (imperfect) enlightenment or (feudal) barbarism.

Recently, a great deal of work has been done in the humanities to demonstrate that the above alternative is itself primarily a product of the Enlightenment ideology (Mignolo 2012; Scott 1999). Writers waging their ideological war against “backwardness” (feudal, tribal, etc.) were obviously not in the position to describe events, phenomena, and characters impartially. Perhaps the most striking example of their strategy was the theory of cannibalism of the non-European peoples aimed to justify the ventures of colonization. At a time when travellers were looking among the “savages” for the evidence of their cannibalism, Europeans themselves were consuming considerable amounts of human flesh

for medical purposes. According to Richard Sugg, “It is very likely that Europeans consumed more human meat during this time than people in the New World” (Sugg 2011).

Nevertheless, in Adam Leszczyński’s “The People’s History of Poland,” the credibility of these (proto)Enlightenment travellers is rated very highly (Leszczyński 2020). Ulrich von Werdum, quoted at great length in this book, as a Protestant representative of the philosophy of reason, is supposed to be particularly sensitive to all the manifestations of Catholic paganism and social oppression. Yet from the works of (mainly feminist) scholars of the period emerges the exact opposite picture. Witch-hunting was a typically modern invention (virtually absent in medieval Europe) supported by the major philosophers of reason (Federici 2009; Merchant 1990; 2006). Furthermore, while Enlightenment writers portray the slavery of peasants, seen during their travels through Eastern Europe, in the colonies founded by the Enlightenment states, between 1700 and 1850, the number of slaves increased tenfold (Losurdo 2014; Buck-Morss 2014).

The trust Leszczyński puts in the Enlightenment travellers and later in the Enlightenment reformers (originating partly from Poland, but mainly from the partitioning monarchies) is problematic not only because of the total lack of credibility of the western travellers, but also because of the questionable progressiveness of the reforms introduced by the Enlightenment governments. In relation to the Enlightenment, Leszczyński applies a kind of right-wing politics of history, in which the defence of “the good name” (homeland, religion, intellectual tradition, etc.) is always more important than confronting the historical reality (Leszczyński 2020). The decision to defend the Enlightenment in this way is all the more surprising as it is probably the only moment in the entire “The People’s History of Poland” when the author so clearly takes the side of the elites (in this case, Enlightenment elites) instead of the subordinated (and usually very anti-Enlightenment) classes oppressed by them. Leszczyński has no shortage of tools to demystify the narratives about the salutary role of the leftist intelligentsia in other times (played in its various variants from the 19th century until the Third Polish Republic) or to expose the false promises of the socialist state, but with regard to the elites of the seventeenth and especially the 18th century this critical awareness seems to fade away. Why?

The Kingdom of Peasant Anarchy

This lapse, in my opinion, results from the choice of the interpretive framework adopted in the chapter on the pre-partition Commonwealth. In most of the parts of the “The People’s History of Poland,” at least three protagonists are put on stage (e.g. in the 19th century: the tsarist regime, peasants/workers, socialist intelligentsia; or in the People’s Republic of Poland: communists, workers, leftist intelligentsia), but before 1800, the history seems to have only two actors: the nobility and the elites of the Enlightenment (Western philosophers and absolutist monarchs). Even there, where Leszczyński decides to give voice to the peasants living at that time, almost always it is the passive voice of victims, never of active participants of history. According to recent research, however, before 1800, the subordinated classes in this part of Europe had quite a lot to say. Certainly much more than the historiography based on the cunning opinions of the Enlightenment writers would be willing to admit. Leszczyński shares their prejudices.

The work that summarizes the findings of the recent historiography on the topic is Marcus Cerman’s *Villagers and Lords in Eastern Europe, 1300–1800* (Cerman 2012; see Kochanowicz 2013). Unfortunately, Leszczyński does not address the argument from *Villagers and Lords* in any way,¹ despite the fact that the book exposes many of the myths inherited from the Enlightenment by 20th century historiography. Cerman proposes to abandon categories such as “eastern backwardness,” “serfdom,” and “secondary serfdom,” which are supposed to explain at one stroke the social life that has been going on for hundreds of years in the territories covering millions of square kilometres. Thus, instead of looking for the convincing sources for the initial dogma, we should rather go in the opposite direction: start with the detailed research on the specific estates, manors, and villages, and only on such basis draw a broader picture of the epoch. Looking from below, we can see, for example, that *pańszczyzna* (serfdom), which is the only institution that Enlightenment writers visiting Eastern Europe could associate with

1 The only reference is the footnote in which Leszczyński refers to the page 37 of *Villagers and Lords*, where Cerman is supposed to prove the thesis of the widespread violence prevailing in the Eastern European countryside (Leszczyński 2020). Yet on the page 37 of his book, Cerman argues the exact opposite. He refers to statistics that show the enormous diversity of violence suffered by the Russian peasants at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries: on some manors, beatings were experienced by up to 25 percent of the serfs, while elsewhere it was as little as 0.3 percent (Cerman 2012, 37).

slavery, is a phenomenon that, in fact, rarely occurs in this region (Cerman 2012, 12, 22). It usually appears and disappears, never lastingly assigned to an entire country, region, or even village. The reason for this is that, without a centralized state, every norm, measure and law remains subject to permanent, local negotiations (Kula 1986). Peasants—especially when the aristocracy has limited recourse to centralized repressive apparatuses (used to suppress open revolts only)—can win quite a lot as long as they fight their battles using the tools of the weak resistance: they can falsify measurements, expand the commons, shorten the workday, and even change the local laws (Cerman 2012, 33–38; Rauszer 2021; Scott 1987).

Because the pre-1800 legal and economic arrangements are locally limited in ways that are difficult to imagine today, it is impossible to speak of anything like Polish, Swedish, or Russian serfdom, just as it is difficult to argue that there was any significant difference in the position of the peasant living in either the Western or Eastern parts of Europe (Cerman 2012, 94–129). Hypostases such as Polish, Swedish, Russian, Eastern and Western economies result from an anachronistic understanding of the pre-modern world. Indeed, the states at that time employ something resembling the centralized modern law; there are also trade contacts between the East and the West that might be associated with the capitalist globalization. But when the matter is looked at more closely, it becomes clear that the scale of this trade (everywhere, not just in Poland) was, in fact, microscopic (Topolski 2000; Pobłocki 2017, 185)², and the law (intended primarily to protect the interests of the nobility) is grossly ineffective—more a record of expectations or even fantasies than a reliable reflection of the actual social relations of the epoch (Cerman 2012, 33–38).

For the law to work (i.e. effectively defend the elite interests) and for the globalization to happen (fuelled by phenomena such as Atlantic slavery), there is a need for centralized, powerful state apparatuses. These, however, do not appear in Europe before the 18th century. There is no reason to regard the absolutist monarchies, legitimized by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, as the institutions standing up for the

2 Kacper Pobłocki writes: “It was only with the advent of technology enabling mass transport of goods over long distances—the steamboat and especially railroads—that one can speak of an increase in the importance of international exchange. As late as the early 19th century, long-distance trade differed little from that of ancient times. All the products that flowed from Asia to Europe throughout the 1800s could be fit on a single modern container ship” (Pobłocki 2021, 189).

oppressed peasantry. It was no coincidence that these states consisted almost exclusively of the repressive apparatuses: army, police, and bureaucracy that controlled the society. Frederick the Great's Prussia—for many Enlightenment writers, an example of the incarnate utopia—spent 75 percent (!) of its annual budget on the army alone. Instead of abolishing exploitation, absolutist monarchies strengthened and sealed it: they limited migration, suppressed the revolts with greater ease, imposed new taxes and forced conscription to the army. Not surprisingly, the struggle of peasants against the modern state continues uninterrupted from 18th century Austria and England, through revolutionary France, 19th century Italy, to 20th century Burma and Malaysia (Luebke 1997; Thompson 1971; Morales 2017; Petrusiewicz 1996; Scott 1977; 1987).

It is in this context that we should see the phenomenon that is completely incomprehensible from the perspective of the narrative proposed by Leszczyński, namely, tens of thousands of fugitive serfs, fleeing Russia, Austria, and Prussia, who stream into 18th century Poland, the only region in this part of Europe which failed to establish the apparatuses of the modern state (Gornostaev 2020, 70–71; Jones 1993). The oppressed in the 18th century Poland are favoured not only by the lack of administration, police, army, and low population density. Above all, they are helped by the natural conditions—abundance of marshes, swamps, and dense forests—that provide shelter and, with few exceptions, are used as commons. Tens if not hundreds of thousands of people wandered around Poland at that time (Assorodobraj-Kula 1966, 43; Assorodobraj 2020), and those who decided to work on the manor could count on lower burdens (Omulski, in a letter from 1786, writes with undoubted exaggeration about the twenty-fold difference in taxation between the Polish and Russian peasants; Jones 1993, 115). This has to be attributed to the limited means of repression at the disposal of the nobility at that time, where an unsatisfied peasant could always, as Leszczyński aptly points out without drawing any major consequences from this observation, “disappear without much difficulty” (Leszczyński 2020).

Enlightened Slavery

The fact that the Commonwealth became in the 18th century almost “stateless” (Scott 2010), a great storehouse for fugitives, smugglers and brigands, threatening the interests of the absolutist states in the region, was, according to some scholars, the main reason for (at least the first

of) the partitions (Jones 1993).³ The partitions themselves, from the perspective of the local peasant, were an event that was at least ambivalent, if not simply negative. Leszczyński is right that under the new order, the peasant gained the legal personality and freedom, but for this (usually purely formal) privilege, the serf had to bear the new judicial system dominated by the nobility, new burdens, greater control over migration, and, finally, forced conscription.⁴ That the partitioning monarchies ultimately acted as defenders of the fundamental nobility's interests can well be seen by the fact that all three of them recognized Polish aristocratic titles and maintained the law of serfdom for decades (in the case of Russia and Prussia, counting from the first partition, it would take nearly a century to completely abolish it).

All three also, as though recognizing the material basis of the power wielded by the local peasantry, inaugurated their reign by conquering nature: exploiting rivers, marshes, meadows, and forests, that is, spaces previously used as commons (Guzowski 2015). Already in 1796, in the Austrian partition, regulations were introduced which forbade peasants to sell timber from the forests in the royal estates; a few years later (1804), the ban began to cover any unprescribed harvesting of timber from the government lands. All the while, in the second and third decades of the 19th century in the Kingdom of Poland, a predatory policy combined with modern forest management was carried out; both resulted in "shrinking of the forested area and limited peasants' access to forests" (Kochanowicz 1981, 56). A similar fate befell the drained swamps, marshes, bogs, and liquidated floodplains (Guzowski 2015, 70). As Kochanowski summarizes these changes, with the new power, "the feudal order lost its symmetrical character—the village, subordinated to the will of the owner or holder, forced to do the corvee, no longer had the right to concessions and care of the manor, while its rights to pastures and forests became limited" (Kochanowicz 1981, 85). Probably in the breaking of the feudal compromise, which in exchange for burdens guaranteed access to forests, pastures, rivers, and assistance in case of

3 Jones shows that this was a fundamental motivation in the policy of Catherine the Great, acting under the strong influence of the Russian gentry originated from the governorates adjacent to Poland and particularly vulnerable to peasant flight and brigand raids (Jones 1993).

4 What affected most was the ruthlessness of the state burden. If previously the amount of taxes is a subject of negotiation between peasant and lord (and thus depended, for example, on the size of the harvest), with the advent of modern fiscal systems there is no longer any room for negotiation (Kochanowicz 1981, 142; see Scott 1977, 97).

fire, drought, or crop failure, the reasons for growing unrest in the countryside not only in the Kingdom of Poland, but also in Galicia, should be sought (Kochanowicz 1981, 100, 142).

While the attack on the commons targeted the economic foundation of the peasant resistance, the forced conscription was a weapon aimed at its political basis. In Russia, it was quite openly treated as a counter-revolutionary tool; the army conscripts were troublemakers or slackers, peasants who impeded the efficient management of property (Miakinkov 2020, 24). Forced military service lasted from a dozen to several dozen years, usually taking place in poor sanitary and health conditions, and most conscripts, if they didn't lose their lives on the battlefield, often died of epidemics, malnutrition or suicide. Forced conscription, an institution that Austria and Russia maintained until the second half of the 19th century (and replaced only with a shorter and less severe general conscription), most often for the lower classes meant nothing but a form of slavery.

If we adopt Orlando Petterson's definition of slavery as "social death" (that is, the forced uprooting of an individual from his or her community, culture, and language), conscription turns out to equal slavery to a greater degree than any form of feudal servitude, serfdom included (Patterson 2018). Not surprisingly, subjugated classes escape conscription: they attempt bribes, fake marriages, even commit self-mutilation, all that to avoid the enrolment (Hochedlinger 2011, 94; Forrest 1989, 136–137). A peasant given a "choice" between feudal and modern slavery will almost always and almost everywhere choose the former (Scott 1977, 43).

The issue does not only concern conscription. According to David Graeber, although the feudal subjection remains legally uniform with the slave labour or bonded labour, in the perspective of social history it is the "free" wage labour which resembles slavery to much greater extent (Graeber 2011, 352).⁵ In both cases, the condition of subjugation is the "social death," that is, the forced uprooting from the local culture:

5 "There is, and has always been, a curious affinity between wage labor and slavery. This is not just because it was slaves on Caribbean sugar plantations who supplied the quick-energy products that powered much of early wage laborers' work; not just because most of the scientific management techniques applied in factories in the industrial revolution can be traced back to those sugar plantations; but also because both the relation between master and slave, and between employer and employee, are in principle impersonal: whether you've been sold or you're simply rented yourself out, the moment money changes hands, who you are is supposed to be unimportant; all that's important is that you are capable of understanding orders and doing what you're told" (Graeber 2011, 352).

from the community, from familiar languages, customs, traditions, from commons—in short, from the social reality built over generations for the protection of the subjugated (especially women) from the elite oppression (Scott 1977; Federici 2009). Such form and degree of alienation remains essentially alien to the feudal world. This is why slavery, in its most extreme forms, had a chance to succeed in the Caribbean, where people, hauled off to the plantations, were stripped of any connection to their social world. This is why rural and urban plebs, in the name of their moral economies, are most often inclined to defend the social structures which yield less income but are more stable and egalitarian than a market society (Thompson 1971; Scott 1977, 40).

In this context, the coming of the Enlightenment can hardly be combined with “social modernization bringing the promise of emancipation to many of our country’s lower-born citizens” (Leszczynski 2020). From the perspective of the regional commoners, transition towards the Enlightenment was at best yet another exchange of elites; at worst, it meant a counter-revolution, an attack against peasant and plebeian autonomy. Thus, if any progress was made in the territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 19th century, it was not thanks to the Enlightenment and its elites, who maintained where they could the slave and the semi-slave social relations for decades, despite or even against the Enlightenment as a result of the struggle against the new social order and its government.

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