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“The People’s History of Poland”  
from the Author’s Perspective:  
What It Is All about

In the beginning let me express my deepest gratitude to the editors of *Praktyka Teoretyczna* for this seminar. I am also grateful to the five extraordinary scholars who have found time in their busy schedules to write a review of my book. It is an honor for the author.

I also beg for forgiveness for not replying to all the critical opinions and inspiring thoughts I found in the reviews. I will try to address at least some of them.

However, I think that a general commentary from the author of *Ludowa historia Polski* (“The People’s History of Poland”) about the purpose of the book and the way it was constructed may be more interesting to many readers. I will try then to describe briefly why this book was written and to explain my approach to the subject, including its problematic moments and its limitations – at least the ones I am aware of.

### The Big Idea

“The People’s History of Poland” tells the tale of the community (or, more precisely, communities) which lived on the Polish lands (with an emphasis on central regions) as a history of the social redistribution of economic resources. It assumes that the economic surplus produced by “the people” was redistributed upwards to the elite (I will return to the definition of “the people” in a moment).

This constitutes the essence of the narrative, the axis of Polish social history and, of course, its central conflict.

The conflict over redistribution is described in this book in three main dimensions: the evolution of the social institutions through which the redistribution upward was carried out; the discourse of domination that justified the whole process; and finally techniques of resistance, rebellion and protest.

From the methodological perspective, “The People’s History of Poland”—despite a similar title—does not borrow too much from the famous book by Howard Zinn. It is certainly not, as some participants of this seminar noted, an attempt to rewrite Zinn into the Polish context. The core of this book is a description of what is basically an economic process with the assumption that power and discourse follow the economic resources: this is by design, and it is arguably a pretty much old-school Marxist approach, with some theoretical inventions borrowed from modern subaltern studies.

The book’s collective hero—“the people”—are not only peasants, but also townspeople or Jews (in the times of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth), or workers (from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century). “The people” are understood as those from whom the upward redistribution takes place (being part of “the people” or “the elite” it is defined by the person’s place in the structure of redistribution). This definition is very broad—understandably, because the social composition of society changed drastically in the ten centuries or so of Polish history—but it also has its problems, which I will discuss later.

## Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of the “The People’s History of Poland” has four layers. One can imagine them in the shape of a pyramid—each floor of which is accessible to a more professional reader.

The first layer is the level of an anecdote, easily understandable to the unprofessional but educated reader. It serves to illustrate the redistribution mechanisms and techniques of resistance. Many readers stopped there. I have always thought that the hermetic jargon of the social sciences serves mostly as a tool to exclude non-professionals from the debate. Therefore I wanted this book to be as democratic in its reception as possible—without diluting the message.

The second layer of the narrative is the history of the evolution of social institutions which underpinned the process of redistribution, with

particular focus on their *longue durée* in Polish history. The reader can, for example, compare the discourse justifying the failure to comply with the legislation regulating labor relations both in the Russian partition (before 1914) and in the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939). S/he then discovers that the institutional dysfunction and arguments used to justify it were strikingly similar. The structure which served the elite interests and made extraction easier changed very little.

The third layer of the narrative is the level of the historical and sociological model that tries to explain social change towards the democratization of social relations and a greater scope of popular autonomy (and thus emancipation). I propose to explain this process—which began taking place in Poland at least from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century—by the mechanism of political competition between the elites fighting for control over resources extracted from the popular classes. Such models also have—I am sorry for stating the obvious here—a long tradition in sociology, political science and economics (classical authors like Schumpeter and Olson come to mind; see Schumpeter 1942; Olson 1993).

The fourth layer is—at the top of the pyramid—an attempt to politicize a large part of Polish historical literature. The book as a whole is a polemic against the dominant worldview of our historiography which has been written, consciously or not, from a patriarchal, elitist and nationalist perspective, often perceived as the only obvious, natural and possible way of describing “the national past.” Breaking out of this canon can be difficult, even for the most intelligent scholars; such is the burden of the dominant narrative. In a very influential book on the methodology of history—Handelsman’s (1922) *Historyka*—the nation was identified as the main subject of historical “science.” It was of course the elite (lords, kings, generals, nobility, the intelligentsia etc.) which constituted the essence of the nation. The rest—peasants, merchants, the poor—constituted for Handelsman only the backdrop of national history, an amorphous, anonymous mass, barely worth noticing. I deliberately refer here to an outstanding methodologist who was a democratic socialist of Jewish origin and very progressive for his time. Handelsman was as politically distant from the nationalists as it was possible to be (he edited and printed the oldest known memoir of a Polish serf, as early as 1907). Even he, as a methodologist, the most progressive of his contemporaries, had a very narrow, patriarchal view of history with “nation” at the center.

An important goal for which “The People’s History of Poland” was written was to show—especially to the broad strata of the Polish intelligentsia—that it is possible to describe the history of our community (or communities) in a totally different way than the nationalist, patriar-

chal and elite-focused history does. Judging from some of the reactions—and angry voices from the right, denouncing this author as a “neomaxist,” the worst invective in their vocabulary—it came as a shock to many.

### Model of the Emancipation Process

In the book I also propose a very broad model of Polish politics in modern times. Models are always a simplification and it is useful to think about them as offering a guide to thinking about social processes, not as providing rigorous description. Let me summarize my proposition here. The different elites—whether native or imperial (in the case of Polish lands under the partitions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century)—compete for control over resources extracted from the lower classes. At the moment of a political turning point—war, uprising, revolution, mass popular protests—the aspiring elite makes a political and economic offer to “the people.”

There might have been a proposal to abandon serfdom and give the land to former serfs (this was the case in 1830, 1848, 1861–1864) or, for example, to break up the big landowners’ estates and redistribute the land (1920, 1944). In different social contexts it might have been a workers’ self-government (1956, 1980). This offer—understood very broadly—always has two main components: one of them is material, promising a new, usually redistributive policy. The second is a proposition of a new (at least at the time) common identity, usually more democratic and open to popular ambitions. This offer serves to gain political support (again understood broadly—e.g. in the form of, for example, participation in an uprising or voting in the elections).

The aspiring elite proposes an attractive and therefore usually more democratic vision of a community. After gaining power, however, the victorious elite reneges on many (or even most) of the promises. They are too costly from the perspective of the interests of the new ruling elite, which has to contend with many different social groups and their influence. For example, rural reform was mostly abandoned after 1920, because of the political influence of a tiny landowning class (making up less than 1 percent of the population).

These unkept promises are an integral part of the process. However, when they are made, they cannot be completely withdrawn; they remain on the table and during the next historical turning point they may finally become reality. The emancipation of the popular strata is then a perma-

ment process—promises once made cannot be completely denied. Emancipation is therefore a dialectical, torturous and painful process. I argue that every political turning point in the modern history of Poland—starting with the Kościuszko Uprising in 1794—can be explained within this model, including the 2015 elections won by Law and Justice.

Is this a Marxist perspective? Yes and no. To be sure, there is a definite conception the historical process baked into this model. On the other hand, real Marxists (and Pospiszyl's remarks during this seminar can serve as proof here) had a problem with it. The whole intellectual structure of this book contains a number of assumptions taken from classical economics: it emphasizes the central place of economics in social life and assumes the general rationality of collective actors (understood as striving to maximize their material benefits).

Old school Marxists were appalled by the perspective this book takes with regard to Communist Poland. For them it was an emancipatory moment in Polish history, which brought innumerable benefits and real freedoms to the Polish working class. In “The People's History of Poland” the communist period is described as an exploitative moment, full of hypocrisy. The elite extracted the surplus from the working classes, just like the previous elite had. It just used slightly (but only slightly) different methods than the previous regime, as well as different rhetoric. They also spent this surplus differently—not only on their own consumption (although they also tended to consume much more than the working class), but also on creating a huge, ineffective and wasteful military-industrial complex, designed mostly to keep it in power in the face of an external threat from the capitalist West.

### The Problems (Only Some of Them)

What do I wish I had done differently? I keep a list of possible changes and updates for the second extended and improved edition—if it happens someday. They are too numerous to mention (and the participants of this seminar added a number of points to this ever-growing list). Still I would like to mention here some issues I find to be the most problematic.

Geography was a problem—the narrative focuses on “core” Polish lands, roughly equivalent to the territory of the 19<sup>th</sup> Kingdom of Poland and Western Galicia. Consequently, I think that the Prussian partition, with its very different social history, was not mentioned often enough. The eastern part (*Kresy*) also deserves more extensive treatment.

There was not nearly enough written in “The People’s History of Poland” about the social and especially economic role of the Catholic Church. In the late Middle Ages, the church administrators were very active in introducing serfdom; throughout this historical period, the Church was instrumental in maintaining social order, explaining to the peasants and workers that their situation was both bearable and justified. The Church is present in the book, but I should have devoted a lot more space to its place in Polish society—which, I think, fits nicely with the main narrative of the book.

The definition of “the people” I used also presents many important problems which I think need addressing in the future. The most important of them is—as some reviewers noted—that the bipolar division between “the people” and “the elite” obviously makes it difficult to write, for example, about exploitation and violence among the various segments of the working class. There was a very extensive hierarchy among the serfs in the Polish countryside, and rich peasants were sometimes very ruthless and cruel masters to their agricultural workers and servants (*parobek*).

On a more conceptual level, I would like to rethink once more the role that violence plays in the story. In “The People’s History of Poland” violence is described in a purely utilitarian manner—mostly as a tool of forcing obedience. I also assume, perhaps wrongly, that violence was rational—used mostly when necessary to force the lower classes to work and maintain social order. In his book *Chamstwo*, Pobłocki presents a very different view on the issue: for him violence is a foundation of the entire structure of social relations and has an almost mystical quality. I don’t share his perspective, but there may be something to it—a conclusion which is not surprising to any reader of modern social theory.

It was extremely enlightening for me to read in Brian Porter Szucs’ review the comparison between the legacy of racism in the United States and serfdom in Poland. Even thinking about this constitutes an offense to mainstream Polish historiography, but I think it deserves more extensive and systematic exploration. I am also grateful to Ewa Alicja Majewska for pointing out the role of gender issues in this book; although they are present, they are not as prominent as—in retrospect—I think they should be. I am still waiting for a history of Poland written from a woman’s perspective, utilizing all the theoretical apparatus of today’s gender studies. I hope I will live to see it.

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**Tytuł:** *Ludowa historia Polski z perspektywy autora. O co w tym wszystkim chodzi*