
Katarzyna Chmielewska

People in Perspective, the People's Perspective. Perspectivism and Positivism

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Scholarly accounts of the past in Poland rarely take the form of perspectival narratives.¹ For the most part, contemporary domestic historical writing likes to appear behind a screen of neutrality, factuality and objectivity, and authors tend to shy away from clearly indicating the perspective from which they are speaking. Texts written in this way are considered as excellent exemplifications of the study of history, meeting – at least in this one respect – the strict requirements of the historical workshop. Surprisingly few works show reflection on the author's inevitable entanglement with earlier interpretations of the past, with structures of narrative and language, with social ideas and social valuations. Even fewer authors are aware of the indelible relativity of the scholarly story of the past, its genre characterization and social conditioning. The Polish school of history has little

1 Perspectivism is Frank Ankersmit's term for the indelible relativity of historical narratives, speaking from an ever-present perspective. Cf. Frank Ankersmit, *History and Topology. The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Frank Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

Katarzyna Chmielewska –

Assistant Professor at the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences (IBL PAN). She is co-founder of the Center for Cultural and Literary Studies of Communism at IBL PAN. Editor of the series "Communism. Ideas – Discourses – Practices." Her research focus: memory studies, discourse analysis, especially cultural and literary contexts of the Communism in Poland, cultural research and contemporary literature, the Holocaust studies. Last publication: *Reassessing Communism. Concepts, Culture, and Society in Poland 1944–1989*, CEU Press 2021; *Year 1966. Polish People's Republic on the Cusp. Socialism and Nationalism*, Routledge (in progress).

recourse to the experience of narrativism, considering it a matter of perhaps interesting methodological disputes, but irrelevant to the scholarly writing practice of history. Narrativism and perspectivism are held in greater esteem by a relatively small group of researchers who combine historical activity with methodological reflection.²

In contemporary Polish historiography, despite the rich traditions of social and economic history, political and event histories still hold the lead, usually following the patterns of simplified positivism.³ These patterns, in the briefest of terms, can be described as the assumption of an unbiased and exhaustive presentation of a sequence of facts in as neutral a narrative as possible.⁴ This state of affairs is all the more astonishing as it also applies to works on social history. The practice, moreover, usually deviates from positivist tenets; the descriptions are in fact far from phenomenalism, and the authors evaluate and reproduce social valuations.⁵ This specific positivism limits the critical load to the traditional criticism of sources, seeing the conditioning of other people's narratives (perceiving them as biased, unreliable, propagandistic or ideological), and consistently overlooking its own conditioning. Historians often uphold the paradigm thus developed, considering it the only legitimate canon for practicing not only the study of history, but also any reflection on the past.⁶ Recent

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- 2 The first example of such a combination would be the works by Tomasz Wiślicz, Ewa Domańska or, before them, by Jerzy Topolski.
 - 3 I cover this more extensively in "Contemporary Historical Discourse on Polish Communism in a Narratological Perspective," *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2016): 99–115.
 - 4 See Jerzy Topolski, *Jak się pisze i rozumie historię. Tajemnice narracji historycznej* [Writing and understanding history. The secrets of historical narration] (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza "Rytm," 1996).
 - 5 From the point of view of narratology, this is obvious and inevitable. Nevertheless, positivism creates a fiction of neutrality, passing over the fact that there is no narrative about the past without at least a selection of relevant and irrelevant elements, not deserving of representation. This is the first valuation. There is also no historical narrative that does not use value-laden categories, such as sovereignty, freedom, nation, authoritarianism, etc. Representatives of the trend dubbed "specific positivism" here indulge in doublethink; on the one hand, they want to create the illusion that these valuations do not exist; on the other hand, they produce valuations, naturalizing them as "common" and "obvious."
 - 6 A characteristic example may be the skepticism with which representatives of academic history in Poland refer to the field of memory studies as a kind of competition in the field of narratives about the past. Arguments revealed explicitly are the unclear scope of research and unstable methodology; arguments somewhat more camouflaged are the failure to meet the criteria of historical research, and in fact of the consensus of "specific positivism."

works in the fields of environmental history,⁷ gender history,⁸ rescue history,⁹ and microhistory are much rarer and definitely stand out from other research, perhaps representing the beginning of a new way of practicing history. Among “positivist” historians, however, works of this kind, as well as interdisciplinary research drawing on the findings of such disciplines as anthropology, ethnology, psychology, literary studies, and film studies, arouse considerable resistance. Treatises inspired by sociology or economics, especially those with clearer empirical inclinations, may be received more kindly.

The People’s Rebellion

The latest historical trend, which describes itself as “people’s history,” “history of rebellion,” “people’s rebellion,” or “history of serfdom,” is certainly an example of a perspective narrative.¹⁰ In just one year, 2021, as many as four books were published that resonated greatly not only in the scholarly world, but also among amateur readers, and this was only the beginning of an entire trend.

7 See, e.g., Małgorzata Praczyk, *Pamięć środowiskowa we wspomnieniach osadników na „Ziemiach Odzyskanych”* [Environmental memory in the memoirs of settlers from the “Recovered Territories”] (Poznań: Instytut Historyczny UAM, 2018).

8 This is a thriving trend; examples include the works by Małgorzata Fidelis, Natalia Jarska, Barbara Klich Kluczevska, Magdalena Grabowska, Dobrochna Kalwa, Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz and many other prominent figures of Polish historiography, whom I do not mention here due to the limited size of the article.

9 The milieu of Ewa Domańska.

10 This trend also includes Tomasz Wiślicz from the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, whom I omit exclusively due to the scattered forms of his utterances and narrow references. Nevertheless, his works merit a mention: Tomasz Wiślicz, *Earning Heavenly Salvation. Peasant Religion in Lesser Poland. Mid-Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Berlin: Peter Lang 2020); Tomasz Wiślicz, *Rebelie chłopskie na ziemiach polskich od statutu toruńskiego do rabacji galicyjskiej: podstawowe zagadnienia badawcze i interpretacyjne* [Peasant rebellions on the Polish lands from the Toruń statute to the Galician slaughter: Basic research and interpretation issues], in *Chłopi na ziemiach dawnej Rzeczypospolitej do czasów uwłaszczenia*, ed. Dorota Michaluk (Ciechanowiec: Muzeum Rolnictwa im. ks. Krzysztofa Kluka w Ciechanowcu, 2019), 287–300; Tomasz Wiślicz, “Fabrykacja nierządnic, czyli o ofiarach względnej swobody seksualnej na polskiej wsi przedrozbiorowej” [The fabrication of a harlot, or the victims of relative sexual freedom in the pre-partition Polish countryside], *Lud* 101 (2017): 129–148; Tomasz Wiślicz, *Naród chłopski? Społeczna, religijna i narodowa tożsamość chłopów we wczesnonowoczesnej Polsce* [Peasant nation? The social, religious and national identity of peasants in early modern Poland], in *Między Barokiem a Oświeceniem. Społeczeństwo stanowe*, ed. Stanisław Achremczyk and Jerzy Kiełbik (Olsztyn: OBN, 2013), 52–65.

I am referring to the books by Adam Leszczyński,¹¹ Michał Rauszer¹² and Kacper Pobłocki.¹³ Their goal is similar: all three authors want to describe the forms of popular resistance against the authority and violence of the upper classes, although the results of their research may differ. In Leszczyński's work, for example, it is power, conditions of oppression, and exploitation that come to the fore, rather than the people themselves. The tension between the perspective of the "victors of history," the traditional subjects populating its pages to date (kings, hetmans, ministers, prime ministers, presidents, party leaders, or, more broadly, magnates, bourgeoisie, nobility, intelligentsia, etc.) and the reconstructed perspective of the people is constantly palpable in all of these books, not only because of the disproportion between the "peasant" and "lordly" sources, but also because of the dialectical relationship of violence/power of the upper classes that defined the condition of the subjugated. These books oscillate between attempts to give voice to hitherto silent social subjects and analysis of the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the people's existence.

Historiography conceived in this way is faced with the task of reconstructing the ill-present perspective, recasting the narratives of the dominant political history, co-creating and consistently maintaining a social perspective, defined by the vantage point from which one looks, by the interpretation of the people's experience. This radical perspectivism implies the need to remodel cognitive categories and categories of description. Perspectival historiography is supposed to encompass a completely different world of heroes, hitherto silent and remaining in the background, a different area of social bios and a different world of historical processes. This also means that a people's history must show a different level of agency in history and subjectivity, since the subjects of the story are not those who in previous depictions influenced, caused, changed – in short: set the machinery of history in motion.

National and Political

The establishment of a people's perspective causes profound re-evaluations in the canon of national history. First of all, the nation ceases to be the center of

11 Adam Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski. Historia wyzysku i oporu. Mitologia panowania* [People's history of Poland. History of exploitation and resistance. The mythology of rule] (Warszawa: WAB, 2020).

12 Michał Rauszer, *Bękart pańszczyzny. Historia buntów chłopskich* [The bastards of serfdom. History of peasant rebellions] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo RM 2020); Michał Rauszer, *Siła podporządkowanych* [The power of the subjugated] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2021).

13 Kacper Pobłocki, *Chamstwo* [Rabble] (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2021).

history. This history is not about the struggle for national self-determination, for independence, nor about the political adventures of the national spirit. Independence does not represent any stakes, nor organize the narrative value-wise.¹⁴ In order to write a people's history, one must violate the consensus on what is most essential to history, what enters its canon, what must be told. For example, the history of all national uprisings or the struggle against the Tsarist authority will not be accommodated. Even more important seem to be profound re-evaluations of the events and processes presented: the January Uprising will remain important, but it will have a fundamentally different meaning for people's history than for national history. It will cease to be a story about manipulated, ignorant peasants who did not recognize the sacred national cause; it will become another installment of the story of the "good lord" (played by Tsar Alexander II), who is better than the local "lords," or a story about the end of serfdom and the escape from slave labor and degrading living conditions. National history suffers from an overabundance of sources, while people's history has to laboriously reconstruct them, often using indirect documents produced by the upper classes. This peculiar archaeology of the dominated and mute subject is sometimes accused of peasant-mania and mythologization of the past. At other times, on the contrary, it is accused of false sensationalism and the politics of breaking down open doors.¹⁵

The need to recast politicality, that is political history as a fundamental form of historical expression, steers people's history towards a specific dialectic, forcing it to turn not only against the main paradigm, not only against individual canonical interpretations, but also against the entire established pattern of thinking about the community.¹⁶ The dialectical starting point in historical narrative means critically (in the spirit of Adorno) rereading the previous historical stories, but also opening up new disciplinary and social horizons.

Looking Awry in an Anthropological Way

By its very nature, therefore, people's history cannot be confined to political history; it must transcend the rigid framework that has been established so

14 For example: those who cared about Poland's independence (Polish Socialist Party) gain approval, their actions carry a positive sign; those who did not care about it (communists) deserve absolute rejection and a negative sign.

15 Characteristically, these accusations sometimes go hand in hand, such as in the text by Janusz A. Majcherek "Narodowo i na ludowo," *Polityka*, March 3, 2021, 28–29. The author also managed to add an accusation of weakening the authority of the elite and apologetics for those poorly educated residents of villages and towns who support authoritarianism.

16 The "us" of whom and to whom the history is told.

far. It departs from the premise that the people (peasants/the poor masses)¹⁷ were not a political subject in either the fifteenth or the eighteenth century, but at most an object of various policies;¹⁸ although they did not remain passive and developed many strategies of rebellion, resistance and survival, they constituted a social subject.¹⁹ People's history therefore seeks tools to describe the place from which it speaks. It is no coincidence that the first works of this trend came from researchers who combine the workshop of history with sociology (Leszczyński) and anthropology (Rauszer, Pobłocki). However, it should be noted that, as in the case of historiography, anthropology also becomes in this case a "sideways glance" or "awry look." For Pobłocki and Rauszer, an anthropological view of people's history means writing against their own discipline, or at least many of its hidden precepts. The ethnographic-anthropological vision of the rural/peasant world as a sacred, cultural, extra-temporal fullness, a self-sufficient cosmos, portrays history and modern society as a destructive force. For an anthropology conceived in this way, the concept of social advancement was unacceptable, and whoever used it risked, at best, being accused of a misdiagnosis. Such anthropology wanted to bring out the harmonious structures, the holistic character of folk culture, and thus the more "traditional" the culture described was, the more authentic it seemed.²⁰ Pobłocki's and Rauszer's stance emerges as contrary to such anthropology.²¹ Their anthropology must be open not only to history, to change, but also to conflict and violence; it describes the experience of the body (Pobłocki) subjected to social pressure and repression, adopting masks, creating secret protocols of resistance (Rauszer). Peasant culture is not an independent cosmos, but it is always in a dialectical relationship to the culture of the dominant classes and their violence.

17 Each author defines this people differently and understands its scope differently. For Leszczyński it will be peasants, workers, the poor, but also Jews and other national minorities clearly subordinated to the Polish majority. Rauszer focuses firmly on the peasants, Pobłocki calls them *pańszczyźniaki* (serfs) and draws attention to women of the lower classes and farmhands, servant girls, peasant servants.

18 It is difficult to fully agree with this, of course, as since the end of the nineteenth century the people were becoming a political subject. Another thing is that only Leszczyński's book describes this period and the twentieth century.

19 I will return to this issue in the part on the political subject vs. the social subject.

20 In contrast, for example, to postwar culture, which from the perspective of this paradigm lacks authenticity, such as the mythologized figure of the peasant-worker.

21 Rauszer and Pobłocki are not anthropology's outliers, they are representatives of a significant current of anthropology, underwritten by names such as: Eric R. Wolf, Giovanni Levi and Carlo Ginzburg, Hans Medick and Alf Lüdtke.

Power, Resistance, Agency

The affinity of goals and similar social imagination does not blur important differences between the authors' respective writing or social strategies. Leszczyński's *People's History of Poland* takes the form of an academic historiographical synthesis, describing the changing forms of violence, power and domination era by era, and following the timeline. As I have noted, however, it does decompose political history: readers do not follow along the "important" political events, the traumas of Polish national history. Referring to the nobility's idea of two nations (the nobles and the "cattle," or rabble), Leszczyński arrives at a shift that had the subjugated identifying with the dominant discourse – which, we should add, they always did in a way that was either wholly or partially unauthorized. At the same time, the "nation of cattle" was held accountable for the shortcomings of this identification and inadequate engagement with national history.²² Only Adam Leszczyński's work reaches the present day – that is, he does not overlook the radical post-war change, although he does not consider this change revolutionary. He points out the continuation of violent patterns. Leszczyński does not see the rupture in history, or notice that the new people who formed at the time have completely different living conditions, and their representatives have new life trajectories, new cultural aspirations, habitus,²³ different opportunities, and expected life paths. In short, that it is a completely different people than perhaps even half a century earlier.²⁴ The focus on the hypocrisy of the elite, however, does not allow the author to see this fact.

Pobłocki and Rauszer adopt a completely different point of view. Their subject is not so much power, but rather the resistance taking shape between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Subordination, violence and forms of exploitation define the social condition of the popular classes, but do not cover the entire field. The people have agency, and in this sense they are a subject. Kacper Pobłocki writes:

22 This is very much reminiscent of Bourdieu's description of symbolic violence, yet the author does not refer to it.

23 Here I understand Pierre Bourdieu's term as aesthetic dispositions, expected life trajectories resulting from training and social positioning.

24 The fundamental and rapid change in the class structure (the abolition of the landed gentry, the bourgeoisie), the ownership of the means of production, the escape from the appalling living conditions of the masses as a whole means that we can legitimately speak of a revolutionary change. It was certainly not a grassroots liberation movement; it took place under conditions of post-Yalta dependence on the Soviet Union.

The serfs were not a passive, silent mass that meekly participated in the world created by the mighty. They refused to obey surprisingly often, not to say: constantly. They also created their own tools and institutions that allowed them to assert what everyone believes deep down: that each one was born equal and free. It is only when we turn our attention beyond the ruling class, to the groups that continue to be denied their rightful place in history, that we are able to see this.²⁵

Rauszer describes these actions in *The Power of the Subjugated* as follows:

The practices of everyday forms of resistance include: slowing down work and sabotaging it, pretending to do things, false complaints, theft, simulated stupidity, gossip and slander, arson, petty theft. Their repertoire depends not only on the ingenuity of the subordinated, but on the very essence of the practice of domination. It is a reaction to the manifestations of this domination. Sometimes these everyday forms of resistance turn into more overt and visible forms, most often when the situation allows it, or when there is no other choice. Among such overt forms of peasant resistance, we can additionally include fleeing, peasant strikes, petty violence (such as beatings of overseers or even lords), up to peasant rebellions and insurrections.²⁶

The mask of the ignorant fool and the humble servant is the same practice of resistance as rebellion, although, of course, rebellion or insurrection²⁷ is the ultimate action, undertaken only as an act of self-destruction. In this case, we cannot speak of emancipation, but we certainly can of agency. And agency is the vehicle that pulls the people into history. Through agency, a people can

25 Poblócki, *Chamstwo*, 12. If not stated otherwise, all quotations from Polish are translated by the author of this article.

26 Rauszer, *Bękarty pańszczyzny*, 54.

27 Poblócki points out the difference in the registers of the two expressions. The word *powstanie* (uprising) is usually reserved for national liberation movements of the nobility. Peasants can at most participate in a rebellion (*bunt*); chaotically and in a haphazard, reflexive manner, since the peasantry, as a group living in pre-modernity, has no social structure. Poblócki, *Chamstwo*, 282: "we also use the language of the ruling class when talking about noble 'uprisings' and peasant 'rebellions.' These ostensibly similar words lead us onto completely different tracks, point to completely different stories. Polish nobles rose up, because the social existence depended on them. The peasant class did not rise up, because they did not exist as an autonomous entity with the awareness of its own distinctiveness and subjectivity. Official, textbook history views the peasant class as a random cluster of individuals, and that is how it tells the story of its resistance: as incidental, atomized, disorderly. Spontaneous, devoid of deeper thought and any more permanent structure."

become a subject. This, however, raised the following question: would “passivity” and non-resistance exclude peasants from history? Would they not be deserving of attention and place? Would they not be subjects then? Does an implicit valuation not come into play in this choice, in which heroism/activity/self-determination is valued much more highly than survival? Is the rejected paradigm of the heroic history of the masters not posthumously victorious here, after all?

The Voice of Peasants

Gayatri Spivak²⁸ famously asked whether the subaltern can speak. This question of whether those whom history deprived of their voice can ever regain it translates into the methodological problem of a lack of peasant sources, or the ability and necessity of reconstructing them. In his book, Leszczyński makes abundant reference to diaries, personal notes, but also court records, documents produced by economists, nobility, and authorities. Paradoxically, he gives more space to peasants' diaries and notes of the past centuries, where this source was extremely scarce, while making sparing use of the abundant peasants' diaries of the inter-war and post-war periods, when “the great mute finally spoke,” as Maria Dąbrowska put it. This is related, as I mentioned, to the author's strategy; Leszczyński is more interested in reconstructing the mechanisms of violence, hypocrisy and perversity of power than in giving a voice to the people.

Rauszer and Pobłocki reconstruct the peasant experience rather than the peasant voice, so memoirs appear quite sparingly in their books.²⁹ They assume that folklore – customs, chants, rhymes, proverbs – have preserved this experience. Pobłocki goes even further, describing common cultural imagery as primal scenes and records of peasant experience – these would be scenes of rape in the woods or at the well, depictions of women as hunted game, images of sexual initiation by lords as sexual exploitation of peasant women, and so on, while using literary works such as Józef Ignacy Kraszewski's novel *Ułana* from 1842.

The reconstruction of the people's voice in Rauszer's and Pobłocki's works is therefore only partial, but not only because of the significant difficulties in acquiring sources and researching old oral culture. Both authors seem to shy away from the usurpation that would be the appropriation of a reconstructed or supposedly reconstructed voice. They see a way out of this impasse

28 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2010).

29 This is also due to the different time frames of Rauszer's and Pobłocki's works (fifteenth–nineteenth centuries); peasant diaries were scarce at the time.

by narrating conditions, situations, relationships, and experiences. Kacper Pobłocki writes:

like the overwhelming majority of members of the popular class, they will forever remain faceless people, people without qualities, people without a voice. We will not draw an individual or even a collective portrait of them; all that remains is to piece together the fragments of knowledge available to us and thus sketch the contours of the world in which they lived.³⁰

Talking about a people through their situation, experiences, archetypal scenes, “the contours of the world,” is not the same as trying to reconstruct their voice, although this is how we can understand the evocation of personal records and folklore. People’s history thus balances between the story about the people and the story of the people. Metaphorically speaking, between first-person and third-person narrative.

Political Subject vs. Social Subject

Pobłocki and Rauszer, focusing on the problem of serfdom and its social and cultural consequences, set a clear temporal boundary for their interest – Tsar Alexander II’s decree of 1864, ending serfdom in the Kingdom of Poland. Leszczyński goes all the way to the present day, writing about the political, social and cultural impact of this way of life. All authors emphasize that serfdom meant not only bonded labor, but also personal dependence, direct violence, beatings, humiliation, annihilation of subjectivity, and therefore a form akin to slavery. They treat attempts at popular resistance as a manifestation of the social subjectivity of the peasantry. The people are thus a social subject, but not a political subject. This approach, however, is due to the time frames, because in fact, the people had already become political subjects since the end of the nineteenth century. They formed parties (peasant and workers’), articulated their interests, organized the 1905 revolution, and undertook strikes (not only workers’, but also peasant strikes in the 1930s).

People’s history reaches back for the notion of social class, rightly seeking to demystify this word. In the field of dominant contemporary anti-communism, “class” is an unwelcome, even unacceptable category in Polish humanities. The authors use it consciously,³¹ although they understand it in different

³⁰ Pobłocki, *Chamstwo*, 19.

³¹ The authors are aware of the problems of using this category, for example, in relation to the Middle Ages, although they do not pay much attention to these considerations.

ways: in Weberian fashion (Leszczyński) or according to the interpretation of the contemporary Marxist Karl Polanyi³² (Rauszer). Rauszer defines class as

The intertwining of cultural and social responses to culturally and socially differentiated mechanisms of subordination, expressing themselves in their own specific ways. If a given system is based on bonded labor, then class relations (of domination and subordination) are expressed in cultural and social practices and political forms of slavery. In addition, this slavery, due to a number of factors, can in different historical contexts shape differently, be more or less intense.³³

In people's history, class antagonism still runs strong. It is described in its many manifestations: legal, political, cultural and symbolic. Unfortunately, there is no answer to the question of whether the people are a class, or to be more precise, one class. Leszczyński separates peasants from workers, but also speaks of other groups, such as the Jewish poor and Ukrainians. Pobłocki differentiates the peasant classes most strongly, and points out the tensions and conflicts of interest between them, although Rauszer too sees internal oppositions.³⁴

Speaking from a people's perspective, fortunately, cannot be reduced to peasant-mania or a fascination with the figure of the flamboyant rebel peasants or, more broadly, the erstwhile traditional cultural models in opposition to alienated capitalist reality. The authors do not look through sentimental intellectual glasses; they show not only the various forms of violence, but also its scale, including violence within families and between different groups of the people. Violence – physical, economic, symbolic – constitutes the most enduring and universal cultural pattern. According to the authors, this long duration, over and above political and economic changes, still has consequences today. Kacper Pobłocki devotes the most space to these issues, capturing violence in terms of an expanding patriarchy, showing how violence “trickles down,” while also defining internal folk relations, relations between rich peasants and servants of servants, children and parents, women and men.³⁵ In Pobłocki's book *Chamstwo*, we read:

32 Karl Polanyi wanted to change the economic definition of class, recognizing that social factors such as the need for recognition are just as important as economic ones.

33 Rauszer, *Bękarty pańszczyzny*, 24.

34 These are certainly not works that could be considered a “class history of Poland”; this still remains a task to be done.

35 Only Adam Leszczyński evades the topic altogether; in his entire 700-page book there is no place for the history of women. The author excuses himself citing lack of sources and competence, leaving this matter to a separate discipline – gender history.

People's history is feminine history. Not only because women are its main characters – they are the ones who usually do the most servile work. People's history is feminine because women are its trustees. A lords' history consists of a procession of heroic figures who come, look around and conquer. The peasants' history is founded upon the myth of valiant resistance to the lords' tyranny. People's history, in turn, is everything that took place in between. Not the history of battles, of clashes between classes, but the history of support, solidarity, care. History without exaggeration, and even without dominant heroes. It is a history of a multitude, of a many-headed hydra. And it involves a completely different language, one that barely broaches the high registers of official Polish. People's history is both feminine history and popular history. Because men also chose unmanly strategies of dealing with the terror of slavery. Instead of revenge or resistance, they too leaned toward care and patience.³⁶

Pobłocki is the only one to contrast peasant history with people's (women's) history. Rauszer speaks of women in the context of witchcraft, their trials, the lords' fear of the folk power of the curse, wielded by the women of the people. Pobłocki also sees the theme of the Catholic Church from the perspective of the patriarchy, while Leszczyński and Rauszer see it as yet another figure of the serf lord.

Potential Histories, Rescue Archaeologies

People's histories are performative, that is, they not only tell the story of past time, but are also a kind of contemporary intervention. Returning to the past, they show different collective genealogies than those stretching back to the families of the well-born Czartoryskis and Potockis, and seek to break down false aspirational lines of descent and false identifications. They unveil a past that is not harmonious, a past not so much of conflict as of violence, forming the present, shaping it into a post-feudal submissiveness, a sense of inferiority, inclining it to accept violent and hierarchical cultural patterns. In this sense, they are an intervention into a culture of hidden violence. People's history attempts to unlearn automatisms, established patterns of memory, to distance itself from national history, to describe and rethink ill-present history. It shows past practices that are hidden (albeit perfectly visible on the surface) to convey a story about also hidden desires for equality and recognition. It reveals new possibilities for a non-national community and non-national history. In this sense, we can call Leszczyński's and especially Rauszer's and Pobłocki's books "potential histories." Ariella Azoulay's term, from her *Potential*

³⁶ Pobłocki, *Chamstwo*, 247.

History. Unlearning Imperialism,³⁷ refers to the history and space of Israelis and Palestinians. Revisiting the imperial past, Azoulay subjected history to critical work, searching for new, concealed starting points, unsatisfied desires, attitudes, and unrealized possibilities for actors of the past. These possibilities create an alternative in thinking about the community, but also in talking about history. History is potential or potentialized in a dual sense – as opening up new possibilities of the past and new possibilities of description. Azoulay's ideas³⁸ and people's history compel us to reopen or reread archives and cultural texts, to extract from them claims to equality and recognition, to bring to light a repressed, overlooked, disregarded past and repressed violence, very much different from the story of a nation's self-realization.

People's history differs fundamentally from Azoulay's project, however, in its quest for reclaiming.³⁹ It demands the restoration of past violence – not even conflict, since it is difficult to speak of any equivalence here – to the public consciousness. Past violence casts a shadow over the present. People's history proposes no coexistence of these two figures of the past – the lords' and the people's in the present, new forms of coexistence that have not yet been exhausted, because the former victors ("lordly" Poland) are only an imagined community, although a living figure of the present.⁴⁰ People's history reveals a paradoxical *constans*: in the modern past, the existing popular masses had no voice, no cultural representation; in the present, the dominant voice is the heir to the narrative of a group no longer in existence, yet permanently hegemonic within the national and cultural discourse.

For the same reason, we cannot consider people's histories as agonistic stories, referring to Chantal Mouffe's⁴¹ term and her opposition between the antagonistic, agonistic and cosmopolitan model. Mouffe cites the situation of conflict between memory and rationales, proposing models for their understanding.

37 Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).

38 Ariella Azoulay, "There Is No Such Thing As a National Archive," in *Archiwum jako projekt*, ed. Krzysztof Pijarski (Warszawa: Archeologia Fotografii, 2011); Ariella Azoulay, "Potential History: Thinking through Violence," *Critical Inquiry* 39 (3) (2013).

39 Though the authors, like Azoulay, are also concerned with understanding it.

40 Although the descendants of aristocratic, bourgeois and noble families also live in contemporary society, 1945 fundamentally changed their social role. The question remains, however, to what extent it was taken over by the intelligentsia, including its members who ascended to it by upward social mobility, who aspired to the aristocratic habitus and the preservation of hierarchical social structures. These considerations, however, exceed the limits of this text.

41 Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics. Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

The antagonistic model implies a life-and-death struggle, denial of the opponents' right to present their arguments, rejection of their acknowledgement. The cosmopolitan model seeks to reconcile rationales, to unite opposing positions, believing that this is a process that must end in reconciliation. Mouffe's agonistic model assumes that the public space is one of struggle between irreconcilable hegemonic identities, which, however, do not seek to abolish the opponent's rationale, but enter into dialogue with each other. In a situation of symbolic dominance, violence, the agonistic model does not work. The past that people's histories want to bring out is far from the conflict of opposing rationales that can meet: one is still silenced and inconspicuous, difficult to reconstruct; the other is dominant, difficult to deconstruct.⁴²

We can also call people's history a Foucauldian counter-history⁴³ (Rauszer speaks of counter-hegemonicity), because it distances itself from the legitimized dominant narrative, one derived in a straight line from the "victors" of the social conflict, and looks for inconsistencies, breaks, cuts in the national narrative. Within this meaning, people's history undertakes archaeological work consisting in the discovery and description of ill-present violence. By analogy to Ewa Domańska's category of rescue history,⁴⁴ we can speak of rescue archaeology which "becomes an element of restitutive humanities, that is humanities of reconstruction, regenerative humanities that support and affirm."⁴⁵ "It is of a multidisciplinary nature and it draws on the tradition and methodological output of many sub-disciplines of historical research, and especially: cultural and social history, anthropological history, microhistory, oral history, grassroots history and/or history of ordinary people, visual history, sound history, history of flavors and sounds"⁴⁶ – and, we might add, of bodies. People's histories reconstitute and reinforce the suppressed, undervalued and forgotten dimension of shared history.

Unwanted Progenitors and Welcome Allies

People's histories were not created in a cultural vacuum. Leszczyński and Rauszer realize that their area of interest naturally refers back to earlier

42 However, the people's voice is always dialectically coupled to the dominant history.

43 Michel Foucault, *Lecture of 28 January 1976*, in Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, trans. D. Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

44 Ewa Domańska, "Historia ratownicza" [Rescue history], *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2013): 12–26.

45 *Ibid.*, 13.

46 *Ibid.*, 15.

historiography, particularly that which focuses on the past of the popular masses. The field of discourse was opened after 1945, during the period of the formation of the communist state, when “people’s power,” the fulfillment of “the best democratic aspirations of the past” and “social justice” were the main elements of the new state’s historical policy,⁴⁷ while egalitarianism and social advancement, the abolition of the privileged classes, in short, were its policy program. Professional historians in the 1950s and 1960s took up the topics of serfdom, peasant resistance, the Galician Slaughter, the figures of Piotr Ściegienny and Jakub Szela.⁴⁸ The attitude of authors of people’s history to these progenitors is telling. They cite (by no means with polemical or critical intent) many works, drawing on the output of Stefan Kieniewicz, Jerzy Topolski, Janusz Tazbir, Nina Assorodobraj, Witold Kula, Stanisław Arnold and others (much of which was published in the Stalinist period). Leszczyński even points out the similarity of starting points with Marxism in historical research at the time:

The key observation brought by Marxists to Polish historiography was that there are no politically neutral facts and no politically neutral study of history. A historian, they argued – regardless of what he himself thinks of his work – usually legitimizes the prevailing social order, or he simply supports the current regime (unless he takes an openly critical stance toward it). The very choice of the object of study has the character of a political statement.⁴⁹

Yet these are rejected, unwanted progenitors. Authors of people’s history emphasize that the change in the paradigm of historiography occurred as a result of administrative, Stalinist coercion;⁵⁰ it was not a free choice of the historical world. Adam Leszczyński writes:

47 See my text: *Legitimization of Communism. To Build and to Demolish*, in *Reassessing Communism. Concepts, Culture, and Society in Poland 1944–1989*, ed. Katarzyna Chmielewska, Agnieszka Mrozik and Grzegorz Wołowicz (Budapest/Wien: CEU Press, 2021): 25–62.

48 Hence, it is easy to level the accusation of ostensible novelty, since the research trajectory has long been open. This is a misguided accusation because of the different questions, research tools and context posed by people’s history.

49 Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski*, 596.

50 See Rauszer, *Siła podporządkowanych*, 18: “the early works of Janusz Tazbir, Jerzy Topolski or Stefan Kieniewicz, to name a few, also became important voices during the communist era. The subject of peasant rebellions and peasant resistance, with few exceptions, was exhausted in Poland in the 1960s. [...] Their research was part of the worldwide discussion of forms of peasant resistance.” And: “research on peasant rebellions, as it were, by administrative appointment, was conducted in many, if not all, countries of the so-called Soviet bloc.”

The apogee of Polish researchers' interest in the internal power relations of Polish society in the past came in the 1950s and 1960s. It was forced on historians – not all, but many – by the Communist Party, for which it was a research priority.⁵¹

Leszczyński is right about the conservative, and in many cases nationalist, milieu of pre-war historians. Certainly, the part of it headed by Władysław Konopczyński, whom he describes (and who was forced to resign from the university), did not embrace Marxism with enthusiasm, euphemistically speaking. Many in academic circles, not just professional historians, certainly opposed Marxism. However, this does not change the fact that the authors of the cited works by no means had to be forced to undertake these subjects; they were often avowed people of the left who participated in the creation of this paradigm (which in no way diminishes the value of their publications). There must be a vast methodological and conceptual difference between books published in the 1950s and in the 2020s, that is some sixty or seventy years later, and the opposite situation would be immensely surprising. This is not the kind of distance at issue, however. It can be assumed that this detachment is a gesture of cutting oneself off from Stalinism,⁵² which in the dominant field of contemporary anti-communism is as understandable as it is ritualistic and tedious.

The people's histories by Leszczyński, Rauszer and Pobłocki are immersed in a trend that evokes a lively social resonance. The discussion began with Daniel Beauvois's⁵³ *Trójkąt ukraiński* [The Ukrainian triangle], which critiqued the idyllic depiction of the relationship between the nobility and the peasantry, the myth of noble freedom and noble democracy, the solidarity between the aristocracy and the nobility, and finally noble patriotism. "The People's Turn," which we have been able to observe for a good ten years, aims to confront the shame of peasant, "rabble" social origins, attempting to re-evaluate the experience of rejection, strengthen the sense of community in the face of past events – the abolition of serfdom, peasant revolts and the experience of coming out of oppression. The distinctive title of Pobłocki's book, *Rabble*,⁵⁴

51 Ibid., 594.

52 Post-October texts also fall victim to this, as tainted by communism and Marxism.

53 Daniel Beauvois, *Trójkąt ukraiński. Szlachta, carat i lud na Wołyniu, Podolu i Kijowszczyźnie 1793–1914* [The Ukrainian triangle: The nobility, the tsar and the people in Volhynia, Podolia and Kyiv Region, 1793–1914], trans. Krzysztof Rutkowski (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2005).

54 "Cham" ("boor" or "bumpkin"), derived from Ham, Noah's biblical son, who was cursed by his father for a shameful act. In contemporary Polish, the word "cham" is still used as

directly alludes to these discussions. It is worth recalling that in 2011 the band RUTA released the album *Gore – pieśni buntu i niedoli XVI–XX wieku* [It's on fire! – Songs of rebellion and misery of the sixteenth to twentieth centuries], while in the same year Marian Pilot received the Nike Award for *Pióropusz* [The warbonnet], a picaresque novel constructed around lowly origins and advancement, and in 2020 the same award went to Radek Rak for *Baśń o węzowym sercu. Albo wtóre słowo o Jakubie Szeli* [The tale of the serpent heart. Or another word on Jakub Szela]. The year 2011 also saw the publication of Jan Sowa's *Fantomowe ciało króla* [The phantom body of the king], a book which opened a society-wide debate on serfdom and the repressed peasant origins of the overwhelming majority of Polish society, as well as the premiere of Monika Strzępka and Paweł Demirski's *W imię Jakuba S.* [In the name of Jakub S.], a film that also drew on the figure of Szela. In the visual arts, one cannot omit the works of Daniel Rycharski and his installations: *Brama*⁵⁵ [The gate] (2014) and *Pomnik chłopca*⁵⁶ [The peasant monument] (2015–2016). Of course, it is impossible in this short text to cite all the important manifestations of the re-evaluation of “chamstwo” and opening to people's history.⁵⁷ However, the examples indicated form a clear constellation that brings to mind the project of potentializing history and the rescue humanities described earlier. The people in perspective and the people's perspective can meet and open up new possibilities of interpretation.

Translated by Maja Jaros

a pejorative for a person who is simple, uncouth and uneducated. In the past, however, it conveyed an element of class, distinguishing the servile peasants (“chamy”) from the lords (“pany”).

55 See <http://rycharski.artmuseum.pl/pl/serie/o/brama>, accessed April 4, 2021.

56 See <https://plock.wyborcza.pl/plock/1,35681,18844982,pod-plockiem-stanie-pomnik-chlopa-mozesz-pod-nim-wykrzyzc.html>, accessed April 4, 2021.

57 At this point it is worth recalling the movement of peasant literature, somewhat suppressed in these discussions, which five decades earlier created a perspective on the people's experience of oppression but also emancipation, describes a different level of social bios than political life, tries to reconstruct the peasant, but also workers' autobiography – here first of all we should mention the texts of Kawalec, Nowak, Myśliwski.

Abstract

Katarzyna Chmielewska

INSTITUTE OF LITERARY RESEARCH OF THE POLISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES (WARSAW)

People in Perspective, the People's Perspective. Perspectivism and Positivism

Chmielewska explores "people's histories" – works by Adam Leszczyński, Michał Rauszer and Kacper Pobłocki – in the context of perspectivism, counter-history, rescue humanities, and, above all, potential histories (which reveal the possibilities of different narratives, and, indirectly, of other historical processes), accounts that analyse an alternative historical bios. The new type of historiography must tackle the task of reconstructing the sources and perspectives that are not properly present, it must recast the narratives of dominant politics, show us a different level of agency and subjectivity, question the consensus on what ought to be regarded as most important in national history and what should enter its canon. It is a unique archeology of the dominated and silent subject.

Keywords

people's histories, perspectivism, potential histories, rescue humanities