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## People's History as an Argument and Discursive Turn

*Historia ludowa jako argument i zwrot dyskursywny*

## ABSTRACT

The article focuses on an attempt to identify tropes in the meta-scientific analysis of the so-called New People's History, aiming to capture certain patterns in the dynamics of its discourse, including a contextual understanding of the current *people's history turn* in Poland, along with its specification within a global context. Among other issues, the paper addresses, the problem of defining people's history (and the concept of 'the people') and the discursive shift from the postulate of *history from below* within the model of social history to the multidisciplinary turn in the humanities. The notion of 'people's history' is considered as both an argumentative category and a discursive turn, along with its genealogy in historical research. Selected methodological and theoretical aspects of *people's history turn*, as well as the justification of the Polish genealogical line, are examined in relation to the concept and postulate of the 'politics of sensitivity'.

**Key words:** *history from below, people's history turn, Polish genealogical line, politics of sensitivity*

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## STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł koncentruje się na próbie ustalenia tropów w metanaukowej analizie tzw. nowej historii ludowej dla uchwycenia pewnych wzorców w dynamice jej dyskursu, w tym kontekstowego ujęcia obecnego zwrotu ludowego w Polsce, wraz z jego specyfiką w kontekście globalnym. Przybliżono tu m.in. problem definiowania historii ludowej (i pojęcia 'ludu') i dyskursywne przesunięcie od postulatu historii oddolnej w modelu historii społecznej do wielodyscyplinowego zwrotu w humanistyce. Pojęcie 'historii ludowej' rozważono w wymiarze kategorii argumentacyjnej i zwrotu dyskursywnego oraz jego genealogii w badaniach historycznych. Wybrane metodologiczno-teoretyczne aspekty zwrotu ludowego oraz uzasadnienie polskiej linii genealogicznej rozpatrzone w odniesieniu do koncepcji i postulatu 'polityki wrażliwości'.

**Słowa kluczowe:** historia oddolna, zwrot ludowy w badaniach historycznych, polska linia genealogiczna, polityka wrażliwości

## INTRODUCTION

In the meta-scientific reflection on the specificity of the so-called '*people's history turn*' (or new people's history), certain recurring issues can already be identified. These include, among others, defining people's history (and the concept of 'the people'), the phenomenon subject of the so-called 'Zinn effect' in both academic research and public space, the theme of people's history as a revisionist discourse, and finally the specific subversion from the postulate of *history from below* in the model of social history to a multidisciplinary turn in the humanities. These threads alone justify the need to consider the broad theoretical and historical-historiographic context in which the current *people's history turn* in Polish historical discourse is well embedded. This, in turn, supports the view that a crisis discourse is being dealt with (as a symptom of a paradigmatic shift) rather than the consequences of a new revisionist program in the science of history.

First and foremost, this context is constituted by social history as *history from below*, and especially its subfields, such as *rural history*, *peasants' history*, as well as *labor history* and *ethnic history*, which are secondary to the former in terms of their dominant themes. The discussion also revolves around the notion of people's turn as a variant of the indigenous turn within postcolonial theory and the concept of *subalterns*. Equally significant is the more established trope of the Annales School tradition in the current development of *people's history*, encompassing socio-economic history, historical demography, history of mentalities, microhistory, and the history of everyday life. The global reach of Marxist theory in the field of social and economic history remains relevant to the peasants' history as a result of the anthropological revision of this model

in the 1960s. Furthermore, the global reach of Marxist theory in the field of social and economic history remains significant for *peasants' history*, particularly due to the anthropological reinterpretation of this model in the 1960s, as exemplified by E.R. Wolf. Approximately at the same time, a significant shift also occurred in the field of *resistance studies*, in the light of the concept of *moral economy* (as developed by P. Thompson and J.C. Scott) and the related notion of *subsistence economy*. Since *peasants' history* dominates this field, it is also necessary to consider the theory of *unfree labor* and *serfdom* (as developed by P. Kolchin)<sup>1</sup>. Finally, we are confronted with the polysemy of the concept of *people's history*, which is clearly illustrated by the French travesty of the famous American formula: *une histoire du peuple, par le peuple et pour le peuple* (i.e., *une histoire populaire*)<sup>2</sup> – history of the people, written by the people, and for the people (i.e., in a popular-scientific narrative). This trope appears in the critique of *people's history turn* along with the concept of *vernacular history* (in the sense of amateur historiographical analyses and popular historical narratives) concerning both meanings of the concept of *people's history* as *history from below* and popular/pop history (i.e., history made simple) written for 'common' people, rather than for intellectual, academic elites, etc. This trend is increasingly accompanied by an implicit statement, sometimes taking the form of an unspoken accusation: the majority of proponents of the *history from below* approach come from left-wing provenance and are often engaged as activists. The question arises whether this fact holds significance for the specification of popular history. Perhaps it does, particularly when *history from below* is understood as a political project.

<sup>1</sup> The Author draws attention to this issue (dominant in the Polish *people's history turn*) along with the question of *serfdom* within the framework of contemporary research related to, among others, economic anthropology and *resistance studies*. In Poland, researchers emphasize the postulate of history of the state as a system emerging from the evolution of interconnected multiple mechanisms (political, legal, social, cultural, economic, administrative, and mental) of *serfdom*, domination, exploitation, mythopractical legitimization of power, forms of resistance and emancipation, and finally, harbingers of modernization in the era of the First Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. A clear context is provided by the broader debate around the theory of hegemony regarding the emergence of the *tout court* state system in the fabric of continuity and cyclicity of these mechanisms. Adam Leszczyński also follows this trope (among others) in his *Ludowa historia Polski* (*People's History of Poland*) as a 'history of exploitation and resistance' and 'mythology of domination'; this is, in a way, a *clue* to his attempt at alternative modeling of Polish history from the perspective of 'history from below'.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. É. Ruiz, *L'histoire populaire: label éditorial ou nouvelle forme d'écriture du social?*, "Le Mouvement social" 2019/2020, 269/270, p. 202.

On the other hand, the current diversification of *people's history* within Polish historical discourse is also noteworthy. It can be observed that that research is conducted by professional historians who explore specific thematic threads, such as Tomasz Wiślicz (socio-cultural history, historical anthropology), Piotr Guzowski (historical demography, economic history), Mateusz Wyżga (social history and historical demography), and Natalia Jarska (social history, women's history). Anthropological studies are emerging from the perspectives of postcolonial critique (Kacper Pobłocki) and resistance studies (Michał Rauszer). Attempts at various types of syntheses or research programs are also underway, q.v. *Ludowa historia Polski. Historia wyzysku i oporu. Mitologia panowania* by historian and sociologist Adam Leszczyński (2020) or *Pamięć – chłopi – bunt. Transdisciplinarne badania nad chłopskim dziedzictwem* by philosopher and memory researcher Jan Wasiewicz (2021). *History from below* has become a trend in the publishing market and a factor of a certain ferment in widely-read historical publications. An example of this is the series by RM Publishing, titled *Ludowa Historia Polski*, ongoing since 2020 and edited by Przemysław Wielgosz<sup>3</sup>. A positive effect of this trend is the emergence of a subgenre of historical writing, to which the author refers as *reportage people's history*<sup>4</sup>.

A transgression beyond the 'Zinn effect'<sup>5</sup> is thus also observed. The fact that a plurality of themes (people's histories of someone/something) has

<sup>3</sup> It is worth recalling these titles, as the series represents a publishing model of *histoire populaire*: Michał Rauszer, *Bękarty pańszczyzny, Historia buntów chłopskich* (2020); Piotr Korczyński, *Śladami Szeli, czyli diabły polskie* (2020); Dariusz Zalega, *Bez Pana i Plebana. 111 gawęd z ludowej historii Śląska* (2021); Michał Narożniak, *Niewolnicy modernizacji. Między pańszczyzną a kapitalizmem* (2021); *Ludowa historia kobiet*, (multi-author work), (2023). However, the exemplary book in this regard is M. Wyżga's *Chłopstwo. Historia bez krawata* (2022), which presents people's history in the form of *histoire populaire* written by a professional historian.

<sup>4</sup> The Author particularly distinguishes here *Cięcia. Mówiona historia transformacji* by Aleksandra Leyk and Joanna Wawrzyniak (2020); *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach* by Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak (2023); and the essay-reportage book by Agnieszka Pajączkowska, *Nieprzezroczyste. Historia chłopskiej fotografii* (2023).

<sup>5</sup> '...dans le sillage des travaux d'Howard Zinn (1980)' – as É. Ruiz put it. The French translation of *A People's History of the United States* appeared in 2002 and what followed confirms the Zinn effect in the market trend of literature popularizing people's history of (*nearly*) *everything*: 'les années 2010 ont vu se multiplier les publications, en français, d'histoires dites « populaires ». Il s'agit, pour partie, de traductions de people's history of anglophones qui permettent ainsi aux lecteurs francophones de lire des « histoires populaires » de l'humanité, des sciences ou encore du sport'. See: É. Ruiz, *op. cit.*, p. 185. In Poland, after the Polish translation of Zinn's work appeared in 2016, a contest was even held for the title of a 'Polish Zinn' (which, as is commonly known, was 'won' by Adam Leszczyński), see: K. Sobczak, *Ludowa historia po raz pierwszy (albo i nie pierwszy), ważne – by nie ostatni*, "Czas

shifted toward a multiplicity of genre, narrative, and methodological approaches in historical discourse is a clear symptom of this phenomenon. Furthermore, the argument in this regard is supported by the Polish genealogical line of *people's history*, the existence of which, incidentally, is neglected in various popular compilations such as Wikipedia. Hence, this constitutes a subject that merits further scrutiny by Polish scholars of *history from below*.

### THE DISCURSIVE TURN: CONCEPTUALIZATION TROPS

The issue of *history from below* is examined here primarily through the lens of argument and discourse, therefore, the concept of an argument needs to be clarified in two aspects. In a broader, pragmatic sense, an argument is a form of utterance that refers to a claim which must be justified argumentatively (i.e. discursively). In formal logic, on the other hand, it denotes the part of an expression that is further specified by another expression (e.g., in the phrase 'people's history as a discursive turn in the new humanities', 'people's history' is the argument specified by the predicate 'discursive turn in the new humanities'). The latter aspect is also significant in attempts to define *people's history*. In addition, arguments can belong to different semantic categories: utterances, particulars, classes (sets, universals, pair classes), etc. These categories, as objective predication concerning entities and states of affairs, comprise all expressions in a language that can be mutually substituted, resulting in another meaningful expression within that language. The elementary semantic categories are precisely the arguments, including utterances, imperatives, questions, performatives, particulars, universals, and suppositions<sup>6</sup>.

On the other hand, the necessity of employing discourse, this charismatic meta-category, in the context of *history from below* is justified by its persuasive, performative, and, in a sense, creative function (according to Steiner's principle of *ars creationis – ars combinatoria*). Discourse is also functions as a form of argument in justifying what can be said about something and how it can be said (or performed), and thus what shapes our perception and understanding of situations. In relation to *people's history*, the critical and revisionist (and thus crisis-laden) element within the science of history is emphasized here, which, in a Foucauldian spirit,

Kultury" 2021, 2, <https://czaskultury.pl/artykul/ludowa-historia-po-raz-pierwszy-albo-inne-pierwszy-wazne-by-nie-ostatni> [access: 20.08.2025].

<sup>6</sup> See: P. Prechtl, *Leksykon pojęć filozofii analitycznej*, transl. J. Bremer, Kraków 2009, pp. 41, 137.

highlights the connection between narratives on a given topic and society, power, and agency. Therefore, we should draw attention to the possibility of considering the crisis element in the discursive *people's history turn* with reference to the concept of 'politics of sensitivity'<sup>7</sup>, whose persuasive and figurative mode demonstrates that, in a crisis discourse, language serves not only to communicate content and meanings but primarily to act. This becomes evident in the context of revisionist tropes within this discourse, as well as in the ways in which it is manifested in the public sphere, especially in artistic spaces.

In this context, two more categories are invoked, or rather recalled. The *imaginarium* (in the sense defined by the philosopher Charles Taylor) is a concept related to the issues of cultural memory, historical imagination, and the social practices associated with them. As a unique repository of linguistic and cognitive figures, images, metaphors, and literary tropes with their affective potential connected to the axiological sphere, and to identity, the *imaginarium* serves as a key factor in creating bonds. In practice, this represents a set of long-standing and stereotypical clichés – readily identifiable and recognizable, although usually not realized in everyday life, yet significant in constructing not only identity discourse (e.g. within the framework of a programmatic historical policy and memory politics), but also new critical-revisionist turns in historical discourse, such as the current *people's history turn*<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Here the Author refers to Michał P. Markowski's book *Polityka wrażliwości. Wprowadzenie do humanistyki* (Kraków 2013). The Author particularly highlights two postulates related to the philosophy of 'the humanities after deconstruction', for which he argues: promoting and shaping its political and existential dimensions, as well as discursive sensitivity in society, based on programmatic plurilingualism). It is thus also possible to postulate the restoration of the humanistic, existential, and discursive dimensions of politics (starting with the idea of political itself). Could *people's history turn* in the humanities, as a project of the politics of sensitivity, become a trope in this direction?

<sup>8</sup> The *imaginarium* of *people's history turn* in historical discourse (particularly cultural history) allows for a wide range of interpretation and proves to be an imagination-creating factor. Its Polish corpus undoubtedly includes terms like 'cham' ('boor'), 'tłuszcza' ('rabbie'), 'pańskczyna' ('serfdom'), and 'rabacja' (Galician slaughter/ Galician Peasant Uprising of 1846), as well as phrases such as 'a panów pią...' ('saw the lords!'), 'idźcie chłopy do roboty' ('off to yer labors, peasants!' – go and do your grim work!) or 'miałeś chamie złoty róg' ('you had a golden horn, boor' – a symbol of lost opportunity). The concepts of the people, plebeians, peasantry, subjugation, exploitation, and pano-wanie (an ironic term for a system in which the 'lords' hold power or dominate) are also part of this corpus. There are also examples that reach into even deeper, less recognizable layers of our collective memory, such as *plica polonica* (Polish plait / *kołtun*) which can be interpreted as a disease, but simultaneously also seen as a form of mental autotherapy and indirectly as a form

Similarly, Foucault's concept of *contre-mémoire* (counter-memory) and the *epistemology of resistance*<sup>9</sup>, that is, critical-revisionist (alternative) narratives about the past concerning histories of those neglected, silenced, and excluded in the paradigm of historicism and the nation-state model of history, as well as the so-called Grande Histoire (in Polish academic discourse, the concept is expanded to include 'counter-history')<sup>10</sup> – are particularly relevant. One can thus argue that this concept supports the postulate of *people's history turn* in the understanding of politics of sensitivity, particularly in its ethical and deontological dimensions, with special reference to, among others, *subaltern studies* and the theme of *epistemic justice*<sup>11</sup>.

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of resistance. A similar effect can be achieved by juxtaposing images such as: the Young Poland-era figure of 'Beautiful Zośka' (the character from the tragic true story of Zofia Paluchowa) and the peasant woman from Anna Świrszczyńska's poem (quoted as the introduction to Kacper Poblocki's book *Chamstwo / The Commoners*). Let us juxtapose Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (La Liberté guidant le peuple 28 juillet 1830) and Gierymski's *The Peasant Coffin* (Trumna chłopska); the figures of Jakub Szela in Radek Rak's *Baśń o wężowym sercu* (The Tale of the Serpent's Heart), in Wyspiański's *Wesele* (The Wedding) and Wajda's film adaptation of this play, and in historian Ryszard Jamka's book *Panów pitą* (Saw the lords), with the figure of a peasant presented as a Gaian-like gardener from the definition of a 'peasant' in J. Attali's *Dictionary of the 21st century*; finally, the image of a reading worker in Bertolt Brecht's poem (quoted as the epigraph to Chris Harman's *A People's History of the World*), contrasted with the character of a 'prole' from Orwell's 1984 (and the phrase: 'proles and animals are free').

<sup>9</sup> In his essay *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, Foucault writes directly: 'The purpose is to turn history into a kind of counter-memory, and thus to transform it into an entirely different form of time'. See: M. Foucault, *Filozofia, historia, polityka. Wybór pism*, transl. D. Leszczyński, L. Rasiński, Warszawa–Wrocław 2000, p. 131. Foucault addressed this topic in the context of his analysis of power relations as a factor in shaping social structures in the mid-1970s, i.a. in his lectures at the Collège de France.

<sup>10</sup> What is particularly significant here is that 'French *contre-mémoire* entered Polish humanities via the Anglo-Saxon reception of Foucault, through the writings of the scholars focusing on hegemonic discourse'. This fact confirms the legitimacy of tracing such relational tropes of new people's history in Poland as a discursive turn embedded within the multifaceted theoretical-historical global context. See: K. Bojarska, M. Solarzka, *Przeciw-pamięć*, in: *Modi memorandi. Leksykon kultury pamięci*, eds. M. Saryusz-Wolska, R. Traba, Warszawa 2014, pp. 396–403 <https://cbh.pan.pl/pl/przeciw-pami%C4%99%C4%87> [access: 20.08.2025].

<sup>11</sup> In this context, the argumentative dimension of situating *people's history turn* in relation to the politics of sensitivity also becomes more pronounced. 'In the broader historiographic perspective, it is therefore about a counter-discourse opposing the dominant philosophical-legal discourse; about exposing the false, allegedly universal assumption that prevailing laws and order are not imposed on the subjugated by the victors, but rather represent

## THE ARGUMENT: TROPES OF JUSTIFICATION

There are justifiable concerns that in the discourse of new people's history, one cannot see the forest for the trees. The good news is that certain patterns can be traced in this forest, particularly in attempts to define history from below through ostensive and persuasive definitions, and through postulates<sup>12</sup>. The starting point, however, is the now well-established juxtaposition of the French and Anglo-Saxon genealogical lines of people's history. According to current findings, Lucien Febvre, the co-founder of the Annales School, was the first to use the term 'histoire vue d'en bas et non d'en haut' (history seen from below, not from above) in a 1932 text dedicated to the historian of the French Revolution- Albert Mathiez, praising Mathiez's effort to narrate 'l'histoire des masses et non de vedettes' (the history of masses, not of prominent figures). Later, Edward P. Thompson's essay *History from Below*, published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1966, brought this concept to broader attention of 1970s historiography. The phrase 'history of the people' appears in the title of Arthur L. Morton's book *A People's History of England* (1938). Scholars from disciplines beyond history, however, attribute the popularization of this concept within their fields to Howard Zinn's canonical 1980 work *A People's History of the United States: 1492–Present*. Finally, critics of this approach emphasize the Marxist model in both historiography and social movements (arguably, the social backbone of *people's history turn*), e.g., in the History Workshop movement in Britain in the 1960s<sup>13</sup>.

A kind of historical narrative is then established from a bottom-up perspective in relation to the masses, rather than social elites and state

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an expression of community and harmony based on external rules. In a narrower variant focused on the epistemology of resistance, both categories – counter-memory and counter-history [...] have found extensive application in research on memory and the experiences of sexual, ethnic, and religious minorities, within the fields of postcolonial, feminist, and *queer* criticism, along with Subaltern and Chicano Studies, etc. These concepts, inflected politically, ethically, and aesthetically, address the issue of revalorizing the historical experience of minority groups within the emancipatory paradigm'. See: *ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> For reference: an ostensive definition is a way of defining a term by pointing to a concrete example or object that illustrates its meaning (the designatum of the defined term); a definition through postulates consists of sentences containing the defined expression, where the meaning of other terms should be known and understood by the recipients; a persuasive definition serves to assign a new (expanded) conceptual content to a word with the intention of influencing the recipients' views.

<sup>13</sup> See: L. Febvre, *Albert Mathiez: un tempérament, une éducation*, "Annales d'histoire économique et sociale" 1932, 4, 18, pp. 573–576; M. Wade, *The New Left, National Identity, and the Break-up of Britain*, Leiden 2013, p. 20 and next.

leaders. This definition encompasses not only the subjected and subordinated classes (such as peasants) but also individuals and minorities who face legal discrimination, persecution, or marginalization, characterized by their low social and economic status (subalterns). In turn, *history from below* is situated within the realm of social and economic history, as well as historical demography, encompassing the history of rural communities and peasants, mass movements, and also microhistories of rebels who challenged their social subordination (figures such as Jakub Szela or György Dózsa would certainly be included in this group); it also includes outsiders and nonconformists (e.g., the miller Menocchio-Domenico Scandella from Friuli, although one might ask whether a figure like Jesus of Nazareth could be considered among them?). According to this approach, the everyday life of ordinary people, within their socio-economic conditions, becomes an agency-driving factor in historical events. This perspective restores their historical subjectivity which has long been relegated to the background as part of the anonymous, silent masses in traditional narratives of political history.

This, then, is the pattern: social history<sup>14</sup> in the history from below model, dominated by sub-disciplines such as: rural history, peasants' history, and labor history. Similarly, the paradigm of critical history – more frequently associated with the Nietzschean conception than with the concept of revisionism – is also situated within the broader context

<sup>14</sup> Social history within the 'history from below' approach gained significance in the 1960s, spreading through intellectual movements in Great Britain and France together with the programmatic assumption that the vision of Great History, focused on states, nations, and eminent individuals, fails to adequately explain the increasingly complex systems of human civilization or the dynamics of social processes and transformations. It is also easy to challenge the claim that contemporary social history and the bottom-up approach in new people's history are merely derivatives of the Marxist historiographical model, especially if one recalls the multiplicity of Marxist currents and the profound transformations within this framework, including the variant of post-Marxism. Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that the so-called anthropological correction of the Marxian model, particularly in peasants' history, and subsequently the cultural turn and linguistic turn in historical research led to an increase in the number of subdisciplines and the rise of alternative approaches to social history, including the critical theory and liberal-social thought. See: C. Lorenz, 'Won't You Tell Me, Where Have All the Good Times Gone? On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Modernization Theory for History,' "Rethinking History" 2006 10, 2, pp. 171–200; C. Tilly, Charles. *The Old New Social History and the New Old Social History*, "Review" 1984, 7, 3, pp. 363–406; K. Pomeranz, *Social History and World History: from Daily Life to Patterns of Change*, "Journal of World History" 2007, 18, 1, pp. 69–98; P.N. Stearns, *Social History Present and Future*, "Journal of Social History" 2003, 37, 1; *Encyclopedia of European Social History from 1350 to 2000*, vol. 5, ed. P.N. Stearns, New York 2000.

of postcolonial discourse. The French historiographical tradition exhibits tropes such as tropes of history of mentalities, socio-economic history, history of everyday life, and microhistory. Finally, the history of social movements within the framework of resistance studies and research on crowd subjectivity finds its reflection in the evolution of Marxist thought<sup>15</sup>. It is precisely in this context that distinguishing E. P. Thompson (1924–1993) among the pioneers of history from below and his *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963, is justified. The book focused on the history of the first political left-wing working-class movement in history, at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. In the preface to this book, Thompson defends his revisionist approach by arguing for the need to rescue from historical obscurity the figures such as 'the poor stockinger', 'the Luddite cropper', 'the utopian artisan', and even the popular 'follower of Joanna Southcott' (a religious prophetess). Their crafts and traditions have disappeared in modern social and economic systems; their backward-looking resentment toward the new industrialism was met with contempt; their communitarian ideals might have been fantasies; their insurrectionary conspiracies were utopian and imprudent. Yet they are the ones who lived through the time of great social upheaval and change that has not been experienced by the contemporary

<sup>15</sup> The reasons behind the Author's reluctance to acknowledge the Marxist provenance of many pioneers and exponents of the history from below model will not be analyzed here; sociological research, perhaps employing methods from cognitive ethnography, would be essential in this regard. One should nonetheless recall, as a matter of intellectual obligation, that Marxist historiography (the Marxist model of historical research) stands as one of the most significant and influential currents in the history of historiography. Its profound impact on social history, economic anthropology, and historical anthropology is undeniable; the class analysis central to this model also catalyzed the development of analytical tools such as race and gender. Marxism was one of the factors influencing the Annales School tradition, contributing to the historiography of social movements, and shaping Anglo-Saxon labor history and working-class studies, and thus the methodology of history from below. However, its deterministic approach to the philosophy of history in historical and dialectical materialism (including the claim that the actual historical process is not predetermined but depends on class struggle, particularly the rise of class consciousness and the organization of the working class) is currently rejected, as is the reductive approach to social relations to economic (material) productive forces, relations of production, division of labor as the determinant of class division, and the treatment of culture as a superstructure of production modes. Yet, in the context of the new people's history, the programmatic postulate of empowering the 'lower' social strata by equipping their representatives with tactics and strategies derived from revised historical knowledge remains relevant (echoing the classical theme of emancipation from the so-called false consciousness). The reference to the postulate of a political project in its emancipatory and modernizing dimension also persists to be relevant.

generation. Their aspirations were valid in the context of their own experiences. Were they merely victims of history, crushed by its forces? Were they aware of the historical situation? Did they define themselves as agents within their local communities and cultures? These suppositions are also significant, especially in light of how Thompson defined social class – not as a static structure, but as a dynamic, time-sensitive relationship. In this view, everyday actions and minor decisions (following the principle of the butterfly effect) become factors in major changes and groundbreaking historical events.

In the author's view, the case of George F. Rudé (1910–1993), a relatively unknown Marxist historian and pioneer in the field of crowd agency, is noteworthy for his groundbreaking work on the history of the French Revolution from the *history from below* perspective. Following the new trends within the Annales School, Rudé sought to dismantle the idea that traditional political history is confined to the study of states, sovereigns, and governing elites. It is the history of lower classes, particularly the accounts of their rebellions, forms of resistance, and protests, that provides crucial insights into the most significant historical events. Adhering to the fundamental thesis of Marxist theory, namely that the primary motives of human action are determined by material needs and economic relations within the structures of the state, Rudé initiated a turn toward the anthropologization of this approach. He assigned 'concrete faces' and micro-biographies to ordinary people in the crowd during the French Revolution, challenging the myth that the revolutionary mob was an anonymous, threatening mass in the background, a mere mindless, physically destructive force. As he aptly stated: 'those who take to the streets in a crowd are ordinary, sober citizens, not half-crazed beasts'<sup>16</sup>. Rudé undoubtedly initiated a paradigm shift in this area of research; the so-called ordinary people in rebellious crowds gained visibility in the discourse, acquiring subjectivity and historical agency<sup>17</sup>.

The case of the anthropologist Eric Wolf (1923–1999), often referred to as the 'advocate of Marxism' in anthropological studies (although he might more accurately be described as a modernizer of the Marxist model of historiography within historical anthropology), can be illustrated by his book *Europe and the People Without History* (1982). However, in the context of *people's history*, his earlier work *Peasants* (1966)

<sup>16</sup> A. Charlesworth, *George Rudé and the Anatomy of the Crowd*, "Labour History Review" 1990, 55, 3, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> G. Rudé, *The Crowd in History. A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848*, New York 1964; see also: E. Hobsbawm, *Obituary: George Rudé; Historian From Below*, "The Guardian" 12 January 1993.

proved groundbreaking, launching a new wave of research on peasants (primarily focused on Latin America) beyond traditional socio-economic history and historical demography. Wolf can thus be considered a pioneer of the anthropological approach to history from below, which also challenges the paradigm of economic dominance in the Marxist model.

Finally, Howard Zinn's case particularly deserves separate study, also due to the extensive discourse among his American critics who tend to situate his work in a Marxist perspective. This criticism is biased, not only due to its ideological constraints, but also because of the difficulty of unequivocally defining Zinn's approach to *history from below*, especially as this approach evolved through successive updates to *A People's History of the United States* across its numerous editions since 1980. This dynamic process of change, correction, and expansion is symptomatic and heralds a *turning point* in the humanities, marked by a specific multi-stream and multi-thematic character within the discourse of people's history<sup>18</sup>.

Finally, attention is drawn to some of the postulates emerging from Polish discourse on *history from below* over the last decade, which, within a relational framework, already reveal tropes, patterns, and models of the *people's history turn* in Polish humanities. For instance, the phrase 'The Missing Element of Consciousness? History from Below Ten Years after the Appeal of Blois' suggests a postulate concerning historical memory (and, more broadly, methodological awareness) in the spirit of the epistemology of resistance with regard to the issue of the freedom of historical research in relation to the historical policy of the state<sup>19</sup>. The idiomatic expression 'Chmielnicki and Szela. The Struggles of Radical Romantics with

<sup>18</sup> Adam Leszczyński is right, in this context, to label this narrative format as critical history (although the Author suspects that he employs this formula also to evade the problematic notion of revisionism). See: A. Leszczyński, *Jak trzeba napisać ludową historię Polski? Esej o metodzie*, cz. 5 Howard Zinn, czyli lekcja historii krytycznej, in: *Ludowa historia Polski. Historia wyzysku i oporu. Mitologia panowania*, Warszawa 2020, pp. 562–567.

<sup>19</sup> The *Appel de Blois* is a document issued in 2008 by historians from the group *Liberté pour l'histoire*, protesting against the *lois memoriales* (Laws on Memorials and Monuments). It is an act of a broad initiative aimed at countering the 'criminalization of the past' by legislative bodies, 'controlling historical memory' and 'establishing historical truth by political authorities', which creates growing obstacles to scientific research and intellectual freedom in general. It was supported by historians, such as Carlo Ginzburg, Eric Hobsbawm, and Jacques Le Goff. The appeal itself, addressed particularly to academics, justifies the need to reject the 'moralization' and 'judicialization' of history through the codification in the system of *lois memoriales*. The underlying premise is the assertion that 'history cannot be a slave to contemporary politics, nor can it be written at the behest of competing memories. In a free state, no political authority has the right to define historical truth or restrict the freedom of historians under the threat of criminal penalties'.

the People's History of Poland', along with the statement 'New People's History – the socio-political roots of contemporary narratives about the history of Polish peasants', already indicates the dominant theme of peasant rebellions in the context of resistance studies and the trope of the specific ruralization (or peasantization) of the Polish *people's history turn*. This trend may have its roots in the crisis-ridden soil of social discontent, including the sense of epistemic injustice. The expression 'global people's history and the problem of surfdom in Old Poland' explicitly advocates a postcolonial critique, while 'The people in perspective, the perspective of the people' contains the supposition that a new research current in the humanities and social sciences is already emerging within a broad theoretical and methodological framework. The concepts of 'the peasant question' and 'the subjectivity of the peasantry in Old Poland' represent two facets of the issue of historical agency, a postulate long neglected in mainstream Polish historiography, particularly with regard to the period between the 11th and 16th centuries. Finally, the question 'What does the so-called *people's history turn* tell us, or what it does not tell us, about the condition of contemporary Polish historiography?' leads to the trope of crisis discourse in meta-historical and meta-scientific reflection<sup>20</sup>.

There are already sufficient examples of this kind to suggest that their cross-referencing in terms of discursive connections allows for the identification of certain patterns within the Polish discourse of the new people's history. A specific reference point can be adopted here, namely the paper, presented by Tomasz Wiślicz at the 20th Congress of Polish Historians in Lublin (2019), titled New Trends in Polish Historiography after 1989: A Diagnostic Report. It is worth recalling the summary here:

'The aim of the paper is to present the trends and research strands that have emerged in Polish historiography over the last 30 years and have

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See: *Appel de Blois*, «Le Monde», publié le 10 octobre 2008, [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2008/10/10/appel-de-blois\\_1105436\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2008/10/10/appel-de-blois_1105436_3232.html) [access: 20.08.2025].

<sup>20</sup> See: M. Gęsiarz, *Brakujący element świadomości? Historia oddolna w 10 lat po Apelu z Blois*, "Sensus Historiae" 2019, 36, 3, pp. 21–33; P. Kuligowski, *Chmielnicki i Szela. Radykalnych romantyków zmagania z ludową historią Polski*, "Czas Kultury" 2016, 32, 3, pp. 100–109; M. Gospodarczyk, Ł. Kożuchowski, *Nowa ludowa historia: charakterystyka i społeczno-polityczne korzenie współczesnych narracji o historii chłopów polskich*, "Studia Socjologiczne" 2021, 2 (241), pp. 177–198; K. Pobłocki, *Globalna historia ludowa a problem niewoli w dawnej Polsce*, "Widok. Teorie i Praktyki Kultury Wizualnej" 2020, 27, pp. 196–206; G. Grochowski, *Kwestia chłopska (The Peasant Question)*, Wstęp do tomu *Chłopskość*, "Teksty Drugie" 2017, 6; K. Chmielewska, *Lud w perspektywie, perspektywa ludu*, "Teksty Drugie" 2021, 5, pp. 293–309; R. Stobiecki, *Co tak zwany zwrot ludowy mówi nam lub czego nie mówi o kondycji współczesnej polskiej historiografii?*, "Teksty Drugie" 2022, 4, pp. 282–301; M. Wyżga, *Podmiotowość chłopstwa staropolskiego*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 2023, 130, 4.

left – or continue to leave – a lasting impact on the field. Four main tendencies have been selected for presentation, going beyond the traditional divisions of epochs in Polish academic history. These are: (1) From 'myth' to 'historical truth' and back, a historiographic trend aimed either at revising the existing descriptions of the past in the name of historical truth, or at creating new myths to replace the old ones; (2) Between structures and idiography, i.e., research directions that reject metanarratives and explore individual experience, as well as those aimed at achieving synthetic knowledge through research of structural, comparative or global character; (3) Identity histories, i.e., concerning the trends emerging in Polish historiography that are important for building the identity of a certain social group, highlighting the distinctiveness and originality of Polish history in this regard; (4) Searching for a place outside history, i.e., conducting research based on sources atypical for historiography and requiring additional skills, or applying theoretical concepts and interpretations that complicate scholarly discussion with other historians<sup>21</sup>.

The tendencies outlined above already delineate the tropes for identifying these patterns. They can be traced through the motif of mythopractice in the discourse of new people's history (ad 1) and the oscillation between micronarratives, social history and historical anthropology narratives, and the metanarrative of syntheses<sup>22</sup> – as seen in works like Tomasz Wiślicz's *Zarobić na duszne zbawienie. Religijność chłopów małopolskich od połowy XVI do końca XVIII wieku* [Earning One's Eternal Salvation: The Religiosity of Lesser Poland Peasants from the Mid-16th to the End of the 18th Century] (2001), Mateusz Wyżga's *Homo movens. Mobilność chłopów w regionie krakowskim XVI–XVIII wieku* [Homo movens: Peasant Mobility in the Kraków Region, 16th–18th Centuries] (2019), or Natalia Jarska's *Kobiety z marmuru. Robotnice w Polsce w latach 1945–60* [Women of Marble: Female Workers in Poland, 1945–1960], (2016) (ad 2). People's history turn in historical research is undoubtedly relevant for source studies, archival science, and auxiliary historical sciences, while also expanding their discursive field to include, for example, visual history, digital history, and particularly cliometrics

<sup>21</sup> See: T. Wiślicz, *Nowe tendencje w historiografii polskiej po 1989 roku. Raport diagnostyczny*, in: "Wielka zmiana. Historia wobec wyzwań...". *Pamiętnik XX Powszechnego Zjazdu Historyków Polskich w Lublinie, 18–20 września 2019 r.*, vol. 1, *Potęga historii*, eds. M. Mazur, J. Pommorski, Warszawa–Lublin 2021, p. 267.

<sup>22</sup> The global context provides yet another pattern of this oscillation, for instance, between Alain Corbin's work (1998) *Le Monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot. Sur les traces d'un inconnu* (1798–1876) and Clifford D. Conner's study *A People's History of Science: Miners, Midwives and "Low Mechanicks"* (2005), or Chris Harman's global history titled *A Peoples History of the World. From the Stone Age to the New Millennium* (1999).

(ad 4). Finally, the identity issue (ad 3) – the category of identity is replaced here by the concepts of subjectivity and agency. However, should it be entirely rejected in this discourse, especially in light of the postulate of the 'distinctiveness of Polish history' in this regard?<sup>23</sup>

Yet another point of reference must be added – this time from the critique of *people's history turn*, featuring the trope of the concept of vernacular history<sup>24</sup> (amateur, popular, non-professional history) and the effect of the democratization of historical discourse. Additionally, the concept of the politics of sensitivity emerges as potentially the principal legitimizing asset of *people's history turn* in new humanities, with an ethical recalibration of the meaning of the political (in accordance with

<sup>23</sup> One might, however, postulate here a construct of social identity (or, alternatively, an invented / rediscovered / imagined identity). A case in point is Magdalena Barcka from Piotr Brożek's film *Niepamięć* (Oblivion, 2015). She embodies the archetypal representative of Polish middle class, a member of the 30–40 age group, an educated metropolitan dweller who incessantly reaffirms her identity credo with the phrase 'ja jestem chłopką' (*I am a peasant woman*). This case fits seamlessly into the film's thematic core (starting with the ambiguity of its title).

<sup>24</sup> Historian Guy Beiner defines vernacular history as a more sophisticated conceptualization of 'people's history', stating that 'the Neo-Marxist flag-bearers of history from below have at times resorted to idealized and insufficiently sophisticated notions of 'the people', unduly ascribing to them innate progressive values. In practice, democratic history is by no means egalitarian'; see: G. Beiner, *Forgetful Remembrance: Social Forgetting and Vernacular Historiography of a Rebellion in Ulster*, Oxford 2018, p. 9. The supposition of 'democratization' of historical discourse (across the entire spectrum of activities in the space of *public history* and *histoire populaire*) is already coupled in this fragment with an announcement of the main target of criticism, namely the 'bearers of the neo-Marxist flag' as proponents of history from below. More interesting, however, is the very formula of *vernacular historiography*, especially in reference to Clement Cheroux and the concept of vernacularity in photographic theory. Beiner performs here a semantic and categorical shift; vernacularity for him denotes not so much a marginalized, neglected, excluded discourse, but rather a more amateur, unprofessional, pseudoscientific, or at least a popular one – that is, for the people. In his previously cited article, E. Ruiz also examines the approach to people's history as *histoire populaire*, tracing the origins of the current *people's history turn* in French historiography. Ruiz adopts a more pragmatic approach to this topic, demonstrating that *people's history turn* is beneficial for historical research, as it is now itself becoming a subject of metascientific study. This new line of inquiry is pursued within cliodynamics and through database corpora that explore, among other topics, the history of publishing movement in the field of history from below. In any case, *histoire populaire du peuple*, focused on topics previously marginalized and neglected in traditional historical discipline, has now established its institutional foundation within applied sciences. This provides evidence for the thesis that the discursive turn serves action, i.e., changing the status quo. See: E. Ruiz, *op. cit.*, p. 188 and next.

Croce's philosophical perspective)<sup>25</sup>. Finally, this distinctive subversion may be discerned in the Polish genealogical line – from pre-war studies on peasants and agrarian economy (in the context of research on serfdom and socio-economic history), through the revisionist 'Otwock Program' (proclaimed at the First Methodological Conference of Polish Historians in Otwock, 1951–1952), which introduced the model of Marxist historiography (including foundational research in this field) to the current *people's history turn* (new people's history) within the broadly understood historical discourse (in an equally broad theoretical-methodological context). This shift is regarded, on the one hand (especially by professional historians), as a symptom of the crisis of the discipline of history in Poland, and on the other hand, as an attempt at revisionism (referred to as critical history) emerging from historical anthropology and sociology.

#### THE POLISH GENEALOGICAL LINE

This overlooked trope in the global discourse closer consideration, beginning with a summary of the tropes that are present and recognized within it. Central to the French line is, undoubtedly, the Annales School, founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in 1929, along with the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. Two years later, the field of rural history (*l'histoire rurale*) was established with Bloch's work *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* (1931). In 1932, L. Febvre coined the term 'l'histoire vue d'en bas et non d'en haut' (history seen from below, not from above) regarding the methodological approach in the works of A. Mathiez, which Febvre discerned as embodying a more Herodotean, ethnographic thread than the one viewed from the Thucydidean perspective. This marked a departure from the paradigm of individualistic historicism, nation-centric Grand History, and the vantage point

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<sup>25</sup> In this perspective, political engagement defines the practices of socially and culturally committed people of action, who, being active in the political sphere, are 'sons of the philosopher' – inheritors and transmitters of cognitive, ethical, and deontological values. These values are connected to the subsistence and development of human culture and civilization, we actually have here a trope of moral economy in conjunction with survival economy, insofar as the value of survival itself is an axiom of civilization. History from the bottom, viewed through this lens as a political project, would become an ethical and axiological fact. In the context of people's history as a political project, the Author also examines the concept of politics of sensitivity as a philosophical and axiological reference point for people of action (engaged humanists), rather than focusing on the theory and metascientific aspects of the new humanities (as conceptualized by Markowski).

of ruling elites. Between 1939 and 1940, Bloch published his fundamental work *La société féodale* (*Feudal Society*), a model of history of mentalities within social history, based on research into the mechanisms of domination in the feudal system. In turn, the Anglo-Saxon line was initiated in Great Britain by the Marxist historian Arthur Leslie Morton and his work *The People's History of England* (1938). Later, the line became established in the field of labor history, notably with Edward Palmer Thompson's canonical *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), alongside contextual works by Eric Hobsbawm: *Labouring Men: Studies in The History of Labour* (1964) and *Workers: Worlds of Labour* (1985). Thompson famously popularized the phrase 'history from below' in his 1966 essay published in "*The New Left Review*".

Finally, there is the often neglected Polish line in this narrative. The discourse of people's history in pre-war Poland emerged primarily within the field of socio-economic history, along with the journal "Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych" [Annals of Social and Economic History], founded in 1929 by Franciszek Bujak and Jan Rutkowski. The history of rural life and peasantry soon developed into a distinct – albeit still peripheral – theme within Bujak's school, with Jan Rutkowski recognized to some extent as its initiator, through his work *Poddarstwo włościan w XIII wieku w Polsce i w niektórych innych krajach Europy* (1921). This work laid the foundations for a pioneering research program in Polish historiography based on the application of statistical and comparative methods within explanatory synthesis; in addition, a novel source base for this field of research (mass inventories of large estates and royal land surveys) was applied. This established a model for studying systemic serfdom in the context of structural mechanisms of domination.

However, the earliest traces of peasant history in Polish historiography date back to the late 18th century<sup>26</sup>, appearing as postulative mentions in the field of research on the history of agriculture, rural life, and the peasant class found in *Historia narodu polskiego* [History of the Polish Nation, vols. 2–7, 1780–1786] by Adam Naruszewicz and *Uwagi względem poddanych w Polsce i projekt do ich uwolnienia* (1807) by Wawrzyniec Surowiecki. Similar themes appeared in the works of Tadeusz Czacki, Jerzy Bandtke, Hugo Kołłątaj, and Józef Łukaszewicz. Arguably, the true precursor of this field was Joachim Lelewel, whose study *Uwagi nad dziejami Polski i ludu jej*, included in his synthetic work *Polska. Dzieje i rzeczy jej* (1855), outlined a theoretical and methodological framework

<sup>26</sup> See: S. Inglot, *Rozwój badań nad historią chłopów polskich*, in: *Historia chłopów polskich*, ed. S. Inglot, Warszawa 1970.

for economic and social history. Equally canonical in the field of source studies was Józef Gluśniński's *Włościanie Polscy uważani pod względem charakteru, zwyczajów, obyczajów, przesądów z dołączeniem przysłowiów powszechnie używanych* (1856). The turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the era of the so-called modernist mutation, was also significant, promoted by figures such as: Michał Bobrzyński, Stanisław Smolka, Antoni Małecki, Franciszek Piekosiński, Adam Szelągowski, Bolesław Ulanowski, Oskar Balzer, and Karol Potkański.

Furthermore, in the first half of the 19th century, one can find an exemplary Polish case of people's history par excellence (une histoire du peuple par le peuple) in Kazimierz Deczyński's *Opis życia wieśniaka polskiego* (1837), along with its postulate to uncover what is hidden<sup>27</sup> – the suppressed narratives of ordinary people). Finally, the work of sociologists Florian Znaniecki and William Thomas *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (English ed. 1920/22; Polish ed. 1976), holds symbolic significance. Regarding the future post-war research directions in the area of history from below, two studies from the interwar period are particularly noteworthy: Nina Assorodobraj-Kula's *Początki klasy robotniczej: problem rąk roboczych w przemyśle polskim epoki stanisławowskiej* (1935) and Maksymilian Meloch's *Sprawa włościańska w powstaniu listopadowym* (1939).

In post-war historiography, people's history – with a particular emphasis on peasant history – became an official field of basic research within the model of Marxist historiography (proclaimed at the methodological conference in Otwock, 1951/1952). It also remained a recurring theme in economic history (q.v. the works of Witold Kula, Marian Małowist, Jerzy Topolski, Andrzej Wyczański, Franciszek Ziejka, Tadeusz Łepkowski, Andrzej Jezierski, and Stefan Inglot). From a social and ethnological perspective, rural studies were pursued by scholars, such as (i.a): Stefan Kieniewicz, Kazimierz Deczyński, Stanisław Szczotka, Józef Burszta, Bohdan Baranowski, Leonard J. Pełka, and Celina Bobińska. The people's trope (e.g., 'luźni ludzie' / 'loose/free people') also merged in social and cultural history (q.v. Bronisław Geremek's *Ludzie marginesu w średniowiecznym Paryżu, XIV–XVII wiek* (1972) and *Litość i szubienica: dzieje nędzy i miłosierdzia* (1989)).

Here, it becomes apparent that the complexity of the Polish genealogical line has influenced the specificity of the current people's history turn. Its tropes are visible, for instance, in the *ruralization* of the discourse of people's history turn in Poland, although this discourse is situated within a global

<sup>27</sup> As is well known, the work was published under the title *Żywoł chłopa polskiego* (The Life of a Polish Peasant) only in 1907, edited by Marcel Handelsman, which (seemingly paradoxically) contributed to its popularization beyond the circle of specialist researchers.

theoretical and methodological context – for example, in studies of serfdom through the perspective of subaltern studies (within postcolonial critique) and in analyses of resistance within *resistance studies* and the concept of *moral economy*<sup>28</sup>. The work of Znaniecki and Thomas anticipated the transdisciplinary nature of *people's history turn* in historical research. Nonetheless, within Polish historiography, this approach remained a separate and peripheral current, primarily situated in economic and social history rather than in the mainstream of nation-centered political history.

In the historiography of interwar Poland (beginning in the 1930s), Marxist influence stimulated interest in multidisciplinary research on social movements and labor history. By that time, peasant history had already become a permanent thread within socio-economic history<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> The term 'moral economy' is nowadays widely used as an analytical tool in social history and historical anthropology, particularly in the study of cultural and economic systems. The history of this idea and concept (developed by a historian, popularized by a political scientist, and applied transdisciplinarily in research projects and programs, bridging economics, sociology, historical sciences, and ecology) spans from the 1970s and the work of its pioneers – Edward P. Thompson (in the context of *labor history*) and James C. Scott (who reinterpreted Thompson's concept within *peasants' history*) is used in contemporary approaches, where the common denominator is the ecological correction of social sciences and humanities (J.P. Powelson, S. Shapin, K. Boulding). E.P. Thompson first employed the term 'moral economy' in his groundbreaking 1963 book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, yet he provided its conceptual explication nearly a decade later in the essay *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century* (1971). There, he presented a comprehensive account of the centuries-old, bottom-up system of feudal production and exchange. He traced the concept of agency among the 'crowd of tinsmiths, miners, weavers, stockingers, and working people' who, when faced with hunger and the loss of their livelihood under a *laissez-faire market*, were driven to morally justified rebellion. The political scientist J.C. Scott (1936–2024) adapted this concept in the 1970s and 1980s for his historical-anthropological research, applying it to the experiences of 20th-century peasants engaged in *subsistence economy* in Southeast Asia. In his 1976 work, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, Scott developed the concept of the 'peasant moral economy'. This concept, rooted in a traditional value system underlying affective and emotional engagement (which in extreme cases leads to revolt and rebellion), is linked to a bottom-up (peasant) interpretation of economic justice and the injustice of exploitation. In the introduction to the book, Scott defined moral economy in terms of a survival ethics and a form of resistance pertaining to 'pre-capitalist peasant societies' in the 19th-century France, Russia, and Italy, and in the 20th-century Southeast Asia. Acknowledging numerous sources of intellectual inspiration, he cited, *inter alia*, Barrington Moore Jr.'s 1966 work *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* and Eric Wolf's *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969).

<sup>29</sup> See: B. Wywiął, *Fenomen szkoły historii społeczno-gospodarczej Franciszka Bujaka*, Kraków 2023, rozdział 9: 'Historia włościan', p. 209 and next.

On the other hand, the study of social movements gained a more defined structure following the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Warsaw in 1931 (at which, incidentally, one of the special sections was devoted to the history of social movements)<sup>30</sup>. The postulates raised at the National Congress of Polish Historians in Poznań (1925) are also worth noting. It was Władysław Konopczyński who argued: 'The rebirth of the state should modify our perspective on the past; the democratization of society compels us to inquire more urgently about the past of the common people, not just the nobility' – *Pamiętniki Zjazdu* vol. 1, text no. 43. In turn, Łucja Charewiczowa advocated for research on the history of labor, whereas Kazimierz Hartleb regarded the teaching of cultural history in schools as a key aspect of 'true democratization'<sup>31</sup>.

After the war, a significant change occurred primarily in basic research and in the construction of a repository of primary sources. Remarkably, after only a decade of enforced dominance, history from below had reverted to its earlier trajectory by the 1960s, evolving once again into a distinct, albeit peripheral, strand of historical inquiry, separate from the central narratives of Polish and world history<sup>32</sup>. It is likely, therefore,

<sup>30</sup> As K. Zamorski writes, 'On December 1, 1933, at the premises of the Warsaw Society of History Enthusiasts (Warszawskie Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii), an organizational meeting of the Polish Commission for the History of Social Movements in the 18th and 19th Centuries (Komisja Historii Ruchów Społecznych XVIII i XIX wieku) took place. The assembly was opened by Natalia Gąsiorowska, who had been elected secretary of the International Commission for Social Movements in the 18th and 19th Centuries at the Warsaw Congress. Haldvan Koht became the chairman of this commission, with Jean Bourdon from Paris and Nikolay Lukin from Moscow serving as vice-chairmen. [...]. This concept, already rich in tradition by then, had been evolving since the introduction of the term 'social movements' coined by Lorenz Stein in the mid-19th century, and was now gaining new dimensions, revitalizing the theory of contemporary sociology and expanding the horizons of historical research. At the post-congress meeting in Warsaw, the commission, alongside Natalia Gąsiorowska, included, i.a., the following members: Stefan Czarnowski, Stanisław Arnold, Nina Assorodobraj, Marcelli Handelsman and Żanna Kormanowa'. K. Zamorski, *Przez profesjonalizację do międzynarodowej ekumeny historyków. Historiografia polska na międzynarodowych kongresach nauk historycznych w latach 1898–1938*, Kraków 2020, p. 169. See: Archiwum Polskiej Akademii Nauk w Warszawie, PTH ZG, VII Kongres Historyków w Warszawie. Materiały organizacyjne, protokoły i sprawozdania Komitetu organizacyjnego, tematy referatów, wycinki prasowe, 1932–1933, ref. no. 142, fol. 48.

<sup>31</sup> See: M. Serejski, *Historycy o historii 1918–1939*, prep., commentary and introduction M. Serejski, Warszawa 1966, pp. 28–29.

<sup>32</sup> At this point, Leszczyński implicitly reveals one of the main objectives of his work – within the framework of a planned revisionism concealed under the postulate of critical history in a Nietzschean spirit, with references to Foucault's poststructuralism and the metahistorical critique in the line of H. White, Leszczyński attempts to break

that during this period, the prevailing people's history approach began, marked by the suppression of the genealogical 'Otwock line' and the marginalization of Marxist historiography model<sup>33</sup>. Simultaneously, there was an emphasis on the Polish specificity of global patterns, such as economic anthropology (pioneered by the philosopher and historian Karl Polanyi<sup>34</sup> and developed by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins<sup>35</sup>), in the direction of an emancipatory model of peasant forms of resistance, as exemplified

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through this schema and write a history of Poland in the model of people's history. To some extent, he succeeded in realizing this project, although the imperfections that co-create it are no less interesting, however, this is a topic for another dissertation which is necessary to undertake. Even if only for this intentional aspect, Leszczyński's work has a groundbreaking dimension and deserves a serious critical analysis.

<sup>33</sup> Although contemporary researchers in the field of history from the bottom display great attachment to signifiers, like: 'people', 'injustice', 'exploitation', 'oppression', 'power', 'redistribution', 'conflict', 'domination', 'resistance', and 'emancipation', they nevertheless fail to demonstrate (perhaps due to repression) the awareness of their theoretical and methodological genealogy.

<sup>34</sup> Economic anthropology examines, in a broad sense, economic systems in relation to economic life as a subsystem of society, and explains human behavior within them in the widest possible context (historical, geographical, geopolitical, and cultural), employing interdisciplinary methodology that also includes field research. Karl Polanyi (1886–1964), in his work *The Great Transformation* (1944), initiated the pivotal debate between substantivists and formalists that was central to the development of the field. He argued that the term 'economy' has two meanings – the 'formal' one refers to economics as rational action and decision-making, including rational choice (e.g., in the perspective of game theory) between alternative uses of scarce means and resources. In contrast, the 'substantive' (material) meaning focuses mainly on investigating how people support themselves and engage in economic practices within their social and natural environment. Three decades later, Marshall Sahlins (1930–2021), in his influential book *Stone Age Economics* (1972), decisively sided with substantivism, asserting that economic life is shaped by cultural rules governing the production and distribution of goods. Hence, understanding social systems must begin with anthropological and cultural principles, rather than the assumption that economy is driven by independently acting, 'economically rational' individuals.

<sup>35</sup> Sahlins emphasized in his methodological postulates the conjunction of history and anthropology, contributing to the development of economic and cultural anthropology by conceptualizing and practicing them as historical sciences, particularly in the context of economic, social, and cultural history. In the work *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976), he makes the problem of historical transformation the central issue, developing the concept of structure of the conjuncture in order to address the dynamics of social change, whose driving factor consists of complex conjunctures of diverse forces. He also addressed the crucial issue of subjectivity and *agency to make history*, which is significant in the current *people's history turn*, as well as the concept of mythopraxis (as social behaviors that involve incorporating concepts and behavioral patterns drawn from myths into everyday life), and in this context discussed the problem of *indigenous* peoples and cultures developed

by the concept of a *subsistence economy*<sup>36</sup>. In this context, considering the first harbinger of new *people's history turn* in the works of Jacek Kochanowicz<sup>37</sup>, the concept of moral economy within resistance studies (following J.C. Scott's line) cannot be neglected, as it continues to be referenced by contemporary scholars such as Michał Rauszer and Adam Leszczyński. A more distinct pattern thus emerges, showing, on the one hand, how *people's history turn* in Polish historical research is embedded in a global context, and, on the other hand, highlighting its potentialization with respect to the politics of sensitivity. What tropes, then, are emerging in Polish *people's history turn* from this perspective?

### IN CONCLUSION

In this context, the question posed by the British historian Patrick Joyce in his lecture titled *Why remember peasants?*, delivered at the French Cultural Centre at the University of Warsaw in October 2023, becomes particularly relevant. Why, then, is historical memory and the narration

in his work *Islands of History* (1985). In doing so, Sahlins focused on studying the discursive ways in which different cultures understand and create history.

<sup>36</sup> *Subsistence economy*, in its original sense, refers to a model of economy (e.g., a peasant household within the feudal system, but also early forms of resource management, such as hunting, gathering, and agriculture) oriented toward self-sufficient survival in providing basic needs (food, clothing, and shelter), rather than producing commodities for the market (economic surplus serves only for exchange to acquire essential goods). In contemporary contexts, within industrialized and urbanized economies, the *subsistence* model may constitute a peripheral form of production for personal needs, serving as an alternative to and a form of resistance against the capitalist-market paradigm. In the framework of *histoire populaire*, this concept is invoked in *resistance studies* as a daily form of peasant resistance against the feudal system and the structural mechanisms of serfdom.

<sup>37</sup> Jacek Kochanowicz (1946–2014), a student and collaborator of Witold Kula, one of the pioneers of research on the problem of backwardness in Eastern European countries, focused on the economic history of peasants using the concept of *subsistence economy* in the context of considerations on daily forms of resistance, and thus indirectly on the theory of *moral economy*. His main monographic works in this area include: *Pańszczyźniane gospodarstwo chłopskie w Królestwie Polskim w I połowie XIX w.* (1981) and *Spór o teorię gospodarki chłopskiej. Gospodarstwo chłopskie w teorii ekonomii i w historii gospodarczej* (1992). See: P. Koryś, Jacek Kochanowicz (15 IV 1946–2 X 2014). *In memoriam*, "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 2016, 123, 2, pp. 405–409. It would be worthwhile to compare his approach with the research of J.C. Scott, particularly regarding the concept of *moral economy*, inherited from E.P. Thompson, in the context of *resistance studies* (focusing on daily peasant resistance). This comparison should also revisit the theory of hegemony (including mechanisms of domination and resistance within the feudal system).

of peasant lives in Europe necessary? A clue to the Author's response can be found in one of the sentences outlining the topic of the presentation: 'What the skeleton is to anatomy, the peasant is to history, its essential hidden support'. While it is uncertain how many historians would concur with this assertion, it is difficult to disagree with another statement: 'We do not easily remember peasants. The realities of their lives are a dim presence in the historical record. We catch only glimpses'<sup>38</sup>.

This memory, this history, and this historiography with its methodological challenges, are neither easy nor straightforward. Yet they are present in the Polish discourse, and it is no coincidence that they dominate the Polish genealogical line of people's history. It is necessary to revisit this uncomfortable question, which may be considered somewhat provocative in the context being discussed: why do Poles need such a history today, with its problematic critical (revisionist) potential for scientific research, even if justified in so many theoretical contexts? In the context of Polish historiography, it is easier to answer the question: how is history from below written and understood? In any case, the meta-scientific discourse around this issue is still to come. The first (possibly initiating) step in this direction was taken by A. Leszczyński in *An Essay on Method* at the end of his book *Ludowa historia Polski*; hence, this dissertation can serve as a starting point for this discussion. It is considered that the most significant issue here will not be the question of whether this work can be regarded as a synthesis of Polish history, nor the issue of circumventing the aporia of the elite perspective (to which an academic researcher belongs; this history in the field of scientific research is generally not written by someone from 'the people'). Rather, the issue worth highlighting in relation to the revisionist approach, the attempt at methodological self-reflection, and the ethical and deontological declaration is this: how the postulate of an alternative model of people's history of Poland is justified in the approach of *histoire vue d'en bas et non d'en haut* (history seen from below, not from above), and how this model is operationalized?

With respect to this matter, when examining methodological tropes for identifying patterns within Polish historical discourse, one of the more significant issues is the field of material culture history – a field comparatively underemphasized in relation to *people's history turn*.

Perhaps because it is precisely in this field that it is easier to counter the argument put forward by some historians (and advocates

<sup>38</sup> *Why remember peasants?*, event from the series *Czwartki z socjologią historyczną*, <https://okf.uw.edu.pl/czwartek-z-socjologia-historyczna-19-10-2023-patrick-joyce/> [access: 20.08.2025].

of the somewhat derogatory label 'vernacular history') that serious academic research cannot be conducted within the model of history from the bottom, due to the absence of primary sources, and therefore, basic research. One example of a response to this is the trend in British historiography toward the history of material culture and the everyday life of the lower classes<sup>39</sup>. Tomasz Gromelski, a historian from the University of Oxford, aptly summarizes this trend as follows:

'Fortunately for contemporary researchers, there were circumstances in the Middle Ages and later that prompted attention to even seemingly insignificant everyday objects. For example, the English legal system required inventorying of the property of criminals (including that of suicides) regardless of their social status, serving as a preliminary step toward the confiscation of goods. Thanks to the archiving of these lists, thousands of valuable documents have survived to this day. Another excellent source of information about non-luxury items and the living conditions of the common people is archaeology. In this regard, the English are particularly privileged. On July 19, 1545, the flagship of Henry VIII's war fleet sank in the Solent Strait. The "Mary Rose" went down rapidly and then settled into the muddy seabed, which naturally preserved the hull itself and thousands of various objects, from cannons to sailors' clothing, all of which were recovered hundreds of years later, in 1982. This precious resource is now intensively used in research. At Oxford, Cambridge, and the universities of Exeter and Birmingham, large-scale projects focusing on material culture and the daily lives of less affluent social strata are nearing completion'<sup>40</sup>.

The daily life of the lower social strata points to the persistent problem concerning the notion and category of 'the people' and the recurring question: 'what is the people' and 'who belongs to the people' – a question which, indeed, presuppose the existence of boundaries and principles of inclusion and exclusion. On the other hand, this is a question asked today in a democratic context; as the philosopher Judith Butler notes:

'That is one reason why democratic theorists have sought to underscore the temporal and open-ended character of "the people", often seeking to incorporate a check on the exclusionary logic by which any

<sup>39</sup> See: *Everyday Life and Fatal Hazard in Sixteenth-Century England* project website: <http://tudoraccidents.history.ox.ac.uk>; *Living Standards and Material Culture in English Households, 1300–1600* project website: <https://medievalobjects.wordpress.com> [access: 20.08.2025].

<sup>40</sup> T. Gromelski, *Tajemnicze kufry, czyli życie codzienne średniowiecznych plebejów*, "Polityka" 2023, no. 46 (3439), p. 72

designation proceeds. We have heard as well about the imaginary character of «the people», suggesting that any reference to the term risks a certain nationalism or utopianism, or that this makes «the people» into an indispensable empty signifier<sup>41</sup>.

In other words, it is about how the notion of the people becomes a signifier in historical discourse. It need not be understood solely along a spectrum ranging from a phantom, a phantasm, a statistical artifact (such as 'the bottom 90 percent of society'), to Nassim Taleb's fractal concept (meaningful at every scale, like the idea of 'the other'). It is therefore worthwhile to consider the question posed by J. Butler herself, which leads to a new performative trope in this debate, in the context of classical studies on crowds: 'what constitutes the people?'

[...] «the people» are not just produced by their vocalized claims, but also by the conditions of possibility of their appearance, and so within the visual field, and by their actions, and so as part of embodied performance. Those conditions of appearance include infrastructural conditions of staging as well as technological means of capturing and conveying a gathering, a coming together, in the visual and acoustic fields. The sound of what they speak, or the graphic sign of what is spoken, is as important to the activity of self-constitution in the public sphere (and the constitution of the public sphere as a condition of appearance) as any other means. If the people are constituted through a complex interplay of performance, image, acoustics, and all the various technologies engaged in those productions, then «media» is not just reporting who the people claim to be, but media has entered into the very definition of the people. It does not simply assist that definition, or make it possible; it is the stuff of self-constitution, the site of the hegemonic struggle over who «we» are<sup>42</sup>.

It is worth noting this particular trope in defining what might be considered a primary (undefinable) category, reflecting visual history approaches (q.v. 'visual field', e.g., local socio-cultural landscape) and related concepts, such as reading cultural landscapes, and Tina Campt's counter-intuitive logic (i.e., listening to images and silence, keeping silent and leaving things unmentioned). This also encompasses the methodologies of oral history, cognitive ethnography, and auto-ethnography, moving toward the reportage history and the perspective of engaged humanities closely aligned with the postulate of a politics of sensitivity.

<sup>41</sup> J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press Cambridge–Massachusetts–London 2015, p. 122.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 23–24.

This trope, however, must confront the inevitable aporia of the 'colonizing approach', just as the current *people's history turn* in Polish historical discourse is confronted with numerous external perspectives and theoretical-methodological models. The question arises: what can be done to ensure that the now-canonical slogan 'decolonizing methodology' does not become an empty signifier in this context? One approach would be to develop one's own theoretical model/perspective and, simultaneously, initiate meta-research on the current *people's history turn*; the concept of politics of sensitivity could also serve as a thread in this direction. In developing such a model, however, one would need to begin with fundamental historical-historiographical research, while also considering the potential of the narrative trope of philological conjecture (exemplified best by Olga Tokarczuk's *The Books of Jacob*) and the methodological trope of cliodynamics, particularly in the creation of data corpora for fundamental research.

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