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HOW POLES BECAME WHITE



KACPER POBŁOCKI

We're not people, we're just negroes.

This surprising phrase was recorded by the anthropologist Elizabeth Dunn during her fieldwork in the industrial town of Rzeszów in 1997. *Murzyn*—a common and often derogatory Polish word for a person of color, which Dunn rendered as “negro”—must have seemed to the Polish factory workers like an acceptable synonym for “nobody,” as they were “unaware how shocking such racist terminology was to a North American listener.” According to Dunn, the factory worker “did not mean to be as pejorative as the English term suggests,” but rather express the feeling that “the firm considered line workers to be ‘slaves’ or ‘unpersons’ in an abstract sense.” In Poland, Dunn argued, “race and ethnicity are completely naturalized.”¹

It was the “revolutionary” Second World War that turned Poland into an ethnically homogeneous country, as erstwhile minorities, most conspicuously the Jews, were systematically annihilated.² Since Poland itself was invaded and occupied by other whites (Germans and Russians, both in the nineteenth century and during World War II) and has never owned its own overseas colonies (despite desiring them on numerous occasions), Poland’s tumultuous history is often presented as if it occurred without the complications of race. Yet references to it keep cropping up. “Do not laugh at your father,” says one of the proverbs jotted down by another anthropologist in the 1980s, “or else you’ll become black.”³ Maybe then we should take such utterances seriously—what if there is an older “structure of feeling” behind this? What if some Poles, like the Irish and the Jews in America, *were* once “black”?⁴

Many people in the West believe that the name for Slavs derives from the Latin word for slave, *sclavus*. Although this is etymologically

unsubstantiated (“Slav” most probably originates from *slovo*, the word for “word,” used to denote people who speak one language), there is indeed substantial weight to the idea that slavery has been an important force constitutive of Polish history over the last thousand years. And yet, this experience of slavery in Poland is often ignored or downplayed, while Polish history is also race-washed into one of being uninterruptedly “white.” So these references to being black, which may at first seem incongruous and merely racist, also serve an important role: they point us back to the history of slavery in Poland. In other words, to understand how Poles became white, we must first acknowledge, and understand, the way in which some of them were once “black.”

Ideas tend to get “incarcerated” in places.⁵ One goes to India to study hierarchy, just as one would go to the West to study modern capitalism, and to the Caribbean to talk about race and slavery. Poland is where one focuses on anti-Semitism, but it would be the last place on Earth to look for race or vestiges of slavery. But slavery was not shackled to one locale. Bringing slavery into the realm of universal history was, after all, an important aspect of the Haitian revolution.⁶ This project is furthered primarily by giving voice to the “specters of the Atlantic”—embedding the history of Black Jacobins within the global narrative that usually excludes them.⁷ But the history of slavery goes beyond the Atlantic Triangle of Western Europe, West Africa, and the Americas, so everybody’s history—even Polish factory workers calling themselves black—is connected to it. It is important to analyze the universality of slavery for global history, to see how it is constitutive of identity and history even in places, like Poland, where nobody would expect slavery to be an important social force. We can appreciate this only once we disentangle the slavery-race knot, analyze the parallel—and often interdependent—trajectories of racism and slavery, and place both phenomena into a truly global context.

THE CURSE OF HAM

Why would laughing at one’s father make one black? This bizarre proverb is actually a direct reference to a relatively minor story in the *Old Testament*, one that became “the single greatest justification for black slavery for more than a thousand years.”⁸ In the *Book of Genesis*, we learn how one evening, having drunk too much wine, Noah fell asleep naked. When his sons saw Noah’s disgrace, they shunned the sight. Only one of them, Ham, was not ashamed of looking at his besotted and unclad father. When Noah woke up, he “knew what his youngest son had done unto him,” and cursed

Ham’s son, Canaan, to become “a slave of slaves.”⁹ Curiously, this same story has reemerged in a surprising number of historical contexts and locations all over the world. It proved handy in vindicating in Biblical exegesis the Iberian subjugation of Native Americans, or in driving the Celts out of Ireland. In Poland, too, it has a long lineage.

There is no reference to race in this original *Old Testament* version, but race somehow made its way into the Polish proverb. For centuries before the advent of European colonialism, the largest market for slaves was in the Islamic World. Yet, “despite the persistent inflow of African slaves into the Middle East for over a thousand years, there are no traces of their descendants anywhere constituting a separate community, which is perhaps a tribute to the social tolerance of the Islamic World in its ability to absorb ‘the other.’”¹⁰ Since Arabs were the ones buying slaves, and not “producing” them, they did not feel inclined to justify slavery. Similarly in ancient Rome, slavery was not framed as a consequence of original sin, but rather as a misfortune that could happen to *anyone*.¹¹ Slavery was not linked to race or any other form of cultural, physical, or ethnic identity. Nor was it linked directly to class, as even upper-class people—those who fell into debt or became war captives—could also be enslaved. In that sense, slavery had been universal.

Racism emerged as an ideology of the slave raiders and slave traders. It was Judaism and Christianity that were most successful in racializing slavery. Vernacular Hebrew versions of the story—in the form of Midrashic and Talmudic commentaries on the *Torah*—have direct references to race: “Since you have disabled me from doing ugly things in the blackness of night,” Noah was believed to have said, “Canaan’s children shall be born ugly and black! Moreover, because you twisted your head around to see my nakedness, your grandchildren’s hair shall be twisted into kinks, and their eyes red; again, because your lips jested at my misfortune, theirs shall swell.”¹² The Curse of Ham became a rhetorical means to racialize slavery.

The transformation of this story shows how fluid the border between race and class often is. In early modern Europe, the subject of racial lineage was so influential that figures as prominent as Voltaire and Robert Boyle felt compelled to have their say on it.¹³ Various (upper) classes invented family trees connecting back to ancient tribes and even further back to the family of Noah. In France and Germany, the elites claimed they were the progeny of warlike tribes such as Franks or Goths, who in turn were descended from Noah’s son, Japheth.¹⁴ Poland-Lithuania—Europe’s largest country in the sixteenth century—was no different. Its nobility argued that it constituted a different racial group from the Jews and the peasants, maintaining that “the

descendants of Shem prey, the descendants of Japheth fight, the descendants of Ham work.”¹⁵ By the seventeenth century, Polish-Lithuanian nobility were convinced they were a race apart, and that even their veins contained a different sort of blood—with traces of gold. (The corpus of their racial theories was called Sarmatism, an ideology based on the premise that the gentry, unlike the serfs, were directly heir to Japheth via the Iranian tribe of Sarmatians, and that this was the reason for both their cultural and physical distinctiveness.¹⁶) The global popularity of the Curse of Ham notwithstanding, it was only in Poland and Russia that it entered the vernacular. Over the years, the serfs, who were believed to be the progeny of Ham, were increasingly called *chamstwo*. Thus while in the Atlantic world race is often how class relations are mediated, in the Polish story, it was class that had the tendency to be expressed in racial terms.

Even in the late 1970s, Polish anthropologists record villagers saying, “We descend from Japheth,” while describing people in a different village as the progeny of Ham.¹⁷ Indeed, the “categorical opposition between *Pan* (lord) and *Cham* (plebs) lies at the foundation” of Polish national identity. *Chamstwo* not only “came to signify in the socialist period all rude and uncivilized behavior”¹⁸ but has also been employed for nearly five centuries to distinguish nobles from savages, true elites from aspiring ones, and the deserving from the undeserving. It was especially salient after 1945, when the descendants of the Polish nobility universalized the gentry culture as the dominant idiom for the national one. It is only at this late date, in fact, that most Poles “became white.”

This transformation of the “exotic Other” to a “stigmatized brother” has only been exacerbated under neoliberalism.¹⁹ While in everyday parlance one rarely encounters overt references to race, when interviewed by anthropologist Lonia Jakubowska the descendants of Polish nobility—who still occupy many of the top positions in Polish society—would openly differentiate between the people who “had” and who did not “have race.” Here, race does not refer to skin color, but “connotes a distinct demeanor, one that exudes confidence, competence, and authority. Although the phantom of mythical ancestry might still linger, this embodied sense of entitlement comes not from genetic endowment but from the socially inherited differences in wealth, prestige and power.” “Most gentry,” argues Jakubowska, “indeed still exert a commanding presence, aptly transforming ideology of superiority into bodily capital accumulated through bearing worn as if a second skin, which—armored by manners and the use of proper language—marks their claim to distinction.”²⁰ In other words, in Poland race has not become naturalized, as Dunn suggested, but culturalized.

Nowadays, one recognizes a descendant of Ham not by the way he or she looks or what family they were born into but by the way they behave.

DEBT AS THE ORIGINAL SIN

Was this spectacular spread of the Story of Ham a mere accident? Global simultaneity is seldom a coincidence.²¹ Around the same time *chamstwo* as a distinct class and race was born in Poland-Lithuania, at the other end of the nascent West-centered world, chattel slavery was being introduced.²² Islands such as Puerto Rico (first colonized in 1509 and never independent), Barbados (first colonized in 1627), Haiti and Jamaica (Columbus claimed the former in 1492 and the latter in 1494), despite their “absence of ruins,” are a veritable palimpsest of successive waves of colonial conquests from virtually all the European powers.²³ Hence, as the anthropologist Sydney Mintz argues, “once it can be acknowledged that the Caribbean colonialism is truly ancient, its history can help to give additional nuance to the term ‘postcolonial.’”²⁴

The West trudged on its path to industrial modernity *because* it developed “under-developed” peripheries that provided it with the raw materials it needed, as was famously argued by Immanuel Wallerstein.²⁵ For example, British workers transformed the cotton grown by slaves in America into textiles. England’s towns boomed because people no longer had to work in agriculture and could move to towns (where they would eat bread made from imported grain). They could subsist on this bread because they washed it down with sweetened tea. Without the “drug foods,” such as the Caribbean sugar that provided the additional and very cheap energy boost, Western ascent would be simply unthinkable.²⁶ Thus the three distinct social formations: wage labor in Britain, slavery in the Americas, and serfdom in Eastern Europe had a common origin and were mutually constitutive.²⁷

There is, however, a tendency to look at them as distinct social formations derived from different phases in an evolutionary scheme of development that proceeds from antiquity through feudalism to capitalism. Yet treating slavery, serfdom, and wage labor as tokens of “stages of development”²⁸ is both empirically inaccurate and grossly Eurocentric. Jack Goody devoted a lifetime to denouncing theories of Western exceptionalism. Europe was somehow unique, he insisted, but precisely for that reason, it cannot serve as the yardstick for global history. It did not invent, but actually “stole,” capitalism.²⁹ Feudalism is not a universal epoch preceding capitalism, but a quintessentially European predicament, precipitated by the nearly total collapse of the economy after 600 AD; other areas didn’t experience this meltdown

and developed much more gradually. The Renaissance was a miracle only in Europe, because it was when the West finally *caught up* with the Rest—and not, as Westerners tend to think, when the West invented science, philosophy, or humanism.³⁰ At the brink of the seventeenth century, Western Europe was “the least promising of the world’s civilizations... among the worst equipped to profit from the world’s ‘Age of Expansion’ which began with initiatives weighted in favor of China and Islam... with states of greater dynamism in Africa and the Americas than any visible in the Latin west.”³¹ Thus, even colonialism was not a Western invention—other civilizations began expanding much earlier, and they were initially more successful at it.

Caribbean sugar plantations represented “bountiful agricultural factories”³² already in the early seventeenth century, and all the elements of industrial modernity, such as the rational organization of the labor process, were present there from the very onset.³³ Although there were differences between a Caribbean slave and a British worker, neither “had much to offer productively but its labor. Both produced; both consumed little of what they produced. Both were divested of their tools.” Thus, Mintz argues, “they really form one group, differing only in how they fit into the worldwide division of labor others created for them.”³⁴

This of course does not mean they were all the same—quite the contrary. Western workers were the privileged underprivileged. The difference between slavery, wage labor, and serfdom was one of degree and not of kind. The common image we have of the “working class” is one of white, middle-aged men in denim overalls toiling in a factory or on a dock. But this picture is historically erroneous, because until the late nineteenth century, the West’s working class (as Eric Wolf insisted) was comprised largely of the most vulnerable groups—women, children, and immigrants.³⁵ This is why many of them spoke not of wage labor but of “wage slavery”—their nominal freedom was not much worth given the abject conditions they had to endure.³⁶ Even their freedom of movement was often merely theoretical. Because of the Poor Laws introduced in 1601 and abolished only in 1834, British workers were tethered to their parishes; they could not subsist without the relief they got from their local church.³⁷ Thus, they were not much “freer” than Eastern European serfs; their different status meant only that their mobility was limited by economic rather than strictly legal mechanisms.³⁸

Likewise, “there were many periods in the Caribbean past,” argues Mintz, “when slavery and other forms of labor coercion were hardly distinguishable.”³⁹ The main difference between serfdom and slavery was that serfs were *obliged* to work for their lord, while slaves were owned by their

master. In other words, chattel slaves were a financial asset.⁴⁰ What distinguished them from ancient slaves and also serfs was their entanglement in a wide and highly monetized international market.⁴¹ Yet many travelers to Eastern Europe would openly compare serfdom to slavery; both systems, in their eyes, were equally brutal and unjust.

People like Prince Stanisław Lubomirski, who owned a latifundium of 1,071 landed estates, making him the richest man in eighteenth-century Europe (he had a private army and a court, and his income was higher than that of the Polish king), was also a master of life and death to nearly a million serfs.⁴² He had also a vast army of administrators who, in the words of Daniel Defoe, “trampled the poorer people as dogs.” Serfs were not only denied a freedom of movement and choice over whom they would marry, but they could also be killed with impunity. Malnourished and overworked, the serfs indeed increasingly resembled a “different race”—sallow, skinny, and sluggish in movement (the prime “weapon of the weak,” to use James Scott’s formulation, of those performing coerced labor). In 1764, a French traveler reported with horror that the “penury of the serfs is beyond description. They sleep on straw together with the cattle, and their slovenliness has become legendary.”⁴³

Also legendary was the class brutality. Polish folklore is peppered with examples of often-arbitrary violence inflicted upon the serfs; the traditional figure of the devil bears an uncanny resemblance to a member of the gentry. Some nobles, particularly notorious for their cruelty, were also remembered by name. Marcin Mikołaj Radziwiłł, for example, was known for violently abusing serfs as he pleased. He was also said to have hanged a man whose only crime was that he sought to ingratiate himself to the magnate: the poor man kept following Radziwiłł so he could remain in his “field of vision.” When passing the sentence, Radziwiłł observed wryly: “Now thou shall always be in my field of vision,” as the gallows were located at the very center of his estate—reminding everybody that they could be hanged at will.⁴⁴

Still, serfdom ought not be dismissed as “backward.” “For more than two centuries,” argued Andro Linklater, “it turned out to be a far more dynamic way of owning the earth than private property.” Not surprisingly, it produced some of the wealthiest people in world history. It was also Poland’s most successful export to date. The future “Iron Kingdom” of Prussia and its Junker class learned from the Polish nobility the techniques of class rule and perfected these forms of direct coercion.⁴⁵ Likewise, by adopting serfdom, “the great serf empires of Austria and Russia would spread faster and further until in 1789 they enveloped all of central and eastern Europe, from Vienna to the Urals.”⁴⁶

While the abolitionist movement convinced many that slavery was inhuman, even the most progressive of commentators in Eastern Europe thought that serfs actually deserved their miserable lot.⁴⁷ In the 1860s, when some four million slaves were emancipated in the Americas, forty-seven million Eastern European serfs were also freed. Yet serf liberation was actually not about freeing people from being moored to the land, but rather freeing land from the people, so it could be put on the market. The terms of a buy-out offered to former serfs were so harsh that many fell into a spiral of debt. The freedom they gained was thus very bitter, as in many cases they experienced an actual degradation in status.⁴⁸ Little wonder the Polish underclass believed that system only *really* ended when the communists abolished agricultural latifundia in 1944.⁴⁹

If serfdom and slavery are more modern than the standard evolutionary schemes would have it, wage labor, on the other hand, is much more ancient than one would often assume. Indeed, wage labor can actually be seen as a *modification* of slavery, the most ancient of humanity's economic institutions. As David Graeber puts it: "Most of our contemporary language of social justice, our way of speaking of human bondage and emancipation, continues to echo ancient arguments about debt." In those times, to be "free" meant essentially to not be a slave. Slaves were traditionally war captives, so they were considered *socially* dead. (The groups that lost them even organized funerals.) Hence "the English word 'free' is derived from a German root meaning 'friend', since to be free meant to be able to make friends, to keep promises, to live within a community." When one became a slave, one died socially, and was reborn as an object. The freedom of slaves was bought and sold, the freedom of serfs was extracted, and the freedom we possess, we rent out. After all, a wage-labor contract is "an agreement between equals in which both agree that once one of them punches the time clock, they won't be equals any more."⁵⁰ Nowadays we are free inasmuch as we can freely suspend our freedom. We cast ourselves as *both* master and slave: Owners of our own bodies, we also must sell them on a daily basis.

The first slaves in human history were recruited not only from groups of war captives but also from the class of debtors. The institution of debt is at least 5,000 years old and *predates* money. The great thing about bullion is that it is mobile: it can be given, taken, and transported. Coins first appeared around 600 BC in the Middle East, India, and China simultaneously and were born from war—soldiers (not factory workers) were the first wage earners in history. As they plundered temples and houses of the rich, precious metals were "placed in the hands of ordinary people ... broken into tinier pieces, and began to be used in everyday transactions." Money

is thus, as Graeber puts it, a solution to the "debt problem," namely, when ordinary people refuse to carry an abstract burden that has been imposed upon them.⁵¹

Debt, which dominates in times of peace and not war, is a relationship of trust. It is based on the idea that it is immoral not to pay one's dues. Thus "there is a connection between money (German *Geld*), indemnity or sacrifice (Old English *Geild*), tax (Gothic *Gild*) and, of course, guilt."⁵² Since creditor and debtor are at first equals (they freely agree to engage in the transaction), if the former "cannot do what it takes to restore herself to equality [i.e. to pay back], there is obviously something wrong with her; it must be her fault." Debt is thus "an exchange that has not been brought to completion."⁵³ In order for this incompleteness to function, this relationship has to be anchored in something both perennial and extra-economic. In order to perpetuate actual inequality and coercion via formally free and equal transactions, debt therefore needs to have its "original sin." This is why it often operates via racial theories such as the Curse of Ham. These theories take on different guises, just as the institution of slavery has been modified in different times and different places, despite its universal and very ancient core.

A THOUSAND YEARS OF SLAVERY

But we can delve even deeper into the netherworlds of Polish history. The genesis of slavery in Poland actually predates racial theories vindicating social subjugation and economic debasement. The Polish word for a black person, *murzyn* actually has the same root as the English word "Moor," or a North African Muslim. In this, it is a witness to perhaps the most ancient of the relationships that tie Poland to the rest of the world. The system eclipsed by serfdom in the sixteenth century was not feudalism—unlike in the West, there were no large agricultural estates in Poland in the Middle Ages. Instead, there was a dual economy based partly on free peasants and partly on what the historian Karol Modzelewski dubbed "state slavery." These slaves were the exclusive property of the king. Very few of them worked in agriculture. Instead, they worked in over forty different trades—ranging from baking and winemaking, through falconry, net-making, and dog-breeding, to shipbuilding and coal-mining—and each slave-based settlement specialized in a particular one. Still today, there are over 600 village or town names in Poland that refer to these specializations.

Yet the scale of this system was larger than that. "If the King granted slaves to his allies such as the Church by the hundreds," writes

Modzelewski, “he must have owned them by the thousands.”⁵⁴ The slave-baker did not serve the king by coming to work at his court; instead, the king travelled to him. The king had at least three main residences and a dozen minor ones, and he spent his time by moving his court between them, so over the course of a year, he would pass by each settlement he owned, collecting his dues from each. The very first Polish state, established between the tenth and twelfth centuries, was a giant network of slave-based settlements that all together constituted yet another entity on the slavery/serfdom/wage labor continuum. Unlike slaves in ancient Rome, the Polish variety did not work in agriculture but had very specialized—one could even say “urban”—trades, the Polish state resembled in a way a giant, sprawling city, except that its inhabitants were scattered spatially and the king was the only link among them. And, of course, these specialist workers did not receive wages.

How did this system come about? For centuries, the capture and trade of slaves had been Europe’s most profitable economic endeavor: “From the southern Mediterranean, the northern shore and its hinterland appeared in the ninth century as a vast arc of slave supply.”⁵⁵ This pertained to *all* the northern tribes, from the Celts via the Germans to the Slavs. When “the first crusade took large numbers of westerners to Constantinople for the first time, they were regarded by the urbanite inhabitants of the ‘Second Rome’ with awe inspired by savagery.” Their description, jotted down by the emperor’s daughter, could just as easily have been found amongst the writings quoted in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. She described Western barbarians as sensual and visceral, both loathsome and somehow attractive—crafty, venal, and arrogant noble savages who were “a slave to no man” but also “marvelous to the eyes.”⁵⁶ They were free because they specialized in enslaving others and peddling them to the Islamic World.

Prague was at the time home to Europe’s biggest slave emporium, and the major slave trade route went from there via Kraków to the Dnieper River (in today’s Ukraine) and down to Constantinople.⁵⁷ Archeologists have found over 200,000 Islamic coins in Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe—many of them cut into pieces, which means that they “probably circulated as the currency for everyday transactions.” Interestingly, around 975 AD, due to “geopolitical shifts in Central Asia,” their steady flow to Eastern Europe dried up.⁵⁸ Was it, again, merely a coincidence? Around this same time, some Slavic slave raiders started to build the very first Polish state and to mint their own coins. Did they realize that instead of selling war captives they could keep them for expanding their power at home? We do not know this for certain. But slaves were also those who fell into debt, so

we can assume that it was a matter of time before some of the more astute slave raiders realized that they could keep free peasants in check and tell them to pay taxes by threatening them with enslavement. The willingness with which freeholders aided the king in capturing runaway slaves is a good indicator of the disciplinary power the institution of slavery had over the “free” population.⁵⁹

How many future “sons of Ham” were recruited from the grandchildren of slaves? That is hard to say. Did Poland “invent” serfdom in the sixteenth century because its elites already had extensive experience in organizing another, older form of coerced labor? That is also impossible to establish conclusively. But we can ascertain that while in the Atlantic world, class undergirds racial relations, in Poland the history of class has also, in a very different way, been entangled with ideas about race. Moreover, slavery was constitutive of Polish society *before* some of the Poles “became black”—that is, before the birth of *chamstwo*.

Curiously, one of the last meanings of the word *murzyn* is “ghostwriter.” Is this another accident? Maybe this is also what Dunn’s interviewees were unwittingly relaying to us: the institution of slavery—in its many guises, including the modern ones—has ghostwritten Poland’s history for the last thousand years. Like everywhere else, actually.

Notes

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