



SPRAWOZDANIE Z KONFERENCJI

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The Postcolonial Perspective in the Study of Polish History: Concluding Remarks**

Abstract

The article provides a synopsis of the main themes of the conference “The Postcolonial Perspective in the Study of Polish History: Benefits, Challenges, Potential,” which took place at the University of the National Education Commission in Kraków on October 23–25, 2024. It assesses the presentations against research agenda as set out by the keynote presentation of Lenny A. Ureña Valerio. The agenda outlined four key areas of development for the postcolonial perspective in Polish history: (1) histories of migration; (2) environmental history; (3) miscegenation and the limits of Polish homogeneity; and (4) intersectionality incorporating race, gender, and class. The article argues that while the conference did partially answer the research agenda, it did not do so fully, and that there remains scope for further development and refining of the postcolonial perspective in Polish history. This includes the need to recognize the limits of the approach.

Keywords: postcolonial, Polish history, migration, miscegenation, intersectionality

Słowa kluczowe: postkolonialny, polska historia, migracja, krzyżowanie ras, interseksjonalność

I would like to thank Professor Piotr Puchalski for inviting me to attend this invigorating conference in the beautiful city of Kraków. It was a challenging task to provide concluding remarks to capture the remarkable diversity and richness of the papers presented and the discussions they have generated over the past two and a half days. This richness is an important indication of the generative potential of the postcolonial approach and the resonances it has

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** This research was presented at the international academic conference “The Postcolonial Perspective in the Study of Polish History: Benefits, Challenges, Potential,” which took place at the University of the National Education Commission in Kraków on October 23–25, 2024 and was financed via the ID-UB-05 Excellent Impact program.

within Poland and more globally. While initially contested, the postcolonial framework has become generally accepted in Poland. The agenda, therefore, has shifted to how best to apply and advance this framework, as well as to demarcate its limits. It seems to me that one of the important roles of this conference has been its systematic and sustained approach to the framework and the questions raised by some of the presentations and subsequent discussions. Undergirding this exercise is a much older historical commitment to comparative histories. The emerging consensus is that comparison has clear historical value when approached with careful nuance and contextual sensitivity.

This exercise in comparison, of course, traces back to the beginnings of historical thinking, whether in dominant Western, Chinese, or Islamic approaches, as Daniel Woolf elaborates.¹ Comparison has been central to challenging the exceptionalist paradigms that underpin many nationalist historiographies, as the eminent American historian George Fredrickson shows.² The growing globality of academia, which reached its apogee in the global history framework, has facilitated such comparisons. It is now being challenged by the resurgence of nationalism and the conscious re-embrace of nationalist myths by governments, voters, and sympathetic intellectuals around the world.³ Comparative approaches rest on the assumption that nations must be understood in context and that human experiences can be comparable. Writing of the comparison of Chinese and Western historiographies, Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer reflected in 2005 how:

As historical memory substantially contributes to the shaping of human beings' identity – the identity of individuals as well as of communities and nations – such an intercultural dialogue naturally moves beyond the narrowly circumscribed arena of academic studies. It converges with a wider intercultural discourse which is unanimously being advocated to avoid the much-discussed “clash of civilizations”.⁴

My journey into comparative history began with my doctoral studies at the University of Sussex and later culminated in a book that examined partnerships between black and white anti-apartheid activists within South Africa during the 1970s. It sought to contextualize the Black Consciousness Movement, most famously epitomized by Steve Biko, not only in global terms but also in relation to other emancipatory movements.⁵ This project primarily looked westward, tracing connections between South Africa, the United States, South America,

¹ D. Woolf, *A Global History of History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011.

² G. Fredrickson, *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1997.

³ P. Skalniak, *Neo-Nationalism as a Reaction to Globalisation and Superstate*, “Studia Ethnologica Pragensia” 2023, no. 2, pp. 27–38.

⁴ H. Schmidt-Glintzer, *Preface*, [in:] *Historical Truth Historical Criticism and Ideology: Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture from a New Comparative Perspective*, eds. H. Schmidt-Glintzer, A. Mittag, J. Rüsen, Brill, Leiden 2005, p. xi.

⁵ I. Macqueen, *Black Consciousness and Progressive Movements under Apartheid*, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg 2018.

and Western Europe, noting their important contribution to South African activists' understanding of their own contexts. These connections complemented an organic intellectual tradition, best represented by the Africanism of Anton Lembede and Robert Sobukwe, as well as a dissident liberal tradition drawn upon by white activists.

Although initially conceived of as a work of comparative history, I became interested instead by the historical links between South Africa and Poland, emblematic of a euphoric "transition moment" from authoritarianism to democracy in the early 1990s. Some of these themes were examined in an article in *Cold War History*, which contrasted the enthusiastic reception of the miniseries *Shaka Zulu* in Poland with the critique and protests it provoked in the United States.⁶ Following the commentary of Lewis Nkosi, the South African novelist who taught African literature at the University of Warsaw in the 1980s,⁷ I argued that Polish enthusiasm for the iconic African hero was conditioned by Poland's own experience of colonization, and that, conversely, its limited direct links to Africa muted its ability to "read" the adroit public relations maneuvering of the apartheid regime's global public relations campaign. More recently, in a paper with Adam Kochajkiewicz of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), we examined the experiences of Patrick Mabinda, a little-known South African exile in Poland during the 1980s, who became the subject of a study by South African filmmaker, Beverly Marcus, studying at the Łódź film school.⁸ What emerged from both papers was the tensions and mutual resonances between the societies, which have been a significant theme of this conference. This conference has been instrumental in complicating the view of Poland's exceptional status as a European country without colonies. The papers presented have instead demonstrated the multileveled impact of colonial ideas and goods on Polish society and their multivalent presence in popular culture and intellectual thought, rendering the view of Poland's exceptional status as a European country without a colonial history problematic.

It is fitting to begin with the keynote address of Lenny A. Ureña Valerio as a way of framing these 36 papers, authored by contributors from eleven countries and five continents. As Ureña Valerio outlined, four areas of development can be proposed to advance the postcolonial perspective in the study of Polish history. These include exploring histories of (1) migration; (2) environmental concerns; (3) miscegenation and questioning of Polish homogeneity; and (4) the need for intersectional perspectives that incorporate race, gender, and class into this analysis. The vibrancy and breadth of papers presented and the questions and discussions they generated indicate a partial addressing of these areas of development but also set the agenda for an ongoing scholarly project. Thus, it seems unlikely that this conference will represent the final word on the

⁶ Eadem, *Shaka Zulu in the Polish People's Republic (PRL): Exploring South African-Polish Links in the Late Cold War*, "Cold War History" 2022, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 265–286.

⁷ L. Nkosi, *Letter from Warsaw*, "West Africa" 24 April 1989, pp. 632–633.

⁸ I. Macqueen, A. Kochajkiewicz, *South African exile in the Polish People's Republic (PRL) in the 1980s: The experiences of Patrick Mabinda and Beverley Marcus*, (in press).

postcolonial perspective and that the approach has not yet lost its intellectual energy, although as noted, some have begun to question where the limits of this perspective lie. In this sense, some of the discussions and debates on post-imperial or post-colonial viewpoints are significant, particularly evident in the provocations of Jerzy Lazor and the presentation by Keely Stauter-Halsted. The need for precise definitions and reflective archaeologies of the concepts within intellectual histories was flagged as particularly relevant for drawing these distinctions. Careful contextualization along with an openness to applying theory, exploring comparisons, and looking for resonances across case studies has yielded rich historical perspectives. Many papers consciously, and in some cases openly, connected the past with the present, which John Tosh has famously characterized, citing Carl Schorske, as “thinking with history” rather than “thinking about history.”⁹

Important themes emerged, which can be grouped in geographical terms. Firstly, the applicability of a postcolonial framework to Polish entanglements with the Eastern territories – especially Ukraine – which included Karina Gaibulina’s study of Polish “ethnographers” in Siberia and the perceptions of Ukrainian nationalists towards Polish power, as elaborated by Elżbieta Kwiecińska. Here, the question of Poles as both subjects and agents of colonialism was key. The significance of the broader civilizing mission as a beguiling allure for Polish elites was also a notable theme.

Secondly, the papers demonstrated the importance of a postcolonial lens for understanding Poland’s experiences of domination within its shifting borders. Colonialism was also analyzed as a trope that Poland engaged with in its efforts on the world stage, as Piotr Puchalski has convincingly documented. This extended to contestations with what Keely Stauter-Halsted described as the “residue of empire” as a new state was founded. As Łukasz Zaremba has shown, the influence of blackface in Poland reflects the impact of colonialism and racism on Polish society. In contrast, Anna Konieczna focused on the significance of the translations of anti-apartheid South African novels and demonstrated how their translations shed light on Poland’s own internal tensions.

Thirdly, the papers demonstrated the importance of the postcolonial perspective in understanding the complicity and participation of Poles in the Empire, both as subjects and agents, whether in Africa, South America, or Asia. Michał Lubina’s analysis of the travelogue by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński revealed the value of such sources. Marta Grzechnik’s account of the Maritime and River/Colonial League’s approach to the tropics provides possible leads towards environmental awareness. This theme also appeared in Aleksandra Kaye’s discussion of Polish agency and complicity in global power dynamics as part of their involvement in the colonization of Latin America. Rhuan Targino Zaleski Trindade drew attention to the perceived threat of Polishness, which stood in tension with Brazil’s internal colonization of its indigenous communities. In this regard, Michał Maciejewski’s work provides an impor-

⁹ J. Tosh, *Why History Matters*, Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills 2008.

tant counter by examining the Polish anticolonial rhetoric in response to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, as does Dorota Kołodziejczyk in her assessment of London's *Wiadomości*. The conference was significant in adding depth and nuance to questions of Polish agency and introduced a wide range of historical actors – including travel writers, anthropologists, businessmen, and even shopkeepers, as explored in Jawad Daheur's paper on the colonial shops – as well as questions of space, as outlined by Wiktoria Tabak regarding alternative imaginaries in the theatre.

Lastly, the postcolonial lens was used to understand Polish diplomacy and relations in the Cold War, as evidenced by the emergence of “Polish-Vietnamese connections.” The generative possibilities of the perspective included Thục Linh Nguyễn Vũ's call for a “need for new periodization of Polish history” informed by experiences broadly termed postcolonial and the insight of the “experience of total war as an important connection between Poland and Vietnam”. This presentation also began to address the topic of miscegenation. Poland's efforts to engage with Africa during the Cold War were also discussed in the case study by João Fusco Ribeiro. In addition, as outlined by Katja Castrick-Naumann, Poland and Eastern European countries played significant roles in broader efforts to establish nuclear weapon-free zones. The migration of Poles alongside processes of decolonization and reconstitution of communities around the world can also be recognized here. This was documented by Josef Butler in his examination of the relationships between Polish refugees and the so-called Windrush generation, highlighting the Poles' ability to utilize their whiteness as a basis for societal acceptance in postwar Britain.

In addition to these broad categories, the postcolonial perspective has demonstrated its capacity to extend into discussions regarding the applicability of a settler colonial framework – whether to Holocaust Studies, as examined by Rachel O'Sullivan, or to the experiences of Polish immigration in Western Europe, as a means of critically engaging with the heritage of European socialist dictatorships, or to engage more deeply with coloniality itself, as presented by Alexis Angelou on the problem posed by the uncritical application of Western knowledge.

In response to the concerns regarding intersectionality raised by Ureña Valerio, the questions surrounding the disruptive potential of class and gender were addressed. In this context, the paper by Jan Wasiewicz was important in demonstrating the relevance of the Peasant Party's critique of colonialism as a panacea for Poland's “agrarian problem.” The issue of class was also reflected in a provocative question by Patryk Labuda concerning the status of the works of communist-era scholars, which are supposedly irrevocably tainted by the ideological outlook of their time, and whether this could serve as a fruitful resource for enriching the postcolonial paradigm.

What has been overlooked? The voices of oppositional thinkers, such as those associated with the *Solidarność* movement and its forerunners, have been scarcely mentioned. Questions surrounding definitions of freedom and their theorization are potential areas for exploration. Peter Betts, James Mark, Ides-

bald Goddeeris, and Kim Christiaens have illustrated how solidarity efforts by Eastern Bloc regimes before 1989 were at odds with a “white resentment’ at the global recognition afforded to the anti-apartheid movement” that could “drown out their own regional struggle.”¹⁰ Such a focus raises questions about the comparability of solidarity and postcolonialism, and its historical limits.

The challenge of thinking in terms of gender has also not been explored in sufficient detail, although some speakers did briefly allude to it. The contribution of religious fraternities to empire was addressed by Maria Rhode, but this is surely another fruitful area for further study. One example is the involvement of Trappist monks – many of them Polish – at the Mariannhill Monastery. Described by Joy Brain as “the largest abbey in the world” in 1898,¹¹ its school trained a generation of African intellectuals, as Bhekizizwe Peterson has shown. It became incidentally the alma mater of Steve Biko, the iconic leader of the Black Consciousness Movement.¹² For these and many other areas of study, it is possible to say that the postcolonial approach has not yet been exhausted, although the question of its limits has been an important theme.

In conclusion, I would like once again to thank Piotr Puchalski for the kind invitation and Michał Maciejewski for the excellent organization. The presentations, discussions, collaborations, and networks established or strengthened here will likely serve as the impetus for new research – research that moves the debates and discussions beyond the narrow trenches of established national histories and instead embraces connected histories that remain grounded in historicist values.

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¹¹ J. Brain, *Mariannhill Monastery, 1882–1982*, “New Contree” 1983, no. 13, pp. 1–5.

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