

Family, Taboo and Communism in Poland, 1956–1989. Polish Studies – Transdisciplinary Perspectives 36. By Barbara Klich-Kluczevska. Berlin: Peter Lang Verlag, 2021. 264 pp.

Most of the secondary literature on the former Soviet Bloc and communism maintains that the postwar period brought about radical change compared to the interwar period. *Family, Taboo and Communism in Poland*, however, takes a different position. Focusing on a single aspect of social history, it proposes that the continuity of the traditional family model was prevalent, despite the modernizing endeavors imported from the Soviet Union. This volume is the English translation of Barbara Klich-Kluczevska's habilitation thesis “Rodzina, tabu i komunizm w Polsce (1956–1989),”¹ in which she explored the concepts of family and taboo in a more comprehensive sense and their intersections, for instance in cases of unmarried mothers, divorce, family violence, and abortion in communist Poland. Based on archival materials (court and police files), private sources (letters, life writings), popular culture (films), and an examination of secondary sources (mainly scholarship in sociology), Klich-Kluczevska concentrates on the institutions and psychology of social control and the subjective perspectives of “lived history.” I offer here a brief summary of this important volume on the history of the Polish family, which challenges the discontinuity narrative concerning communist societies by focusing on under-researched taboo subjects, such as single motherhood, divorce, domestic violence, and abortion.

Using the methodology of “anthropological history”² in the first chapter, Klich-Kluczevska follows the evolution of taboo concepts and argues for a modernized interpretation based on the works of twentieth-century British social anthropologists (Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, Mary Douglas) as a research category and an informational tool for “socially designating what does not fall in the line with the prevailing structure” (p.18). Taboo is understood as a consensus and a means of organizing social order via the examination of public discourses. It can be an indicator of social change or the lack of social change. However, the observed phenomena can scarcely be taken as taboos in the sense of something that needs to be silenced. Rather, they were seen simply as immoral or socially

1 Published in 2015. https://ruj.uj.edu.pl/xmlui/bitstream/handle/item/35028/klich-kluczevska_rodzina_tabu_i_komunizm_w_Polsce_2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (Last accessed on August 3, 2022)

2 See Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, and Dobrochna Kalwa, eds., *From Mentalités to Anthropological History: Theory and Methods*, Krakow: Towarzystwo Wydawnicze “Historia Iagellonica,” 2012.

unacceptable actions, and it is therefore doubtful that this framework adds a significantly novel perspective.

Chapter two provides a general picture of postwar Polish sociology, with presentations of the most influential schools (Poznań, Lublin, Cracow) and scholars (Zbigniew Tyszka, Jan Turowski, Danuta Markowska, Barbara Łobodzińska) and their relationships to the communist state. As was the case in other Eastern European countries, sociology in Poland was supervised by the state, and from the 1970s on, family sociology followed a grand narrative of crisis and change. Klich-Kluczevska challenges ideas adopted from American sociology, according to which the modern nuclear family became the norm, and she notes that the traditional mentality and conception of the family proved remarkably durable, despite industrialization and urbanization. She also calls attention to “schizophrenia in the sociological studies.” The family is cast in this scholarship either as a monotypic, ideal social unit with the help of which communism could be built or as a form of deviance associated with domestic violence and alcoholism. While the urban model of the nuclear family with separate households appears to be a model never adopted by most of the population, the Nowa Huta research also set up an idealized, homogenized picture of rural society. This chapter formulates questions concerning representativeness and the dilemmas of the fragmented historical knowledge by the examples of knowledge production in communist Poland. It seeks, moreover, to address lacunae in the secondary literature by deliberately focusing on marginalized research topics and the work of (mostly female) academics who are more likely to be omitted from the history of science.

The next chapter begins with an excerpt from a radio broadcast on single motherhood as a social problem in the 1980s. Here, the crisis narrative dominates the discourse. Unmarried mothers were frequently compelled to migrate from rural to urban environments, creating a social burden and moral crisis for the state. Regarding social security, Klich-Kluczevska offers a hybrid model in which the family turns out to be responsible for the upbringing and education of children, not the socialist state. The chapter also includes statistical data on single mothers and children born out of wedlock, suggesting concerns about visibility and the credibility of these data. The elimination, in the terminology, of the status of “illegitimate” as a term referring to children born out of wedlock is presented as a political measure rather than as a step in support of women’s social emancipation. In 1946, women outnumbered men by more than two million in Poland, but the postwar “matriarchy” did not fundamentally change

gender roles, and motherhood remained the primary role for women (pp.87–88). Klich-Kluczevska contends that there was no real breakthrough in terms of women's social roles.

The most convincing part of the book is the fourth chapter, which examines divorce. It opens with the study of an educational film from 1975. The legislative changes from the interwar period up to the communist divorce law are summarized, offering a broader historical perspective on divorce in modern Poland. The narrative of crisis and criminality also defines the breaking of family bonds, like all other matters characterized as “deviance.” However, the statistical data reveals that the number of divorces in communist Poland was comparatively low compared to the other countries of the region, and there were significant differences in divorce rates in rural communities versus urban communities. It is important to take the mentality of the rural population into consideration to the extent that the sources permit, as a more nuanced understanding of this mentality could strengthen and enrich the continuity-narrative of mental patterns and further a more subtle grasp of the processes of knowledge and attitude transfers between cities and small settlements. Klich-Kluczevska maps the discourses on divorce in two frames. Until the 1970s, the annulment of marriage was characterized as a deviant act. This only changed in the second half of the socialist period.

In the next chapter, which addresses the issue of domestic violence, court and press documents are utilized to elaborate on the social acceptance of domestic violence. The widespread acceptance of abuse within the family raises the question of whether this abuse can be regarded as taboo or not. Klich-Kluczevska encounters many problematic points in this part, specifically, if violence as a means of addressing everyday conflicts is a socially acknowledged method, what do the available sources imply about “non-extreme” cases? The chapter opens with a case study involving the story of an eight-year-old girl who was abused by her parents, especially her stepmother. As this case makes clear, the line between socially tolerated methods of punishment and legally or socially condemned abuse is extremely thin. Moreover, the fact that the stepmother figures as the principal accused raises questions about the concepts of motherhood and the social images of cruel women concerning the normative discourses about the feminine nature. Klich-Kluczevska then outlines social imaginaries of physical violence in educational and legal discourses, with particular focus on corporal punishment in schools. Alcoholism appears as a facilitator of domestic violence, the victims of which were usually women and children, but extensive

alcohol consumption did not in itself explain family abuse. Reading the chapter, one might find also it problematic that the hierarchies underpinning domestic violence are not adequately emphasized in the analysis. The records on domestic violence at the end of the chapter are also presented in a relatively normative or stereotypical way. The case of a “lazy housewife” is implicitly framed on the spectrum of the socially accepted female roles but without any recognition of gendered hierarchy or the power relations of the couple. This part ends with an analysis of magazine correspondence about domestic violence and a short, thought-provoking subchapter on male victims of domestic violence.

The last chapter, which examines the issue of abortion, covers the period between 1948 and 1956, which does overlap neatly with the era specified in the book title. One might find this decision anomalous, since it is not explained convincingly by Klich-Kluczewska. She offers a case study of an illegal abortion from 1948 induced by a *babka* (abortionist). Though some remarks were made on the relationship between family planning and the Catholic church, the absence of the Church perspective is the most perceptible in this chapter. Particularly in the light of recent legal changes concerning abortion in Poland, it would have been progressive to present some of the recent scholarships on the subject.

Although Klich-Kluczewska refers to her scattered source base as a negative element, it could encourage a more complex interpretation of the socialist era. The corpus of secondary literature is likewise a valuable foundation, since these social theories are usually not handled as historical sources but as scientific data. Nevertheless, narratives such as letters to public institutions and life stories documented for journal competitions should not be mistaken for sources that reveal private thoughts, no matter how personal they might appear. Public narratives are always susceptible to influence by state narratives or are structured, whether deliberately or not, according to strategies which might give them agency to shape the events in favor of their authors. And these strategies are more likely to reflect state discourses on family life and its taboos than personal attitudes. Yet, the didactic nature of press narratives was only emphasized in chapter four in a discussion of the experiences of female divorcées.

This book is an impressive experiment aiming to discredit the social transformation myth of the family in communist Poland by examining several interlinked taboo phenomena within the (socialist) family. Alongside explicit comparisons of the interwar and the socialist periods, this volume offers implicit explorations of continuity and discontinuity by applying a long *durée* perspective. It challenges the concepts of Polish family sociology on the fundamental

transformation of traditional society. In light of Hungarian ethnographic data on informal social relationships connected to family life, it would be compelling to conduct comparative research in post-socialist countries, as the continuity of social patterns may well turn out to be a regional phenomenon. This book also foregrounds the intersections of private mentality and perceptions of gender roles in light of single motherhood, divorce, and domestic violence. Moreover, it stresses the importance of scientific knowledge production by female scholars in socialist Poland. Still, the far-reaching conclusions are based on a fragmented source base, as Klich-Kluczevska herself acknowledges (pp.24–28), and there are significant gaps in the analysis. The last two chapters do not fall in line with the premises of the book, so if it comes to taboo as understood by Klich-Kluczevska, it is rather to be discovered in phenomena connected to marriage: single motherhood and divorce. Social transformations, she contends, occurred to some extent, especially in cities, but (heterosexual) marriage as the foundation of the family and thus of Polish society remained a widely accepted part of the social imaginary. Though she is aware of the fractured nature of historical knowledge, the volume in all does not offer a comprehensive (counter)narrative about the Polish family between 1956 and 1989. This volume seems to follow the scientific transformations of Central European countries from gender studies to family studies, omitting, however, discussion of the political nature and criticism of the gender hierarchy from its study of the private sphere.

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