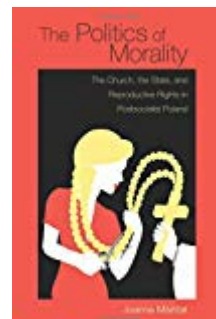


**Joanna Mishtal.** *The Politics of Morality: The Church, the State, and Reproductive Rights in Postsocialist Poland.* Polish and Polish American Studies Series. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015. 272 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8214-2139-0.



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*The Politics of Morality* by Joanna Mishtal provides insight into the complex negotiations between individuals and interest groups involved in discussions regarding abortion rights as well as the social cost of the Polish so-called abortion compromise of 1993, based on a very strict abortion law (with the exception of Ireland, Poland has the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe). The book is based on the premise that reproductive rights are at the heart of the practice of democracy and one of the tenets of liberalism. In Poland, as the author emphasizes and many students of Polish history and politics know, the debate about choices regarding individual sexuality and reproduction resembles a heavily entangled knot of politics and morality. One of the factors responsible for this is the fact that already in the post-socialist Poland of the early 1990s, the Catholic Church dominated the language of public debates regarding reproductive rights and health care of the nation, even if that meant pitching the rights of the nation against the ones of society.

One of the author's inspirations was a book by Carole Joffe, *Doctors of Conscience: The Struggle to Provide Abortion Before and After Roe v. Wade* (1995), which examines the time in the United States before abortion was legalized and in particular doctors' efforts to respond to their patients' needs through performing illegal abortions, providing backup medical services, and campaigning for the legalization of abortion. The voices of physicians included in Joffe's book inspired Mishtal to base her research on four distinct voices that she gathered through unstructured and semi-structured interviews and participant-observations of women of varied socioeconomic backgrounds, physicians, reproductive rights advocates, and clergy. The author takes us through various responses, strategies, and motivations that play out on a micro level, including the tools that clergy use to police and survey their followers; the strategies that advocacy organizations employ to help women; the interpretations of the situation by physicians; and women's responses, which often contest the legal, political,

and social order sanctioned by the government and the church.

The book begins with a discussion of historical context that accompanied a political struggle that began in Poland soon after the fall of communism and led to tightening of the abortion law in Poland in 1993. From this point forward, an abortion can be performed legally only in cases of a serious threat to the life or health of the pregnant woman; cases of rape or incest confirmed by a prosecutor; and cases in which prenatal tests, confirmed by two physicians, demonstrate that the fetus is irreversibly damaged. A woman seeking an abortion is also required to obtain counseling from a state-approved psychologist. A physician who performs an abortion in violation of the law may be subject to up to two years' imprisonment. Even Poland's entry into the European Union in 2004 did not change much in terms of these laws: separate treaties assured the separateness of the Polish position on abortion within the EU.

The new code triggered a surge of refusals to perform abortions among Catholic physicians, actions partially motivated by these doctors' religious convictions and partially by fear of breaking the law. It also triggered the emergence of underground abortion services (according to the author, addresses of places where abortions are performed can be easily found in local newspapers). As Mishtal attests, one of the doctors she interviewed summarized the situation by saying, "Let's just say that everything is possible" (p. 155). At the same time, while abortion flourishes underground, the Catholic Church teaches that abortion is a moral evil and sexuality and reproduction are inseparable. These teachings are not limited to the church sermons: the church remains active in its attempt to police women through various clerical obligations, which the author presents as tools of surveillance, such as confession, pastoral annual visits (*kolęda*), other face-to-face contacts, and/or premarital courses, during which priests have the opportunity to ask questions about reproductive

choices or express their versions of the only morally acceptable contraception methods. While striving to reach those who do not attend church regularly, the church attempts to respond to the dropping numbers of practicing Catholics. Interestingly, the confession manual allows priests to grant absolution to women who admit to abortion and show regret. The same confession manual presents the husband of a woman who has an abortion as an innocent bystander. "The man is sinned against, rather than sinning" (p. 125).

Polish women have adapted to the situation; according to the author, on the surface women agree with church doctrines and obey its norms regarding church weddings and baptism. And yet, despite the apparent accord between women and the church, Polish women are somehow coping with imposed limits and the church's expectations to have more children: the Polish birthrate is one of the lowest in Europe. Here lies one of the most important questions that Mishtal engages: how do women explain their reproductive decisions in light of the state and church's criticism and attempts to curtail apparent sexual and reproductive choices?

Women, as the author argues, developed what she calls their own unofficial biopolitics, which are essentially individualized and privatized responses to the official secular and religious restrictions. They managed to defy abortion law and maintained at least some of the freedoms over their reproductive rights. However, the consequence is political passivity. The author argues that overwhelmed by the alliance between the church and the state, the women's movement lost its language, which led to a halt of the evolution of the movement on the grassroots level. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that promote women's rights in Poland exist, but the majority of these groups are still severely underfunded. The lack of a developed women's consciousness also may be exacerbating serious social problems, such as anti-gender phobia, limited sex education,

and a rise in teen pregnancies despite the fact that the total fertility rate actually declined.

*The Politics of Morality* is a very informative book, which can serve well the needs of undergraduate and graduate students. The variety of voices as well as the richness of interviews and participant-observations will benefit students interested in current affairs in Poland. Interestingly, recent events in Poland prove that the relationships between the church, women, the state, and professionals are very dynamic, perhaps even more dynamic than the author suspects. In the fall of 2016, the right-wing organization Ordo Iuris proposed to seriously tighten the abortion law. The proposition was rejected, but the very possibility that the right-wing government could consider the change opened a new debate not only on the connection between reproductive rights and the liberal tenets of democracy but also on a short-sighted value of a compromise, which for years was justified with a claim that the solution was not ideal and yet satisfactory. Along with the new and very radical proposition, the center (and with it an understanding of a compromise) is moving to the right. However, this time the new proposition pushed the women to go onto the streets to protest in defense of their rights. What we observed was the increased mobilization of society against the laws that can trample the dignity and health of women. Despite the weakness of feminism and feminist consciousness, it is the women who are defending their democratic rights to dignity. These recent events constitute the subsequent chapters to the *Politics of Morality*, but these are certainly not the final chapters.

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