



Barbara Klich-Kluczewska. *Rodzina, tabu i komunizm w Polsce, 1956-1989.* Krakow: Libron, 2015. 296 pp. \$24.99, cloth, ISBN 978-83-65705-06-8.

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The latest publication of the prominent Polish historian Barbara Klich-Kluczewska, *Rodzina, tabu i komunizm w Polsce* (Family, taboo, and Communism in Poland), is another addition to the recent historiographical works dedicated to the history of private sphere, family, taboo, and violence in eastern Europe.[1] The book can be seen as a complement to the, equally methodologically advanced, work of Małgorzata Fidelis (*Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* [2010]). The latter analyzed the presence of women in the public sphere, mainly female wage employment outside the household, whereas Klich-Kluczewska aims at the private sphere. The book's structure is very clear. The methodological chapters on the studies of Polish sociologists and the recent research on taboo history precede the chapters devoted to the respective "taboos"—single mothers, divorce, physical violence, and abortion. The analyzed topics are backed up by an advanced discussion on the sources and a wide historical context.

Examining the question of taboo, Klich-Kluczewska refers to the theory advanced by Mary Douglas that connected taboo with pollution and disorder. However, somewhat in opposition to the anthropological view maintained by Douglas, Klich-Kluczewska explains invisibility of such phenomena as poverty and violence in the

Polish post-1945 discourses, pointing out not only tabooization but also, surprisingly, commonness and obviousness of the phenomena that resulted in the postwar erasure.

The issue of twentieth-century modernity, relevant in the recent historical literature, is also present in the book's agenda.[2] The Polish family is examined in comparison to the "western family," the 2+2 nuclear model, and emancipation of housewives. Following Béla Tomka's argument, Klich-Kluczewska wisely undermines the "East-West" division and the dominant Western perspective. Modernity was not necessarily democratic or progressive, and eastern Europe, aspiring to be "modern," was a notable example. Communist modernization evoked the nineteenth-century one, with the modern state imposing "modern law" on existing lifestyles. However, the way Klich-Kluczewska sees it, modernity was one of the forces that created taboo in Communism, not unlike conservatism of social groups, party elites, and experts: "some phenomena, perceived as harmful to the family's empowerment, were stigmatized twice, on the one hand as a sin towards morality, on the other, a sin towards modernity" (p. 264). The bureaucracy, for instance, striving for ideals of modernity, strengthened the exclusion of "backward" single mothers.

The main argument in this original book reads as follows: there was no revolutionary change in the private sphere. The period of 1956–89 can be seen as an interval between the end of World War II, the Stalinist revolution, and the capitalist transformation of the late twentieth century: “the period of evolution and social mediation of meanings,” as the author notices (pp. 22-23). For instance, the change in divorce rates was rather insignificant. The family alone was perceived in the context of bigger communities of nation and state, which significantly restricted modernization discourses and ideas. However, Klich-Kluczevska should have more carefully underlined the significant change in the discourse and state policies concerning the role of the family and its possible outcomes. Beginning in the early 1970s, in so-called Gierek’s decade, backlash determined social policy and expert views, not to mention the very perception of taboo.

Klich-Kluczevska carefully navigates between discourses of the time. Pointing out the diversity and ambiguity of politics in Communist Poland, she examines voices in courts, the press, state agencies, books, and the influential Catholic Church. Last but not least, she examines the voices of female workers, peasants, and white-collar workers. She notices, for example, that debates on divorce were indeed not polarized, as historians would expect conflicting ideas of the Communist authorities and the Catholic state, or of the modern state and conservative society. In the same vein, she questions the opposition of city versus country, for it could marginalize social heterogeneity and mobility of that time. Finally, she tends to avoid stigmatization, distancing herself from popular modern terms of “social pathology” and “deviation.” She is equally alert when drawing terms from the newest terminology.

Taboo shaped mundane experiences of women in Communism. Klich-Kluczevska demonstrates how single mothers rescued themselves by leaving their villages or accepting fixed marriages

in order to hide their premarital sexual activity. Contrary to the Soviet Union, in Poland moderate natalist policy made no improvement in the image of single mothers. In the excellent chapter on divorce, she explains how crucial the postwar change that made a civil divorce possible was for the private lives of Poles. At the same time, she points out the economic motivations that undermined women’s ability to file for divorce and the criminalization of divorce, a consequence of the Communist idealization of family. Writing about domestic violence, she consequently brings out permeation of culture of violence with the discourse of “modern family.” Since modernity forced the negotiation of socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, the lately condemned violence against women has increasingly belonged to the taboo.

With abortion trials as a useful example, Klich-Kluczevska demonstrates continuities in the prewar and postwar demographic concerns that encouraged politicians to raise the issue of female fertility as an extremely important matter. Decriminalization of abortion during the Polish Thaw (1956–57) changed everyday behaviors of many women. However, the abortion experience still belonged to the taboo sphere, and opinions of Poles on the topic were very diverse. It is disappointing that the chapter on abortion concludes too early; the narration stops unexpectedly at the Thaw. After all, the presence of legal abortion in the lives of Polish women under Communism was equally important. Interesting debates featuring Communist Party activists, the Catholic Church, the women’s press, and women’s organizations have continued throughout the next decades, also within the Solidarity movement in the 1980s, with a well-known finale: the restriction of the abortion law after the collapse of Communism in Poland.

To sum up, *Rodzina, tabu i komunizm w Polsce*, with its careful analyses, deep understanding of diverse sources, and unusual conclusions, is

a challenging read even for a scholar. In the end, it is worth the effort, for the book renders the problem of Communism in eastern Europe far more comprehensible in the context of modernity. The book by Klich-Kluczevska, an excellent writer, deserves a translation. English-speaking readers may like to broaden their knowledge in less popular topics, and would appreciate such a deep insight into the history of twentieth-century Poland.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, works dedicated to the German Democratic Republic: Donna Harsh, *Revenge of the Domestic: Women, the Family, and Communism in the German Democratic Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Paul Betts, *Within the Walls: Private Life in the German Democratic Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[2]. See, for example, the discussion of the AHR Roundtable, "Historians and the Question of 'Modernity,'" *The American Historical Review* 3 (2011): 631–751.

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