

**Review of Joanna Mishtal, *The Politics of Morality. The Church, the State, and Reproductive Rights in Postsocialist Poland* (Polish and Polish-American Studies Series), Ohio: Ohio University Press 2015, 258 pp., ISBN 978-0-8214-2140-6**

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In *The Politics of Morality*, the Polish American anthropologist Joanna Mishtal explores the impact of the Catholic Church on women's reproductive rights in postsocialist Poland (1989–2014). The book's main thesis is that the politics of reproduction launched during the transformation from state socialism to liberal democracy has been informed by a specific type of 'church-state "gender regime"' and is foundational for the Polish postsocialist state's edifice. The restrictive law on abortion, difficult access to contraception and inadequate sexual education are salient features of this politics, which has far-reaching consequences for women's lives. In this volume, the author compiles vast empirical material from extensive participant observation, health surveys, and numerous interviews with women, reproductive rights advocates, clergy, and health care providers. Her ethnographic findings are complemented with scholarship on Polish Church history, Polish economic, political and social history before and during the transformation, as well as with demographic analyses. Such an approach strengthens Mishtal's argument about the overpowering presence of the Church in Polish society by providing evidence from several social and political domains. Mishtal relies on the concept of 'moral governance,' built on the Foucauldian notion of governmentality, as a tool for interpreting the impressive amount of data she has collected in this book.

Although feminists and researchers have held the Church at least partially responsible for the decline of women's rights in Poland over the last two decades, Mishtal's critical intervention in this debate offers a compelling explanation of the link between the two. *The Politics of Morality* provides (a) a thorough account of the circumstances in which the Polish Church rose to political power, (b) explanations of the motives for this institution's strong focus on women's reproductive freedom, (c) analyses of the mechanisms that allow the Church to maintain its influence, and (d) an examination of the consequences of its gender politics on women's rights.

The opening chapters of the book provide an overview of several social and political developments that enabled the Church to gain power in the early 1990s. Of particular importance for this process, the author argues, was a new wave of moralization launched by the Church. It advocated for a 'return' to the conservative gender order and for familism as cornerstones of 'national purification.' Disciplining women's sexuality by restraining access to abortion and contraception became a major feature of the Catholic project of the state's moral rebirth. Religious discourse quickly came to serve the secular establishment by legitimizing the weakening legal and economic position of women during the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s. Although the introductory parts of Mishtal's book rehash past arguments and conclusions, they provide a comprehensive introduction to the history of postsocialist Poland for a non-specialist audience.

Mishtal's major contribution to secondary scholarship is her exploration of the strategies the Church employed in order to become an influential political actor capable of exercising moral influence irrespective of fluctuating political climate and the declining Catholic affiliation. Chapters two, three and four offer an image of the Polish Church's moral governance exercised through multilevel interdependent measures such as legal sanctions, social ostracism and individually internalized beliefs that guide professional and reproductive choices. One of the main strengths of *The Politics of Morality* lies in Mishtal's ability to give concrete examples of the workings of the Church's governance. In Chapter two Mishtal demonstrates how Catholic moralization, in combination with a sophisticated apparatus of intimidation, has informed the operation of the health care sector on an institutional level as well as on the level of individual doctors' choices of not delivering even lawful procedures to women. Furthermore, the author shows how the Church has managed to create a 'Catholic political habitus' internalized by politicians on the right and left alike. As a result, even under favorable political opportunity structures, policymakers have been unable to challenge what is called the compromise on the restrictive abortion law. In Chapter three Mishtal explains how the all-pervading moralizing discourse has hindered the emergence of the Polish women's movements and how it continues to inform the strategies of the reproductive rights advocates. In Chapter four the findings on the impact of the Church on the health care sector, on lawmaking and women's movements are complemented with an analysis of the strategies employed by the Church for disciplining women's sexuality and reproductive behaviors in personal interactions with regular, irregular, but also with non-church goers.

In contrast to the findings on the Church's powerful political mandate in postsocialist Poland, Chapters five and sixth disclose the presence of what the author calls the 'unofficial biopolitics'. Mishtal defines the latter as a myriad of highly successful individualized and privatized strategies used by Polish women to defy the state-Church's prohibitions in order to stay in control of their bodies. The author observes that the constricted parameters of 'morally proper' reproduction and the discourse on the primacy of motherhood for women have not resulted in either demographic growth, as expected by the state, or in the strengthening of the 'traditional family,' as envisioned by the Church. Rather, they have brought about one of the lowest birth rates in the world and a growing gap between the normative teachings of the Church and actual social practices. For Mishtal the current politics of reproduction demonstrates the overall condescending attitude of the Polish state towards its female citizens. The

effects of this politics cast a doubt over the quality of democratizing processes unfolding after 1989. To strengthen her point, the author contrasts the rapid decline of women's rights during the transformation toward liberal democracy with the progressive legal status of women and emancipatory opportunities during state socialism.

Despite the high quality of Mishtal's analyses, her assertion that the state unceasingly supports the Church and remains continuously unreceptive towards women's issues could benefit from further consideration. The Polish state in the 1990s and between 2008–2015 is not entirely the same entity. Although the restrictive law on abortion remained unchanged throughout these years, the launch of the Governmental Plenipotentiary Office for Equal Treatment (2008), legal changes pertaining to domestic violence (2010), the introduction of quota on the electoral lists (2011), the laws on paternity leaves (promoted as a gender equalizing measure, 2011) and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (2015) are examples of the state's changing attitude towards women's rights. Moreover, some of these laws have been passed despite the very strong criticism of the Church and the considerable mobilization of the Catholic constituency. In addition, between 2009 and 2015 Polish women's movements have expanded thanks to the emergence of the controversial Women's Congress, which managed to establish a working relationship with the state. It seems likely that the recent achievements of the Polish women's movements will vanish in the current hostile political climate. Nevertheless, they are worth examining even if they are temporary and their magnitude is not as vast as women's rights advocates expected.

Those interested in social phenomena at the intersection of gender and religion will find *The Politics of Morality* a thought-provoking addition to the ongoing debates on the impact of patriarchal religions on women's rights in liberal democracies. The author offers an in-depth analysis of how religiously motivated moral discourses turned into laws shape women's reproductive rights and access to health care, as well as state policies beyond reproductive issues. Mishtal's book is an excellently executed case study on the shaping of Polish liberalism by the political involvement of the Church, an involvement which has gendered consequences across the economic, the political, and the social spheres.