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I Think, I Feel, I Decide: The Polish Struggle for Reproductive Rights

(Adrianna Zabrzewska, Joshua K. Dubrow (Eds.), *Gender, Voice, and Violence in Poland: Women's Protests during the Pandemic*, Warsaw: IFiS PAN Publishers, 2021, 229 pages)

In 2016, the news of the Polish government's attempts to restrict reproductive rights and the subsequent strikes that were organized across Poland reverberated throughout Europe and the world. In October 2020, the ruling of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal finally posed further restrictions on these rights, making abortion in Poland illegal in almost all cases – including when a fetus has a severe and permanent disability or an incurable and/or life-threatening illness. In the midst of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, scenes from the protests that ensued were particularly poignant.

The open-source monograph *Gender, Voice, and Violence in Poland: Women's Protests during the Pandemic*, edited by Adrianna Zabrzewska and

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Joshua K. Dubrow (Zabrzewska & Dubrow, 2021a), chronicles through eighteen chapters the events that took place after the ruling. It takes a scholarly approach to the topic that is based in feminist theory, providing the reader with an overview of the actions taken by activists and political discussions on the issues of abortion access, protests, and police violence.

Structurally, the book is split into three parts. The first provides a timeline of the protests as well as the voices of the protesters. The second part represents an insight into the political debate that was ignited by the ruling and the subsequent protests. The third and final part is a collection of scholars' essays whose aim is to provide both a wider context to the ruling and the protests, as well as examples of how such events and social movements can be critically examined. While the first two sections' main function is to document the goings-on, the third section puts the events into perspective, explains how they came to be, and opens further questions.

In the introduction, the two editors state that "the aim of this sourcebook is to examine a momentous period in Poland's history through the presentation of a selection of voices on the 2020 protests in Poland that followed the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling on abortion" (Zabrzewska & Dubrow, 2021b, p. 11). Their hope is that the book will find "a wide variety of uses, including research, teaching, journalism, and activism" ("Preface", 2021, p. 7). This seems a likely outcome. The monograph represents an effective snapshot of a time and place as it is not only informative but also didactic. The open-source format also means it is widely accessible (a simple Google search retrieves several links which lead to pages offering the pdf for free), and the same can also be said of its contents. Although the third section consists of academic essays which have their own format and vocabulary because they are about this very real and important issue, as well as because of the corpus that came before them, it could be said that they are accessible to anyone with something at stake here, from academics to activists.

Before delving deeper into the many complexities of the events outlined in the monograph, it is important to understand the Polish context. Even before these most-recent developments, reproductive rights in Poland were quite restricted compared to most other European countries. The Act on Family Planning, Human Embryo Protection and Conditions for Legal Pregnancy Termination was passed in 1993, effectively banning abortion with three exceptions: if the pregnancy (1) poses a risk to the mother's life, (2) is the result of a crime, or (3) there is fetal impairment. Throughout the different texts contained in this monograph, this law is referred to as "the compromise" by both

the conservative ruling party and the more liberal-minded opposition, thus reflecting the common attitude that has been established in the course of the public debate since the early 1990s. However, looking at it from the perspectives of the European mainstream and the history of reproductive rights in Poland before 1993, it is hard to view it as anything but the most stringent and prohibitive reproductive policy. This legislation put Poland in the group of only a handful of European countries where abortion is illegal or severely restricted – along with Malta, the Vatican, Liechtenstein, San Marino, and Andorra. Then, on October 22, 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal outlawed abortion in cases of severe fetal defects; this is what the conservatives quoted throughout this monograph refer to as "eugenic abortion".

Both the 1993 law and the 2020 ruling are in stark contrast with the history of abortion access in Poland. In Chapter I, written by Natalia Zakrzewska and Joshua K. Dubrow, the authors address this important development in Polish history:

> There was little public debate on the matter of abortion before the fall of Communist rule and the transformation of the political system (Girard and Nowicka, 2002). The Communist system's policy made abortion widely accessible for women, free of charge, and available in public health care. Under Communist rule, termination of pregnancy was permitted in 1956 for social reasons, and in 1959 it was completely allowed and justified by law to protect the lives of women who would otherwise undergo unsafe procedures. Abortions were performed by national hospitals, free of charge. This egalitarian approach to reproductive rights was influenced by Marxist philosophy and Communist ideology that provided wide medical access. However, this promptly changed with the system transformation to modern capitalism. (Zakrzewska & Dubrow, 2021, pp. 24–25)

The transformation that the authors mention also included a strong shift towards Catholicism. As is evident from this monograph, it is impossible to discuss the issue of abortion access without referring to the stronghold that the Roman Catholic Church has on Polish society. In 2021, Reuters reported on the marked increase of young Poles cutting ties with the Church as a consequence of the Church's more blatant forays into the world of politics. The same article also highlighted the importance the Church held for Poles as "a beacon of freedom in Communist times", going on to say that "in 1989 when Communist rule ended, nearly 90% of Poles approved of the Church, according to the state-affiliated CBOS opinion poll". However, the current figures are at 41%, making them "the lowest since 1993", the year when an agreement between Warsaw and the Holy See was signed that outlined the relationship (Pawlak & Ptak, 2021). Nevertheless, these defections only confirm the point

made throughout the monograph that RCC is an influential actor in Polish politics, especially when it comes to the issues that triggered the protests during the pandemic (most prominently, reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights).

Chapter I provides a timeline of the apex of the protests, from October to December 2020. The authors use data provided by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data project (ACLED) to paint the timeline of the gatherings, as well as Our World in Data (OWiD) and other relevant sources to chart the course of the pandemic in those months. As expected, the pandemic played a major role in how the protests were organized, but it also served as an easy excuse for the forceful dispersion of these gatherings by the police.

The second chapter gives an insight into *Strajk Kobiet*: their postulates, plans and calls to action. *Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet*, or the All-Poland Women's Strike, is a feminist organization established in 2016. It was formed after the first attempts of the right-wing government to tighten abortion laws in Poland, and it helped organize massive protests in the form of strikes all over the country.

Two points jump out within this chapter. One is the vulgarity of the language used, what Magdalena Grabowska terms "radical rudeness" (Grabowska, 2021, p. 199). The protesters' choice of language works in two ways. It is an expression of their rage but, more importantly, the vulgarity of the slogans and the incidents in which statues were defaced are what made it difficult for the protesters to be ignored by the people in power. The transcripts the editors included in the monograph only confirm this: there are endless references to damage done to buildings and rude slogans being shouted, carried, or spray-painted.[1]

Besides using vulgarity in phrasing like, "1. Get the fuck out with Przyłębska's[2] ruling / 2. Get the fuck out with Przyłębska" ("Voices of Strajk Kobiet", 2021, p. 41), it is also the use of emotional language that comes through as an important characteristic of the protesters' self-expression: "During the meeting, 13 areas – fields of battle – have been identified. These are: 1. Women's rights – put an end to women's hell" ("Voices of Strajk Kobiet", 2021,

[1] Anti-choice deputies mentioned the defacement of the statue of Ronald Reagan as a particularly hurtful instance of the protesters' behavior, which is rich with bitter irony given that when he was governor of California in 1967, Reagan signed the Therapeutic Abortion Act, one of the first pro-abortion laws in the US. His legacy being what it is, this is a simple reminder both of how contentious this issue is, as well as how little it has to do with morals, ethics, or religion.

[2] Julia Przyłębska is a Polish judge and the current President of the Constitutional Tribunal.

p. 43). These articulations of emotions are used against both the protesters and the opposition party members that defend them, and they add fuel to the narrative the ruling right-wing politicians wish to create, namely that these people are acting irrationally and irresponsibly simply because they are exhibiting fear and rage at being stripped of basic rights. Zabrzewska dedicates a substantial portion of the final essay of the monograph to the dynamics at play here, namely the long history of patriarchal disregard and disdain for emotions. What is remarkable, however, is how both the protesters and the opposition members doubled down on this reading of their reactions to the ruling: the Guardian and other outlets reported that chants of "I think, I feel, I decide" were part of the gatherings (Davies, 2020), while opposition deputies stressed that it is understandable that this issue is an emotional one for many. The final words of *Strajk Kobiet* included in the monograph are also telling: "Revolution happens not only in the streets – it also happens in our hearts and minds. This is the second stage of our common revolution which is meant to repair the state" ("Voices of Strajk Kobiet", 2021, p. 45).

The second point to be made about the postulates and demands of *Strajk Kobiet* is that they do not end with abortion access. Throughout the book, the editors and scholars highlight this movement's intersectional approach. This approach is reflected in the movement's demands, which include LGBTQIA+ rights, a secular state, an appropriate response to the climate crisis, support for differently abled persons, support for the mental health of children and youth, etc. Abortion rights are merely one issue on the agenda of this dynamic movement.

The middle part of the book is a collection of transcripts from committee meetings, speeches, and interviews. These provide a snapshot of how the politicians view the issues of reproductive rights, protests, and police violence. While the opposition deputies mostly express their empathy towards the protesters and their disapproval of both the ruling and the way police handled the protests, the response of those in power ranges from indifference, through theatrical dismay, to cruelty. There is even gradation present in how these views are expressed that is almost lyrical. It starts with *PiS* (Law and Justice) deputies' repetitive references to the damage done to private and public property, especially churches, the sullied image of Polish women that is sent into the world, etc. The narrative they take up works to both distract from the issues at hand as well as to strengthen the set notion of what a respectable Polish woman is, any deviation from which is unacceptable, which is an important part of their reaction. The gears shift, however, with the speech of the Polish

Deputy Prime Minister and *PiS* leader Jarosław Kaczyński that was given five days after the ruling.

Though short, this speech leaves a lot to unpack. The most prominent part of Kaczyński's oration is his urging to protect the Church. It seems he means both churches as buildings (viciously spray-painted by the protesters), but also the prominence of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, whose "moral deposit […] is the only moral system that is commonly known in Poland". Kaczyński continues that "renouncing it is [an act of] nihilism", which is expressed by "those who demonstrate, their almost unbelievable obscenity, in everything that shows the bad side of some part of our society". The pleas to protect the Church gain even more momentum, with the speaker stating: "We must defend Polish churches before all else. We have to defend them at all costs" ("Jarosław Kaczyński's October 27 speech", 2021, p. 85).

What Kaczyński attempts to portray here as strong religious and patriotic feeling can also be read as his strong dismay regarding the protesters, who in his view act against Poland. In his speech, he equates the RCC with Poland, framing it as the safekeeper of morals in Polish society. When protesters target church property and voice their disapproval of its political activity, they are launching an attack on Poland as well. However, what Kaczynski does not state explicitly, but which can be read into his comments, is that the protesters are working against the nation not merely through targeting the Church. Protesters, who are women in large part, behave in vulgar, obscene ways while demanding control of their bodies. This is unacceptable as women's bodies do not belong to women. Just as men's bodies are often portrayed as instruments for battle, bodies with uteri are seen as instruments for a nation's preservation and, as such, are a national domain, not personal.

The ability to give birth has long been used against women[3] under the banner of patriotism, nationalism, and striving to preserve a great nation. In times of war or other social unrest or instability (such as the COVID-19 crisis), these cries grow even louder. In one of her speeches in the 2018 documentary *Reversing Roe*, pro-choice activist Gloria Steinem stated: "It is a political issue, and

[3] It is important to note here that the authors use the term "women" in the chapters but include the following footnote: "In this chapter, we use the term 'women' since Polish legislation, ACLED data, and many sociological sources refer to cisgender women and cisgender men. Being aware of the limitations of this approach, we want to acknowledge that reproductive rights and reproductive health concern not only cisgender women, but can also pertain to the lived experiences of transgender men and non-binary persons" (Zakrzewska & Dubrow, 2021, p. 23).

the state means to control our bodies. We produce the soldiers, we produce the workers, and they fear the loss of that control". In a more recent interview for this film, she continues: "It is the basis of democracy that you control your own body. And it is the basis of hierarchy and totalitarian regimes that you don't" (Stern & Sundberg, 2018). So, when Kaczyński makes mention of war and shouts out pleas to "defend Poland", he is not only equating the RCC with the Polish nation, which is problematic in itself, but he is also implying that abortion is an attack on the nation, as opposed to a personal choice that everyone should be able to make for themselves.

This kind of view of women seems common to societies where nationalism takes center stage. Writing from a context that is somewhat different (during the wars in former Yugoslavia), in her essay *From State Socialism to State Nationalism: The Case of Serbia in Gender Perspective*, Žarana Papić examines what this transformation meant for the role of women in the society and what new dynamics came into play:

> In that sense, as all these new democracies are in fact deeply male democracies, all these newly emerged post-communist nationalisms are also male nationalisms. Their essential discourse, and practice, is that of the warrior, the "hero" of nationhood is no one else but a Man, who is defending the nation, territory, tradition, glory, honour, etc. This type of aggressive, war-oriented nationalism, as a rule, is based and functions on a patriarchal system of values and social, gendered order, in which men and women are separated into opposite zones – (battle) fields and (sheltered) fields. This kind of war-gendered-order is the most extreme example of men's and women's separated realities, which are presented and seen as a natural, unavoidable and eternal state of affairs. […] Moreover, women are of fundamental importance as actual "producers" and pillars of these values and goals. But the problem is that there is no way women could be, or become, equal partners and subjects of these values. Instead, they are objects, consequently objectified in their prime function of reproducing the very same "feminine" values, but from which they are excluded. (Papić, 1994, p. 13)

After Kaczyński's speech, many of the debates were dedicated to how the police handled the protests. Throughout these, protesters are painted as irrational and even as "potential sowers of death" by right-wing politicians ("Committee on Administration and the Interior, December 9, 2020", 2021, p. 154) as the protestors insisted on gathering despite the pandemic measures, putting not only themselves at risk, but also society as a whole. The Police, on the other hand, are painted as acting responsibly and in the interest of preserving everyone's health, including that of the protesters. These health-related

concerns often dissolve quite quickly and give way to concerns for buildings and residents of Warsaw who do not participate in protests but are nevertheless inconvenienced by them. All instances of police violence are disregarded as either hearsay or isolated incidents. There is a jarring difference between this view and the picture the opposition deputies paint, often expressing their disapproval and concern for police officers who, in their view, increase tensions instead of defusing them and often use excessive force.

The final two chapters of this section are dedicated to President Andrzej Duda. Duda was the candidate of the ruling Law and Justice party and he ran on a very conservative platform, making statements such as "LGBT is an ideology, not people" in his re-election campaign (Grabowska, 2021, p. 198). His response to the events starts with a hardly even tepid attempt to calm "social emotions" by proposing a project to the Sejm through which abortion would be allowed when "prenatal screenings or other medical premises point to the high probability that the child will be born dead or will suffer from an incurable disease or a defect that unavoidably and directly leads to the child's death" ("Andrzej Duda in interview with Bogumił Łoziński", 2021, p. 170). This is quickly revealed to be merely theatrical, as the President does not show any intention to push for this project to make its way through the legislative bodies when interviewers probe him about this. As for the protests, Duda believes they did not solely result from the ruling but are a reflection of society being "anxious due to various pandemic-related restrictions" ("Andrzej Duda in interview with Bogumił Łoziński", 2021, p. 171). He begins by brushing off the protesters' concerns and attempts to pivot to other circumstances that are out of his control, such as the pandemic.

The statements that follow are even more controversial and show the President's conservative bias more overtly, as shown in Chapter XIII. When TV presenter Krzysztof Skórzyński asks him about abortion, the President's replies are marked by what could be seen as a complete disregard for the many complexities of this issue. When asked about the ruling, the President responds: "Let us be frank, the ruling of the Constitutional Tribunal had no influence whatsoever on women's lives". The interviewer's response betrays his shock at this statement: "The tribunal *de facto* banned abortion in Poland". Duda responds that "of course, if a woman's life is threatened, abortion is possible, and the decision is up to the woman" ("Andrzej Duda in interview with Krzysztof Skórzyński", 2021, p. 177). Although this is in line with the rest of his statements, it is an oversimplification of a complex issue, and it is untrue. The doctors are

the ones deciding whether the life of a pregnant person is threatened or not. To illustrate how limiting and dangerous this kind of law is, the introduction to the monograph contains this chilling story:

> On October 29, 2021, lawyer Joanna Budzowska wrote on Twitter about a 22-week pregnant woman who died in hospital in Pszczyna, a town of 25,000 people in southern Poland (Theus 2021). Pregnant with a fetus that had been earlier diagnosed with prenatal defects, the woman was admitted to hospital with oligohydramnios, a deficiency of amniotic fluid. Hesitant about terminating the pregnancy, the doctors waited for the fetus to die. In effect, the woman went into septic shock and died (Kojzar 2021). The news rekindled Strajk Kobiet protests. In the first week of November 2021, people across Poland gathered and marched to honor the woman's passing and to once again protest the anti-abortion law. This time they demonstrated under the message "Ani jednej więcej" [Not one woman more].
>
> Her name was Izabela. She died on September 22, 2021. She was 30 years old. (Zabrzewska & Dubrow, 2021b, p. 17)

On various occasions in the transcripts, opposition deputies refer to the unavailability of the quality healthcare and prenatal screenings that are crucial in order to save lives.

The President continues with provocative statements, at one point literally stating that proof of Polish police acting professionally is that no one was killed by them during the protests, doubling down on this stance even as the interviewer suggests this is hardly an "argument for positively evaluating their actions" ("Andrzej Duda in interview with Krzysztof Skórzyński", 2021, p. 178).

After such nuanced opinions, the editors provide the reader with somewhat of a respite in the form of the academic essays that make up the final part of the monograph. This part contains work by Karolina M. Gilas, Elżbieta Korolczuk, Magdalena Grabowska and Dorota Hall. All four authors contextualize the events and pick apart different aspects of them. They are united in their emphasis of the togetherness and intersectionality exhibited within the movement, as well as the lessons of hope that could be learnt. Elżbieta Korolczuk is only one of the authors to highlight the fact that these protests included not only straight cis women but also members and activists of the LGBTQ+ community, proving that "for the new generation issues concerning gender identity and sexuality constitute key markers of their political identification" (Korolczuk, 2021, p. 194). References to the "new generation" are made by other authors as well, putting their hopes in the hands of youth and a movement that is based on "a set of new feminist values, including 'radical empathy', 'responsibility', and 'care'" as well as "an ongoing shift away from "pedagogical", top-down feminism towards

activist connectivity between diverse social struggles – through networking, active involvement, and active learning about various engagements", as Magdalena Grabowska puts it (Grabowska, 2021, p. 199).

Grabowska's essay also tries to hint at the more theoretical lessons to be learned from these events, which are very in line with the ethos of this book. She emphasizes the importance of "incorporating social movement protests into the debate on democratization, examining their capacity to trigger contentious and subversive political practices, and leading the social change" and "paying close attention to how momentous social mobilizations suddenly begin (or 'crack'), how they reproduce through repetition, and how they create a long-lasting legacy, memory, and sometimes also institutional change (DellaPorta 2018)" (Grabowska, 2021, p. 201). What typically happens is "centering on the institutions as crucial actors of political processes (which) often leads to misunderstanding the role that social movements play" (Grabowska, 2021, p. 201). It seems that this is exactly what a book like this is trying to contribute to: shifting the focus of the narrative from institutions and placing it upon a movement; examining how events came to be, in order to "help us see movements such as feminism as crucial actors who build political responses to the democratic backsliding (Dimitrova 2018) and push forward re-democratization processes (Verloo 2018)" (Grabowska, 2021, p. 201).

The monograph's conclusion is an essay by Zabrzewska herself. At the most superficial level, the book can function as a snapshot of a tumultuous and important time in Polish society; as such, it paints quite a detailed and expansive picture. One of the monograph's uses could be exactly what Zabrzewska does in the final chapter: using the texts as a corpus for analysis that can help better understand the goings on in Poland, as well as elsewhere with similar circumstances. It also provides an example of how movements and political struggles can be documented in a didactic and almost interactive way, if appropriately framed.

As of writing this review, the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling remains in power. However, as the monograph notes, thanks to these protests, "the political debate in Poland shifted almost overnight" (Grabowska, 2021, p. 199). *Strajk Kobiet* demanded full abortion rights, and the opposition party, Civic Platform, changed their position on abortion access "and now advocates for changes to the law to allow abortion on demand under certain conditions" (Grabowska, 2021, p. 200). Their stance changed to not only request a return to the "compromise" solution of 1993, but access to abortion "up to the 12th week

(of pregnancy) for women who have an 'extremely difficult personal situation' and 'after consultation with a psychologist and a doctor'" (Wilczek, 2021). Besides creating a strong activist community, this is so far one of the most important results of the protests.

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Myślę, czuję, decyduję. Polska walka o prawa reprodukcyjne

W monografii *Gender, Voice, and Violence in Poland: Women's Protests during the Pandemic* redaktorzy Adrianna Zabrzewska i Joshua K. Dubrow zebrali różnorodne głosy, aby stworzyć migawkę burzliwych czasów w społeczeństwie polskim, kiedy to wskutek radykalnego ograniczenia dostępu do aborcji przez Trybunał Konstytucyjny jesienią 2020 roku w warunkach pandemii COVID-19 doszło do niespotykanych dotąd protestów społecznych. Za pośrednictwem głosów aktywistów, polityków i naukowców redaktorzy przedstawiają szerszy kontekst władzy, protestów i walk ruchów pro-choice i podobnych w Polsce. Monografia nie tylko dokumentuje same wydarzenia, lecz stanowi także bogate źródło informacji zarówno dla badaczy, nauczycieli, jak i aktywistów.

Słowa kluczowe: recenzja, *Gender Voice and Violence in Poland*, Polska, dostęp do aborcji, protest, Strajk Kobiet, *Myślę, czuję, decyduję*

I think, I feel, I decide: The Polish struggle for reproductive rights

In the monograph *Gender, Voice, and Violence in Poland: Women's Protests during the Pandemic*, editors Adrianna Zabrzewska and Joshua K. Dubrow have compiled a variety of voices to create a snapshot of a tumultuous time in Polish society, when, in autumn of 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal limited the already heavily restricted abortion access, and unprecedented street protests ensued in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the voices of activists, politicians and academics, the editors provide the wider context of the ruling, the protests, and the struggles of the pro-choice and adjacent movements in Poland. Besides

documenting these events, the monograph represents an expansive resource for researchers, teachers, and activists alike.

Keywords: review, *Gender Voice and Violence in Poland*, Poland, abortion access, protest, Women's Strike, *I Think, I Feel, I Decide*

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