The Polish Paradox: Democracy, Reproductive Rights, and the Politics of Morality

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Brief Overview:

- **Research topic:** The changes in reproductive rights and policies, and fertility decline after the fall of communism in 1989?

- **Anthropological research in Poland, 2000-14:**
  - Doctoral dissertation - University of Colorado
  - Postdoctoral research - Columbia University
  - Faculty research - UCF
Why study reproductive rights in Poland?

- Democratization and rights
- **Paradox**: severe restrictions on family planning, yet declining birthrate
Purpose of Research:

To examine:

- Reproductive intentions and decision-making underlying fertility decline *(Why?)*

- The use of contraceptive methods, clandestine abortions, and other methods to control fertility *(How?)*
Research Design

- 23 months of research from 2000 to 2014
- 1,800 pages of single-spaced narratives
- Qualitative in-depth interviews & Quantitative surveys
  - Women, ages 18 to 40
  - 188 interviews
  - 430 surveys
Timeline

1947-89  Communist (state socialist) period

1980s  Solidarity oppositional movement

*1989  Collapse of communism in Poland

1990  Nationalist-Catholic Administration of L. Walesa

1992  Concordat with Vatican

1993  Near-total ban on abortion; sex education removed

2004  Poland joins the European Union

2007-  Escalation of abortion right battle & IVF battle
Historical Context:

- **Communist Period, 1947-1989**
  - secular state

- **1989: Solidarity - Lech Wałęsa**

- **Post-socialist Period, since 1989:**
  - Catholic agenda in reproductive policies
  - Neoliberal economic agenda - cutbacks in social services
Social Service Reductions since 1989

- Social services
  - maternity leave and family benefits
- Childcare
  - cuts in kindergartens and nurseries
- Healthcare
The Politics of Morality: Church-influenced Policies

1.) Conscience Clause law (1991)

2.) Near-total abortion ban (1993)
Policy changes cont.

3.) elimination of sex education

4.) no health insurance for contraceptives

5.) restrictions on prenatal tests
Yet,

Fertility fell at the same time!
Total Fertility Rate in Poland:

- **Urban TFR**: 1.1
- **Total TFR for Poland 2013**: 1.3
- **Replacement TFR**: 2.1
Total Fertility Rate - World

Avg. # of children that would be born per woman per lifetime

Source: geography.hunter.cuny.edu
Total Fertility Rate in Poland from 1989 to 2003

Number of 1st (yellow), 2nd (lime), 3rd (blue) births per woman, between 1989 and 2003 (in thousands)

Fertility Decline in Other Eastern European Nations

Data: World Resources Institute, 2005
How do women control fertility?

- Contraception as top priority in personal budget

- Clandestine abortion:
  - “white coat” clandestine abortions
  - abortion tourism to Slovakia
Illegal Abortion Advertisements (in Gazeta Wyborcza)
Protests against Church in politics
Religiosity in Poland

- 89% Catholic
- 52% are practicing Catholics

Catholics in the US:

- 98% use contraception
Social Service Reductions since 1989

- Social welfare
  - maternity leave and family benefits

- Childcare
  - cuts in kindergartens and nurseries

- Healthcare
  - Impact on women
Feminization of Poverty in Poland

- Female employment dropped from 80% to 65% in 1990s
- Lesser chance of employment, while better educated
Key Research Finding:

- Gendered discrimination in employment:
  - Employments “contracts” to not get pregnant
  - Loss of jobs after maternity - illegal
  - No legal recourse
“I have two kids, my daughter is two and son is six, and I have been fired twice, after my maternity leave with each child. When I got back to work after my son was born, it took only a month for my boss to fire me because my son was sick and I missed several days of work. A few years later when I was at a different job and I returned from my maternity leave following the birth of my daughter, I was fired as soon as my daughter got sick for the first time. That day I called in to take a day off because she had a fever, and my boss said right on the phone that the company doesn’t need me anymore. That’s when my sister said: ‘Everybody wants a child but it makes no sense to get pregnant.’ She’s right. Now, nobody wants to hire me with small kids so my husband has to support us. I won’t even try to look for a job until the kids are older.” [#8, age 32]

“The employer looks at it [pregnancy] with an evil eye. I’ve worked at my job for 4 years now and I’m the senior manager but I would be afraid to tell my supervisor that I’m pregnant. Women who get pregnant don’t advance or get raises, they start getting treated as less serious workers than others.” [#5, age 29]
State’s Answer: Pronatalist Politics

- “Profamily Program” - since 1999
  - Ineffective

- Political tool to justify family planning restrictions
Concluding Thoughts:

1.) **What does democracy mean in Poland?**
   - Not only free market

2.) **What is the role of women in a democratic society?**

3.) **What is the role of the state in:**
   - Health care?
   - Women’s rights?
Forthcoming book:  
Feb/March 2015
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