

Kościańska, Agnieszka. 2021. To see a moose. The history of Polish sex education. (Foreword by Frances Pine). London, New York: Berghahn Books. 354 pp. Hb.: \$145.00/£107.00. ISBN: 9781800730601.

Book review by

Suzana Ignjatović

Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade (Serbia)

To See a Moose is the English edition of the book published in Poland in 2017. The book is a comprehensive history of sex education in modern Poland. It encompasses the 20th century, but also takes the reader to the 19th century and early 21st century to explain the dynamics of historical change. The book tackles the neighboring fields of political anthropology and sociology, peeling back the layers of complex relations between political actors and ideological matrices—between faith and secularism, dogma and science, conservatism and progressivism.

The book is divided into three parts (ten chapters). Part One is the largest part of the book (eight chapters), covering a range of topics: manuals on sexual education, masturbation, first sexual experience, pregnancy, pornography, queerness, and sexual violence. Part Two explores the history of Catholic positions on sex education over the studied historical period. Part Three focuses on stereotypes and biases on sexuality “in the countryside”, pointing at some epistemological issues in the anthropology of sexuality.

The method is based on historical research and ethnography. The study was conducted from 2008 to 2016, combining participant observation (sexology conferences, courses for educators), in-depth interviews with sexologists and educators, and written sources (handbooks, curricula, newspapers, magazines, and research studies). Young people’s letters to the leading sexologists (based on public sources and private archives) present the most valuable historical ethnography.

Drawing on the Foucauldian approach to sexuality, the author adds agency as an important factor in the biopolitics of sexuality. The agency-based approach reveals the ambiva-

lent status of sex education in Polish history. Even though the origins of sex education in Poland date back to the early 20th century, in 2020, legislative prohibition of sex education was demanded: “to ensure that children and young people are shielded from the sexual depravation and demoralization developing at a dangerous tempo and impacting thousands of the youngest Poles through the medium of ‘sex education’” (p. xii). During communism, the dominant approach to sex education was progressive, with many publications and popular magazines that addressed young people’s sexuality, including formal sex education in schools. Along with the dominant emancipatory discourse, the Catholic model of sex education persisted, promoting a “strong will” to postpone sex-related practices until marriage, and not much practical knowledge.

Historically, the politics of sexuality (including sex education) has oscillated between progressivism and conservatism. Social regulation of sexuality was based on shifting alliances between state socialism, Catholicism and nationalism. Ideological differences were often emphasized, but sometimes, the contradictions were tolerated. After the fall of communism, the promoters of conservative views on sexuality had readily made links between medical and patriotic education, rooted in Catholicism as an inherent value of the Polish nation: “The Polish nation, Catholic for centuries, has the right to require the ethical norms recognized by the majority (...)” (p. 51). In the 1990s, the state stopped providing subsidies for contraception, IVF, and sex reassignment surgery. However, sexual and reproductive rights have become increasingly important and “normalized” (including LGBT rights or pornography).

The book presents an interesting reading for sociologists of religion (Part Two). We find a range of historical examples of a “disjunction between principles and practice” in the Catholic approach to sex education (p. 234), with ritualistic and superficial religiosity, and weak adherence to Catholic morality. For example, in the interwar period, people did not regard contraception as a sin and abortion was performed by midwives. Also, the church modified its positions to fit the needs of modern life. Catholic teachings abandoned rigid positions on contraception (prohibition of calendar method or intermittent abstinence) with more realistic approaches to family planning. Catholic scholars used the “language of scientific religiosity”. Masturbation was sinful at the beginning of the 20th century, but in the 1980s it was depicted as addiction and psychological immaturity. Arguments against contraception were based on health discourse, stressing the detrimental health effects of the pill and the positive effects of sperm on a woman’s health.

The book offers a nuanced view of gender norms and sexuality, demonstrating how gender equality was related to sex reforms, and shaped by the interests of political and religious authorities. We can see that the discourse on masturbation in sex education has always been gendered. After losing its sinister character as a detrimental and sinful practice, it remained perceived as more natural to boys than to girls because “a girl’s desire is not to have sex, but to become a mother” (p. 63). The same goes for contraception as a predominantly female responsibility. Also, the taboo of “the first time” has undergone reversible changes—from being strongly gendered, to less gendered at the end of the 1980s (late socialism), and again, it became strongly gendered after the fall of communism with the dominance of the Catholic worldview.

We get some interesting insights into the history of ethnographic research on sexuality in Part Three. The biased perception of rural morality was rooted in the assumed strong adherence to religious norms in rural communities. There seemed to exist two different pictures of sexual culture: mainstream ethnography was based on the paradigm of “traditional rigorism” and censored folk songs, whereas marginalized (amateur) ethnography revealed educational folk songs about contraception and female sexuality through metaphors and jokes. The mainstream ethnography constructed a picture of sexuality in rural areas based on stereotypes of chastity and prudishness, disregarding evidence of parental tolerance of young people’s sexuality.

The practical dimension of sex education is evident throughout the book. Kościańska explained her motivation to follow the principles of public and engaged anthropology: “I decided to do this after recognizing that sex education in Poland is in a pitiful state, much worse than it was in the past. I therefore present the ideological conflicts of adults alongside the voices of young people, expressed through letters sent to specialist counseling centers and the press.” (p. xvi). The book subtly advocates for this policy-motivated goal, using solid arguments from the research study at the intersection of anthropology and history.