
Works that have the potential of becoming ‘great leaps forward’ in a given discipline may often seem provocative. This both is and is not the case with Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas’ *Mężczyźni z enklaw biedy*. It is the case because this is a rare book that does not conflate gender studies with women’s studies and examines the livelihood of pauperized and marginalized men in the emerging post-socialist ‘ghettos.’ Alas, it is not the case because this thought provoking book has stirred virtually no controversies in the world of Polish feminism and gender studies.

The volume is based upon interviews with members of 23 families living in one of the 17 enclaves of poverty in the city of Łódź. In the late 1990s these constituted 44,000 people out of 750,000 city dwellers. Although women have also been interviewed, it is the three generations of men who are the subject of the book: ‘fathers’ (above 65 years old), their sons (between 35 and 55), and grandchildren (born in the 1970s). Strictly speaking, it is not a work of history in its method, yet the mode of explanation is thoroughly historical—biographical insights and family histories covering nearly the last 50 years allow Golczyńska-Grondas to make serious claims about the nature and genesis of post-socialist poverty and exclusion.

Chapter 1 contains an informed overview, based on Anglo-American literature, of how models of masculinity have evolved over the last two centuries, discusses the emerging ‘crisis of masculinity’ and gives tentative answers for its causes. In Chapter 2 the author turns to the Polish case, and argues—after Mira Marody and Anna Giza-Polesczuk—that the socialist economy promoted a dual identity of female ‘courageous victim’ and male ‘big child.’ Women were both discriminated at work and had to sacrifice themselves for their husbands and children with their domestic toil. Men’s position on the other hand was undermined because their ambitions to participate in the public sphere were blocked by the communist party and they experienced mounting frustrations at home too, as it was women who effectively ran the households, in spite of the cultural stereotype that men ought to be family heads. Since it was primarily women who would sacrifice themselves, men were deprived even of moral gratifications for their suffering—and this is why they opted for becoming ‘big children.’ Capitalism with its ideology of individualism, self-sufficiency, and activity allowed for a grand symbolic return of masculinity. Women, however, were better prepared and educated for the emerging service sector (banking, advertising, tourism, social welfare agencies, etc.) that started to develop after 1989, and they—together with younger and better educated males—dominated it. No significant niche in the labor market for middle-aged men developed after 1989. Erstwhile industrial workers experienced drastic decline in living standards, and material, cultural, and psychological marginalization.

As we shall see in the latter chapters, Golczyńska-Grondas complicates this picture. Except for the strengths of the empirical argument, the major theoretical value of the book is that the author is not lured by the symbolic hegemony of masculinity that indeed rules supreme in post-socialist mass culture (and, to be sure, her informants do embrace the *macho* style). Instead, she reaches beyond popular *clichés* and looks at these changing gender models at the grassroots level. For some, the argument that those who are often perpetrators of domestic violence are themselves victims as well may seem highly controversial. Golczyńska-Grondas, however, does not weight the relative male or female subalternity. Her theoretical argument goes far beyond simple binary oppositions: it’s either man or women who are the oppressed/oppressors. Although her work engages with the so-called *man’s studies*, she is critical of many of its policy suggestions,
such as Geoff Dench’s arguments for moving women out of the labor market in order to rescue the entrenched masculinity. Gilles Deleuze once said that majorities effectively do not exist since virtually everybody could be classified into a minority of sorts. Golczyńska-Grondas seems to understand this very well, and is one of the very few authors who appreciates that some men may actually suffer tremendously under the symbolic regime of ‘male domination.’ Unlike most gender-minded authors, she goes a step further than doing a simple media content or popular culture analysis and provides a new perspective on post-socialist gender relations.

The ethnographic material presented in her remaining chapters is organized around the various ‘roles’ that these marginalized men fulfill. These are either roles played out as family members (fathers, sons, husbands, partners, and fathers-in-law), roles assumed in order to deal with various institutions (pupils, employees, citizens, church goers, welfare benefit recipients, etc.) or various other social roles such as ‘the poor,’ ‘neighbors,’ or ‘alcoholics.’ Golczyńska-Grondas provides a thorough analysis of the various trajectories that they take within these roles. This constitutes a rich description of the life choices available in post-socialist urban ghettos. Except for the individual differences, there are stark generational contrasts. If the grandfathers used to be the ‘big absent ones’ to their own sons, because they either passed away during the war or spent no time at home because of work or alcohol, and the middle generation of men was brought up by single ‘mother-heroes,’ the youngest generation grew up in their homes where there were effectively no parents. Biographies of the youngest men start resembling not their parent’s but rather their grandparent’s fate: they have to start working at a very early age, are dangerously malnourished, and are brought up only on the street. Above all, they have both no experience of and no chances for regular employment.

This leads us to the book’s major argument: the only ones who have enough cultural stamina to face their impoverished fate and are not immersed in the ‘culture of poverty’ are the ‘transition losers.’ This is the minority that stands out from the vast group of those who have been impoverished already in their third generation. This means that although 1989 did trigger a massive wave of pauperization, there was also significant social exclusion and poverty under socialism. And these are not merely ‘vestiges’ of the previous system that surface today—Golczyńska-Grondas reminds us that just as the urban and rural poor are stigmatized today by the liberal and conservative right as ‘underclass’ or even ‘outerclass’ (Bill Clinton’s phrase), such terms bear striking resemblance to the similarly disdainful Marxist notion of ‘Lumpenproletariat.’ A vast majority of those who slipped into poverty after 1989 still make outmost efforts to make ends meet and to maintain their personal dignity and independence. It seems that merely altered socio-economic circumstances would be enough to lift many of them from their dire straits, because they have enough constructive elements in their biographies (such as work in the socialist economy) that could potentially serve as positive stimuli. This is not the case with families that had lived in poverty before 1989 and the children of transition losers. The latter will most probably never find ‘normal’ employment and have already learned to become ‘professional’ benefits takers.

Post-socialist marginalization is, therefore, a time bomb that will manifest itself in the near future—and most likely do so with a vengeance.

To be sure, the socialist economy did provide opportunities for many of the urban poor to escape the vicious circle of pauperization yet some of them had not made use of these chances. The biographical knowledge going back three generations is more or less enough to cover the entire post-1945 period. It is often assumed that before 1939 there was a ‘healthy’ working class, with ‘proper’ working class values that was labor-oriented, diligent, and honest, and it was “demoralized” by first the Nazi occupation and then replaced by the putative Homo Sovieticus.