



Review of the publication: Markus Krzoska, *Ein Land unterwegs. Kulturgeschichte Polens seit 1945*, Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh 2015, ISBN 978-3506780850

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The German historian Markus Krzoska, who is an expert on Central European history, presents his postdoctoral thesis with the publication "Ein Land unterwegs: Kulturgeschichte Polens seit 1945" ("A Country on its Way: Cultural History of Poland since 1945"). The book changes the typical focus from confirmed knowledge (p. 13f) in the field of political and economic history towards Polish everyday life, in order to describe therein the "Normal" and the "European" (p. 21). Although research into contemporary history does link the micro and macro perspectives more often, this everyday-life approach has hardly been used in the case of Poland before. The author rightly maintains, that the functioning of a political system can only be understood by also taking into account everyday phenomena (p. 27). For this reason, he directs his attention to transnational-political frames and to small-scale and regional structures. He does so by analyzing "big events", like the accession of Poland to the European Union, but also through questions of lifestyle within village communities. With this broad research approach, Krzoska does not only support the idea of a paradigm shift within the historiography of Central and Eastern Europe, but he himself successfully places another type of "Cultural and Social History" (orig. "andere Kultur- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte", p. 25) in the forefront of his research.

The author does not choose a chronological structure; instead he examines important themes of the political, social, und cultural everyday life in Poland from 1945 until today in eleven chapters. For the purpose of reconstruction and analysis, he does not limit himself to scientific studies, but he also includes newspaper articles, song lyrics, novels, movies and autobiographical documents. By using these varied sources, he is able to vividly present his research themes to the reader. The themed reference framework as well as the differentiated approach to his research object enables Krzoska to deconstruct prevailing myths about the Polish nation. He clearly describes for example global fads in fashion, art and music and their adaption in Poland, which enables him to refute the idea of a cultural division of the European continent in East and West. Furthermore, this method enables him to situate Poland in a Pan-European context. By the same token, Poland's special status – finding its narration in a specific expression of Catholicism or a presumed martyrdom of the nation – can be demystified through the comparison with other (socialist) countries (Chapter 5: Faith, the Catholic Church and the Pope, orig. "Glaube, katholische Kirche und der Papst"). Also the perpetuated characterization of Poland as a resistant and dissident nation is questioned frequently by Krzoska – without however diminishing the relevance of the Solidarność movement or the authoritarian regime to the country. (Chapter 4: Oppression, Support, Adjustment and Resistance, orig. "Unterdrückung, Unterstützung, Anpassung und Widerstand"). According to Krzoska, "this combination of diverse levels [makes] the complexity and different forms of human coexistence attractive" (orig. „dieses Nebeneinander verschiedener Ebenen [macht] die Komplexität und den Reiz jeder Form menschlichen Zusammenlebens aus", p.18). He draws attention to the fact, that discussions in science as in society often enough have a lack of complexity. As a result, Poland was frequently regarded as a "grey" nation "shaped by shortages" (*ibid.*) as well as social and spatial immobility (one need only think of the class affiliation or limited traveling rules during Socialist times). Krzoska in turn assumes mobility as the key element of Polish history since 1945 (p. 21ff).

By integrating "mobility" as a horizontal analyzing category that refers to all themes of the thesis the author offers an innovative perspective. In a competent manner, he points out the aspects of social and spatial mobility especially in regard to flows of migration and the tension between centralism and regionalism. (Chapter 3: In Motion: Mobility, Migration, Emigration, orig. "In Bewegung: Mobilität, Migration, Emigration" and chapter 8: The 'big' and the 'small homeland': Centralism and regionalism, orig. "Das 'große' und das 'kleine Vaterland': Zentralismus und Regionalismus"). At this point Krzoska refers to the importance of the huge Polish diaspora, but also other phenomena such as culture or shopping tourism or smuggling from Poland to the GDR or ČSSR and vice versa (p. 238). He also finds indications of a comprehensive mobility during his analysis of Polish social structure (Chapter 2: A Society in Transition, orig. "Eine Gesellschaft im Wandel") particularly in regards to the meaning of the cultural intelligence or the importance of social groups such as young people and women. (Chapter 6: Everyday Life under Socialism, orig. "Alltag im Staatssozialismus"). He also states a lively international and cultural exchange for the socialist decades (p. 70). Krzoska illustrates meaningful nuances of social and spatial

mobility based on examples like mechanisms in the re-privatization of education, but also by visualizing ideas of the so called „bikiniści” (p. 172) with their mopeds and colourful chequered shirts. Furthermore, his gender sensitive research exemplifies how the social mobility of women depended on public resource shortfalls and the propaganda involved.

While Krzoska's analysis of the tension between mobility and immobility is fully taking into account the decades of the Cold War, the analysis of the phase of the system transformation is rather sketched out. Therefore it would have been beneficial to return to the life contexts of the before mentioned figures (such as youth, women, peasants, workers and so forth) in order to visualize changes, which emerged with the political turning points of 1989 and 2004. For example, the chapter „Arrived in the West? System Transformation and the Consequences.” (orig. "Angekommen im Westen? Systemwandel und die Folgen") deals within just four pages with the social changes in the social security system, criminality, media, education and science. Similarly, in some places it would have been advantageous to underline more clearly the transnational relations in respect of regional aspects. However, one cannot hold this against the author, since at this point he is aware of the incomplete current state of research (p. 290). Also because for present Poland neither social mobility nor tense transnational relations are questioned the chosen temporal priority for structuring the thesis remains comprehensible.

The strength of the book resides in the reassessment of socialist Poland. Indeed, Krzoska succeeds in capturing everyday life as well as life inspired by the European idea and global ideals in Poland in the 20th and 21st century. Thereby he deftly avoids a teleological attribution of the European Idea to all Polish citizens. Even though it is a methodical challenge to capture the present, Krzoska's attempt – for example in the very readable chapter "Historical Images and Debates after 1989" (orig. "Geschichtsbilder und -debatten nach 1989") has been most worthwhile.

"A Country on its Way" is not just an important contribution to the reassessment of the cultural and social history of Poland. The meticulously researched historical lines of development enable to locate Poland in today's Europe. In addition, the reader-friendly language as well as the extensive bibliography make this book an excellent reference work for anyone interested in Poland.

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