

Material Culture as a Tool of Anthropological Exploration: Fur and the Polarization of Polish Society

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Siobhan Magee. 2019. *Material Culture and Kinship in Poland: An Ethnography of Fur and Society*. London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic. 176 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5013-4562-3

Through the prism of fur, Siobhan Magee sheds light on continuity (inheritance) and change (intergenerational tensions) in contemporary Poland. Her book is based on ethnographic research carried out in Krakow in 2009–2011. She conducted an extensive study, interviewing not only women who have inherited fur coats from their grandmothers, but also animal rights activists, furriers, and people involved in the fur industry. To gain insight into fur production, she visited not only furriers' shops and workshops but also fur farms.

Magee's research seems to confirm that Polish society is divided into two groups: those entrenched in the religious-nationalist 'normalizing' narrative (in reaction to recent rapid political changes and the free flow of new, liberalized patterns of life), and those who do not identify with or fit such a vision of Polish identity. Fur turned out to be a useful tool for showing the polarization of Polish society, and the generation gap resulting from the abrupt historical changes in 1989. This quite controversial material evoked such issues as religiosity and the dominance of the Catholic Church, gender inequality, and sexuality (a heterosexual relationship as the ideal way of organizing one's personal life). Being against fur in Poland often means also being against the aforementioned 'normalizing discourses'. Speaking up against fur often brings into view the existence of many other marginalized and excluded groups who do not fit in the category of 'normal'¹. Therefore, opponents of anti-fur protests have sometimes suggested that the demonstrators are not 'truly Polish'.

¹ Similar observations have been made by Grażyna Kubica (2009: 146) who sheds light on the controversies around the organization and realization of the first Festival of Culture for Tolerance and the Cracovian March for Tolerance, which formed a part of the former.

As Magee has observed, the class system in Poland in some way 'goes beyond' such categories as 'wealth' or 'education', and it also involves the division of 'mainstream' or 'normal', and 'alternative' or 'countercultural' (p. 149). However, it seems that the categories of 'mainstream' and 'alternative' are derivatives, and rather reinforce old divisions of educated/uneducated or affluent/poor, as wealth and education are usually pre-conditions for 'alternative' or 'countercultural'.

Magee addresses the issue of the luxury of fur from quite a new angle. As her analysis indicates, in the Polish context, 'luxury' resonates with the concept of 'normality'. She argues that places which underwent rapid changes and struggled with economic unrest afterwards were often attracted by 'the normal' or 'the ordinary'. Therefore, people try to afford expensive products to conform and belong to 'the normal', rather than to differentiate themselves. The author aptly captures this dialectical relationship between 'luxury' and 'ordinariness' in the statement that fur in Poland is an 'excess of the normal, embodying less standing out than fitting in' (p.142). Moreover, because of the shift from the communist economy, in which citizens had to struggle with empty shelves, to the capitalist one, characterized by too much choice and too many commodities, the logic of distinction has changed. Therefore, in order to stand out, one has to withdraw from the consumption of popular commodities. This altered logic of distinction may explain the inclination (observed by Magee) of middle-class Cracovians towards humble and simple cafes and bars, often decorated with furniture that the older generation would simply throw out.

Contrary to some parts of Western Europe and the United States, in Poland fur does not evoke affluence and has seldom been related to exclusivity. Also, unlike in the West, it is usually worn by older generations of Polish women. It seems that a fur coat, along with a mohair beret (Novikowa 2017), has become a symbol of Polish conservatism and the persistence of Catholicism. The motif of fur was raised several times in interviews with the younger generation in reference to the polarisation of political opinion between generations: 'things still feel conservative because of the old woman in the street wearing the fur coat who keeps the interest in that kind of politics' (p. 4), said one young woman interviewed by Magee.

The altered connotations of fur mean that sometimes it is a problematic gift that young women receive from their grandmothers, as fur coats are often subjects of pre-mortem inheritance. As Magee's study reveals, inherited furs sometimes become a kind of 'decor' or 'artefact'. If a granddaughter does not wish to wear the inherited clothing, sometimes it is repurposed (e.g. made into cushions), or it preserves its form but not its function by being displayed in homes. In this way, it symbolizes continuity on the one hand, and change on the other.

Interestingly, Krakow was not only the background but also the foreground of the analysis, and the study can also be inscribed into ‘urban anthropology’. Although fragments devoted to Krakow were especially interesting to read, as some of the common convictions about the city and its distinctiveness have been ‘externalized’ and somewhat ‘objectified’ in anthropological research, their reading evoked doubts. Sometimes the vision of Krakow was quite romanticized and idealized, like in the claim: ‘In Kraków, people routinely and openly ask “big questions” about the nature of materials, time and relationships’ (p. 149). Also, some statements, although unquestionable at first sight, upon further reflection evoke some reservations. For instance, the author observes: ‘In Kraków, people’s social and psychic allegiances centered not only on their homes but, (...), on places of worship, cafes and bars, and outdoor spaces such as parks and squares’ (p. 129). While this may be true, a counterexample, namely another city whose residents’ lives do not center around such objects, may be difficult to find.

The distinctiveness of Krakow was often pointed out by the interviewees (the emphasis was put mainly on its traditionalism, but also intellectualism). ‘I’m not from Poland, I’m from Kraków’ (p. 9), one of the Magee’s interviewees said, which is in line with a tendency observed in Poland that the attachment to region or town is on the rise: the majority of Poles declare they, first of all, belong ‘to the locality or town where they live’, instead of ‘to Poland’ (Marody and Mandes 2017: 244). The author also aptly noted that Poland is not a monolith and is regionally differentiated. Therefore, the question that comes to mind is to what extent the conclusions can be generalized and extrapolated to the rest of Poland, as for instance, the title suggests (the author travelled to other cities such as Wrocław, Poznań, and Warsaw, yet still, the main focus was put on Kraków). Despite this criticism, the extensive character of Magee’s analysis, the complexity of relations between fur and kinship she details, and her remarkably apt observations about Krakow’s specificity, are impressive.

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