

**Michał Piotr Pręgowski and Justyna Włodarczyk (eds.): *Free Market Dogs. The human-canine bond in post-communist Poland*. Purdue University Press 2016.**

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The book comprises an introduction and seven separate chapters, each with a slightly different point of view into the dog-human relationship. An overarching theme is the defining of dog's agency within this relationship in the post-communist Poland. Most importantly, the book shows how the dog-human relationship – or the human-animal relationship in general – is tied to societal changes. Dogs represent this change well, due to their exceptionally long common history with humans.

Although it is possible to identify universal development phases in the relationship between humans and dogs (e.g. Miklósi et al. 2003), the role of a local context is crucial when defining the social positions possible for canines. The book makes its case in the context of Poland becoming a capitalist “free market” and a “post-communist” society – a bipolar mix of past and future orientations. However, the volume is all about dogs and less

about direct societal analysis. The attentive reader will, however, pick up the analytical metanarrative and appreciate the detailed depictions of Polish experiences, some of which are startling in their contrast to the Western point of view: that, for example, the rationing of meat in the 1980's Poland meant that the keeping of large dogs was not conceivable.

The book portrays well how the choices and interpretations of breeds reflect also the societal changes at large. In the post-communist Poland, this has e.g. meant that some breeds popular in the USA have gained popularity also in Poland. Breeds are heavily symbolic, also of nationalism. Changes in the popularity of breeds depict changes of use, but they also reflect what each breed represents in a given historical situation. By their choice of breed, humans can thus create reflections of and aspirations for identity.

If left to their own devices, dogs are not tolerated in the modern societies.



Their activities, behavior, habits and ways of communication are those of animals; they must be shaped and trained. A central part in the development of the human-dog relationship concerns the methods of training and “grooming” for social acceptability. *Free Market Dogs* illustrates well, also with reference to social theory, how the collapse of communism brought forth new possibilities for dog training methods. The traditional, punishment-oriented methods gave way to positive reinforcement and reward-centred methods. Irvine (2007) analyzes the transformed approaches by describing the historically earlier approach as one that represents “the view that animals are simply bundles of instincts”, and stating that in the later approach “they [animals] possess a level of consciousness that makes them similar to humans in many ways” (Irvine 2007, 60-61; cf. Koski & Bäcklund 2015; 2017). *Free Market Dogs* makes the very modern point that training is more and more about educating, not about controlling the dog.

The historical functions of dogs (hunting, herding, and guarding) have to a great extent been substituted by the roles of “versatile companions”. One of the fairly new roles dogs have been given is as a companion in various dog sports, also in post-communist Poland. This has meant the internationalization of knowledge flows and collaboration. In this context, dogs are expected to act as

active companions in achieving the goals that the trainers have chosen to pursue. This aspect is well covered in the book. Hence, in addition to humanization and animalization, it is justified to discuss the instrumentalization of the dog, the valuing of the canine based on how well the human can pursue her/his objectives through engaging with the dog. The recreational aspect adds an interpretative layer: in the context of dog sports, it is not only the social moral codes that define the agency of the dog; it is the individual human herself who decides how the dog must act. This question concerns the space of self-fulfillment and forms of interaction as well as social, cultural or political possibilities and restrictions. It is a question of agency – and agency is one of the most troublesome concepts in social sciences.

On the other hand, sports offer the dog a possibility for novel agencies that mould and redefine the roles of both the dog and the human. Goal-oriented action demands the species-specific needs are catered for by the human, through training methods. This also means that the human needs to adjust her/his actions accordingly. Both the trainers and the dogs have to adjust their actions to those of their partner, to make situational choices and to change each other. The vast increase in the volume of dog sports in post-communist Poland has further shaped the need for renewing training

methods. In doing so, the human-dog relationship has been redefined in multiple ways.

In post-communist Poland, many Western trends of canine utilization have become more pronounced. For instance, the therapeutic use of dogs has seen sizeable variegation. This development comes with novel tensions, too. The tensioned relationships between different approaches and knowledge needs is well depicted in *Free Market Dogs*. The book argues that the ambiguous line between what is medically defined as therapy and what is rather considered as a joy-creating activity, or e.g. exercise in general, needs to be defined. If a dog were to have a clear role in therapy, not only should it be suitable and trained when necessary, but also the responsible human should be adequately educated in interpreting dog behavior.

In Polish literature, one can see an anthropocentric, straightforward attitude towards the canine, one in which the dog is saved by the human and both eventually fuse into family life. Another intriguing interpretation in this vein concerns the Polish tendency to depict dogs “with a past”. Perhaps these are metaphors for the need for societal reconciliation under post-communism? A grimmer history is the utilization of dogs in early space flight experiments. Everyone knows of Laika, the canine cosmonaut, but Laika was just one in a succession of

dogs to be flung into space during the first decades of the space age. While certainly worth a section of its own, here the history of the space dog is just an intro to the analysis: Laika, as depicted in recent artwork, is revealed here as a representation of the whole human-animal relationship, or some aspects thereof. The interpretation boils down to a question: can we even start discussing the subject without condemning what was done? The mixed public-private dialectic of pet cemeteries in Poland also builds on the backdrop of the possibilities offered by the breakdown of communism. Yet a distinctly Polish tradition seems to be emerging – or in any case, one that differs from the North American. The Polish practice seems to almost contradict the notion of the “free market dog” in many ways: no fuss, government regulation, sober imagery – a clear break from the “free market” of the American pet cemetery.

While definitely not for the social theory bugs, *Free Market Dogs* is an informative and refreshingly multifaceted collection of articles for everyone with an interest in the human-dog relationship. Even for the reader not specifically interested in Poland per se, the volume offers Western histories that are well worth looking into.

## REFERENCES

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