In *Polish Patriotism after 1989: Concepts, Debates, Identities*, political scientist Dorota Szeligowska traces the concept of “patriotism” as it was discussed and debated among a group of Polish intellectual elites in several weekly and daily newspapers. The author limits her scope of analysis to three debates that occurred in 1991, 1997, and 1998. She takes care to include a range of political points of view by selecting newspapers that represent conservative, centrist, and progressive political orientations. Methodologically, the book is based on secondary data analysis of written sources.

It is useful to briefly offer some background for these debates. After the fall of the state socialist regime in Poland in 1989, the new political landscape following nearly fifty years of Communist governance represented both a void in terms of democratic structures and practices and a space of new opportunities for reform and democratization. Part of this unstable political space was also the contestation of terms and concepts with which to shape newly possible national strategies. The main common perspective at this time was an allergy to “Communism,” which was reinforced and crystallized by years of struggles against the regime leading up to the political transformations of 1989. Szeligowska argues that the newly democratic Poland was also a space of vigorous debate about how to democratize Poland and undertake nation building. The purpose of the book is to examine one of the vignettes that took place within these broad national conversations. The author traces over time the right-wing conservative rhetoric advocating for the “affirmative” version of patriotism, in which complete loyalty to the Polish nation—regardless of past mistakes or flaws—was taken as a defining feature of a true Pole. Szeligowska claims that this became the dominant version of patriotism in public intellectual discourse and explains current right-wing populist politics. She juxtaposes “affirmative” patriotism against what some progressives labeled “mature” patriotism, which allows introspection about Poland’s troubling past and present, including persistent anti-Semitism.

The book’s presentation is based on a dissertation-style organization with a heavy emphasis on a review of existing literature and definitions of terms. The data presentation is provided through detailed tracking of exchanges and conversations between two or more people contained in the articles under analysis. It is indeed a challenging task to extract the concept of patriotism from broader discussions and to make these vignettes into a book narrative.

This book contributes to its field of political science by bringing attention to the particular use of language in public debates in Poland. Specifically, the book highlights the preference for the use of the term “patriotism” over “nationalism” among the intellectuals whose statements the author analyzes. While patriotism and nationalism are virtually indistinguishable in this context, the former term is favored in everyday language because of its less “aggressive” and more noble connotations of national allegiance to, or even “love” of, one’s country of origin or “fatherland.” Szeligowska respects the local discursive terms of debates and adheres to the use of the term “patriotism” throughout the book; however, she also shows how in the case of Poland “the fatherland
becomes a nation-state” and thus, patriotism essentially stands for nationalism (p. 90). This rhetorical preference may indeed mask the bellicose overtones of the day-to-day nationalist discourses evident, for example, in anti-immigration rhetoric. Because of this discursive specificity in the Polish context, the book is fittingly published as part of the Nationalisms across the Globe series.

The main shortcoming of the book is its rather decontextualized picture of the political debates after 1989, limited mainly by the narrowness of the dissertation topic at hand. In particular, the book misses the vigorous debates on gender and reproduction—especially abortion rights and the demographic “crisis”—in which debates on the meanings of the nation and the nature of democratization were imbedded. Restrictions on reproductive rights, driven by the renewed political power of the Catholic Church, were at the heart of right-wing constructions of “purifying” and “re-moralizing” the nation after 1989. Indeed, Catholic-nationalist rhetoric has long held that childbearing is a reflection of patriotism, and this greatly intensified during the book’s period of analysis after 1989, as birth rates continued to fall to one of the lowest in Europe. From this imperative to reproduce the nation, Polish conservatives implemented restrictions on family planning and sex education—including a near total ban on abortion in 1993—and justified these major policy changes with arguments that called for higher births in light of the “demographic crisis.” Szeligowska offers a truncated description of this larger picture and the crucial role of the Catholic Church only at the end of the book in chapter 6, but this section acts more as a tangent than a proper contextualization of relevant discussions during this period. Furthermore, the writing produced in the Polish media by the feminist public figures cited in this book, including Magdalena Sroda, Wanda Nowicka, and Agnieszka Graff, focus mainly on gender issues, but the reader will not learn this from the book’s narrow engagement with these intellectuals’ writing.

Nevertheless, the book offers a slice of discussions about the notion of patriotism as captured in the national media in Poland, and may be of interest to political science scholars.

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