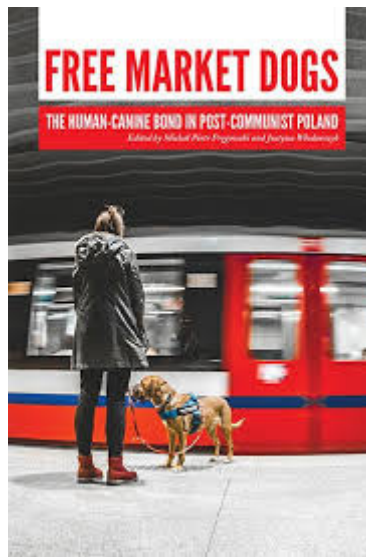


## Reviews

Joan Gordon

### Running Dogs of Capitalist Poland

Michał Piotr Pręgowski and Justyna Włodarczyk. *Free Market Dogs: The Human-Canine Bond in Post-Communist Poland*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue UP, 2016. xxiii + 186 pp. \$34.95 pbk.



I spent a year as a Fulbright Distinguished Chair at Marie Curie Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland, where I taught in the American Studies Department and had a wonderful time. I had the opportunity to observe and meet a number of dogs when off-duty and noticed a few differences between Polish dogs and American ones. The most notable difference was how many fewer Polish dogs had been neutered. More dogs in Poland wore muzzles and fewer people cleaned up after their dogs. Still, the dogs I met personally were affable family pets, able to get along with humans, other dogs, and, in one case, a charming tortoise, which is to say, they were very much like their American counterparts, if often of different breeds or of different versions of their breeds. So I was eager to see the more thorough and informed view of Polish dogs that this volume provides.

Since 1989, when Poland ended Communist rule, it has changed markedly, and its relationship to pets has changed as it embraced capitalism and Western social

influences. *Free Market Dogs* traces those changes from a number of disciplinary angles, with contributions from sociology, anthropology, literature, and the arts, as well as more concrete areas such as animal training. The brief introduction locates these changes and makes the convincing claim that the discussion here “can be generalized and may help readers understand the transformation to democracy and its impact on the postcommunist societies of the former Eastern Bloc” (xii). The introduction is followed by a helpful timeline, “Four Paws of the Third Republic of Poland,” that draws parallels among political, economic, and animal-rights developments in Poland. Seven chapters by diverse hands form the body of the collection.

The opening chapter, by editors Pręgowski and Włodarczyk, summarizes the position of dogs in democratic Poland. They argue that “activism related to animals is influenced by Poles’ increased feelings of agency as citizens of a democratic republic” (2), although they find that such important institutions as animal shelters still leave a great deal to be desired. More developed, it seems, is the role of dogs (or, at least, their owners) as consumers. Chapter two, “Toward Mutual Understanding, Respect, and Trust: On Past and Present Dog Training in Poland,” is by Agnieszka Orłowska, who is herself a dog trainer. The inclusion in an academic publication of an essay by a practice-based expert is welcome. The article begins with a broad historical summary of dog-training techniques before narrowing down to the specific Polish context. Orłowska points out that much information about animal behavior from the Western sector was simply unavailable before 1989, and with this added information, attitudes toward dog-training have changed, moving toward positive reinforcement and “emotional-cognitive education” (35).

Co-editor Justyna Włodarczyk contributes “Canine Performance Sports in Poland: Another Look at the Dog Training Revolution.” Again, training is the focus and again the author provides an historical perspective, although the emphasis in this chapter is more theoretical, using the ideas of Foucault on power, for instance, while building on the previous chapter’s more practice-based approach. Włodarczyk sees the new emphasis on agility sports in Poland as “a sign that dog guardians are actively seeking new ways of interacting with their dogs: ways that reflect postmodern notions of identity, exhibit a changed understanding of what it means to care for a dog, and prioritize the nurturing of canine happiness over expectations of blind submission” (62).

Chapter four focuses on pedagogy, examining “Dog-Assisted Therapy and Activities in Contemporary Poland.” Agnieszka Wojtków’s contribution explores “dogoterapia” or “cynoterapia” in Poland. She writes from experience, having worked in the field from 2006 to 2013. As with the other chapters, she begins with a general historical overview,

moving to a summary of the subject in Poland, and finally describing the state of the field at present. She emphasizes that country-wide standards are lacking but necessary, and suggests some of the problems in implementing such standards.

I must admit that, as interesting and informative as the first four chapters were, I found the last three the most engaging. Chapter five, "Representations of Dogs in Recent Polish Memoirs and Novels," by Małgorzata Rutkowska, compares several Polish examples of dog memoirs alongside American examples "to determine culture-specific differences in the way the human-canine relationship is experienced and shown" (108). While she finds a number of similarities "in plots and motifs," she also finds significant differences. The most intriguing is how, while in American memoirs the dog functions as a "'savior' to his guardian," in Polish narratives it is most often the human who saves the dog. Also thought-provoking is her finding that "Polish books rarely end with the dog's death or function as grief memoirs" (133) as American ones so often do. This chapter reflected wide reading in both American and Polish literature and provided clear and thoughtful analysis.

The sixth chapter considered how recent Polish art has addressed the problem of animal testing, organized around the artistic treatment of Laika, the dog sent into space by the Soviet Russian space program. "The Future and the Moment of Animal Suffering in Space: Representations of Laika in Polish Contemporary Art," by Dorota Łagodzka, focuses on three representations of Laika. After relating the story of the historical Laika, she analyzes the works of art, and the chapter's interest lies in the art works and their descriptions, rather than on more general theses and conclusions, offering an indirect reminder of how exciting Polish contemporary art is.

The final chapter, "Pet Cemeteries in Poland and Beyond: Their Histories, Meanings, and Symbolism," is by co-editor (and the only male contributor), Michał Piotr Pręgowski. Following the standard general history of the subject, we learn that only after the fall of Communism did pet cemeteries appear in Poland although, as in the field of pet therapy, there are as yet no common standards for these cemeteries. The influence of Catholicism is prevalent in the Polish adoption of the custom, with few religious symbols present. Nevertheless, the Poles adapt their Catholic practices to the mourning of pets. Where every November 1 Poles mark All Saints Day by visiting the graves of their loved ones, leaving flowers and votive candles, they now "mirror" this ritual in Pet Memorial Day on the first Sunday of October after October 4: the feast day of Saint Francis of Assisi and World Animal Day (169). And although they do not mark

the graves with crosses, they do often leave rainbow-colored pinwheels to symbolize the Rainbow Bridge evoked in American pet-mourning practice.

This collection does not answer all my questions about Polish dogs. I would still like to know why Poles are reluctant to neuter their pets, for instance, and why, as I have also observed, they are so fond of miniature Yorkies. But it is a solid, well researched, and insightful contribution to the social role of animals in changing political and economic climates. The emphasis on historical context throughout makes it accessible to people unfamiliar with Polish history and culture, as well as to those who want to put that history and culture in a wider context.