

Editorial:

Gender Relations and Women's Struggles in Socialist Southeast Europe

Dijana Jelača, Nikolay Karkov, Tanja Petrović

Editors - Special Issue

CONTACT:

Dijana Jelača, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, New York City. dijana.jelaca@brooklyn.cuny.edu

Nikolay Karkov, State University of New York at Cortland, Cortland. nikolay.karkov@cortland.edu

Tanja Petrović, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Ljubljana. tanja.petrovic@zrc-sazu.si

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For readers versed in the tradition of North Atlantic feminist theory, the intersection of "socialism" and "feminism" is relatively uncomplicated. As a rule, the theory proffers a critique of the "double oppression" that women experience under patriarchy and capitalism, with the exact relationship between these two systems then up for debate. While often not explicitly thematized, the theory's geographical roots in North American and Western European struggles and contexts inform its epistemological practice and organizational protocols. Its few references to historically existing socialist societies usually point to the early twentieth century, when communist women such as Alexandra Kollontai vehemently insisted on the

“non”- and even “anti-feminist” character of their political commitments (Kollontai 1980: 51-52). Yet unlike state socialist women’s organizations and activism which, well into the 1970s and 1980s, continued to speak of women’s emancipation rather than of feminism (Dinkova 2003; Popa 2010), “Northern” socialist feminists embrace(d) the at times uneasy (but not necessarily unhappy) union of socialism and feminism as indispensable. Even though it may have lost some of its steam—under the challenge of intersectional, postcolonial and decolonial feminisms in particular—the socialist feminist project continues to boast more than a few adherents to this day (Holmstrom et al 2002).

The herstory on the other side of what used to be called “the Iron Curtain,” however, has unfolded quite differently. While the struggles against socialist patriarchy in “the East,” especially from the 1960s on, had a profound impact on Eastern European societies, they continue to be subjected to a double strategy of erasure and banalization.¹ As a rule, the strategy of erasure informs the writings of globally-oriented Northern feminists with limited or simplified knowledge of the former socialist world, as they trace both historical genealogies and unfolding trends of feminist theory and practice. For instance, Nancy Fraser’s feminist narrative of the Cold War period as defined by the “family wage” (of the salaried male), in a popular *New Left Review* article, selectively overlooks state socialism’s open hostility toward the housewifization of women, even if women continued to work the “double shift” on a daily basis (Fraser 2016, p. 104). Similarly, Kathi Weeks’s monograph *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, uncritically reduces historically existing socialism to a “society of work,” including in its discussion of “socialist humanism” whose sole theoretical reference includes German expat Erich Fromm (Weeks 2011, pp. 83-87). Neither author engages, in any serious way, with issues of historical specificity, geographical difference, or a

rigorous examination of local sources; and both (along with many others) display a reductive perception of Eastern European socialist countries and their systems as homogenous or, simply put, all the same, thereby performing a flattening and simplification of the complicated and diverse lived experiences under the (often starkly) different socialist systems in Eastern Europe.

For scholars of historical socialism, by contrast, the preferred weapon of choice, so to speak, has been banalization, especially after the first decade of the post-socialist transition. What this strategy usually entails is a reluctant recognition of the advances that women experienced in socialist societies and a simultaneous neutralization of those gains by attributing them to an external source, typically patriarchal manipulation. As discussed in this issue by Tanja Petrović and Jovana Mihajlović Trbovc, it is this strategy of trivialization that also underlies Nanette Funk's problematic effort to disentangle the "very tangled knot" of socialist womanhood, which Funk identifies, in the last instance, as devoid of feminist agency (Funk 2014; see Petrović and Mihajlović Trbovc in this issue). A similar impulse informs Romanian scholar Mihaela Miroiu's widely circulated polemical piece titled "Communism Was a State Patriarchy, not State Feminism," whose main argument reads "communist feminism" as a *contradictio in terminis*, even as the author recognizes "people's socialisation in state nurseries, kindergartens, and later schools, universities, mass-media, and within leisure time" (Miroiu 2007, p. 1999). For Miroiu, it is the refusal of state socialism to recognize "women's autonomy as an end in itself" (2007, p. 198) which obviates the possibility of a convergence between the normative goals of feminism and the patriarchal realities of historically existing socialism. Alongside Miroiu's "state patriarchy," state socialism has been defined as "public emancipation" and "public patriarchy" as well, further undermining socialism's multiplicities and varied articulations (Funk 2003, p. 7; Kotseva 2009, p. 221).

This special issue's ambition is to challenge these politics of omissions and trivializations. At the same time, we do not set out to "get it completely right" or give the "final verdict" once and for all—a daunting and perhaps impossible task anyway. What the issue pursues instead is to contribute to an expanding body of work that seeks to offer a more nuanced understanding of gender relations and struggles over women's emancipation under state socialism.² While historically existing socialism admittedly fell far short of its own stated ideals, including in the sphere of gender relations and sexuality, its record of actual accomplishments had a wide impact especially in the second half of the twentieth century, in both the East and the West, and continues to bear important lessons for the present moment (see e.g. Kulawik 2020). The product of a constant tug-of-war between the patriarchal state bureaucracy and the champions of de-patriarchalization (usually party members if not bureaucrats themselves), the major advances in women's emancipation under socialism constitute no minor feat, especially in light of both the brutal patriarchies that preceded it and the neoliberal destructuring (and destruction) that has followed (see e.g. Daskalova 2007; Burcar 2012).

Keeping in mind the contributions of each individual text in this special issue, it is worth marking three of the areas in which gender relations and women's struggles in Southeast Europe in particular made important strides forward. It is no secret that state socialism's arguably greatest achievement was in the field of socialized reproduction. While the socialization of reproductive work dates back to the utopian socialism of the 1840s, it is after October 1917 that it would also become a mainstay of socialist policy, in an effort to eliminate what Engels had already identified as the "domestic enslavement of woman" (Engels 1978, p. 744; see also Ghodsee 2018; Adamczak 2018; Bonfiglioli 2014, 2020). By the late 1960s and early 1970s these ideas found their field of application in the socialist

countries of Southeast Europe as well. In the context of post-Stalinist Bulgaria, for instance, this time period witnessed major increases in state support for social reproduction, including in the construction of kindergartens and workplace canteens, the sequestering of funds for single mothers, mothers of many children, and women with disabilities, and the provision of an up to-three-years guaranteed maternity leave, much of it paid. While facing up to a demographic crisis which the party apparatchiks were inclined to read through a sort of reverse Malthusianism (too few workers for the available means of production), a set of Politburo decisions ended up committing support for reproductive practices and facilities rather than imposing a ban on abortions, for instance (Ghodsee 2014, p. 253). Notably, this commitment of state resources was itself couched not in terms of heightened productivity, but of access to leisure and leisurely activities, as per the new 1971 Constitution's famous article 42.

No less importantly, these significant advances were not the product of patriarchal benevolence or merely a logical extension of the transition to an administered socialism of the consumer variety in Southeast Europe. They were also and very much the fruit of women's emancipation activism, including on the pages of popular women's magazines, in the hallways of the newly recalibrated women's mass organization (the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement), and even in behind-closed-doors Politburo meetings (Ghodsee 2014a, 2014b; Dinkova 2003, 2008). As "femocrats" pushed and pulled against the inertia of the party bureaucracy, organized major surveys on the time budget of women across the country, and even ghost wrote and smuggled key sections into the major programmatic documents of the Bulgarian Communist Party, they had everything to do with the "women-friendly" decisions of the BCP leadership of the time.³ Over and against definitions of women's agency as pivoting around full autonomy, participants in these

struggles identified their own position as one of “illuminated realism,” i.e. an activist awareness that in the transition from (the purity of) theory to (the messiness of) practice one’s “accomplishments appear half-baked, distorted, stained” (Dinkova 2008, p. 51).⁴

Notably, these socialist accomplishments, while under constant threat of dismantling, continue to shape social, professional and family life in the former socialist countries. The remnants of Bulgaria’s generous maternity continue to rank high internationally to this day (Kalb 2018, p. 88), while post-socialist Slovenia has one of the lowest gender pay gaps in the European Union, with 8% in 2017 as compared to 16% for the EU as a whole. The equality of earnings between men and women was made possible because of the wide array of welfare services established during socialism that are still largely preserved in Slovenia, including accessible and affordable preschool and free after-school care for children. As Chiara Bonfiglioli stresses, “together with the vision of work as a source of human emancipation, and as the main source of emancipation for women, the Yugoslav state after 1945 promoted the socialization of domestic work and social reproduction, namely, the so-called ‘social motherhood’” (Bonfiglioli 2020: 57). At the same time, Slovenia’s pay gap is among the fastest rising in the European Union, with welfare provisions among the first victims of the politics of austerity of the post-socialist era (STA 2019). Positive assessments of socialism by (former) workers in the textile industry, which are usually dismissed as (trivial) nostalgia, are also clearly linked to these welfare benefits from the socialist era (Bonfiglioli 2020, reviewed in this volume).

The second major characteristic of socialist women’s activism was its commitment to collaborative projects and transnational exchanges, particularly with women’s organizations and activists from the global South and especially from the 1970s on. At a time when

second-wave feminism around the North Atlantic expressed a strong reluctance toward engaging in state-sponsored institutional activism and often embraced a homogenizing vision of sisterhood and an uncritical practice of separatism, women's mass organizations and actors from Southeast Europe were firmly committed to struggles against not only patriarchy, but also colonialism, imperialism, and racism (Bonfiglioli 2016). This stark contrast was especially visible during the UN Women's Decade (1975-1985), including during the celebrations marking 1975 as International Women's Year. At the international women's conference in Mexico City of the same year, socialist women from countries such as Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Hungary chose to attend sessions and discuss matters with their peers from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, rather than the far more formal talks by Western feminist celebrities such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem (Popa 2009). The National Council of Women in Romania (CNF) had proposed 1975 to be declared the year of women already three years earlier, and organizations such as the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement and the Yugoslav Conference for the Social Activities of Women (KDAŽ) were instrumental in drawing connections between women's development and emancipation and the struggle against colonialism and neocolonialism (Bonfiglioli 2016, p. 535; Ghodsee 2014b, p. 255). The Yugoslav women's involvement was very much in line with the country's strong presence in the Non-Aligned Movement since the late 1950s, while the Bulgarian organization had been assigned the task of working with women in Africa and Asia by the Soviets (Bonfiglioli 2016; Ghodsee 2014b).⁵

An important part of those exchanges included the transfer of material resources and knowledge practices between socialist women and their peers in the global South as well. For instance, women from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East were often invited on fully covered official visits and to training seminars on how to run a mass

women's organization and advocate for social change, and were also provided with full scholarships to pursue university studies in a host socialist country before returning back home (Ghodsee 2014b). Organizations such as the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement had their own special "international solidarity fund," which was often accessed to finance such activities (Ibid.). Importantly, the South-East conversations and collaborations often extended beyond the framework of the state-sponsored women's organizations as well. As socialist women signed petitions, wrote letters, and organized demonstrations on behalf of racialized women in war-torn zones and in support of political prisoners in the global North, they often experienced significant shifts in perception and in their senses of self as well. Such practices often opened up unprecedented possibilities for learning and practical solidarity, as evidenced by the international campaign to "Free Angela" and evidenced by Davis's subsequent tour of the countries of Eastern Europe (Todorova 2018; Valiavicharska 2019).⁶

The third theme of interest to this issue pertains to questions of gender and sexuality. While normative accounts of "sex under socialism" tend to portray a bleak landscape of compulsory heteronormativity, familialism, and often an outright repression of desire, at least since the early and ultimately abortive practices of sexual experimentation of the Russian Revolution (Kollontai; Adamczak 2018), the complex and often contradictory dynamics of the socialist societies in Southeast Europe defy an easy categorization or a neat lumping together. While it is true that expressions of desire and (especially non-normative) sexuality posed major challenges to the institutions of state socialism, important local developments often troubled simplistic binaries of a sexually liberated West versus an oppressed and sexless East. This was certainly the case in the field of popular cultural expression, where films such as Bulgarian *Monday Morning* (Aktasheva and Piskov, 1966), Romanian *I Am Not the Eif-*

fel Tower (Oproiu, 1964), and Yugoslav *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism* (Dušan Makavejev, 1971) challenged socialist patriarchy and yet still did it within the broad framework of the socialist imaginary. *Monday Morning*, for instance, offers a powerful critique of a dedicated communist husband, via the figure of his defiant and pleasure-seeking young wife, while in *I Am Not the Eiffel Tower* a female doctor with “emancipated girlfriends” and a male architecture student reimagine their lives together while lost on a road in the countryside. Perhaps most radically, in *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism*, the female protagonist, Milena, proudly proclaims that there is no (socialist) revolution without a sexual revolution (following the teachings of Wilhelm Reich, whose initials are referenced in the film’s title). Furthermore, as Jasmina Tumbas’ article in this issue illustrates, in Yugoslavia, both avant-garde female artists and mainstream female pop stars openly and at times quite graphically explored the questions of sex and sexuality in their works.

Yet it wasn’t just about a few isolated cultural artifacts whose capacity for immanent critique was probably not lost on the general public. While admittedly atypical in socialist Southeast Europe, Yugoslavia, well ahead of 1989, had a public and visible “queer” culture, which included not only widely available newspapers and gay and lesbian magazines, but also a vibrant underground club scene, strong activism, and even a public gay festival. In fact, the very first gay and lesbian movie festival on the European continent was organized in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 1984 (Kajinić 2016, p. 17–18). With exception of 1987, when it was banned, it has been held yearly up until today as *The Lesbian and Gay Film Festival*. As Sanja Kajinić helpfully suggests, post-socialist claims to “firstness” present complex challenges, as the pursued legitimization through Europeaness bespeaks a post-socialist desire to separate Slovenia from the Balkans and its Yugoslav past. No less importantly and over and against normative alignments of queer politics and a liberal-capitalist West/

North, Ljubljana's gay and lesbian scene of the 1980s "creates ruptures in the geotemporality of the hegemonic Europeanizing project" by the insertion of socialist Yugoslavia as quintessentially European (Kajinić 2016, p. 29).

Certainly, the above three themes—the socialization of reproductive work, practicing international solidarity with women and women's organizations in the global South, and the politics of (non-normative) gender and sexuality—do not constitute a complete list of all of state socialism's accomplishments when it comes to women, but only some of the fields in which such accomplishments materialized. Furthermore, the advances in the struggle against socialist patriarchy were always uneven and often conditional, a product of complicated negotiations that never just scored simple victories and that were often strained between maximalist goals and far more modest political realities. Yet if we have selected to foreground these three rubrics of socialist life, it is not only because of their subjection to neglect or oversight in feminist historiography and political thought. It is also because each of this issue's individual contributions touches on one or more of these themes, inviting us to complicate even further our own preconceptions about gender relations and women's struggles under socialism.

The issue begins with two texts which explore works of literature from socialist Yugoslavia and Romania, as they take up questions of socialist womanhood from a critical perspective. Tijana Matijević's opening essay, titled "Biljana Jovanović, a Rebel with a Cause or: On 'a General Revision of Your Possibilities,'" analyzes the often overlooked Yugoslav writer Biljana Jovanović's early novels as part of the "laboratory of questioning and experimentation" that was socialist Yugoslavia (Matijević, this issue). Notably, the essay explores Jovanović's reflections on the possibility of imagining alternative forms of sociability in socialist Yugoslavia, which would

result in universal human emancipation. In Matijević's reading, Jovanović singles out class and sex as accentuating universalism, since they are not categories of identity, but structuring societal categories.

Working out of a Romanian context, Ovidiu Țichindeleanu's essay titled "Veronica Porumbacu's *Return from Cythera* (1966): A Conceptual Manifesto of Socialist Feminism" revisits the poetry volume *Return to Cythera* by Romanian poet and translator Veronica Porumbacu from a philosophical perspective. As he situates Porumbacu's influential work in the context of rising anti-colonialism and intense debates around the "future of communism" in the 1960s and 1970s, Țichindeleanu reads Porumbacu's re-appropriation of the mythical island of Cythera as a challenge to the virtues of disembodied and asexual reason. Țichindeleanu consequently proposes that Porumbacu's unassuming volume be considered "a conceptual manifesto of socialist feminism" in which "embodied thought, historical consciousness, and the reflexive eroticism of freedom" not only defied socialist patriarchy but also continue to push us beyond the limits of capitalist colonial modernity (Țichindeleanu, this issue).

The issue's next three texts look at Yugoslav socialist women's agency, in relation to both artistic practices and political commitments. Dijana Jelača's essay "Towards Women's Minor Cinema in Socialist Yugoslavia" discusses the concept of minor cinema that addresses the spectator as female, conceptualized through cultural texts circulating within the so-called "women's genres" such as melodramas and soap operas. These cultural forms, Jelača argues, "frequently articulated feminist stances that did not draw a dichotomous opposition to the socialist state as such, but rather called for the state to fulfill its original promise of women's emancipation" (Jelača, this issue). Moreover, Jelača challenges the normative his-

torical accounts of socialist Yugoslav cinema that typically ignore, or conveniently forget, woman's work. By focusing on Yugoslavia's first woman feature film director Soja Jovanović, Jelača inserts this important figure into the (her)story of not only Yugoslav cinema, but also of socialist minor cinema as women's cinema more broadly.

In their essay titled "Agency, Biography, and Temporality: (Un)making Women's Biographies in the Wake of the Loss of the Socialist Project in Yugoslavia," Tanja Petrović and Jovana Mihajlović Trbovc also shed light on the complex and often contentious relationship between women "political workers" in socialist Slovenia and the socialist state. Petrović and Mihajlović Trbovc discuss these women's agency, which was understood in socialism as an "ability to act and meaningfulness of acting on several fronts." This kind of agency vanished in the wake of the Yugoslav socialist project, when the biographies of these women were also refashioned and fragmented by stressing only certain aspects of their agency during socialism while omitting, marginalizing, or questioning others. This narrowing down of what counts as meaningful political work, the authors argue, contributes to delegitimizing, forgetting, and disabling the modes of political and social engagement that were possible in the context of state socialism.

The collection closes with "The Return of Jugoslovenka: An Unrequited Love Affair" by Jasmina Tumbas, in which she argues for the central place of women's emancipation in the Yugoslav socialist project. She discusses feminist art production from the 1970s and 1980s, as well as contemporary, post-socialist feminist artistic engagements with Yugoslavia's legacy. Tumbas explores the concept of "Jugoslovenka" (Yugoslav female) popularized by the country's most popular pop-folk singer Lepa Brena in her eponymous song. Importantly, as Jugoslovenka is articulated as an emancipatory figure in both mainstream culture and avant-garde

feminist practices, Tumbas' essay challenges the dichotomy between the two in Yugoslav cultural production.

The essays gathered in this collection are heterogeneous and cover a variety of themes, but are simultaneously closely intertwined by several threads. They all abound in complexities and tensions, and often yield unexpected arrangements of the relationship between women's struggles against patriarchy and the socialist states in Southeast Europe. All authors engage in recuperating forgotten, ignored, or intentionally refashioned histories of these struggles. They also all insist on the relevance of these histories for present-day temporality defined by neoliberal and neo-colonial regimes, both in the region and globally.

This special issue has both been long in the making and appears at a critical moment in time. The idea and original framework were conceived about three years ago, when an early proposal on Southeast European women's emancipation struggles was submitted to *Wagadu's* board for approval. Between then and now, changes in the composition of the issue's editorial collective and of its list of contributors has resulted in a final product (the present one) notably different from that original conception, mirroring our ever evolving and deepening understanding of the complex and uneven nature of historically existing socialism. As we recognize the invisible labor of those who walked with us for much of the way, we also note that, under a complex mix of circumstances beyond our control, this special issue veers heavily toward the former Yugoslav context and to forms of cultural expression such as literature, cinema, and the arts more broadly. Rather than an intentional centering of Yugoslavia as *the* normative case study of socialism and feminism in Southeast Europe, this particular configuration is much more the result of contingency than planning, including of editorial and peer reviewing decisions, and is certainly not meant to minimize the sig-

nificance of gender relations and struggles over women's emancipation in other socialist countries of Southeast Europe. If anything, we hope that it will motivate further (urgently needed) research on the intersections of socialism and feminism in the region.

Last but not least, the final stages of the production of this special issue, as well as its publication, coincide with both the global COVID-19 pandemic and a renewed wave of protests against racial injustice in the US echoing around the world (another pandemic, as it were). We mention these lived conditions not only because they disproportionately target vulnerable and marginalized bodies, but also because they, too, inevitably affect not just our lives but also our work (and the in/ability to perform it). As we take stock of the heavy burden of a global health emergency and a (no less global and rapidly accelerating) racist violence and the growing protests against it, some of the questions that historically existing socialism posed in the second half of the twentieth century, around the issues of social(ized) reproduction and the imperatives of international solidarity in particular, continue to loom as large as ever. As we present this special issue to our readers, we do so in the hope that its dossier of texts will offer some additional helpful tools for grappling with the challenges of the present moment. Speaking as scholars from Southeast Europe, we also hope that the issue be taken for what it is meant to be: an invitation to move the conversation further, honoring a complex legacy that still deserves far better than being trivialized and simplified under post-socialist conditions, when it is not erased out of existence altogether.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For a discussion of these two strategies with respect to representations of the Haitian revolution in official historiography, see Trouillot (1995, p. 97).
- ² For a starting list of references on the topic, see the essays in De Han (ed.) 2016, as well as the bibliography at the end of this editorial.
- ³ As Kristen Ghodsee claims, the support for working mothers in Bulgaria was unprecedented in the socialist world, at the time when it was proposed in 1970 (Ghodsee 2014b, p. 253).
- ⁴ In a similar vein and while discussing the same context, Kristen Ghodsee suggests that women's self-actualization does not necessarily rest on "the production of individual, autonomous subjects liberated from all social obligations" but more on improving "the quality of one's life" (Ghodsee 2014a, p. 540).
- ⁵ Notably, these fruitful exchanges have been erased from the official historiographies of Cold War feminism, including on the pages of some of its most prestigious academic publications. As Chiara Bonfiglioli reminds us, an early 1976 Women and Development conference at Wellesley College reflected "a conception of third-world women's interests and needs based largely on perceptions of first-world scholars," with women from the socialist bloc completely absent from the conversation (Bonfiglioli 516, pp. 527-528; see also Coogan-Gehr 2011).
- ⁶ As Miglena Todorova reminds us, one of Davis's interlocutors in socialist Bulgaria was a young Romani girl by the name of Meliha Andreeva, who started the "Free Angela" letter campaign in Bulgaria and who had a chance to meet Davis during her visit to the country after her release in 1972. The meeting played an important role in helping the young Meliha develop further her anti-patriarchal and anti-racist sensibility (Todorova 2018).