

BOOK REVIEW

Kristen Ghodsee. *Second World, Second Sex. Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-1-4780-0181-2 (pbk), 328 pp.

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While most recent feminist studies on the socialist heritage are preoccupied with the conjunctures of postcolonial and postsocialist conditions of the 1990s and beyond, Kristen Ghodsee's book *Second World, Second Sex* (2018) evokes the most vibrant decade of women's global activism marked by joint initiatives of women from both socialist and decolonized societies from the Global South. Confronting the usual Western (re-)interpretations of the vanishing Second World in temporal rather than spatial categories, Ghodsee redraws the geography, political economy, and specific historical context of the socialist emancipation project "beyond the usual tropes of totalitarianism — the secret police, travel restrictions, and consumer goods shortages" (p. 27). Even more radically, Ghodsee considers Marxist feminists from the former Eastern bloc (such as Elena Lagadinova, Krastina Tchomakova or Vida Tomšič) to be the most influential activists who initiated the global movement of women at official UN forums, allowing women not only to speak about women's rights but also to discuss issues of development, colonialism, racism, apartheid, imperialism, and the injustice of a New International Economic Order. Using a distinctive binocular perspective on the women's political activism in

Bulgaria (an exemplary socialist country) and Zambia (a non-aligned postcolonial country with socialist leanings), the author demonstrates how socialist ideals, including those of state-supported women's emancipation and state-supported care for social reproduction, were transmitted worldwide and for two decades shaped the most progressive course of our modern social history. The book is organized in two parts: the first part compares women's activism in domestic political context in Bulgaria, USA and Zambia, while the second part appraises major achievements of the international women's politics, its scope, results, and shortcomings. The conclusions of the first part ("Organizing Women under Socialism and Capitalism") — that socialist women benefited from progressive legislation and equal rights earlier and on a larger scale than women in Western democracies, that feminist internationalism, solidarity and the politics of equity and were conceptualized and promoted by leftist women from the Women's International Democratic Federation — may not be new but are corroborated by meticulous archival and oral history research. Also, the opinion that the international feminist project is much broader and more inclusive than usually perceived in Western feminist historiography is exemplified by professional biographies of distinguished women such as Elena Lagadinova, Maria Dinkova, Sonya Bakish, Ana Durcheva, Chibesa Kankasa, Lily Monze, and Senior Chieftainess Nkomeshya Mukamambo II, who might form an alternative "feminist pantheon" alongside figures canonized in the West.

With precious photo documentation and the compelling narration characteristic of all her studies, Ghodsee assigns faces, voices, and temperaments to these forgotten activists, sketched with the help of detailed oral history interviews, archival sources from three continents, and a thick ethnographic description of women's public agency. The joint efforts of the socialist champions of women's emancipation in the Global South are enormous, and their intersectional approach to the issue of women's subordination is as relevant

today as it was in the past. One of the important conclusions, which resonates particularly with the current feminist debate over the (false or true) agency of socialist women, states that the socialist women activists were not the “dupe[s] of the male communist elites back home” (p. 12) but rather and most often proactive social agents acting semi-autonomously.

The second part of the book, “The Women’s Cold War”, explains alternative paths to modernization, humanism, social equality, and women’s rights that women activists from the Eastern Bloc “exported” to the Global South, primarily through the activities of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WILF), which initiated the UN International Year of Women in 1975 and the subsequent (1975-1985) Decade for Women. Although the exchange of ideas and initiatives along the North/South axis was not equal, Ghodsee demonstrates how the speeches, debates, and actions of a few thousand participants at the four UN conferences for women (Mexico 1975, Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985, and Beijing 1995), changed the course of modern history not only in the newly liberated former colonies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, but also in the First World, where women profited from the ideological competition over progressive laws and better socioeconomic opportunities. Alongside the books and articles by feminist historians Francisca de Haan (2010, 2012) and Jocelyn Olcott (2017), by feminist activists, and scholars, and also by the UN conference participants, Devaki Jain from India and Peggy Antrobus from Jamaica, Ghodsee’s book is crucial for understanding how European socialist women delegates “formed a powerful alliance with the women from the developing countries and managed to dominate both the official proceedings and the parallel NGO Forum” (p. 174). This alliance was particularly strong while debating the political character and importance of the UN women’s meetings, since delegates from the socialist and developing countries “argued that the international

women's conference should be a forum to allow women to have their say about the same world issues that men debated in the UN (nuclear proliferation, peace in the Middle East, apartheid in South Africa, and so on)." Simultaneously, the East European delegations "asserted that women would have more success in achieving cooperation and peace between nations and therefore focused on the perceived imperialist actions of the United States rather than the problems of achieving legal equality with men (which they at least theoretically already had)" (p. 148). On the other hand, American liberal feminists, formally instructed by government officials not to socialize with socialist women outside of protocol, had demanded to discuss only "feminist topics" such as legal barriers, employment discrimination, inequalities in educational attainment, and women's representation in political office.

Confronting the regular US criticism of "politicizing" the women's issues in discussions and documents resulting from the UN conferences, especially those denouncing the violence of imperialism, racism and Zionism, Zambian delegate Petronella Kawandami wisely observed in her address to the Plenary Session of the Mexico conference that "the political superstructure transcends all human activities in one way or another" (p. 149). In a way, this thought summarizes Ghodsee's detailed research proving that knowing the political framework of the Cold War, but also the conflict of the two ideological and economic systems, is necessary to understand the global women's rights movement, its wavy history and internal controversies. As one of the best authorities on the history of socialist women's international activism, the author's work points out the unproductiveness of contemporary confrontations between *liberal* and *Marxist* feminists represented by "the feminism for the 99%" (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019). Namely, she has demonstrated how the gradual discreditation of the Marxist critique of capitalism cum imperialism as the main cause of rising global in-

equality has resulted in the diminished importance of women's actions and protests worldwide since the 1995 conference in Beijing. But she also clearly points out the dependency of the Eastern European women's rights achievements on the socialist state's gender equality agenda, in an "unhappy marriage" between communism and feminism, state interventionism and state patriarchy. The *Second World, Second Sex* has to be strongly recommended not only to scholars in Slavic studies, feminist, gender and postcolonial studies, as well as international relations, but to all those who have high expectations of the current trend of re/connecting the feminist and the climate change movements, as well as the new global actions combating inequality, racism and violence against women and girls, as necessary actions to restore the political relevance to transnational women's organizing efforts, as was the case in the 1970s and 1980s.

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