

TRANSLATION

WOMEN AND SELF-MANAGEMENT*

*Blaženka Despot, introduced
by Zsófia Lóránd*

Abstract

Blaženka Despot (1930–2001) was a Yugoslav philosopher who applied a critical reading of Marxism to the philosophy of technology and, after the mid-1970s, proposed a form of Marxist feminism that took into account the context of Yugoslav self-managing socialism. In the short text “Women and Self-Management,” Despot summarises the ideas she developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially her Marxist-feminist critiques of socialist women’s emancipation in Yugoslavia. She calls for re-focusing on women and revisiting Marx’s concept of nature through a reading of Hegel. While doing so, she raises the issue of violence against women as a key matter of women’s equality. Zsófia Lóránd, in her introduction, discusses the text in light of Despot’s broader oeuvre and in light of the history of feminism in Yugoslavia.

Keywords

The woman question, Marxist feminism, history of nature, human emancipation, racism

* This text is based on work of the COST Action NEP4DISSENT, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

Introduction and Commentary

Zsófia Lóránd

The woman question needs to be reopened, even if it's inappropriate; moreover, we need a Marxist feminism to revisit the issue of women's emancipation and achieve real social change. So argued the philosopher Blaženka Despot in her writings of the 1980s. The following short essay from 1981 that we are re-publishing in the current issue of *Contradictions* well summarises the main questions Despot was working on in the 1980s and offers a glimpse not only into Despot's impressive oeuvre, but also into the history of feminism in Yugoslavia at the time. Despot (1930–2001) studied philosophy in Zagreb and earned her PhD at the University of Ljubljana in philosophy of anthropology. She worked as a professor of Marxism, socialism, and self-management (teaching philosophy and sociology) at the Veterinary Faculty in Zagreb and later at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Zagreb. She was visiting scholar in Frankfurt am Main, and visiting professor in Konstanz and Bamberg. Despot published multiple books and a large number of journal articles. She was a well-loved and respected teacher and intellectual.¹

Blaženka Despot was also one of the few intellectuals who maintained a presence in two of the most impressive intellectual circles in socialist Yugoslavia: Praxis and new Yugoslav feminism (*neofeminizam*, also referred to as the *Žena i društvo*, that is: Woman and Society group, or rather groups). Early in her career, she was influenced by Praxis, and although she was never formally or informally part of the group, she participated in the intellectual debates around Praxis and was active at many of the Praxis events, including the Korčula summer school. Already in her early work, she was most interested in human freedom and women's emancipation. It was in the early 1980s that she became deeply involved with feminism, which was both old and new in the Yugoslav context at the time. After the explicitly and vocally non-feminist socialist women's emancipation politics and discourse that characterised not only the self-managing Yugoslav take on women's equality but also that of the entire socialist bloc, a new interest in feminism was sparked in the 1970s by what is often referred to as

¹ Short biographies of Despot: Ljerka Schiffler-Premec, "Despot, Blaženka" in *Hrvatski biografski leksikon* (Zagreb: Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, 1993); Gordana Bosanac, "Blaženka Despot," in Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova, and Anna Loutfi (eds.), *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms in Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe: 19th and 20th Centuries* (Budapest and New York: CEU Press, 2006), pp. 114–117. An excellent overview of her work and significance: Gordana Bosanac, "Mjesto i značenje Blaženke Despot u suvremenoj hrvatskoj filozofiji" [The place and significance of Blaženka Despot in contemporary Croatian philosophy], *Filozofska istraživanja* 28 (2008), no. 3, 625–637.

the “Western second wave” and also involved a return to the diverse interwar feminist traditions of the Yugoslav region. In the language of the socialist women’s emancipation project, feminism was outdated, Western and bourgeois, which the feminist generation of the 1970s then questioned in a multiplicity of ways. As one way of bringing feminism into the socialist Yugoslav context, Blaženka Despot worked out a complex and comprehensive argument for a Marxist feminism, which she sometimes called a “feminised” form of Marxism.² Grounding her feminism in Marxism did not mean that she spared Marx and other Marxian thinkers from ruthless scrutiny and criticism. Neither was she hesitant when it came to a critique of Yugoslav self-management and women’s rights and social status. Together with other new Yugoslav feminist thinkers, she claimed that self-management had not fulfilled its promise of women’s equality. Despot was a generation older than most new Yugoslav feminists (mostly born after WWII) and adhered to the writings of Marx much more closely than they did. Her work also drew heavily on Hegel, Marcuse, and Lukács. Other thinkers of the (intellectually rather heterogenous) group, while well-versed in the work of these authors, were much more inspired by the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s from France, Great Britain, and the United States. Despot, already a professor at the time, was open and willing to engage in a dialogue with and learn from students and the recently graduated PhDs in the *Žena i društvo* group.

In the *Žena i društvo* group, there was a growing fascination with (among others) feminisms from Luce Irigaray through Juliet Mitchell to the writings of the Redstockings, and it was simultaneous with these discussions that Despot sharpened and deepened her critique of not only the “dogmatic” but also the revisionist Marxist takes on the woman question. While women’s equality was not neglected in the Praxis circle and some of the established male Praxis-professors were supportive of the creation of the feminist discussion groups,³ their take rarely stepped out of the shadow of the canonical Marxist texts (by Engels and Bebel) on women and the family.⁴ Despot’s suggestion for a new Marxist feminism, therefore, was innovative and brave, as it also involved questioning the proclaimed success of women’s emancipation by Yugoslav self-managing socialism. This idea was very much in line with the critique articulated by the other Yugoslav feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, forming one of the rare cases of feminist dissent to the communist-led regimes in the entire region of Eastern and East-Central

² Blaženka Despot, “Feminizirani marksizam” [Feminised Marxism], interview by Dragan Jovanović, *NIN* 35, no. 1723, Jan. 8, 1984, pp. 17–18.

³ About Praxis and women, see David A. Crocker, *Praxis and Democratic Socialism: The Critical Social Theory of Marković and Stojanović* (New Jersey: Humanities Press and Sussex: Harvester, 1983), esp. pp. 128–132. Concerning the role of the Praxis professors during the early phase of new Yugoslav feminism, see Zsófia Lóránd, *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 32.

⁴ See Una Blagojević, “Praxis and Women Intellectuals,” in this issue of *Contradictions*, pp. 47–69.

Europe.⁵ Within the broader framework of new Yugoslav feminism, Despot provides a case of a move from Marxist revisionism to feminist dissent.

Despot's primary focus was on the issue of nature, and its interpretation by Hegel and then by Marx, as well as the concept of time in the work of Marx. Focusing on these two concepts was crucial for a better understanding of women's status and women's lived experience in socialism. This enabled Despot's claim for the woman question to be reopened: she believed in the need for a well-grounded theory, one that then can be turned into practice. The main problem with the existing approach to the woman question, to Despot, lay in the very concept of the *working mother*, centring theory and practice alike around her figure. The concept of the woman being replaced by that of the mother prioritises women's reproductive role (nature) over everything else. In the dialectic of nature and society, if nature is seen as the eternal and never-changing and is "attributed a secondary significance in society's value system, and the inference to then be drawn is that all that is biological, natural, unhistorical, female – is regarded as being of a lower value," argues Despot in her essay here.⁶ A dangerous idea since, as her argument continues, "to confine history to historical beings who are, to a lesser extent conditioned by nature, is an absolute – scientific premise (Hegel) for *racism*."⁷ Confining women to their reproductive role, therefore, is what Despot and her contemporary and fellow-philosopher, Gordana Bosanac (like Despot, a generation older than most of those in the feminist circle) called *male racism* or *sex-based racism* at the time.

This manoeuvre in her argument is especially clever, as she steps out of the dialectic of gender (the woman question) and class (the class question), where gender as a determinant of emancipation needs to be subsumed to class. She moves the debate to a different terrain. One that was both more neutral and more conflictuous. Talking about racism was more neutral vis-à-vis the regime, given that, officially, self-managing socialist Yugoslavia and its leadership under Tito was devotedly anti-racist. Thus, racism appears to be something outside the local political debates, there being a consensual condemnation of racism. However, it is more conflictuous and provocative to talk about racism, since here Despot suggests that there was still a form of racism present in self-management. (The issue of racism as such was of course far from being a non-problem in socialist Yugoslavia itself, as current research shows.)⁸ Despot dispels

⁵ See Zsófia Lóránd and Ana Miškovska Kajevska, "From Dissent to Dissidence and Assent: Belgrade and Zagreb Feminism in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s" (manuscript under review), and Zsófia Lóránd, "Creating Feminism in the Shadow of Male Heroes: That Other Story of 1989," in Ferenc Laczó and Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič (eds.), *The Legacy of Division: East and West after 1989* (Budapest and New York: CEU Press, 2020), pp. 177–186.

⁶ See below, p. 149.

⁷ See below, *ibid.*

⁸ See Catherine Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-Conflict, Postcolonial?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018).

the idea frequently used to justify racism, that nature is never-changing, through Marx's argument that nature *does* change over time, and argues: if the human relationship to nature changes over time, then "nature" changes over time: "nature is no longer a determining constant, neither is the 'nature of woman.'"⁹

The other aspect of the critique of the conceptualisation of the working mother is related to the concept of time. Despot tediously and creatively re-read and re-interpreted the concept of labour from a Marxist-theoretical perspective. She chose Marx's concepts of abstract and concrete labour in order to reconceptualise what she considered a neglected concept of domestic labour.¹⁰ Labour and time being intertwined, she argues that women do not have time to be engaged in politics, to essentially fulfil the possibilities offered on paper by the legislation of Yugoslav self-management, because of the "attitude to the 'nature of women.'"¹¹ Despite the possibility in self-management to a "new attitude to nature, to the division of labour, and to state and authoritarian relations as a whole,"¹² women were still on the margins of participation in decision-making. She developed this idea further in the chapters "History and socialist nature" and "History and women's nature" in her 1987 book, *Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje* [The woman question and socialist self-management].

Women's lack of time, due to the old way of reducing them to their reproductive role (nature), is tied together with the phenomenon of domestic violence. In the essay below, Despot directly connects what we would call today discrimination against women to violence against women: "Self-managers beat their wives, too, a proof of the old relationship to nature. The old authoritarian attitude to the division of labour to nature – authoritarian relations within the family and society – mainly affects women because *she does not have the time* for acquiring skills and becoming involved in politics and science on account of the traditional values underlying the division of labour within the family."¹³ She goes even further with this argument in her book *Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje*, expanding on the forms of violence against women that are ignored and treated as a non-problem in the writings of Marx. Reducing the matter of women's emancipation to the class question ignores violence, "the violation of the body," which on the other hand, in Hegel, is considered worse than any attack on private property and which is seen as a prerequisite of freedom (prevention from slavery).¹⁴ To Gordana Bosanac, this move to the issue of violence against women as

⁹ See below, p. 149.

¹⁰ Blaženka Despot, *Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje* [The woman question and socialist self-management] (Zagreb: Cekade, 1987), p. 58.

¹¹ See below, p. 150.

¹² See below, *ibid.*.

¹³ See below, *ibid.*, emphasis in the original.

¹⁴ Blaženka Despot, *Izabrana djela Blaženke Despot* [The collected work of Blaženka Despot], ed.

a core matter was the decisive move for Despot, one that ultimately differentiates her from the thinkers of Praxis.¹⁵

The way Despot is specific about the forms of violence against women – by providing a list of its prevalent forms: beating, rape, control of women’s reproduction, verbal abuse, and vulgar, violent utterances about the female body and sex – was at the centre of new Yugoslav feminist activities in the 1980s. In those major cities where the new Yugoslav feminists were most active, that is in Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Zagreb, there was a shift from theory to activism in the early 1980s. This shift was driven by the examination of different forms of violence against women. The very first centres and SOS helplines for victims of violence against women and children were set up in the late 1980s as counter-institutions to the state. The knowledge gained from activism was creatively and intelligently rechanneled into the theoretical work.¹⁶ Despot’s writings are an excellent example of the interaction between feminist activism and feminist theory. Her assertion that theory is needed for social action is reflected in her work’s sharp focus on social issues and her choice to place one of the most burning issues in women’s lives at the centre of her philosophical investigation.

Blaženka Despot’s philosophical writings were always uncompromisingly focused on the matters of human freedom, radical humanism, and the freedom of women. She saw the radical potential in women, their ability to push society towards real transformation: “women tend to show the greatest interest in radically questioning the entire production of life – division of labour, relationship to nature, authoritarian relations, statism.”¹⁷ As her Sarajevo-based fellow feminist, Nada Ler Sofronić argued: women have been aware of their hundreds of years of oppression, and learned how to survive it, but this awareness has the potential of radical change too.¹⁸ Despot’s conclusion in her texts, including the short essay below, about the need to make women aware of their potential ability to fight their oppression has been the conclusion of many feminist thinkers and activist groups throughout history. She and the new Yugoslav feminists were fascinated by new ways of consciousness-raising, a concept that had a long way to travel from Marx’s writings to the feminists of the 1960s and 1970s in the U.S. and the UK. Eventually, it re-occurred in socialist Yugoslavia as a concept of subversion and

Gordana Bosanac (Zagreb: Institut za društvena istraživanja – Ženska infoteka, 2004), p. 128. See also Bosanac, p. 364.

¹⁵ Bosanac, p. 364.

¹⁶ See Zsófia Lóránd, “Violence against Women, Feminism in Yugoslavia and 1968,” in Sarah Colvin and Katharina Karcher (eds.), *Women, Global Protest Movements and Political Agency: Rethinking the Legacy of 1968* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 84–97.

¹⁷ See below, p. 150.

¹⁸ Nada Ler-Sofronić, “Dijalektika odnosa polova i klasna svijest” [The dialectics of the relation of the sexes and class consciousness], *Dometi* 13, no. 2 (1980): pp. 5–14, 7. See also Lóránd, *The Feminist Challenge*, p. 50.

critique of the self-managing socialist system. Much of feminist thought and practice of the 1980s in Yugoslavia was dedicated to finding non-hierarchical ways to make women aware of the injustice of their social status. For Despot, philosophy was a means towards radical social change, where education is a means of revolution. Her version of Marxist feminism was one of the most original critiques of existing socialism in socialist Yugoslavia.

List of Books by Blaženka Despot

Humanitet tehničkog društva [The humanity of technical society] (Zagreb: Centar za društvene djelatnosti omladine RK SOH, 1971).

Ideologija proizvodnih snaga i proizvodna snaga ideologije [The ideology of productive forces and the productive force of ideology] (Osijek: Glas Slavonije, 1976).

Plädoyer za dokolicu [A plea for leisure] (Belgrade: Predsedništvo Konferencije SSO, 1976).

Žensko pitanje i socijalističko samoupravljanje [The woman question and socialist self-management] (Zagreb: Cekade, 1987).

Emancipacija i novi socijalni pokreti [Emancipation and new social movements] (Osijek: Međuopćinska konferencija SKH - Centar za idejno-teorijski rad, 1989).

“New Age” i Moderna [New Age and modernity] (Zagreb: Hrvatsko filozofsko društvo, 1995).

Izabrana djela Blaženke Despot [The collected work of Blaženka Despot], ed. Gordana Bosanac (Zagreb: Institut za društvena istraživanja - Ženska infoteka, 2004).

Women and Self-Management*

Blaženka Despot

The problem of women, “the woman question” as it relates to socialist self-management, has not been sufficiently developed from a theoretical point of view. Practice has suffered, as a result, in that it has not reached the level of historical possibilities liable to yield a solution to this issue. The very issue is regarded as inappropriate since equality between men and women has been laid down in the Constitution. The question of women is perceived with its “particularities,” and subordinated to the class problem of the proletariat. In other words, the emancipation of women cannot, as was thought in the nineteenth century, be achieved unless there is emancipation of the working class. In the Yugoslav context of socio-economic and socio-political life, this would mean that the solution to the problem of women’s emancipation depends on the pooling of labour and resources, on concentration and consultation on all action taken by the Yugoslav working class in its struggle for the economic liberation of labour, or rather for its human emancipation.

The special concern of society for women is manifested through the existence of institutions, and even laws, dealing almost exclusively with the reproductive, biological function of women: childbirth, the welfare of the mother and child, upbringing, family, and so on. Social care is mainly geared towards *the working mother*. Hence, the particular aspects of the “woman question” are confined to *the nature of women*, which is something constant, while associated labour enhances the conditions of reproduction.

However, to reduce the “woman question” – that is, problems concerning the relationship between women and self-management – to the nature of women, presumes that nature, perceived in an ontological and ontic sense, is per se a constant, unrelated to history, while society is related to history. Naturally enough, an unhistorical being, unrelated to time, has its own “historicalness” in the attainment of her or his finality and, consequently, in a nature which is invariable, unhistorical, determining. If woman, or rather “the nature of woman,” is part of nature conceived in this way, woman has no history, her finality is reduced to the biological reproductive cycle. She has always (timelessly!) given birth, and birth has always been a part of her world – motherhood. All that which is timeless, outside the scope of time, is considered unhistorical. All that which is a function of time, of history, of society, relates to man.

* Reprinted with revisions from Blaženka Despot, “Women and self-management,” trans. S. Ninčić, *Socialist Thought and Practice: A Yugoslav Monthly* 21, no. 3 (March 1981), pp. 34–38. Revisions to the earlier English translation have been made after consulting the Serbo-Croatian original, “Žena i samoupravljanje,” *Delo* 27, no. 4 (April 1981), pp. 112–116.

Man also has his “male nature,” but as it is not directly linked up with a reproductive, biological role, he is able to become part of history, time, of a “different nature” – of society, politics, culture. If, in addition, he falls into a cultural pattern such as the West European one, the determining principle of nature is assigned a negative sign, or attributed a secondary significance in society’s value system, and the inference to then be drawn is that all that is biological, natural, unhistorical, female – is regarded as being of a lower value. On the other hand, we know that to confine history to historical beings who are, to a lesser extent conditioned by nature, is an absolute – scientific premise (Hegel) for *racism*. Or, to put it differently, racism is reducing the human being to her or his biological function, to her or his unhistoricalness, since some races have not, owing to their natural determinateness, been able to enter into history. According to Hegel, a Black man represents a natural man in all his savagery and lack of restraint; in order to understand him correctly, he must be abstracted from any veneration of morality, and there is nothing human in such a character.¹⁹ Consequently, the metaphysical and theoretical background to racism is the reduction of the human being to a natural being, a biological being, an unhistorical being. To confine the nature of woman to her natural biological role is racism. Male racism.

Marx historically resolved the abstract division between history and nature. According to historical materialism, man’s real history is the history of the mode of production, interaction between man and nature by introducing nature into history. What nature is per se is a metaphysical question. The practical questions here relate to nature as part of the productive inter-action between man and nature in a given historical context, in a specific mode of production, in a given pattern of social and class relations. If the attitude to nature alters historically, and, consequently, the attitude to “the history of nature” as well, then nature is no longer a determining constant and neither is the “nature of woman.” All the more so as historical-materialist views on history hold that production signifies the production of life as a whole, implying the reproduction of people and, consequently, of families.

Hence, the entirety of life production as it relates to nature and is influenced by the mode of production will have an effect on the production of life – on social attitudes to family and the “nature of woman.” The bourgeois production of life is grounded on the productive forces of capital, on an abstract relationship between the natural sciences and nature. “The history of nature” is conceived unhistorically as a relationship between science and nature. Science, as a paradigmatic form of the productive forces of capital, conceives this relationship as the eternal relationship between man and nature; in other words, it takes its bourgeois basis to be the eternal basis of society. Such a science technology is authoritarian in its relationship to nature, in the *division of labour*, in interpersonal relations. The authoritarian attitude of the mode of material

¹⁹ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Batoche Books: Kitchener, 2001), pp. 113–114.

production gives rise to an authoritarian production of life itself, in other words, an authoritarian family, authoritarian inter-personal relations. The patriarchal family reproduces authoritarian relations with an authoritarian division of labour within it.

In the reproduction of life, as a whole, authoritarian relations are reproduced; people are brought up and socialized to perform authoritarian functions. Women tend to interiorize the values of society, becoming, thereby, an offshoot of the over-all mode of life production, of production based on wage-labour.

The socialist self-management pattern of life production is based on old forces of production. When it evokes productivist morality because its forces of production are underdeveloped, because of the material postulates underlying its own-relations of production, it necessarily assumes an authoritarian attitude to the division of labour as its “natural” premise, to the “nature of woman,” to relations among people, similar to that of the state. New relations of production are set forth in the legal sphere, such as the socialized means of production and the right to self-management, as well as the equality of women. It is impossible however, to penetrate, proceeding from a legal and ideological sphere, the ontological, concrete, and historical foundations of the old mode of production: the division of labour, and in relation to this, the attitude to the “nature of women.” Socialist self-management offers – it is true – a possibility for attaining a genuinely alternative culture, enabling self-management to radically question the entire production of life to-date. This implies a new attitude to nature, to the division of labour, and to state and authoritarian relations as a whole. Socialist self-management as a possibility of ushering in an alternative culture can essentially be said to be a class problem of the proletariat that also includes the “woman question,” “the nature of women.” In this respect, women share the fate of socialist self-management’s working class.

Yet, in self-management, as a genuinely alternative culture, women are the least present in this new relationship to nature. From the basic organizations of associated labour to the highest decision-making bodies, the number of women tends to decrease in the pyramid. They *do not have time* for self-management. Not to have time means being outside of time, outside of history, remaining in one’s biological nature.

Besides the question of their participation in the new, historical change of attitude to nature, a participation shared with the entire working class in Yugoslavia, they also have a “specific” problem – restricted participation in historical events in the sphere of self-management, on account of male racism. Self-managers beat their wives, too, a proof of the old relationship to nature. The old authoritarian attitude to the division of labour to nature – authoritarian relations within the family and society – mainly affects women because *she does not have the time* for acquiring skills and becoming involved in politics and science on account of the traditional values underlying the division of labour within the family. In view of their objective socio-economic and socio-political status, brought about as a result of historical inter-action between man and nature, women tend to show the greatest interest in radically questioning the entire production of life – division of labour, relationship to nature, authoritarian relations, statism.

Socialist self-management as an alternative culture cannot be realized without the participation of women, as this is no longer their “specific” problem but rather a general one. They represent the general interest of a new, non-authoritarian culture, directed against the old relationship to nature, society, and to the individual. This relationship is not determined by sex, biologically. Women, one may even say, interiorize old values more often than men. Reduced to an a-historical function of reproduction, they are inclined to interiorize the values of an authoritarian culture in the reproduction of real life: they reproduce this same sort of relationship from the framework of the family to society.

The main problem facing women is how to enter into history – the greatest obstacle towards achieving this being, in socialist society, the male racist attitude to women. There is a situation where patriarchal society prevents them from radically questioning the entire production of life. By taking this view of phallogocratic culture, the proletariat is depriving itself of its historical possibility, already provided for by socialist self-management.

The racist attitude to the “nature of woman” has its ideological roots in the consciousness of people. The historical-materialist concept of human emancipation consists in the legal implementation of socialised means of production. Male racism tends to bring historical possibilities below the level of actual possibilities. To attain the level of actual historical possibilities, women must, therefore, attain awareness, which implies inter alia, the need for education. The latter is, by no means, in contradiction – with the revolutionary role. On the contrary, the one presupposes the other.

To paraphrase Nietzsche: *Zarathustra, your fruit is ripe, but you are not ripe for your fruit.*

There is, therefore, a need for the self-realization of women.