

THE FEMINIST CHALLENGE TO THE INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF STATE SOCIALISM

Zsófia Lóránd, *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia*
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When writing about the history of feminism in socialist Yugoslavia, Chiara Bonfiglioli has complained that it is largely omitted in the Western feminist canon. She blames the prevailing “essentialist, victimised representations of *Balkan women*” for this silence about the struggles and achievements of Yugoslav feminist scholars and activists.¹ Certainly, the history of feminist thought and activism in East-Central Europe is on the margins of mainstream research. This is partly because most textual sources remain inaccessible outside the local languages. However, several attempts have been made to fill in this gap. One of them is Zsófia Lóránd’s new book *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia*, published in the Palgrave Macmillan series *Genders and Sexualities in History*, which presents the fascinating story of the so-called new Yugoslav feminism. The book provides a valuable contribution not only to the history of feminism and women’s movements, but also to the intellectual history of East-Central Europe. It corresponds to the growing interest in the history of women’s participation in academic and political cultures and their contribution to social and political changes in the former Eastern bloc. And finally, it is an attempt to incorporate Yugoslav (and state socialist) women’s activism into global feminist history.

The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia is a study of the intellectual turmoil of the 1970s and 1980s, which resulted from the emergence of a new type of feminist movement. This was connected to the fact that in the last two decades of state-socialism, Yugoslavia experienced a crisis that was not only economic and political, but also socio-psychological. Dissidents began to openly attack the idea of

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¹ Chiara Bonfiglioli, “Feminist Translations in a Socialist Context: The Case of Yugoslavia,” *Gender & History* 30 (2018), no. 1, p. 240.

socialist self-management and to deconstruct the central Yugoslav political myth of a more humane, self-managed socialism.² This fostered an environment in which criticism of the communist project of women's emancipation became possible and could be articulated in public. This is the starting point for the analysis proposed by Lóránd. Her narrative is organized around feminists' efforts to redefine the "women's question," to introduce women into the political realm and to find the appropriate language for dialogue with the state.

The very title of the book suggests contradictions between feminism and the socialist state. Therefore, the way the author defines "feminism" is particularly interesting. First and foremost, she does not identify it with "state feminism," a phrase widely adopted in scholarly debates on the gender policies of former socialist countries.³ Secondly, she does not think about feminism in terms of organized effort. Instead, she adopts the broad definition developed by Sara Ruddick, who considers it as a complex set of thoughts varying through time, based on the acknowledgement that socially created "gender divisions of work, pleasure, power, and sensibility" (18) can be changed. Hence, she chooses to use the term "feminism" in the singular, despite its dynamics and variety, often described in terms of "waves."

Recognizing the importance of activism, Lóránd focuses more on feminists' intellectual contribution to the political and philosophical thought of the time. This allows her to think about new Yugoslav feminism in terms of dissent that challenged the official party-state policies toward women as well as the statement that women's emancipation had been achieved.

Although she leaves aside the discussion about the possibilities of women's agency within state socialist mass organizations, some important points of reference are the official emancipatory policies, dominant discourses, as well as the legacies of the generation of the partisan women and the activity of the only approved women's organization in Yugoslavia: the Conference for the Social Activities of Women.

Lóránd argues that the new Yugoslav feminists did not reject the communist project of women's emancipation or the tradition of the women's movement within the "partisan revolution" during the Second World War. They complained that the promise of equal rights remained only a promise: women were still promoted in their "traditional" roles as mothers, wives, and housekeepers, and official political discourse in fact confirmed the patriarchal gender order. Therefore, they perceived the place of women as constant

² Marie-Janine Calic, "The Beginning of the End: The 1970s as a Historical Turning Point in Yugoslavia," in J. M. Calic, D. Neutatz, and J. Obertreis (eds.), *The Crisis of Socialist Modernity: The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1970s* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2011), p. 82.

³ Dorothy McBride, et al. *The Politics of State Feminism: Innovation in Comparative Research* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010). Wang Zheng, "State Feminism? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China," *Feminist Studies* 31 (2005), no. 3, pp. 519–551.

opposition. However, as Lóránd also demonstrates elsewhere,⁴ they did not openly resist, which could mean publishing in samizdat and being persecuted. Instead, they managed to create a “microspace” in which their rebellious ideas could be articulated. They even published their texts in official mass circulation magazines and participated in state-sponsored arts and culture. In this way they occupied oppositional positions within the state socialist realm. Thus, Lóránd argues that new Yugoslav feminism was a “critical discourse” in dialogue with the state (9). Choosing the phrase “dissent,” not “dissidence,” she goes beyond the totalitarian paradigm in the post-socialist narrative, which places “society” in opposition to the “state.” This allows her to present the complexity of the socialist system, where there was some limited space for discussion. I completely agree with Lóránd’s argument that new Yugoslav feminism was a case of the “productive encounter of discourses” (7) rather than an open dissident movement. The dialogue was built on the basis of Marxist philosophy and the communist promise of gender equality.

The book is based on a detailed analysis of the feminist discourses produced in the 1970s and 1980s in the three most economically developed Yugoslav republics: Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia. It is significant that although the author writes about “Yugoslav” feminism, she emphasizes that the movement developed differently in each of these republics. At the same time, she highlights the role of knowledge and idea transfer at the level of the republics, as well as local differences, thereby showing the particularity of the Yugoslav case. It seems to me, though, that the history of feminism in other, less developed Yugoslav republics – like Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia, and Herzegovina – needs further research.

The book is based on impressive archival and library research. The author quotes multiple published materials, from theoretical treatises to popular journalism, most of which were published only in Serbo-Croatian. The book goes beyond the analysis of written sources. Lóránd refers to visual art, paintings, and performances that represented the feminist perspective. Avoiding formal analysis, she focused on artwork as an expression of values and ideas, as a way to communicate them to the general public. Of particular interest is her use of sources rarely used by historians: popular culture texts, from pulp novels and popular journalism to TV programs. She recognizes mass media as possessing importance similar to that of arts and literature, and she emphasizes how influential they were in shaping people’s worldviews. The in-depth analysis of the media products allowed her to ask how “popular feminism” differed from the feminism presented in academia and to show the expansion of feminist ideas in Yugoslav society.

⁴ Zsófia Lóránd, “Socialist-Era New Yugoslav Feminism between ‘Mainstreaming’ and ‘Disengagement’: The Possibilities for Resistance, Critical Opposition and Dissent,” *The Hungarian Historical Review* 5 (2016), no 4, pp. 854-880.

There is much to admire in the book, and the variety of analyzed sources certainly is one of the reasons.

The diversity of primary sources was followed by a complex methodology. The multi-disciplinary approach proposed by Lóránd allows her to build a theoretical framework that covers the story of feminist discourses and actions. She shows various methodological inspirations, whilst focusing on critical discourse analysis covering not only written sources but also “visual texts” from photos and illustrations in print magazine to artworks.

She identifies language, concepts, and ideology as three main categories of the new Yugoslav feminism and, consequently, of her research. Therefore, she refers to Quentin Skinner’s “humanistic project of interpreting texts,” to the history of political thought, as well as to the massive body of feminist research from Gerda Lerner to Joan Scott.

Although Lóránd is not especially attached to the oral history methodology, she interviewed twenty prominent figures of the feminist movement, including two prominent essayists and novelists, Slavenka Drakulić and Dubravka Ugrešić. As she explains, she meant to give the reader a glimpse into the lives of the protagonists.

The book is written from a feminist perspective. Therefore, I think it will make a great contribution to further explorations of the methodological possibilities of feminist intellectual history. It can provoke discussion on how feminist researchers write the history of feminism and whether *autoethnography* as a form and method of research can be applied to historical studies.

The book has a clear structure. It is divided into six chapters, each dedicated to a different issue, but forming a consistent narrative. In the introductory chapter, Lóránd gives a brief overview of the history of new Yugoslav feminism, providing readers with basic knowledge about its periodization, institutional framework, events, and names. Then she provides fundamental insight into the history of the communist project of women’s emancipation and the women’s movement in post-1945 Yugoslavia to show the historical context of her analysis. Although the book is not dedicated to socialist-state emancipation, it seems to me that it would have benefited from a more developed historical section. I suppose that a consistent overview of the activities of the officially approved women’s mass organization in communist Yugoslavia, as well as of the top-down solutions introduced by the regime, would be extremely helpful to understand the background for the emergence of feminism in the 1970s, especially since Lóránd argues that the relationship between communism and feminism was not unambiguous and she repeatedly refers to the concept of *općeljudske emancipacije* (“general human” emancipation), which was used in official discourse to eliminate the need for the women’s question. According to this concept, women’s emancipation was a part of the communist project of general equality and was achieved with the revolutionary changes introduced by communist authorities. Since the opposition between *općeljudske emancipacije* and *women’s question* is in the center of the narrative, this may make the reader seek information about the implementation of the women’s equality policies.

After the short historical introduction, the author explains her research methodologies and theoretical inspirations. First of all, she places her research “at the crossroads of various fields of historiography” (12), which means the history of women’s activism, the history of LGBT movements, the history of the state-socialist emancipatory politics and women’s agency, and the history of ideas and political thought. Promisingly, the author places her story about feminism in the framework of *intellectual history*. Naturally, she also refers to the tradition that considers feminism counterculture, and analyses it in terms of activism, but first and foremost, she presents it in dialogue with other ideologies and schools of thought, such as Marxism, liberalism, conservatism, etc. Her approach is therefore focused both on a variety of texts, from theoretical treatises to works of art and literature, and on the knowledge production process.

In the first historical chapter Lóránd discusses how in socialist Yugoslavia, feminism was located within the social sciences and humanities. Firstly, she shows how in the 1970s academia became an important discursive space for feminism and how feminism challenged academia. Presenting various sources of inspiration, including Marxism and its interpretations in Western leftist movements, radical revolutionary women’s activities, French post-structuralist feminism (including the works of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray), and Indian philosophy, Lóránd shows the process of transnational exchange of knowledge and ideas about women’s rights across the Iron Curtain.

This kind of knowledge transfer was quite typical for the development of feminist thought in East-Central Europe, but the book demonstrates some particularities of the Yugoslavian case. Due to the relative intellectual freedom and intensive international exchanges resulting from the political liberalization introduced in 1948, there were more opportunities to get in touch with Western feminist concepts. Therefore, original academic publications that discussed the theoretical problems of women’s emancipation, relations between Marxism and feminism, and the gendered division of labor appeared earlier than in other countries of the bloc. For example, in Poland the first volume with translations of canonical feminist texts was released only in 1982,⁵ and until then feminism was rarely mentioned in the mainstream media. Similarly, LGBT issues were mostly ignored in Poland, while they became visible in Yugoslav feminist academic discourse and also in popular mass media as early as the beginning of the 1980s.

Through analyzing the first publications to offer translations of the canonical Western feminist texts and their interpretation, this chapter shows that the new Yugoslav feminists were inspired by their Western counterparts and sometimes followed their way of thinking but made efforts to redefine basic discursive categories according to the state-socialist context. Moreover, they discussed such concepts as the distinction of sex and *gender*, the “double burden” being inspired by second-wave Western feminists, but referring also to the legacy of Yugoslav intellectuals of the earlier periods. Notably,

⁵ Teresa Hołówa (ed.), *Nikt nie rodzi się kobietą* [One is not born a woman] (Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1982).

in this chapter Lóránd gives insight into the process of feminist knowledge production and emphasizes the importance of the contribution of local intellectuals and artists.

Later in this chapter she explores the connections between new feminism and official media addressed to women. Mass circulation magazines, such as *Žena* and *Bazar*, although not feminist, published feminist texts and advocated for women's emancipation. Like in other countries of the socialist bloc, namely Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, official women's magazines in Yugoslavia took part in the discussion about women's rights in the socialist realm. Lóránd explores this in the context of Yugoslav liberal media policies and specific forms of censorship, which made it possible to publish feminist texts in official media.

After an in-depth analysis of the feminist theoretical texts and their interpretations of Western feminist ideas, Lóránd argues that the new Yugoslav feminists, who had a strong Marxist base in their education, developed new meanings of the concept of feminism in order to be understood by their local intellectual audience. This leads to the conclusion that their action in academia was a discursive one, aimed to create a *new language* to talk about women's emancipation and gender relations in a socialist society. This process was based on the redefinition of basic concepts, taken for granted in both political and academic discourse, such as: family, work, patriarchy, consciousness, private, and public. Similarly, the adaptation of such concepts as *écriture féminine* led to the revision of the official literary canon and to vivid discussions about contemporary women's fiction.

Finally, at the end of this considerable chapter, Lóránd discusses the importance of historiography for the new feminism. Initially aiming to write the story of women and the feminist movement, memorializing "forgotten sisters," it later provided arguments for feminist criticism of the state-socialist system and its unfulfilled promises of gender equality. Once again, the author emphasizes the specificity of the Yugoslav case. Whereas in many countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain, feminist historians complained about women's invisibility in the master narrative, in state-socialist Yugoslavia women were represented in official historiography. Their role in the Second World War and the partisan movement and their engagement in postwar changes were used as a source of legitimacy for the establishment's version of history. Although feminist historians like Lydia Sklevicky, Žarana Papić, and Dunja Blažević agreed with the official positive evaluation of Yugoslav unification, they called for a reconsideration of the communist project of women's emancipation. Lóránd concludes this chapter by stating that writing history was a step toward creating a feminist identity, which was common for the movement in most countries, but in the Yugoslav case it also contributed to feminist claims about unfulfilled promises of equal rights. Therefore, historiography provided a space for discussing the ideology of state-socialism.

According to the title of the book, new Yugoslav feminism is presented as a challenge. Therefore, the author devotes some space to the issue of its reception, focusing on the dialogue between state ideology, which promoted the concept of *općeljudske*

emancipacije (general human emancipation), and feminist claims for women's equality. Basing her account on critical text analysis she shows how the strategies of post-feminism, which in fact can be defined as a milder form of a backlash against feminism, were present in the official discourse of state-socialism. This discourse suggested that women's equality has been accomplished and, since the state advocated the idea of "general emancipation" for both men and women, feminism was no longer needed in Yugoslavia. In this way, Lóránd sheds new light on state socialist gender policies, emphasizing the patriarchal character of socialist modernity in Yugoslavia. The two next chapters offer an insight into feminist activities in the fields of the arts, literature, and popular media. To a larger extent than the previous part of the book, this part is based on oral history interviews. Once again the author emphasizes the particularity of the Yugoslav case and the ambiguities behind both categories: dissent and dissidence. She argues that many artists, although critical of the official ideology, benefited from the opportunities offered to them by the "moderate totalitarian" system. Thus, feminist artists and art theoreticians were active within state-sponsored institutions. Student centers, which were founded after the student protests in 1968, intent on keeping the critical and experimental arts under control, played a particularly important role in promulgating feminist ideas. Similarly, feminist art, although often challenging the official discourse about the achievements of the communist project of general emancipation, was presented in state-funded galleries, and strongly supported by women art curators.

After a brief overview of the themes and motifs in the literature written by women in the 1970s and 1980s, Lóránd develops her original concept of *writing of sisterhood*. Considering the popularity of biographies and autobiographies, she defines the concept as a polyphonic narrative created from borrowed "voices and lives of other women" (107). She provides the readers with numerous extremely valuable examples of this technique and presents books and artworks that I would guess are not known outside the Yugoslav context.

In the next part of the chapter, Lóránd shows how political, social, and historical circumstances affected the works of the new Yugoslav feminists. Writing about motherhood as a concept and as a common women's experience is a very good example. Feminist intellectuals and artists made efforts toward a critical reinterpretation of the very concept. As shown in the book, they were inspired by provocative contemporary lectures (for example, the works of Élisabeth Badinter), but shared generational experiences affected their writing about motherhood to an even greater extent. Firstly, they were daughters of the partisan women, who represented the success of women's emancipation during state socialism, which was being questioned by the younger generation. Secondly, they had their own experiences with medicalized childbirth and an oppressive healthcare system. Comparably, feminist criticism of beauty regimens emerged from the fact that Western-style consumerism legitimized the authoritarian regime, and therefore, mass media promoted *the objectification of women's bodies*. Political and historical contexts made the Yugoslav case exceptional, and Lóránd repeatedly reminds us of this.

A slightly shorter section of the book explores relations between feminism and socialist popular media. Since the topic is still insufficiently explored, this is a very useful contribution. The author analyses a feminist critique of the women's press and then provides significant insight into "feminist content" in the mainstream media (mass circulation magazines and TV programs) to examine how feminist ideas were presented. She highlights the ambiguous position of Yugoslav media, defined by the encounter between state control and limited censorship on the one hand and the system of funding and self-management on the other. A discussion of pornography serves as a significant manifestation of this ambiguity. Lóránd shows that Yugoslav feminists, although opposed to pornography in principle, were suspicious of American anti-porn campaigns as potentially dangerous for the freedom of speech. This resulted from the fact that both pornography and new feminism were criticized and controlled by the state. Exercising dissent meant opposing the idea of censorship and state control over arts and the media. Therefore, although new feminists followed Western debates, they developed their own arguments.

The final chapter before the conclusion focuses on the shift toward activism in the Yugoslav feminist movement in the middle 1980s. Lóránd tells a compelling story of the transfer of feminist knowledge into activism – and vice versa – and the influence of activism on academic discourse." Referring to such topics as women's health, motherhood, and violence against women, she examines the process of feminist knowledge production, which took place not only in academia but also in practical activities, such as SOS help centers, founded in the late 1980s, which was much earlier than for example in Poland.

The story ends with the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s and the diversification of feminist groups. This marked the end of the new Yugoslav feminism as well. In conclusion, Lóránd emphasizes the great achievements of the movement. All things considered, she identifies the process of "feminization of citizenship,"⁶ which completely challenged state-socialist Yugoslavia and contributed to further changes in gender policies after its breakup.

I am completely convinced that *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia* makes a great contribution to the history of women's activism under state socialism, as well as to intellectual history. It provides readers with extensive knowledge of the major debates and arguments concerning women's rights. Lóránd identifies "canonizing events," which became milestones in the history of the movement, and canonical texts, which introduced concepts and ideas for the new Yugoslav feminism. Thus she provides numerous names and titles that I think may be unfamiliar to wider audience. Needless to say, I wish I had seen the feminist performances described in the book.

⁶ Pnina Werbner, "Political Motherhood and the Feminisation of Citizenship: Women's Activism and the Transformation of the Public Sphere," in P. Werbner and N. Yuval-Davis (eds.), *Women, Citizenship and Difference* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

More importantly, Lóránd focuses on the processes of knowledge production – in other words, on the texts and contexts of the new Yugoslav feminism. The book is especially valuable and insightful in its examination of Yugoslav particularity in the socialist realm and in the social and cultural background of feminist intellectual activities

Finally, the book is extremely well written. I appreciate the idea of using elements from the oral history interviews as the mottos for each chapter. Alongside their role in constructing the narrative, they give insight into the language, values, and general mindset of the feminist intellectuals and artists.

Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz