

forum

Is 'Communist Feminism' a *Contradictio in Terminis*?



Communism was a State Patriarchy, not State Feminism

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Feminism(s) as Ideal and as Ideology

I shall appeal to a concept I consider regulative for political, moral, and cultural feminism: women's autonomy. When autonomy is undermined by patriarchy, there is no gender-fair competition, nor a real gender partnership. It means that feminism can only attain its goals when women have the capacity to rule over their own welfare, freed from oppressive patriarchal, androcratic, and andromorphic cultural, moral, and political constraints. This entails that men are also autonomous when they are able to rule over themselves freed from oppressive 'matriarchal' gynocratic and gynomorphic cultural, moral, and political *constraints*. Though it might be illusory to think that such constraints will disappear, it is not an illusion to work on the elimination of their oppressive character, and reducing both types to mere *influence*. The history of the feminist movement stressed the goal of equilibrating the andromorphic and gynomorphic perspectives for both sexes and pointed towards gradual means to attain them, from civil and political rights to equal opportunities (i.e., the first and second waves). Briefly, a feminist approach means:

Don't use me as a means for your interests just because I am a woman. Ask for my informed consent. Let me think by myself what my own interests are. I want to be your equal competitor and partner. I have the right to self-assertion and you have not any moral and political right to turn me into a dependent and a victim.

However, a self-reflective feminism must reject the idea of ideologically prescribing women's individual interests and life plans. There is no universal messianic ideology for women. In order to be autonomous, some women have to survive (a minimalist requirement), to gain the recognition of their rights, and to become emancipated and exercise their rights. Some of them need more social protection for their life and dignity because they are dependent, humiliated, oppressed, or victims; others need more freedom and opportunities to self-assert; and others ask for freedom from a prescriptive feminism (see the third wave and 'post-feminism'). If one were to embrace this approach, all other historical goals, such as civil and political rights, economic justice, and equal opportunities, are means to attain the goal of autonomy. Feminism is not about women's happiness, because happiness is an individual issue. It is not about women's well-being either, because there are plenty of situations in which someone enjoys well-being in a state of dependency, even in a state of serfdom.¹ Some policies can lead to a growth in women's social and economic roles, even to women's participation in the decision-making process, although they are not at all feminist, as we shall immediately see in the case of communism. Without autonomy as a moral and political goal, anybody may proclaim the end of feminism as a necessary ideal, once some of the agenda of the general well-being (welfare policies) are politically accepted.

I consider women's personal autonomy as an end in itself, an ideal, as the collective goal and the reason for the collective action of feminists. Women have the right as individuals to freely express their interests and to be represented according to their specific interests. The main differences among feminisms refer to the means for achieving this general aim: more rights and freedom, less discrimination and prejudices (especially liberal feminism), more social and economic gender justice, equal opportunities (socialist feminism), or more access to express and value gender differences (especially radical feminism). As an ideology, feminism is always contextual and convenient to a certain category.²

Communist Feminism is a Contradiction in Terms

One may think that I define feminism as ideal and ideology in a 'Western' manner. In communism, within a different context, we can consider another kind of feminism. Moreover, some of the main representatives of socialist and communist ideologies were explicitly in favour of women's emancipation from their dependence on men *via* access to work and economic independence, such as August Bebel in *Women and Socialism* (1879) and Friedrich Engels in *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).³ Both wrote about changing women's role in society and economy, as well as women's emancipation not just as a by-product of class struggle, but also as a strategy to attain communism. Gender equality and women's promotion are an essential part of the socialist and Marxist doctrines, a necessary extension of their concept of oppression.⁴ But Marxism did not, to be clear, acknowledge women's interests as political ends, considering the extension of the logic of individual rights as a deeply 'bourgeois' political strategy. However, the works of Bebel and Engels played a significant ideological role for the development of Western socialist and Marxist feminisms.

Beyond the doctrine there was a vast and real communist life. From the very beginning, the main explicit command was: 'Cut off feminism: it is deviationist, dangerous and bourgeois.' All dictatorial regimes are 'messianic' *per se* and cannot tolerate any other 'isms', irrespective of their names. Compared to fascism, communism was a 'paradise' in terms of women's emancipation *from men*, but not of their emancipation *from traditional family roles and state patriarchy*.⁵

The messages against feminism were firm. They came from the very beginning (1917) *via* Aleksandra Kollontai, the promoter of women's emancipation as a means for communist revolution, but not for women's autonomy and self-assertion. She was right to proclaim herself 'antifeminist'.⁶ The *Zhenotdel*, the special Soviet organisation for women (created with Kollontai's contribution in 1919) had an ambiguous status: some of its purposes were related to women's interests, but subordinated to the interests of the proletarian revolution. When the organisation was suspected as 'feminist' because of its intention to introduce women's issues on the Party's agenda, all of its autonomy was eliminated. The organisation entirely disappeared in 1930. Lenin firmly opposed the autonomy of women's organisations and Stalin turned the *Zhenotdel* into an openly gender-conservative tool. He was, in fact, the official founder of the politics of the double working day (burden) together with those of maternity in service of the state.⁷

The communist parties were intolerant vis-à-vis any uncontrolled form of association. Over-sloganised emancipation had other purposes. Officially, communist rule must cover every aspect of human behaviour. But it was hard to control an individual inside her household. Women had to leave their 'gynaeceum' and enrol in the economy or in politics under the eyes of the party-state. The traditional family patriarchy was never officially questioned, apart from some courageous individuals.⁸ Women's promotion by quota system aimed to assure their physical presence as obedient soldiers under the party's command. It barely had to do with the political representation of women's interests.

Communism was a society of scarcity, not just in terms of goods, but also in terms of human resources.⁹ Socialist firms needed working force and men were not enough. Traditional religious patriarchy was officially replaced by the state one, bypassing modern patriarchy.¹⁰ The modern patriarchy (women's mass-dependence on men's income as housewives) was generally created in the process of industrialisation. East European countries were only superficially and partially industrialised, and remained massively peasant societies. To a large degree, before communism, women were not housewives, but family workers.

The logic of control over the entire population has functioned in the case of people's socialisation in state nurseries, kindergartens, and later in schools, universities, mass-media, and within leisure time. The state helped women raise their children, but drastically diminished parents' private influence over them.

The state patriarchy negatively 'feminised' both women and men. The purpose of their life became the self-sacrifice for the communist goal, better expressed in the obedience towards the 'Head of the Society', the Communist Party. As in the classical patriarchal societies, women were celebrated as collective anonymous entities: *Mother*, *Worker*, or *Tractor Driver*. Men's celebration had the same negatively feminised pattern

(read obedience and self-sacrifice), minus Fatherhood: *Socialist Working Hero, Constructor of the New Society, or Top-Ranking Worker*. Communism left family patriarchy untouched. In spite of the new label for gender relations, 'work and life comrades', there was not even a vague official idea of a domestic partnership.

Communism has placed gender equality in the framework of a general and programmatic absence of economic and political competition. Women and men were equally non-competitors in a statist economy freed from the 'free market' mechanisms. However, communism created its own gender hierarchies and privileges. The state budget, all economic branches and salaries were planned by the Communist Party in a politically established hierarchy. Haphazardly or not, all masculinised social services and industries (e.g., heavy industry, construction, and defence) had top positions in terms of political 'importance', level of investment, or salaries in these branches. In contrast, all feminised industries and social services, such as textiles, food industry, commerce, health, and education, were at the bottom of political 'importance' in terms of investments and salaries.¹¹ Communism has indeed produced a relative economic independence of women from men, but this was not a road to female autonomy.

From State Patriarchy to 'Room-Service Feminism'

All societies have both open and hidden gender policies, some of them fair, some of them not. Gender policies, usually patriarchal in purpose or only in its consequences, can be spontaneous or premeditated. Some are influenced and shaped by feminism, many of them are not; on the contrary, they can be deeply patriarchal. But the patriarch can change his masks. He can be a man, as a head of the family, a religious or ethnic conservative community, or the state itself (the communist case).

One cannot reasonably contest that there were gender politics in communism, mainly politics of 'emancipation through work', which spontaneously avoided the creation of modern patriarchy, but they were not feminist. Communism never had a 'State Feminism', but it definitely had a strong, overwhelming 'State Patriarchy'. While we can admit that there were unofficial islands of feminism *in* communism, it is hard to admit that ever existed something like *a communist feminism*. The former communist bloc was a different world, in which there was no place for second-wave feminism, any of the movements related to the *personal is political*,¹² or to *equal pay for equal work*.

It is easier to understand why, then, in the EU accession process of East European countries, we are dealing with two contradictory tendencies: the internal spontaneous creation of modern patriarchy (women's massive dependence on men's incomes), and the simultaneous import of an external 'room-service feminism' *via* the *Aquis Communautaire*, as a normative obligation for Europeanisation.¹³

◆ About the Author

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◆ Notes

1. For example, life in a harem can be very comfortable and carefree.
2. I tried to explain why the concept of 'convenience' serves better than 'justice' and 'care' for understanding moral and political choices in Mihaela Miroiu, *Convenio. Despre natura, femeii si morala* (*Convenio. On nature, women and moral*), Bucharest, Alternative Pub. House, 1996, re-published Iasi, Polirom, 2002.
3. Not to mention the 'utopian socialists'.
4. I think that, apart from the Nomenclature, communism benefited some people in communist societies, as well as the working classes in the West: many of the economic and social rights there can be traced to the competitive struggles for legitimacy and power of the Cold War. In order to prove that communist benefits for workers could be better attained under capitalism, Western governments until very recently accepted welfare state policies. My prediction is that the fall of communism, together with the current low prestige of the political left, as well as the increasingly dominant global political role of the multinational corporations, will undermine many of the welfare politics if a transnational civil society won't react against this tendency and if a transnational public sphere will not gain its global space to lobby for the worker's rights
5. See further M. Miroiu, 'The Vicious Circle of the Anonymity', *Thinking*, New Jersey, no. 1 (1994): 54–62; 'Ana's Land or the Right to be Sacrificed', in *Ana's Land, Sisterhood in Eastern Europe*, ed. Tanija Renne, Boulder, CO, Westview Press, 1997, 136–140.
6. For a different perspective see Natalia Novikova's contribution to this Forum.
7. In 1966 Ceaușescu succeeded to expropriate women's reproductive capacities in Romania. See the impressive work of Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity. Controlling Reproduction in Ceaușescu's Romania*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
8. In Romania, for example, by two prominent figures: Ecaterina Oproiu and Stana Buzatu. See Cristina Olteanu. Ed., *Femeile în România comunistă* (Women in Communist Romania), Bucharest, Politeia, SNSPA, 2003, 110–118.
9. See e.g., Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999.
10. Which was recently created in the post-communist transition. M. Miroiu, *Drumul catre autonomi, Teorii politice feministe* (The road to autonomy. Feminist political theories), Iasi, Polirom, 2004 and M. Miroiu, *State Men, Market Women. The Effects of Left Conservatism on Gender Politics in Romanian Transition*, in *Feminismo/s. Revista del Centro de estudios sobre la Mujer de la Universidad de Alicante*, no. 3, junio, *Mujer y participation politica* (2004): 207–234.
11. See also Vladimir Pasti's book, *Ultima inegalitate: politicile de gen in Romania* (The last inequality. Gender politics in Romania), Polirom, Iasi, 2003.
12. Issues related to domestic violence, sexual harassment, parental leave, or valuing differences were ignored.
13. For a more extended argument, see M. Miroiu, 'State Men, Market Women'.