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THE STRANGE CASE OF YUGOSLAV FEMINISM: FEMINISM AND SOCIALISM IN ‘THE EAST’

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ABSTRACT:
The text counters the prevailing idea that there was no feminism in the socialist Eastern bloc, carefully presenting a peculiar case of Yugoslav feminism which grew out of socialist political and cultural framework. Yugoslavia was the country where the organization of the singular feminist event in the Eastern world, the conference “Comrade Woman – The New Approach?” (1978), took place. The text traces the ideas on emancipation and liberation which appeared in Yugoslav scientific and literary journals, immediately after the “Comrade Woman” and until the late 1980s, before the proclaimed fall of the Iron Curtain. The written material is grouped into three sections, according to how the so called woman’s question was elaborated. By re-reading this material, the text examines if feminism was legitimized within the dominant socialist discourse, or whether it was purely translated as something externally Western. The aim of the text is to describe how scholars and activists portrayed emancipation and liberation at that very time: to see if they negotiated or failed to negotiate Western definitions and Eastern realities. In that sense, given material is not used to simply reinforce or refute the claim that feminism was an imported Western (i.e. capitalist) product that had no place interfering with the development of socialism. It also urges us to re-consider the common knowledges we have, in order to see how they become situated as common.

KEY WORDS:
Feminism; Yugoslavia; Woman; Emancipation.

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**SAŽETAK:**


**KLJUČNE RIJEČI:**

Feminizam; Jugoslavija; Žena; Emancipacija.
It is almost a common knowledge that countries in Eastern bloc knew no feminism. Feminist movement was regarded as an undesirable import from the capitalist West, entirely needless in socialist states that emancipated women and men through professedly progressive state policies. It was only after the fall of Iron Curtain that feminism, slowly but surely, began to be introduced in this part of the world, and that feminism was recognizably Western in kind. The spread of liberal democracy and capitalism brought with itself ideas on liberation of women, previously unknown to the Communist East.

This common knowledge is not easily refutable. A simple Google search on ‘Eastern feminism’ reveals a completely different ‘East’ of today: the Middle East, Muslim or Islamic feminism. The content of the East/West opposition has dramatically changed, since only 25 years ago it referred to different topoi, along with different tropes and ideological spaces hidden within their names. Evidently, the ‘East’ acts as an elusive, shifting designation which sways through space and time, while the West seems immovable and solid. Bearing in mind the hidden spaces produced by the supposedly clear-cut divisions and their political volatility, I want to examine the strange case of one older and perhaps forgotten ‘Eastern feminism’ – feminism engendered in an Eastern socialist country, Yugoslavia.

Yugoslav feminism emerged in late 1970s. The openness of state borders, traveling opportunities and the unchecked availability of information, books and journals, enabled Yugoslav women to be in touch with the ideas from abroad and to communicate personally with writers, activists and scholars worldwide. Furthermore, several decade long process of institutionalizing of emancipatory policies has given a peculiar shape to an emergent Yugoslav feminist thought. It grew out of a socialist political and cultural framework, different in many respects from both the capitalist West and the statist East. Were those differences also integral to this topographically Eastern feminism? Was Yugoslav feminism socialist? Or was it Western and, as the equation went, capitalist all along?

To propose some possible answers, I will re-read written documents, articles and reports on emancipation and liberation of women, produced immediately after 1978. The year is chosen purposefully, because it marks the key point in Yugoslav feminist genealogy, the conference Drug-ca žena – žensko pitanje: novi pristup?
(Comrade Woman – The Woman’s Question: A New Approach?). *Drug-ca žena* was a singular feminist event in the Eastern world and a foundational event for Yugoslav feminism. This timeframe allows us to understand Yugoslav socialism from within, before the fall of the Iron Curtain and before the open and willing Westernization of Eastern European societies. Moreover, it allows us to understand a time when the disintegration of Yugoslavia, let alone that event’s bloody nature, was completely unforeseeable.

Perhaps contrary to expectations, texts about women’s condition, emancipation and liberation, were plentiful. The production of theory and research on ‘woman’s question’, even before 1978, had been profuse. A highly significant journal Žena (*Woman*), published by the Croatian Conference for the Social Activity of Women (state sponsored organ within the Socialist Alliance), covered a range of women-related issues: the socio-economic position of the working woman, women’s role in the family, their roles in the revolutionary politics and in building the socialist society. Žena offered statistics regarding the number and quality of kindergartens in Yugoslavia, compared the literacy of women in the six socialist republics, proposed strategies for improving their position in the sphere of self-management, and regularly reported on the state of the women’s movement in the West (Prlenda 2011). However, squarely ‘feminist’ issues were also present in various other scientific and literary journals that did not have women as their sole focus.¹ The space for elaboration of women-related issues was wide and, indeed, quite open to a range of relatively differing opinions on what emancipation really meant.

By re-reading and comparing texts which addressed the issues of emancipation of women, I want to examine to what extent has feminism been integral to the Yugoslav home-grown socialism. I want to see whether it was legitimized within the dominant discourse (and if so by what means and in what forms), or whether it was purely translated as something externally Western, and thus smuggled into Yugoslav reality. The aim of revisiting feminist ideas produced in the socialist era is to under-

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¹ For example, *Delo*, the Belgrade based journal for theory, criticism and poetry, dedicated its 1981 issue to women, language and linguistics; *Dometi*, a journal for culture and social issues based in Rijeka, dedicated its 1980 issue to the women’s movement and revolutionary processes; the Belgrade based *Marksistička misao*, a journal dedicated to socialist theory and practice and socialist self-management, devoted an issue in 1981 to the question of self-management and the inequality of sexes. Other similar endeavors could be found in the Sarajevo based journal *Opređeljenja* (1978) and the Zagreb based *Sociologija sela* (1979).
stand how scholars and activists portrayed emancipation and liberation at that very time: how they negotiated or failed to negotiate Western definitions and Eastern realities, or how they applied and invented conceptual tools to compromise those differences. In that sense, given material is not used to simply reinforce or refute the claim that feminism was an imported Western (i.e. capitalist) product that had no place interfering with the development of socialism. It also forces us to re-think the common post-socialist notion that Western feminism is the only feminism there is.

As it was mentioned earlier, differing opinions on emancipation often stood side by side in one and the same publication. In what follows, I will try to trace those differences, to compare them and consider if and how they complemented each other. After a brief description of the context in which Yugoslav feminism emerged, I group the texts published immediately after 1978 into three sections. The first section presents a position premised on the notion of inseparability of woman’s question and the question of class. The second section links feminism and socialism, wherein woman’s question has its own status, autonomous from that of class, but whose only true resolution necessarily resides within socialism. The third section takes as its point of departure the relative autonomy of the woman’s question for which it seeks a new approach, regardless of its socialist background.

**From Bled to Belgrade: A New Approach to the Woman’s Question**

The Yugoslav socialist state fully endorsed equality of men and women. As early as 1958, at the Seventh Congress of the League of Communists, it was already widely believed that

*the problem of equality of women in Yugoslavia is neither political, nor one of women’s legal position in society; it remains chiefly an issue of economic backwardness, religious opinions and other retrograde prejudices, private-property relations, which still impact family life. Backward household and existing material problems of the family hamper woman from full participation in the economic and social life of the country (in Petrić 1980: 75).*

The famous 1974 Constitution, promulgated only four years before Drug-ca, filled in the ‘political and legal’ crevices by further guaranteeing equal rights to work, health and social protection, schooling and access to higher education. As an addition
to an early constitutional declaration of sexual equality (1946), the 1974 Constitution specifically proclaimed sexual discrimination illegal: every citizen was entitled to equal pay for equal work regardless of sex. Article 191 guaranteed the right to abortion virtually on demand. Marriage partners were given the right to assume either surname, to retain their prenuptial property, as well as, in the case of divorce, the portion of the communal property they each contributed through work, including household work. Everyone had the right to inherit, including children born out of wedlock. The Constitution guaranteed financial protection for mothers and children, with developed social schemes guaranteeing a workplace upon return from maternity leave (Dobos 1983: 48). These apparent political and legal successes were part of the emancipationist politics of the League of Communists. Tito himself proclaimed that after the revolutionary struggle in which unprecedented numbers of women took an active part, communists ought to be at the forefront of the struggle for affirmation of women’s social position, their unique and socially responsible role as working mothers (Tito 1979: 2).

Although the development of those beneficial legal measures relied heavily on the work of official women’s organizations (Dobos 1983), and despite the fact that the results of that work may now be deemed feminist in their effects, the emancipationist politics decidedly distanced itself from feminism. At the beginning of World War II, the Communist Party saw existing women’s organizations as bourgeois, and thus as counterrevolutionary hindrances to the mobilization of the populace in the struggle against capitalism and class society. Feminism was officially denounced as a ‘right-wing opportunist force’ in 1940, when Vida Tomšič (later to become president of the Antifascist Women’s Front, and later still the state official in charge of women and welfare policies) declared the need for a clear and resolved stance of the Communist Party on the woman’s question (Petrović 2011: 67). After the war, several successive official organizations advocated for woman’s question, with varying amount of institutional support (Božinović 1996). However, two features remained central to their work: they struggled fervently for the benefit of women and against ‘retrograde prejudices’, albeit consistently within an antifeminist framework, defined in early opposition to civic women’s organizations created between the two world wars.

The convention that took place in Slovenian town Bled only one year before Drug-ca, exemplifies this position well. Presented as one of the largest and most important events following the first world conference on the status of women that
took place in Mexico City in 1975, the Bled seminar gathered 102 representatives from 40 countries, the UN and other international organizations. Entitled “Woman and Development,” and organized by the Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia, it aimed to resolve the differences of socio-political and economic conditions of the developed, developing and non-aligned countries by defining what fundamentally determines the “fate of all people, the humanity, and therefore women as well” (Šoljan 1978: 13). The convention aimed to tackle four crucial topics: new international economic order; women as a developmental factor of national economies and the subject of societal management; improvement of the social position of women; and the legal position of women in SFRY. The Yugoslav attitude to the woman’s question, promulgated at the seminar and with specific regard to the Mexico conference, underlined the utter obsoleteness of ideas that the status of women may be transformed only through measures designed exclusively for women (and by women), framed by the struggle against men. Since the greatest majority of people in the world live in conditions of severe exploitation and discrimination, the only struggle worth its name – led by all truly progressive forces – must lead to the elimination of the root causes of the world crisis. Instead of a life of passive victimhood that requires care and catering, women have to be active agents who ardently participate in the struggle for human, and not merely women’s, emancipation.

Only a year later, quite a different proceeding took place. With its very name, it announced a turn to feminism:\footnote{Drug-ca conference inaugurated the use of the relatively short-lived term ‘neo-feminism’. This prefix enabled both distancing from the old interwar ‘bourgeois feminism’ and accentuating the novel character of feminism produced in the self-managing socialist country. By the end of the 1980s it fell into disuse, also because the standard ‘wave’ periodization began to permeate the feminist discourse.} Drug-ca žena (somewhat sardonically used abbreviation for the female form of ‘comrade woman’) – žensko pitanje: novi pristup? (where the question mark signified both a distancing and possible waywardness from the by then typical Bled view on the women’s issue, as well as a somewhat timid openness for differing approaches). The meeting was far smaller in scope than the previous one: around 20 Yugoslav speakers and 14 invited foreign (mainly Western European) guests, together with the local and non-invited international public, gathered at this seminal event in Belgrade (Bonfiglioli 2008: 53). Four, but this time quite different topics were also singled out for this conference: women-capitalism-revolution; today’s women’s movement; psychoanalysis-sexuality-women’s identity; and woman and culture. According to its English-language brochure, the conference wanted to question the tenability of the traditional patriarchal order and
social inequality of the sexes in present day industrial capitalism, but it also wanted to discuss the changes that occurred after the victory of socialist revolutions.

What is the real position of women in socialism, what are the achievements in emancipation and what are the problems that are still unsolved? Does the existing emancipation of woman lead to her actual liberation...? To what extent are patriarchal mentality and the traditional relation between the sexes still present? What are the possible ways for consciousness raising and action of women in the transformation of their role? (Qt. in Ibid 127, emphasis added)

The mere size and the proximity of these two events demonstrate that in the late 1970s Yugoslav society was abuzz with discussions about the emancipation of women. However, there were considerable differences in how it was discussed. It would be false to argue that the 1978 conference initiated the woman’s question (Feldman 1999: 8), but it is true that there was something particularly new in the way the question was discussed there: it resembled neither the nascent Yugoslav interwar feminism, nor the communist ‘state-feminism’ (as it would come to be known later, after socialism) – the latter exemplified by the official Bled stance.

What were the conditions of possibility for Drug-ca žena? And what kind of feminism was engendered in 1978? Was that feminism in any way related to its Bled predecessor – can we claim that the official emancipationist line conditioned or at least shaped the new ways of thinking about woman’s question? Or, can we say that the Yugoslav feminism abandoned its socialist upbringing and merely tried to transplant something foreign, Western and therefore capitalist, into a culture adverse to such ideas. Bearing in mind newer discussions on this point, especially with regard to the East/West divide and the possibilities of ‘feminism in communism’, I will next present three Yugoslav views on the woman’s question.

**Emancipationists: The Toddler Shoes of Feminism**

The basic premise of the emancipationist approach to the woman’s question was that there was no woman’s question above or beyond the question of class. It is oftentimes assumed that emancipationists – the generic name I will be using for

3 See, for example, two significant forums in Aspasia in 2007 and 2016; see also one early account by Bruegel 1991.
the representatives and ideologues of the official state structures – believed that the woman’s question had been solved together with that of social class. That, as we shall see, was not necessarily the case. However, the emancipationists agreed on the notion that feminism was a bourgeois concept, and that it represented a backward, isolationist and fragmentary tendency.

What framed the emancipationists’ view in particular was the idea that the country was built from scratch; that the growth of its institutions was gradual but unflinching, and that profound social transformations were taking place continuously and on an everyday basis (Tomšič 1981; on Vida Tomšič see Bonfiglioli 2016). Many proponents of this view had been either directly involved in antifascist war efforts or subsequently active in various structures responsible for instating socialism. The direct experience of armed emancipation and care for human lives produced a firm belief that women’s participation in socialist revolutions must be regarded as being the very condition of its mass, democratic character and indeed its triumph (Tomšič 1978: 157). Thus, wide – and prospectively total – emancipation of women was a prerequisite for a totally emancipated socialist society.

The emancipationists believed that the socialist socio-economic and political system provided men and women both with “strength and initiative, derived from self-managing association and democratic organization of working people, to build a community of free producers in which they create possibilities for improving their and their families’ living conditions” (Rezolucija 1978: 177). Yugoslav self-management was highly praised for being different from both capitalist and statist modes of production, and for offering a qualitatively new socialism founded on non-authoritarian relations (Despot 1981). This inbuilt anti-authoritarianism, which made Yugoslav socialism so fundamentally different from its USSR equivalent, was seen as deeply humanist at its core and therefore ever more disposed to the emancipation of women.

These were the necessary postulates for further emancipation of women in society. In other words, a given state of Yugoslav self-managing affairs was not understood as perfect or complete, but as perfectible and completable. It was firmly believed that ‘inherited’ social divisions based on sex could be eradicated only through institutionalization, further development of socialist self-management and material
productive forces, which would in turn ensure improvement of various social, educational, cultural, health and other humanitarian factors (Rezolucija 1978: 181). Those ‘inherited’ divisions were present in all spheres of life, and there were many attempts to research and counter their specific drawbacks. For example, the Council for Questions of the Social Position of Women declared in 1978 that conservative tendencies still ran through the educational system, negatively affecting further education and employment of young women. Resilient and coordinated action throughout all levels of society, and especially within educational structures, was still urgently needed. It had to be accompanied by a pervasive mass-media campaign against prejudices and stereotypes, a struggle for overt favoring of abilities over sex in employment, humanized curricula (from kindergarten through university), direct equalizing influence of teachers, and, probably most important, through further and more exhaustive socializing of family functions (Iz rada 1979).

These educational demands were required even more for women in rural areas. Socialism brought notable changes in the sphere of agriculture, of which feminization of the agricultural labor force seemed to be very prominent (First 1979). Although women were the main agricultural workers and thus potential bearers of modern agrarian production, their participation in self-management and delegate structure of the socialized sector remained symbolic. That is to say, even though they bore the brunt of agricultural work, their socio-political participation in the development of the village life had not been encouraged enough, which in effect aggravated their social invisibility. Thus, in order to “attain faster socialist transformation of agriculture and improvement of socialist relations in village communities”, farm women needed to be more fully recognized as workers and self-managers (Ibid: 19). ‘Worker, self-manager and mother’ figured as a socialist emblem of emancipation. Yet, the conflictual nature of this multiple role-bearer was not concealed or depreciated. The issues of the notorious ‘double burden’ were widely discussed among emancipationist researchers and ideologues, while the randomness of emancipatory actions, double standards among male comrades, or absence of extensive and long-term societal moves towards eradication of the ‘inherited’ divisions were openly criticized (Biaći 1981; Despot 1981; Milosavljević 1981).

None of these appeals, however, came close to the promotion of feminism. The old allegations of sectarianism and “wrongheaded theory in the fight against men,”
which blunted the cutting edge of class struggle (Šoljan 1981: 41), still stood. By the end of the 1970s, the woman’s question had an unaltered revolutionary potential, being even more strikingly related to overturning an untenable exploitative system that obstructed global development. For that reason precisely, it should not be placed in the “toddler shoes of feminism” (Tomšič 1978: 161): “what we are talking about here is not ‘legal equality’, but a new position of man and woman in work, family and society, a new status and behavior of members of each sex, new moral, ethical values” (Ibid: 167). According to this stance, there is no woman’s question without the class question, as much as there is no true emancipation of women (and men) without socialism.

**Socialist Feminists or the Rise of ‘Neo-Feminism’**

The basic premise of the Yugoslav socialist feminist approach was that woman’s and class questions may be dissociated, because the woman’s question was temporally and structurally older. They are, nevertheless, not truly separable, because “there is no revolution without liberation of women – as much as there is no liberation of women without revolution” (Ler-Sofronić 1978a: 1975). True liberation of women assumes her emancipation first, attainable only by means of revolution and lived only in socialism. Although I am using the term ‘socialist feminists’ to designate this loose grouping, the proponents of this position did not refer to themselves as feminists matter-of-factly and were themselves critical of (some aspects) of feminism.

Socialist feminists rejected the prevailing attitude – shared, as we have seen, by the emancipationists, but only to a certain extent – according to which class equality immediately produced formal and actual equality of women and men (Koprivnjak 1980). What made their stance distinctive were three pivotal points. First, they argued that inequality of the sexes was more fundamental and more pervasive than any other social antagonism. All social antagonisms are, in fact, molded against it, because it acts as a paradigm of the master/slave relationship and has its deep roots in psychological structures of both sexes. The difference between sex and class antagonism must therefore be acknowledged and handled differently (Ler-Sofronić 1978a: 178, 209). Second, the economic emancipation of woman, taken to be the key source of her liberation in socialism, proves not to be sufficient. Wage labor cannot release women from sexual oppression and exploitation at home: employment is only the first condition, which must be accompanied by the revolutionizing of modes
of production, society, morality and consciousness. Without a total revolution, the entire sex will remain enslaved, even in socialism. Third, the lived reality at the time seemed almost dreamlike in comparison to the very recent past – socialist revolutions were crushing old antagonisms and many utopian visions were coming true along the way. However, socialism did not demystify the world of sexes, and the position of women had still not reached the status of full humanity (Ler-Sofronić 1978b: 34–35). Although different from the Western-type ‘feminine mystique’, some mystifying, not truly socialist, remained yet to be disposed of.

Unlike the emancipationists, socialist feminists criticized real existing socialism openly. That critique, however, assumed that there is no better social, legal and political framework for women’s liberation and that only in socialism – more humane, more sensitive, more thorough in its attempts to revolutionize itself – such liberation can be achieved. the envisioned future socialism needed to be more humanized, or more feminized—indeed even feminist. As it is, “in societies that undertook to build socialism, theories on women’s emancipation predominantly relied on leveling male and female roles... If femininity and similar problems were rapidly abandoned in theoretical considerations, in practice the view on constancy of traditional feminine traits soon became dominant – despite the rejection of traditional divisions of labor” (Čačinović-Puhovski 1978: 22). In all spheres, Yugoslav socialism managed to replace bourgeois and capitalist institutions with self-managing ones; all but one – the family, “where the ancient principles of labor division and mainly patriarchal-bourgeois values still ruled” (Ler-Sofronić 1979: 62). As it is, socialism had not become feminist yet: the subversive potentials of femininity had not permeated its fabric (Čačinović-Puhovski 1978: 23). Autonomy of women, recognition of their full humanity, or the ultimate differentiation of the sexes seemed to be solutions for an ever more creative socialism to come.

Socialist feminists and the emancipationists agreed on one thing: woman has to be the subject of her own liberation. As a revolutionary subject who strives with all her might towards a brighter future of socialism, woman revolutionizes society as a whole. This holistic outcome has to be premised on a holistic approach – one which was much easier to advocate from a socialist country – which is indeed feminist. Feminism here appears as a normative direction of socialism, irreducible to partial confrontations with “abstract patriarchy and ‘universal male dominion’, with no liberationist effects” (Ler-Sofronić 1978a: 216).
With socialist feminists, feminism ceased to act as a mere Western import. The term was still used with caution, but benevolently. For that reason, socialist feminists were to some extent at odds with the emancipationists. On the other hand, they were also suspicious of feminism *tout court*. Women’s movements – situated somewhere else, primarily in the West – were split into reformist and revolutionary (Drakulić 1978: 222), perceived as either oppositional to the joint struggles for the future of humanity, or belonging to them. The prevailing sentiment was that Western, and especially geographically closer European feminism, with its gradual and deliberate leftist leanings (Zuppa 1978: 68), could learn from Yugoslav feminism that women’s liberation cannot be possible without human emancipation – that is, without socialism.

What socialist feminists enabled was a central change in vocabulary. The key was not whether the woman’s question was particularistic in its nature: women were placed at the heart of the universal struggle for emancipation of humanity. It was rather how the woman’s question positioned itself in the whole array of ‘particularistic’ struggles for the transformation of humanity itself. As Blaženka Despot summed it up, coupling self-management with feminism, “if the ‘woman’s question’ remained repressed in its particularity, situated between inverted commas, it was an expression of a society that does not comprehend the causes of its own crisis and the possibilities of cooperation with movements and forces which spearhead the ideas socialist societies normatively opted for” (Despot 1989: 189).

**Liberationists: “Proletarians of the World, Who Washes Your Socks?”**

The term ‘liberationists’ – again, never adopted by the Yugoslav proponents of this stream themselves – is used to emphasize open distancing from the older, emancipationist line, in which liberation, an emphatically radical feminist notion, had no particular relevance. Their insistence on liberation as something more than a causal effect of economic emancipation and the processes of socialization of women’s domestic role brought them closer to socialist feminists. However, their focus on the liberation of consciousness made them much more responsive to feminism in all its varieties. That focus may be said to have been derived from the discovery that patriarchalisms had not disappeared from the socialist private sphere – the domain of the intimate and everyday life – and that capitalist and socialist societies in fact shared
a strong common feature. Thus, in the form it had actually taken, socialism had not solved the woman’s question, regardless of what it did with the issue of class, while feminism presented itself as a progressive and indeed necessary movement both in Eastern socialist and Western capitalist societies.

In their contribution to the famous *Sisterhood Is Global* collection, Rada Iveryko-vić and Slavenka Drakulić-Ilić point to the ‘private side’ of Yugoslav socialism. Contrasting formal *policy* and actual *practice*, they demonstrate that women comprised 34.5% of the labor force (22.7% of the registered agricultural force), that 57.8% of the total unemployed were women; that marriage remained traditional in most of the country, with a very traditional division of labor in most households; that there was preferential hiring of men in order to avoid paying maternity costs; that in 1979 only 8% of children were accommodated by day-care facilities; that despite the legality of contraception, 83% of women used ‘traditional methods’, not least because contraceptives were hard to obtain and not advertised (1984: 731–732). For this reason, instead of focusing on policy, which was the domain of the emancipationists, or on broadening theoretical insights into women’s emancipation, the liberationists focused mostly on *practice* and its immediate and indirect effects.

Focusing on practice meant primarily focusing on various dimensions of the private sphere. For example, an examination of women’s journals, a trivial pastime item that nonetheless may have formative functions, was used to show (our) hypocrisy towards (our) women. Although Western in origin, this ‘industry of happiness’, successfully conflating female biological and social roles, also flourished in Yugoslavia, enabled by its specific market socialism. The publishing houses of the newspapers and magazines promoting values and ideals of the socialist and self-managing

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4 ‘The ‘private’ here refers to the domain still left untouched by the economic analyses (Iveković 1987: 22), as that part of the life for which the strategic socialist policies were not sufficient. ‘The private’ was a broad designation for a space where various micro-struggles, not only in the family, but in the trams, in the street, in the tavern, in the school and workplace, were yet to be fought (Drakulić 1984: 178). I argue that the private in the liberationists’ narratives has to be understood as referring to a public/private distinction, implying that even in socialism there was a private sphere unregulated and possibly unregulatable by socialist socio-legal mechanisms. This argument contests some portions of the post-socialist history of ‘the private’. For example, the one which reduces the private to what socialist women possessed or rather did not possess, such as tampons, makeup or fancy clothes (Drakulić, 1992); or the one which insisted on the specific socialist falsity of the feminism’s dictum ‘personal is political’, because, as Hungarian sociologist Zsuzsa Ferge claimed, “the reality and the danger is that the private becomes political too often and always... We have an over-politicized life so we want to defend it” from politics (Einhorn 1993: 63).
society simultaneously issued women’s journals, which were, in liberationists’ view, completely incompatible with socialist ideas about the full actualization of human beings (Milanović 1978: 236–237). A similar disenchantment arose from the examination of the effects of sexual education in primary schools. Gross gender stereotyping and “pedagogically ‘served’ sexism” (Drakulić-Ilić 1979) which were present in Yugoslav textbooks, taught children, quite contrary to the ideals of socialism and its historical consciousness, that there was an immutable (male and female) nature. No wonder then that women writers and artists were by definition compared to and valued against men, that they were often denigrated in their achievements (Dias 1984), often forgotten in history, even in their own celebrated revolutionary, anti-fascist history which better remembered horses than women (Sklevicky 1989). This in itself may be seen as fertile ground for a patriarchal psychological nexus between women – every mother and daughter: a nexus which precludes daughters’ self-esteem and self-development, and was in the service of continuing female subjugation to men, and acted as a hindrance to solidarity among women (Mladenović 1984).

“There is no doubt that the differences between the position of women in our and in Western societies are indeed great... It seems to me, however, that this does not question the basic assumption – that today women are still, in all societies, more or less ‘second-class citizens’”, says Mirjana Oklobdžija in her introduction to Dometi’s special issue on the women’s movement and revolutionary processes (1980: 4). Being a second-class citizen in socialism demanded a thorough analysis of the private sphere – how and why it remained part of the life-world which sought to utterly abolish the conservative public/private distinction; and how to build a society which would be practically and not only formally de-privatized and humanized. In order to change the normalcy of this ‘second-classness’, the entire “culture of human relationships” needs to be transformed (Papić 1981: 32). For that, feminism offered tools overlooked by the mainstream socialist economic and policy analyses.  

5 Lydia Sklevicky’s article, “More Horses than Women,” persuasively describes how even the women who bore arms for the socialist future of Yugoslavia were treated in history textbooks on which later generations of Yugoslavs were raised. Sklevicky’s text also gives an opportunity to touch upon significant generational differences. She begins by recounting an occasion in the early 1980s when she, a young historian herself, first became “aware that Yugoslav women had not marched through history’s events like numb shadows... [such a false view] was reinforced by the very meager attention given to those whose names and merits were part of my generation’s cultural/historical heritage” (1989: 68). In contrast to the emancipationists, both socialist feminists and the liberationists belonged to the post-war generation which, curiously enough, had to re-learn about women who built socialism.
The texts written by the liberationists did not disclose their anti-socialist or anti-Marxist stance, for which they had been cursorily accused by the media and the emancipationists (Iveković and Drakulić-Ilić 1984). What they do contain, at least implicitly and especially in hindsight, is their taking socialism for granted, as if it had always been there and always would be. They had not fought for socialism with firearms in hand (and, as Sklevicky noted, they might have never heard of those who had), nor were they instituting its policies. They basically insisted on what had not been asserted strongly enough: that there were patriarchal remnants which formal policies did not or could not reach. They were thus more embittered with socialism as it was than willing to have it replaced with something else. By introducing feminism, they criticized socialism which had allowed itself the deception that, where women were concerned, it differed fundamentally from bourgeois capitalist societies.

**All Quiet on the Eastern Front**

Was Yugoslav feminism feminist? Was it in some way comparable to its Western counterpart, and what were the points of their dissimilarity? Was there anything unique about it? Could we say that it was socialist, in some manner different to Western socialist feminism? Or was it capitalist, brought in with other permissible products of the cultural capitalism? Finally, was it Eastern? After the fall of the Iron Curtain, there was a very common notion that Eastern Europe knew no feminism. This view is aptly articulated by Romanian feminist philosopher, Mihaela Miroiu:

*One cannot reasonably contest that there were gender politics in communism, mainly politics of ‘emancipation through work’... 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 there 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, or to equal pay for equal work. (Miroiu 2007: 200)*

Even if one admits that we have to think in terms of islands – and one has to wonder in what part of the world exactly are the entire continents of feminism – the Yugoslav case begs to be an archipelago. The quoted paragraph must also make us
think what an acceptable definition of feminism is, and whether feminism can be anything but Western (especially in its post-socialist aftermath)?

What I offered here was a more nuanced typology of emancipatory agency and the discourses around it in an Eastern socialist country that also engendered distinctly feminist thought. Yugoslavia was a country that cultivated the belief that “our working class, our working people, which also means our working woman, live, produce and fight together with all organized socialist forces for a new epochal experience – the experience of total self-management heretofore unknown to any working class anywhere in the world” (speech by Mirjana Poček Matić on the occasion of March 8th, qt. in Šoljan 1981: 42). After her experience at the Drug-ca conference, radical French theorist Christine Delphy wrote that the Westerners felt bias and dishonesty in Yugoslavs’ faith in self-management. However, on second thought, she came to the following important question: “How to struggle against a system when women’s liberation is part of its principles?” (qt. in Bonfiglioli 2008: 67). What is more, how to struggle (and against whom?) if the liberationists, criticized overtly by the emancipationists for their ‘feminist excess,’ honored the emancipationists’ “accepting, supporting and pushing through many a helpful reform regarding the women’s condition” (Iveković and Drakulić 1984: 735)?

Let me conclude by returning to the issue of Eastness. As I hoped to have shown, the socialist, self-managing, Yugoslav road to emancipation saw itself in many ways superior – in terms of being closer to full humanity – to its Western capitalist counterpart. In addition, it saw itself as being fundamentally different from both ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ societal models, due at least in part to Yugoslavia’s more market-oriented and ‘open’ form of socialism. Now, with socialism gone and, even more so, with Yugoslavia dissolved, that sentiment seems completely misplaced. However, the questions remain. How did everything Western – feminism included – in a relatively short time-span, come to signify everything progressive, authentic, almost universal in nature? How did we (ourselves) come to believe – against the patent variety of approaches described – that there was either only ‘Socialist Patriarchy’ or that the supposed unofficial islands of feminism were only simulating Western-type feminism? How do nearly all comprehensive feminist theory textbooks so neatly categorize Marxist feminism or socialist feminism without even mentioning possible feminisms groomed in socialist spaces in the very recent past, such as the
Yugoslav one? How did we end up with one-sided definitions of what agency is (Funk 2014), what emancipation and liberation might be, and in what contexts these words have their proper uses, while in others they appear somewhat clumsily and with a strange echo?

To the question “Did socialism liberate women?” an emphatic ‘no’ can no longer be an answer. As Penn and Massino argue, we need multiple answers that require attending to many voices and stories (2009: 3). The same is true for the Manichean division between Western (grassroots) movement and (Eastern) “imposed, superficial and disingenuous official structures... directed from above” (Harvey 2002: 28; see also Ghodsee and Zaharijević 2015). What this post-socialist division conceals is how something comes to be entitled as proper (Daskalova 2016), how portions of histories become purposefully obfuscated to buttress such properness, and how and why we ourselves choose to produce and reinforce essentializing differences, such as those between anti-feminist, politically immature, oppressed and manipulated ‘Eastern European women’ and pro-feminist, politically mature and liberated ‘Western women’ (Spehar 2005: 115). Disregard for various feminist archipelagoes or underestimation of hybrid soils where feminisms were or could be grown, appears and re-appears time and again in so many different guises (Mohanty 1984; Power 2009: 11–16). All of them, however, appear and disappear on the background of a seemingly solid and immovable West, a seemingly solid and immovable capitalism.

Thus, perhaps instead of asking what was Eastern in feminism behind the Iron Curtain, and how much has the West, in the form of Western feminism, figured as the content provider to the so-called Eastern feminism, we need to pose the question differently. Countering the ‘common knowledge’ – that no feminism ever appeared in the East, wherefore feminism as such cannot not be Western – also counters the clear-cut divisions between the East and the West, between socialism and capitalism. This does not mean that the introduction of the notion of ‘cultural capitalism’ would be enough to solve the strange case of Yugoslav feminism. It might be that the sheer strangeness of this case must serve as a reminder that political volatility of the concepts we use often curbs political imagery and negates portions of history – turning them into spurious ‘common knowledge’.
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