The Enemy of My Enemy Is My Friend: The Curious Tale of Feminism and Capitalism in Eastern Europe

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1 Introduction

Across Eastern Europe today, populist leaders fan the flames of anti-feminism. Poland has seen renewed attempts to restrict women’s reproductive rights and revert to traditional gender roles as Catholic bishops rail against the pernicious influence of “gender ideology.” (Kościńska 2014). In Hungary, anti-gender policies have led to new rhetoric of “family mainstreaming,” and Viktor Orbán himself has said that women can only be promoted in his administration if they have three children (Juhász 2016). Fears about falling birth rates throughout the region have led to a resurgence of patriarchal, nationalist political movements, which reject supposedly foreign notions of gender equality. Women have become the scapegoats for weak economies and demographic collapses.

In this brief essay, I want to revisit my own early fieldwork in Bulgaria in the late 1990s (Ghodsee 2004, 2005) and also think about Nancy Fraser’s seminal article, “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History” (Fraser 2009) in relation to the current gender backlash in Eastern Europe. Fraser’s article was intended as an indictment of the narrow domestic identity politics of American feminism, but it has a great critical value when we consider the ways that Western liberal feminist theory and praxis were exported to Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall. As Fraser argues in the United States context, I propose that the triumphalist neoliberal capitalism of the 1990s co-opted and deployed liberal feminism and women’s rights as a tool in the project of Western economic domination in Eastern Europe. Current tropes of hyper-masculinity and anti-gender diatribes in Eastern Europe at least in part arise from local perceptions that liberal feminism is an ideology of Western cultural and economic imperialism, a perception that can and must be challenged by activist women in the region. By embracing the history of
local women’s activism, including that of state socialist women’s organizations, feminists can once again represent a political project with the potential to challenge (rather than support and perpetuate) the ravages of unfettered free markets in the twenty-first century.

2 Feminisms East and West

This story could start back in the late nineteenth century with the debates between Western women advocating for separatist suffrage movements in the United States and Great Britain and the socialist women in Germany and Russia who believed that working women needed to struggle together with working men for political as well as social and economic rights (Zetkin 1896). But for the sake of brevity, I begin this tale in 1975, in the middle of the Cold War when the government of Mexico hosted the first United Nation’s Conference on Women for International Women’s Year. This historic gathering brought together delegations from the capitalistic West, the state socialist East, and the developing countries of the South to deliberate on women’s roles in society and culture under the three themes of “Equality, Development, and Peace” (Olcott 2017).

American feminists travelled to Mexico City expecting to find a global sisterhood of women united in a common fight for equal rights with men. Instead, Jane Jaquette, an American political scientist noticed the deep tensions that divided women from different political backgrounds: “I found North American feminists surprised to discover that not everyone shared their view that patriarchy was the major cause of women’s oppression, and that Third World women held views closer to Marx than Friedan” (Jaquette 2004). Arvonne Fraser, a member of the official United States delegation in 1975, later recalled that: “American women learned that they could be the target of public vilification, which shocked many of them deeply...the new U.S. women’s movement had taught many American women to think of all women as friends, people united in a common cause. To find this not true, in their first international encounter, was, to some, an infuriating and very disappointing experience” (Fraser 1987).

Most relevant to the argument I hope to put forward in this essay, however, is the report from a journalist covering the 1975 conference for the American magazine, Foreign Affairs. She reported that some African women attending the conference considered Western feminism a neo-colonialist plot to divide and conquer the men and women of newly independent countries in the Global South (Whitaker 1975). In order to resist the economic and political imperialism of the capitalist countries, they argued, African men and women needed to work together. They believed that an independent women’s movement would merely play into the hands of their former colonial masters. Also, was this attitude really so unreasonable, given the long history of British imperial tactics to divide and rule African populations by promoting inter-ethnic hostility? Indeed, throughout the United Nations Decade for Women that followed the International Women’s Year (1976–1985), liberal feminists from
the advanced capitalist countries tried to insist that the UN conferences focus on
narrowly defined “women’s issues,” whereas women from the Eastern Bloc coun-
tries and many women from the Global South wanted to use the international
women’s congresses as an opportunity for women to speak about larger social,
political, and economic issues (Ghodsee 2012).

Fast forward to 1998, when I began living in Bulgaria to do my dissertation
research on women’s labor in the tourism industry. The immediate post-communist
period was a time that witnessed a resurgence of traditional gender roles across
Eastern Europe (Gal and Kligman 2000). This was a moment when Western aid was
flooding into Bulgaria through the European Union’s PHARE Program, USAID’s
Democracy Network (DemNet) Program, and a variety of other bilateral donors to
encourage the development of civil society through the establishment of local
non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Many of these new NGOs were created
specifically to promote women’s issues, to allow Western liberal feminist ideas to be
transferred to East European women who had been “emancipated from above”
(Drakulic 2015). The anthropologist Katherine Verdery has argued that state social-
ism reduced women’s economic dependence on men by making men and women
equally dependent on the centralized state (Verdery 1996). With the collapse of that
state and the rapid privatization (and outright theft) of state assets, men under
capitalism would regain their supposedly “natural” roles as familial patriarchs and
women could return to their “natural” roles as mothers and wives supported by their
husbands (Gal and Kligman 2000). Across Eastern Europe, nationalists argued that
capitalist competition would relieve women of the notorious double burden and
restore familial and societal harmony by allowing men to reassert their masculine
authority as breadwinners. For instance, the historian of sexuality, Dagmar Herzog,
shared a conversation with several East German men in their late-forties in 2006.
They told her that:

It was really annoying that East German women had so much sexual self-confidence and
economic independence. Money was useless, they complained. The few extra Eastern Marks
that a doctor could make in contrast with, say, someone who worked in the theater, did
absolutely no good, they explained, in luring or retaining women the way a doctor’s salary
could and did in the West. ‘You had to be interesting.’ What pressure. And as one revealed:
‘I have much more power now as a man in unified Germany than I ever did in communist
days’ (Herzog 2010, p. 113).

In Bulgaria, many women initially left the paid employment voluntarily, opting
out of the labor market for a well-deserved break and believing that their families
would be able to survive on one wage in the glorious democratic future to come. As
enterprises began to be sold off or closed down, there was an early attempt to
preserve jobs for male workers. As Nanette Funk observed: “Reducing women’s
paid work is a major instrument of economic quasi-privatization and the integration
of post-communist societies into a capitalist market system” (Funk and Mueller
1993). Before 1989, women had enjoyed generous maternity leaves that guaranteed
that a job would be available for them when they were ready to return to work, so
women left formal employment with the expectation that they could go back anytime
they wanted.
However, as the economy imploded, the banks failed, hyperinflation ate up the nation’s savings, and men found themselves increasingly made redundant, women realized too late that there would be no jobs for them to go back to (Ghodsee 2005). As early as 1992, the Croatian journalist, Slavenka Drakulic, “worried about what would happen to all the good things that we did have under communism—the medical care, the year’s paid maternity leave, free abortion” (Benn 1992). Although men and women were both impacted by the sudden liberalization of labor markets, this historical moment coincided with a resurgence in traditional gender roles that rationalized women’s return to the domestic sphere (Saxonberg and Sirovatka 2006).

At this moment of severe economic crisis and the growing impoverishment of the majority of Bulgarian men and women, Western-funded NGOs supported projects that dealt directly with a narrowly defined set of women’s issues that blamed the deficiencies of traditional Bulgarian patriarchy for women’s new ills. By prioritizing issues such as domestic violence in the home and sexual harassment in the workplace over the pressing social problems arising from unemployment and the dismantling of social safety nets, Western-funded women’s NGOs targeted local patriarchies as the cause of women’s disadvantages, constructing the image of the backward and uncivilized East European male who drinks too much, beats his wife, and is otherwise incapable of embodying the progressive, liberal habitus necessary for the citizens of modern democracy. Moreover, discursively constructing women as a distinct category of Bulgarians whose suffering required special remedy through foreign aid, these Western-funded NGOs created new gender-based fissures in Bulgarian society where there would otherwise been class-based solidarity. Like the socialist women of the early twentieth century and the African women at the 1975 UN Conference on Women in Mexico City, many East European women were suspicious of Western liberal feminist discourses that valorized gender identities over class affiliations or national identity.

Non-governmental organizations funded by Western donors attempted to create civil society by funneling dollars to support advocates for women’s rights or ethnic minority rights. By creating democracy from the ground up, these NGOs are also an important sort of “feminism-by-design,” whereby Western projects and programs were imposed willy-nilly on East European women interested in organizing to counteract the deleterious effects of the economic transition. The president of one organization in Sofia believed that the biggest challenge facing Bulgarian women was unemployment and economic displacement, but the Western donor agencies preferred to fund projects about domestic violence, sexual harassment, or human trafficking.

To receive funds, women’s organizations in Eastern Europe framed their proposals using the language of Western liberal feminism and adhered to strict pro-market projects, such as the promotion of social entrepreneurship or the encouragement of women-owned businesses. Projects that challenged the logic of privatization or the marketization of previously state-funded social services often went unfunded. Back in 2004, I asked if feminism and capitalism were “strange bedfellows” in Eastern Europe. I argued that:
Women’s NGOs may actually weaken grassroots opposition to neoliberalism and the dismantling of the social welfare state in Bulgaria in two key ways. First, they place the blame for the drastic reduction in living standards for women squarely on the shoulders of traditional Bulgarian patriarchy. They deflect attention away from the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and the stabilization programs of the IMF, which are primarily responsible for the disappearance of the social safety net that once supported women and their families. Second, NGOs in Bulgaria co-opt educated middle-class women who may otherwise have been able to organize a solid class-based opposition to secure women’s rights in the post-1989 period (Ghodsee 2004, p. 748).

Looking back after two decades, I understand that those early Western “democracy promoters” were at least partially genuine in their hope to create a robust civil society sector by empowering different groups to advocate for their own rights within the new market economy. However, the suspicious way that Western funding most often supported pro-Western organizations reveals that these were not just projects about building local civil society actors and organizations. These Western funds also determined which kinds of projects got funded, which voices were heard, which people were sent abroad for education and training, and which issues were supposed to matter to women or ethnic minorities or people with disabilities. In the case of many feminist organizations, if they wanted to survive in the competitive marketplace of ideas (and receive foreign grants) they learned to adhere to a narrow set of appropriate women’s issues for which they could advocate, especially trafficking, sexual harassment, and domestic violence.

I have a vivid memory of interviewing a senior MP from the Bulgarian Socialist Party back in 2003. I wanted to talk about women’s issues, and she told me that she did not deal with “your [American] kind of women’s issues.” She told me she dealt with policies dealing with pensions for widows, maternity leaves for mothers, and the education of young girls. “These are women’s issues, too” she told me, defensively, and opined that NGOs could not take interest in these more pressing problems because they required the intervention of the state. NGOs could only deal on the level of the individual, but what was needed, in her opinion, was macro-adjustments to the economy that only a sovereign government could undertake. She wanted to focus on the structural foundations of inequality.

This process was mirrored across Eastern Europe in the years leading up to European Union accession. Candidate members hoping to join the EU had to align their policies on gender equality with those envisioned in Brussels, which increasingly focused on the economic value of achieving gender parity within the framework of free markets, a shift that has been seen as a move from “state feminism to market feminism” (Kantola and Squires 2012). This market feminism was a stark contrast to the discourse of the international women’s movement during the Cold War when women’s issues had been framed as basic human rights. However, after the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, a new discourse began to emerge, one that tied gender equality to explicitly economic outcomes; thus, linking a certain kind of liberal feminism with market-oriented reforms (Stratigaki 2004; Elomäki 2015). This liberal feminism focused on improving the human capital of individual women to make them more
competitive on emerging labor markets and did little to challenge the structural causes of gender disparities (Spehar 2012; Ghodsee and Zaharjević 2015). As in Bulgaria, the specific brand of liberal feminism was strapped to the back of neoliberal capitalism as it spreads its tentacles out across the region.

3 Gender Mainstreaming and Economic Suffering

In addition to the NGO activism, countries wishing to accede to the European Union in 2004 or 2007 implemented a variety of gender mainstreaming legislation designed to “protect” women from the worst ravages of the emerging free market system. Just as East European men supposedly had their masculinity restored by the “natural” gender order guaranteed by capitalist competition, West European bureaucrats insisted that women needed special protections from unenlightened Eastern masculinity. Also, this is despite the fact that in countries such as Hungary and Bulgaria, male unemployment actually outpaced female unemployment in the 2000s (Ghodsee 2005). Indeed, in Russia and the former GDR, male life expectancy had suffered a precipitous plunge during the 1990s, primarily attributable to the premature deaths of middle-aged men economically displaced by the transition process.

In an article in the premier British medical journal, the Lancet, David Stuckler, Lawrence King, and Martin McKee published an examination in the change in the mortality rates of working-age men between 1989 and 2002 in the countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Stuckler et al. 2009). By examining the effects of mass privatization (which they defined as the transfer of 25% or more of previously state-owned assets to private hands within 24 months), and controlling for other factors to isolate the specific effects of the so-called “shock therapy,” the authors found a statistically significant link between privatization, male unemployment, and premature death. Russia provided the direst example, with male life expectancy falling by more than seven years between 1985 and 2002. While Soviet men lived to an average of 67 years, their Russian counterparts barely survived to 60. Struckler and his co-authors argued that privatization in Eastern Europe could be blamed for millions of premature deaths.

Against the backdrop of this carnage, women’s NGOs and their Western funders, as well as EU bureaucrats, continued to insist on special programs and laws to support/protect women’s rights in Eastern Europe. I am not saying that problems like sexual harassment and domestic violence were not important, nor that these women’s rights should not be protected, but merely want to point out that this insistence on importing a particular brand of Western liberal feminism to Eastern Europe coincided with the imposition of neoliberal capitalism and that the former might have been part of a package of liberal discourses used to justify the latter.

This importation of “feminism-by-design” from the West did two things. First, it attempted to erase the history of progressive state socialist policies for women in the region by claiming that it was illegitimate because ordinary women had not advocated for their own rights. This idea of “emancipation from above” (Drakulic 2015)
has been used to explain why East European women are supposedly so willing to let their rights evaporate after 1989. If rights were not hard won through grass roots activism, so the argument goes, women would not value them and they can easily be reversed. (Of course, American women fought hard for their rights through an independent women’s movement and they are still being reversed!) Second, and more important, the importation of Western liberal feminism to Eastern Europe discursively created a predetermined category of expected losers in the new capitalist economy. Western liberal feminism emerged in conflict with capitalism, but also very much a part of capitalism. Although there were many varieties of feminism in the West that challenged the hegemony of free markets along with patriarchy, the particular brand that got exported in the 1990s was the one that worked best with the free market economy, with a focus on the “politics of recognition” (i.e. identity politics) rather than on the “politics of redistribution” (Fraser 2009). The “feminism-by-design” model encouraged projects to protect women from market discrimination and thereby discursively legitimating that discrimination.

In the American context, Nancy Fraser, Susan Faludi, and others have argued that Western feminism has been co-opted by the economic project of neoliberalism, with its fetishization of unfettered free markets, emaciated states, and shredded social safety nets. In 2009, Fraser published a stunning critique of contemporary liberal feminism’s abandonment of social justice issues and its narrow focus on identity politics. The article systematically outlined how, “the dream of women’s emancipation [was] harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation.” Rather than challenging the structures of inequality that oppressed women, liberal feminists (such as those who concentrated on supporting women’s autonomy in a world of legally guaranteed sexual equality with men) unwittingly paved the way for the expansion of an economic system that ultimately increased the wealth and power of patriarchal, capitalist elites. Although liberal feminists focusing narrowly on patriarchy eventually came to dominate the official American and EU feminisms, Fraser argues that the early Second-Wave feminist movement was far more critical of capitalism:

All told, second-wave feminism espoused a transformative political project, premised on an expanded understanding of injustice and a systematic critique of capitalist society. The movement’s most advanced currents saw their struggles as multi-dimensional, and simultaneously against economic exploitation, status hierarchy and political subjugation. To them, moreover, feminism appeared as part of a broader emancipatory project, in which the struggles against gender injustices were necessarily linked to struggles against racism, imperialism, homophobia and class domination, all of which required transformation of the deep structures of capitalist society (Fraser 2009, p. 107).

In her article, Fraser documents how the forces of neoliberal capitalism enlisted feminism as a tool to undermine the ideological hegemony of what she calls the “state-organized capitalism” of the post-war era. By challenging the four pillars of this state-organized capitalism – economism, androcentrism, étatism, and Westphalianism – liberal feminism unwittingly helped to give birth to a world of globalized, unfettered free markets, and justified the ultimate dismantling of welfare states and the evisceration of class-based social movements. Instead, second-wave
feminism devolved into identity politics where rights and recognition took precedence over issues of redistribution and social justice.

In 2013, Susan Faludi launched a scathing critique of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg’s book, *Lean In*, as a way to investigate the strange affinities between capitalism and feminism in the United States during and after the ravages of the Great Recession. Faludi noted how feminist discourses had been co-opted by the corporate elite and had lost touch with ordinary working women. She writes:

Sandberg’s admirers would say that *Lean In* is using free-market beliefs to advance the cause of women’s equality. Her detractors would say (and have) that her organization is using the desire for women’s equality to advance the cause of the free market. And they would both be right... For the last two centuries, feminism, like evangelicalism, has been in a dance with capitalism (Faludi 2013).

This dance recognizes that, in the West, perhaps the most stalwart opponent of capitalism has often been patriarchy. Whether advocating for a family wage for men or promoting special labor protections for women and child workers, patriarchy often strategically deployed traditional gender roles as a bulwark against exploitation. By keeping women out of the labor force and in the home, patriarchy benefitted from the reduced supply of workers, which often translated into higher wages for men. Traditional patriarchal values also underpinned the creation of generous social safety nets to protect vulnerable women and children unable to fend for themselves.

Second-wave feminists in the West deplored the paternalism of the welfare state and insisted on equal treatment in the labor force, challenging the basis for gender specific labor protections or social entitlements. Where feminists saw an opportunity to banish discrimination and unequal treatment, employers saw the opportunity to increase the supply of labor while doing away with unwieldy labor regulations and expensive welfare programs. By liberating themselves from patriarchal oppression, liberal feminists made themselves available for capitalist exploitation. Both Fraser and Faludi argue that this was never feminism’s goal, but once the wheel of history was set in motion there was no turning back.

I believe that it was this particular version of liberal feminism that was imported into Eastern Europe during the 1990s, and in 2004, I catalogued the problems with building a “feminism-by-design” that was so closely linked to the imposition of neo-liberal capitalism. Just as women’s emancipation was conflated with communism and stridently rejected in the early 1990s, today that gender equality, reproductive rights, and anti-discrimination laws are too easily conflated with Western economic imperialism, and this is what has led to the growing gender backlash throughout the region, as well as the rise of new tropes of nationalist hyper-masculinity. For example, the countries of Eastern Europe rank the highest among those with the fastest shrinking populations in the world. A combination of out-migration and high mortality is exacerbated by below replacement fertility rates. Since liberal feminists insist on reproductive freedoms for women, nationalists and social conservatives will inevitably assert that “feminism” and “gender” are part of a “Western plot” to depopulate and weaken the East European nation-state. The ongoing hysteria about the impending demographic collapse of countries in Eastern
Europe links patriotism with traditional gender roles as a protective mechanism against the perceived cultural and economic imperialism of the European Union and the United States, and the liberal causes they seek to promote in Eastern Europe, including that of liberal feminism.

4 In Lieu of a Conclusion

I wrote this essay for the conference in Berlin to provoke scholars of East European women’s movements to rethink the history of the last three decades in the context of the resurgent nationalisms sweeping across the region. I want to make it very clear that I am in no way defending those politicians and citizens who hope to reinstate traditional gender roles and rob women of their bodily autonomy, but I believe it would be blind to ignore the fact that liberal feminism has been, and continues to be, deployed as a tool of neoliberal capitalism, both in the United States and around the world. Indeed, Sara Farris (Farris 2017) has recently coined the term “femonationalism” to denote the way that women’s rights can be used to promote a right-wing, xenophobic agenda, showing that women’s issues can never be divorced from their larger social, political, and economic contexts.

Across Eastern Europe today, at least some of the anti-feminist sentiment stems from a deeper anti-capitalist frustration, particularly in the wake of the global financial crisis, the subsequent Great Recession, and the devastating economic impacts of the novel coronavirus pandemic. For those of us interested in upholding women’s rights, we must be cognizant to disentangle our demands from those that justify the extension of capitalist exploitation. Feminism, or pro-women’s activism—if we do not want to use the word “feminism”—does not have to be an exclusively female social movement that protects the interests of elite women, or to paraphrase Susan Faludi (2013), which focuses on the glass ceiling while ignoring the floor. Women have been the members of broad-based inclusive social movements that fight for the rights of all individuals while still challenging the patriarchy, nationalism, and xenophobia in all of its forms.

If feminism and capitalism have been “strange bedfellows” in Eastern Europe, perhaps it is time for a divorce.

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