

Feminism-by-Design: Emerging Capitalisms, Cultural Feminism, and Women's Nongovernmental Organizations in Postsocialist Eastern Europe

Whatever happens in my part of the world, I see it in terms of class formation or the formation of income inequalities. I see gender and national sentiment as only helping these class formations.¹

Women of color within the United States as well as women from developing countries have attacked the hegemony of Western cultural feminism. The idea of a global sisterhood erases important differences in power and access to resources among women of varying races, ethnicities, and nationalities. These critiques, however, have often gone unheeded in the reconstruction projects of the former "second world." Western feminists and their nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been employed by the multilateral and bilateral aid communities to help women in former socialist countries survive the process of economic transformation. At the same time, many local women throughout Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have resisted the importation of cultural feminist ideologies. They have stubbornly refused to develop a collective gendered identity to advocate for their own rights.

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¹ Comment made by Elena Gapova at the Annual Soyuz Symposium in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in February 2002 in response to her paper "Nation, Gender and Class Formation in Belarus . . . and Elsewhere in the Post-Soviet World."

Billions of dollars have been lent and spent in aid to develop “democratic institutions” and “free markets.” Yet only Poland’s and Slovenia’s citizens enjoyed a higher standard of living in 2000 than they did in 1989 when the socialist experiment ended (UNDP 2001a). Similarly, after over a decade of attempts to create independent women’s movements in Eastern Europe, *feminist* is still a bad word (Holmgren 1995) and there is still an atmosphere of antifeminism (Jalušić and Antić 2000). Eastern European women continue to resist a gendered analysis of their oppression (Gal and Kligman 2000).

In this article, I will examine the role of cultural feminism and the international aid that has attempted to rebuild postsocialist countries after 1989. I will try to untangle how Western feminists and their local counterparts have ignored the complex historical legacies of socialist versus what has been called “bourgeois feminism” in the East. I argue that the specific type of cultural feminism that has been exported to Eastern Europe (and many of the local NGOs informed by its ideology) may be unwittingly complicit with the proponents of neoliberalism responsible for the very decline in general living standards that gave Western feminists their mandates to help Eastern European women in the first place. The NGOs that privilege a gender-based analysis of oppression over an analysis more sensitive to class issues may actually legitimize ideas that women are somehow naturally less suited to free market economies.

Cultural feminism refers to a specific package of discourses and practices that promote the idea that women and men are essentially different—either because of inherent biological differences or because of gendered socialization so deeply ingrained as to be irreversible. These differences between the two sexes transcend class, race, age, and ethnicity and supposedly unite all women in a common sisterhood. Whereas radical and socialist feminisms advocate for more comprehensive societal change in order to liberate women, cultural feminism often aims at meeting women’s special needs within the status quo. In other words, cultural feminism looks to find solutions for how the worst offenses of patriarchy can be mitigated, while never challenging the social or economic relations within which the patriarchy thrives. Therefore, as a way of addressing women’s concerns, cultural feminism (unlike other feminisms) works well within the neoliberal ideological constraints of the large bilateral and multilateral aid institutions in the West. This is not to deny that cultural feminism in the United States and Western Europe—and even in some instances in the developing world—has been responsible for gaining women necessary and important rights and services. However, this article focuses specifically on the applicability of cultural feminism in the postsocialist context.

Capitalism-by-design

After the unexpected collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, billions of dollars in aid and assistance flowed from the United States and Western Europe into the former Eastern bloc. A virtual army of consultants and experts descended into capital cities to fashion the foundations of capitalism and liberal democracy from scratch (Wedel 2001). These early years of the 1990s were characterized by what David Stark (1992) has called “capitalism-by-design.” Western experts advised local governments on how to create the institutions of democracy and capitalism. If the experts could create the proper institutions in a country, the rules of those new institutions would guide individual behavior, and one could create the conditions for the development of capitalism, literally by design.² The capitalism-by-design paradigm still underlies the structural adjustment and stabilization practices of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in this region.

The problem with the capitalism-by-design thesis was that it duplicated the fallacy that society could be radically changed all at once, much as the socialists themselves had once believed that administrative decrees could instantaneously change property relations. Early proponents of capitalism-by-design believed that 1989 was a historical break with the past, creating a blank slate on which a whole new society could be built.³ But socialist (and in some cases presocialist) institutions and social practices were very slow to disappear despite the sweeping changes. Privileges under one economic system could be readily converted into privileges under new economic systems without regard to changing institutional imperatives (Stark 1992; Eyal, Széleányi, and Townsley 1999).

Stark (1992) challenged the capitalism-by-design paradigm by introducing a theory of path dependence. Path dependence suggests that the differing circumstances that led up to a country’s entrance into and exit out of state socialism would inform the creation of postsocialist institutions. Capitalism would not be built by the conscious design of experts from the West. Instead, it would be composed out of the rubble of the socialist East. Path dependence as a critique of neoliberal economic theory also reinserted structuralist concerns into the debate. Unlike the rational choice theory favored by economists, path dependence recognizes that structural imperatives—in this case, the legacies of the socialist and presocialist past—constrained people’s choices (Alavi and Shanin 1982). The

² Victor Nee’s (1989) market-transition theory explained the rationale behind the shift to markets.

³ See, e.g., Nee 1989 and Sachs 1995.

decades of experience that preceded the transformation process could not be swept away with the crumbling of a wall; memory and experience are embedded in the individual actors who have become the new capitalist subjects of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Many Western donors and women's NGOs have failed to recognize exactly these historical legacies of socialist feminism (as distinct and separate from bourgeois feminism). Socialist women from Central and Eastern European countries always prioritized resistance against class oppression above agitations based on any specific form of gendered subjugation. Proletarian men were seen as closer allies than bourgeois women, who then, as now, advocated for a kind of global sisterhood based on women's supposed biological and psychological similarities.

Feminism-by-design

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. Past gender segregation of the work force under state socialism, in conjunction with new Western-style sex discrimination, help along that process.

—Nanette Funk 1993, 7

During the early transition period, Western feminists and women's organizations also jumped on the aid bandwagon. The money was abundant. Studies were undertaken and reports were prepared to show that the economic transition from communism would disproportionately harm women. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Western scholars who have written about gender and economic transformation have tended to paint a very dark picture of women's position in the emerging postsocialist societies.⁴ And while some disaggregated statistics do show that women as a whole have been the greater "losers" during the transformation, these analyses subsume important emerging class distinctions by their preoccupation with gender.

In many ways, the literature on gender and transformation fell into the trap of the capitalism-by-design paradigm. Institutions from advanced market economies in the West replaced the old socialist institutions. Since many scholars agreed that women are at a disadvantage in these Western

⁴ See, e.g., Corrin 1992; Einhorn 1993; Funk and Mueller 1993; Moghadam 1993; Alsanbeigui, Pressman, and Summerfield 1994; Rueschemeyer 1994; Buckley 1997.

institutions, there was an assumption that once these institutions were transplanted to postsocialist societies they would produce the same effects on Eastern European women. This argument seems to underlie many of the claims that were made about women very early in the economic transformation period. If researchers such as Nanette Funk (1993), quoted above, recognized any legacies from the socialist past, they often did so in a negative way, assuming that any structural disadvantages that women had under socialism would be reproduced under capitalism. Although many disadvantages were ultimately reproduced, this was by no means an inevitable outcome of the transition, and many scholars failed to consider the possibilities of positive legacies of women's experience under socialism. Thus, Eastern European women would suffer from the structural constraints of both socialism and capitalism, even if capitalism was drastically reshaping the institutions around which society revolved.

The same capitalism-by-design model also guided the solutions to the "problems" of Eastern European women. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), for instance, funded teams of Western consultants to carry out "gender assessments" and to create "gender action plans."⁵ Each country was encouraged to have some kind of "national machinery" in place to deal with women's issues—a governmental body in charge. The sections and oversight committees were formed, but they were rarely effective because they had been imposed from the outside. The other institutions of Western feminism—the women's advocacy groups, the gender think tanks, the battered women's shelters, the rape crisis hotlines, the women's resource centers, and so forth—began springing up everywhere throughout the former communist countries. Most of these entities were attached to local nongovernmental organizations. These NGOs were either directly funded by large multilateral and bilateral donors or supported by Western women's organizations subcontracted by the USAID or the European Union's Poland and Hungary: Action for Restructuring the Economy (PHARE) program to foster "civil society" in the region.⁶ Thus donors retained Western feminists to produce what I will call "feminism-by-design," in much the same way as the World Bank retained consultants from the big three accounting firms, Price Wa-

⁵ See, e.g., Nails and Arnold 2001.

⁶ In December 1989, the Council of Ministers of the European Union established the PHARE program to assist the Republic of Hungary and the Polish People's Republic. Within two years the program was extended, and it now covers fourteen partner countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

terhouse Coopers, Deloitte and Touche, and Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler KPMG, to create capitalism-by-design.

A clash of feminisms

As defined earlier, the particular brand of cultural feminism that has been exported to the postsocialist countries since 1989 favors an essentialist concept of gender over any social explanation for women's growing inequality with men. The deradicalization of women's movements in Western Europe and the United States after the turbulent 1960s eventually led to the mainstreaming of women's concerns within both national and international institutions. Western feminists began working within the dominant capitalist structures of society in order to make the system more favorable to the unique needs and requirements of women.⁷ These unique needs applied to all women and allegedly united them in their common struggle against patriarchy. Men were the main enemy. Issues of both class and race were subsumed under the primacy of gender oppression.⁸

The sudden import of cultural feminism in Eastern Europe went against the established ideologies used to understand oppression. As far back as the late nineteenth century, Western and socialist feminists debated the relative importance of either class or gender as the primary category of analysis when discussing the oppression of women. The socialists believed that private property was the root of women's oppression and that there could be no true emancipation for women under a capitalist system.⁹ The "bourgeois feminists," as they were referred to by socialist women, believed that women needed to be politically and economically incorporated in the capitalist system on equal terms with men, particularly with reference to universal suffrage for both sexes. The bourgeois feminists did not challenge the right to private property and believed that women's disadvantages could be solved through access to the democratic process.¹⁰ Because of these differences, bourgeois women could not be counted on as allies in the socialist cause. Not much has changed since 1907 when the German

⁷ For example, "equal pay for equal work." It does not matter if the jobs are lousy and the wages are low; men and women should have equal access to them.

⁸ Both women of color in the United States (e.g., hooks 1981; Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983; Lorde 1985) and "third-world" women (e.g., Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991; Narayan 1997; Bulbeck 1998) have criticized the white, middle-class bias of cultural feminism.

⁹ See Engels 1978.

¹⁰ The same way many Western feminists today believe that women's disadvantages can be solved through access to higher salaries and management positions.

socialist Clara Zetkin wrote: “There cannot be a unified struggle for the entire [female] sex. . . . No, it must be a class struggle of all of the exploited without differences of sex against all exploiters no matter what sex they belong to” ([1907] 1984, 101).

In the early twentieth century the “woman question” became such an important political issue that both the social democrats and the more radical communists tried to use it to bolster support for their causes. Especially in the newly established Soviet Union, raising the status of women was one of the most important ideological weapons Vladimir Lenin used to defend his interpretation of Karl Marx in the face of Karl Kautsky’s stinging criticisms.¹¹ But again, women were incorporated into the revolutionary program as workers first.¹²

Communism taught women not to distinguish their needs from the needs of men but to struggle together in their class interests. Of course, this may not have been the best model for women, because their needs were constantly subsumed under class rhetoric by communist states dominated by male leaders. But until 1989, at least on an ideological level, bourgeois feminism was still considered a tool of capitalism. Bourgeois feminists were considered complicit in the process of exploitation that capitalism perpetuated. In the aftermath of the communist collapse, many Eastern European women saw the sudden arrival of cultural feminism in the former socialist countries as a foreign and unwelcome ideology.

This ideology had piggybacked into Eastern Europe on the backs of Western scholars and activists riding a tidal wave of grants made available for research on and projects in the countries undergoing transition. Western feminists imported the paradigm of “gender first” without really understanding the significance of the historical struggle between Eastern and Western women over the primacy of class or gender as the appropriate category of analysis. Their research and project proposals merely had this analytical preference built into them as the hegemonic and commonsense way of thinking about women’s lives in times of great social, political, or economic upheaval.

All of the major international bilateral and multilateral aid agencies developed some form of women’s program to combat the negative effects

¹¹ Kautsky strongly disagreed with Lenin’s communism and favored the use of democratic elections to realize socialist goals. Lenin used the woman question to undermine Kautsky’s disagreements, arguing that Russian communism had already given women the right to vote and made them full equals in society. The social democrats, on the other hand, had still not been able to secure suffrage for women.

¹² For example, see Kollontai 1977.

of transformation.¹³ These programs were well funded and also informed by the ideas of cultural feminism. They subcontracted their own Western feminist groups and funded the production of reports that documented the plight of postsocialist women.¹⁴ National statistics disaggregated by gender for the first time began to show that women made up the majority of the registered unemployed. North American and Western European NGOs funded local subcontractors to produce reports on issues such as domestic violence and rape—topics rarely discussed in the public sphere prior to 1989.¹⁵

Although there were valuable insights gained from much of this work, the proliferation of reports and documents circulated to both the local and international press created an overwhelmingly negative picture of the situation of women in postsocialist countries. Activists argued that the sensationalism was necessary in order to call attention to the real problems that women faced. Indeed, high-profile issues such as reproductive rights and trafficking in women brought much-needed resources into the region. At the end of the day, however, the constant attention to the vulnerability of women in these economies may have done them more harm than good.

The discourses produced by these scholars, activists, and international donors construct women as the natural and inevitable group of victims in the economic transformation period. The creation of NGOs to support women through the transformation process may discursively create an acceptable category of “losers” for a previously egalitarian society in which there was no acceptable category of loser. In other words, the concentration of Western resources and academic research on the problems of women may perpetuate or actually create real barriers to women who must now fight against new stereotypes that women are less adaptable to the market economy. Furthermore, too much of a focus on the poor and disenfranchised woman may alienate those “surviving” women from their “failing” female compatriots. Women who are thriving in the postsocialist period might not want to associate themselves with the negative stereo-

¹³ The World Bank, the U.N. Development Program (UNDP), the Open Society/Soros Network, USAID, and the EU PHARE Program all have gender programs or components informed by cultural feminist ideologies.

¹⁴ For example, the United Nations Development Program (1997) in Bulgaria put together an entire report on *Women in Poverty* in the transformation period. The World Bank (2000) held a conference and published a discussion paper on *Making the Transition Work for Women in Europe and Central Asia* in spite of the fact that its own structural adjustment programs are responsible for much of the alleged damage to women’s position.

¹⁵ For example, Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights funded controversial reports on domestic violence (1996) and sexual harassment (1999) in Bulgaria.

types and may distance themselves from any potential women's movement. Finally, the discourse that women are less flexible in adapting to the new economic system may actually convince the women themselves that they are ill equipped to weather the storms of economic transformation.

These factors may help to explain why many women in the region refuse to separate out their problems from those of men. In one interesting study by Bozena Leven (1994, 41), respondents had to agree or disagree with the statement "negative economic effects [of transition] were felt more by women than men." Out of 1,477 urban Polish respondents in 1990–91, 38 percent of men agreed, compared with only 32 percent of women, demonstrating that men were more convinced of women's weakened position in societies than the women themselves. Many of these differences may stem from varying constructions of the "state" and the "family" in Eastern and Western contexts, wherein women from the former socialist countries perceive their role in the private sphere as the more emancipatory and therefore more desirable role (Gal and Kligman 2000). In Bulgaria, my own experience and interviews also revealed a reluctance on the part of women to agree with the idea that they were more negatively affected by the changes than men.¹⁶ Most women preferred not to distinguish their problems from those of men or those of their societies as a whole. In one interview with a very high-ranking female politician, I was told emphatically that there was absolutely no discrimination against women in Bulgaria despite all the "data" and "NGO whining" that argued otherwise.¹⁷ Thus, as Susan Gal and Gail Kligman (2000, 106) have argued, in the Eastern European context "political solidarity cannot be assumed on the basis of shared 'womanhood.'"

On the one hand, this refusal to accept their new disenfranchised position may reflect years of Marxist-Leninist teachings. Forty-five years of communist indoctrination may still convince many postsocialist women that separating out their concerns from the concerns of men will cripple any effective coalitions built on class lines (i.e., against the nouveaux riches, the mafia, and the robber barons of the postsocialist state). Political plurality in Eastern Europe may also presuppose the creation of a unified women's movement. A study by Vlasta Jalušić and Milica Antić found

¹⁶ The research for this study included sixteen months of fieldwork in Bulgaria in 1999 and 2000. I also conducted interviews and had ongoing personal communications with the major women's NGOs in Bulgaria, USAID Bulgaria, UNDP Bulgaria, the Women's Program at the Open Society Institute, the Center for the Study of Democracy, the Global Fund for Women, and the World Bank Resident Mission in Sofia between 1998 and 2001.

¹⁷ Interview with Ms. Vera Tagarinska, the presidential liaison to NGOs, in August 1998 in Sofia, Bulgaria.

that women in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia had “a singular rejection of collective action on the part of women holding different political views” (2000, 3). Yet another possibility is that women in Eastern Europe truly do not perceive that their situations are different from men’s. Indeed, staggeringly high unemployment rates and declining living standards for both sexes make it difficult to argue who is really worse off. Finally, women may not buy into the discourses of disadvantage because, in a handful of cases, women actually had significant advantages over men, at least in the early stages of transition.

In some sectors of the new market economy, women (particularly members of the former *nomenklatura* or women with higher levels of general education) were able to exchange their cultural capital for economic capital (Eyal, Széleányi, and Townsley 1998). In Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, Eva Fodor (1997) found that women who had worked in the quasi-private sector during communism had more advantages and were more flexible in the new market economy than men who were wholly employed in the public sector before 1989. Julia Szalai (2000) found similar patterns in Hungary, where men have made up the majority of the registered unemployed since 1989. Lisa Giddings (2000) found that women with higher levels of general education had an advantage over men in the early transition period. In my research (Ghodsee 2003), I found that women’s cultural capital—foreign languages, general education, knowledge of the West, and so forth—translated into significant advantages in the dynamic tourism sector, where women occupy the highest managerial levels. In almost all of these cases, however, the social class of a woman before 1989 is a more significant determinant of success in the market economy than merely gender alone.

It is not my intention to discredit the idea that many women have, in fact, been hurt by the transition from communism or to argue that gender is not a useful category of analysis when examining the situation in Eastern Europe. My main agenda is to understand why cultural feminist ideas are being imported into these countries at this particular historical moment and with so much support from international organizations and Western bilateral aid agencies. Why might it be politically important to construct women as disadvantaged despite the fact that there is a great deal of heterogeneity among women within and among Eastern European countries? The production and perpetuation of certain discourses may be essential ideological building blocks in the construction of the new, material reality of postsocialist nations.

Feminism and capitalism: Strange bedfellows?

Although overly reductionist at its core, economic determinism insists that the dominant intellectual paradigms of the day always serve the material interests of the ruling class, which Marx imagined as bounded by the nation-state (Marx 1983). Given this framework, cultural feminism as an ideology does not exist in an intellectual vacuum. Its discourses manifest themselves in the real world and serve the interests of those who have the power to control and perpetuate them. Michel Foucault further extended Marx's analysis by linking knowledge and power more directly through an examination of "the political economy of truth" (1980).

For Foucault, "truth" is created and disseminated through discourses of knowledge that support structures of power (although not necessarily economic ones as Marx would have it). Nevertheless, it is the power of discourse that serves the interests of those who control its production and circulation. In the case of former socialist countries, the old truths and ways of conceptualizing the world and human relations within it inevitably supported the ideals of communism and the communist states that embodied those ideals.¹⁸ It is not surprising then that the triumph of capitalism would require the production of new truths in order to support the material reality of a new economic and political system. This is especially important in countries such as Bulgaria, where state propaganda derided capitalism for over four decades.

In the case of Bulgaria and other CEE countries, one has to ask, Who controls the production of truth about the situation of women in the postsocialist context? For the last fourteen years, the discussion has been almost entirely dominated by international organizations and their local NGO counterparts along with a handful of Western scholars viewing the situation from the outside. But who are the ultimate beneficiaries of the new discourse of gender over class? And whose truths do NGOs promote?

James Petras (1997, 1999) and Petras and Henry Veltmeyer (2001) have written passionately about NGOs "in the service of imperialism" (Petras and Veltmeyer 2001, 128). With specific reference to Latin America, Petras argues that the rise of opposition to neoliberalism coincided with a concomitant rise in Western government and World Bank funding of NGOs. Both the World Bank and the NGOs were opposed to the state, the former preferring to champion the market and the latter favoring civil society. The attack on the state seemingly came from both the left and the right, but in reality bilateral and multilateral aid agencies were able

¹⁸ Albeit with very questionable results.

to promote their neoliberal agendas by working through the NGOs, purchasing influence with increased funding. Self-help and community-based projects in such areas as health care, education, social work, and child and elder care allow the neoliberal state to dismantle its social programs and shift the responsibility for these services to the grass roots.

While Petras tends to lump all NGOs together in the service of a neoliberal conspiracy against the people, Julie Fisher (1998) recognizes that NGOs cannot be reduced to one essentialist category. On the contrary, NGOs can be many things to a multiplicity of actors. Fisher argues that while some NGOs can be effective in championing antistate and antiglobalization discourse, others are co-opted to support the agendas of international organizations and state elites. The very heterogeneity of the NGO community is what has made it so easy for states and political forces to co-opt or establish new NGOs for their own purposes. Because external funding for NGOs has increased so drastically in the last decade, the vast majority of NGOs are primarily dependent on official aid for the majority of their funds (Edwards and Hulme 1996). This dependence on external funders redirects accountability upward toward the aid giver and away from the aid recipients of the NGOs' so-called constituency.¹⁹

Janine Wedel (2001), in her analysis of Western aid to Eastern Europe, is also highly critical of NGOs and claims that "with outside donors as chief constituents, local NGOs are sometimes more firmly rooted in transnational networks than in their own societies" (114). Sarah Mendelson and John Glenn (2000, 2002) also found that the heavy reliance of Eastern European NGOs on foreign assistance interfered with their ability to service their own populations. Furthermore, competition for external grants breeds divisiveness and bitterness among organizations that might otherwise cooperate for the common good. Kevin Quigley (2000) has argued that U.S. funds for NGOs under the DemNet (Democracy Network) program created a perception among many Eastern Europeans that "democracy building grants for NGOs were politically motivated, their primary purpose being to promote specific U.S. political objectives" (203). Other studies have also shown that Bulgarian NGOs have little legitimacy among the people (Snavelly and Desai 1994; Daskalova 2000).

In nearby Romania, Laura Grünburg has specifically demonstrated that women's NGOs have no constituencies despite their claims of representing the Romanian woman. In Russia, Rebecca Kay (2000) and Valerie Sperling

¹⁹ Clarke 1996; Edwards and Hulme 1996, 1997; Fisher 1997; Mendelson and Glenn 2000, 2002; Ottaway and Carothers 2000.

(1999) have argued that women's organizations do not always represent the needs of the majority of Russian women. Gal and Kligman (2000) have pointed out that women's NGOs in Eastern Europe are often dependent entirely on foreign agencies for their survival and that they "quickly learn to produce whatever 'language' and 'interest' the foreign funders are willing to finance" (96).

The 2001 UNDP *National Human Development Report* for Bulgaria found that "NGOs are the least desired mediator for the transmittal of citizens' opinions to the government" and that "the least desired citizen practice is participation in NGO projects" (UNDP 2001b, 40). The UNDP concluded that "the NGO sector [in Bulgaria] is growing not only because of the availability of a *solvent and low-risk market* as represented by donors, but also because of the growing unemployment among intellectuals. From its very origin this market is an *export of services*. Therefore, the NGOs sector has not emerged in a natural way, as a result of internal citizen needs; it complies with an external demand, articulated in the donors' aspiration to stimulate civic society in Bulgaria" (UNDP 2001b, 41).

Transnational corporations and NGOs—a cozy alliance?

It is not only academics who have noticed the growing coziness of NGOs and their sources of funding. The large multilateral lending institutions and bilateral aid agencies have already incorporated NGOs into their development strategies. Many in the corporate world have also looked to build partnerships with NGOs, recognizing that NGOs can be used as powerful tools. Thus, the traditional conceptualization of the state-market-civil society triad as an equilateral triangle is slowly moving toward the isosceles triangle as the market and civil society work together more closely.

For example, in one project funded by USAID, NGOs are seen as an essential tool in expanding business interests in Asia in the face of mounting environmental opposition at home and abroad. The NGO-Business Environmental Partnership program provides incentive grants to Asian NGOs working in collaboration with the urban industrial business sector. The USAID U.S.-Asia Environmental Program Web site described the program in 2001: "The objective is to encourage NGOs to move beyond confrontation in their traditionally adversarial roles with the private sector in addressing industrial pollution in Asia. This cooperative approach will lead to a greater understanding in the public sector of the difficulties faced

by the industrial sector struggling to remain competitive in business while reducing pollution.”²⁰

Here is evidence of NGOs being encouraged to move beyond confrontation and work together with businesses. Funding for their operations is the primary incentive for the NGOs, which cooperate with business interests. For many of the middle-class employees of the NGOs, these funds provide their salaries, usually well above the average income of the country. In cases where existing NGOs cannot or will not be co-opted by external interests, funds are made available for the creation of new NGOs that meet the ideological specifications of the donors. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) increasingly sees “building NGO capacity” as one of its primary goals. An online ADB report (1998) states clearly that “it would be in the Bank’s interest to provide necessary and appropriate institutional and capacity building support to the NGOs, particularly at the local and national levels.”

The *Oil and Gas Journal* has also promoted the role of NGOs in supporting the global expansion of business. In an article for the journal, David Knott (1998, 27) argues that NGOs can be valuable allies. He cites a study that shows that NGOs have become more cooperative with international corporate interests; its authors write that “satisfactory cooperation between NGOs and corporations is essential if future global business is to be conducted along mutually acceptable lines. Are these the beginnings of a strange affair?”

Even in the popular press, NGO co-optation and manipulation by individual entrepreneurs has been used as shorthand for establishing the savvy business practices of rogue capitalists. In a June 2001 article on the

²⁰ This quotation originally appeared on the Web site of the U.S.-Asia Environmental Partnership in 2000, referring to a project titled “The NGO-Business Environmental Partnership Program.” This program was funded by USAID and administered by the Asia Foundation. By 2003, however, the language I have quoted disappeared from the Web site, and the project was renamed the “United States Asia Environmental Partnership (US-AEP) Environment and Civil Society Partnership Program”; see http://www.usaep.org/services/ser_grants_ngo.html. Although the goals of the new project were essentially the same as the goals of the original, the language used to describe the partnership had been softened considerably. As the change in title suggests, the project went from being an NGO-business partnership program to an environment-civil-society partnership program, erasing the obvious presence of the “business” component. To my knowledge, the exact quotation I cite in this article no longer exists in electronic form or in publicly available hard copy. The Asia Foundation, however, did publish *A Guide to NGO-Business Partnerships* (2002), which uses very similar language as the original project. The guide also discusses “how the adversarial role [between NGOs and businesses] can be changed into a collaborative effort bringing about environmental improvement along with profits for businesses” (13).

Clinton pardon of Marc Rich, *Vanity Fair* (Orth 2001) detailed how Rich used an environmental NGO to close down a mine deep in the Amazon forest after he had lost a bid to purchase it.²¹ This increasing attention in all circles to the emerging partnerships between those who represent the market and those who champion civil society has caused cynicism to spread to some of the most unlikely places. Although the conservative *Economist* magazine has asked in the past whether NGOs represent “a dangerous shift in power to unelected and unaccountable special interest groups” (1999, 20), it has more recently admitted that civil society often does the bidding of private, corporate interests. In a 2001 survey of globalization, the *Economist*'s Clive Crook writes: “It is dispiriting to watch as big companies work out how to maintain their influence nationally and extend it to the global arena, using ‘civil society’ and ‘corporate social responsibility’ as levers. Naturally, in light of the protesters’ concerns, the multinationals are willing to sit down with governments and NGOs—they have lots of ideas for collecting extra subsidies, and piling punitive taxes and regulation on their less responsible competitors” (Crook 2001, 28).

The sarcastic tone here is telling. Not only have transnational corporations (TNCs) been able to co-opt local and international NGOs in their battle against the protectionist measures of individual states and increasing global concerns about pollution, sweatshop labor practices, and gross exploitation, they have also been able to use NGOs against other TNCs in their battles for increased market share. Although it is easy to see how environmental and human rights groups can be used to the advantage of corporate interests, the connection between women’s NGOs and TNCs may be more opaque. But in this age of the ever-increasing deindustrialization of the developed world, third-world women are being drawn in growing numbers into the sweatshops and maquiladoras of the global capitalist system. Women not only manufacture clothes and athletic footwear—they are also the labor behind much of the technological hardware that supports the information revolution.

Ken Kursterer (1990) and Lydia Lim (1990) have argued that capitalist exploitation of women’s labor in the third world will bring about the “imminent demise of patriarchy” (Kursterer 1990, 239). They claim that

²¹ Rich funded the environmental group, which then picketed and cut off all routes to and from the mine. The competitor, frustrated with the picketers, did not renew its contract, and Rich acquired the mine at half price. According to the source, Rich then cut off funding to the group, which ultimately had no choice but to cease its operations. This anecdote highlights the idea that environmentalists and protesters, like presidential pardons, always have a price.

drawing women into the global proletariat will strengthen the class consciousness of both male and female proletarians and allow them to recognize their common struggle against the capitalists both at home and abroad. Kursterer and Lim may be misguided in their Marxist optimism, but women's NGOs in Eastern Europe do, in some ways, directly undermine the possibility of a united proletariat by narrowly focusing on projects for women and discursively constructing women as somehow less suited to capitalism.

In former socialist countries, the fracturing of ideologies of class solidarity is even more important to TNCs than in the developing world. Marxist indoctrination is difficult to overcome, but it is well worth the costs to do so in transitioning countries with highly skilled labor forces available at bargain prices.²² Where nonclass essentialist fissures in society do not exist or have been altered or discursively "erased" by previous economic systems (i.e., communism), they may be recreated through new national and international discourses about the vulnerability of certain subpopulations and through the establishment and funding of civic organizations advocating for their rights.

Women's NGOs in Bulgaria and Eastern Europe

If NGOs are perpetuating the discourses created by international agencies and foreign states in regard to women's issues, then it could be assumed that the ultimate beneficiaries of these truths may also lie outside the boundaries of the nation-state. The shift from a class-based analysis of oppression to a gender-based analysis of oppression, as created and perpetuated by NGOs in Bulgaria, may work in the interests of transnational capital looking to take root in the Bulgarian economy. Thus, more than being the representatives of a civil society, the NGOs may be the unsuspecting allies of transnational corporations and international organizations in promoting what Mark Robinson (1993) has called the "New Policy Agenda." This set of ideologies revolves around neoliberal economics and liberal democratic theory and supports the expansion of Western capital into the region (Moran 1998, 239).

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

²² In Bulgaria, for instance, the average salary in 2000 was about US\$200 a month. The highest skilled workers employed by the international organizations or foreign companies were paid a very generous US\$900 a month or about US\$10,800 a year.

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 International Monetary Fund (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.

Many women's NGOs are implicated in what James Ferguson (1990) has called the "anti-politics machine." Along with international organizations, these NGOs focus on the technical fixes of social problems and not on the structural conditions in society that create those problems in the first place. Although there are many different kinds of NGOs in the CEE region and it is difficult to make generalizations, there is a tendency for Eastern European NGOs and their donors to concentrate on issues that are independent of politics; they avoid tackling larger issues of economic injustice and inequality in society (Pearce 1993; Clarke 1996; Quigley 2000). Many NGOs tend to emphasize individual projects, which address specific goals narrowly defined by the project's funders. Community-based self-help projects are encouraged over national mobilizations. And NGOs find it difficult to support social movements that challenge the status quo or that implicate class differences in the ever-widening gap in living standards between the haves and have-nots in society (Petras and Veltmeyer 2001).

Petras (1999, 435) is especially scathing in his critique of women's NGOs. He attacks the emergence of identity politics, which erase the class differences between the "Chilean or Indian feminist living in a plush suburb drawing a salary 15–20 times that of her domestic servant who works 6 1/2 days a week." By focusing exclusively on patriarchy at the microsociological level, women's NGOs and the middle-class women who often run them may not only be complicit in the exploitation of women in their own country, they may also indirectly benefit from it. These middle-class women make careers out of their civil-society-building activities by emphasizing the problems women in their country face in order to secure the grants to fix them. This is not to say that there are not real challenges that concern only women nor that there is not gender-based discrimination all over the world. The point is that in Bulgaria:

1. Women outlive men.
2. Infant mortality for boys is higher than for girls.
3. Women have higher levels of education at almost all levels.
4. Women have the right to own property and assets in their own

- name (which they can keep in case of divorce).
5. Women still enjoy longer paid maternity leaves than in most Western nations in spite of recent IMF-supported cuts.
 6. In 2002, there were more female members of parliament than anywhere else in Central and Eastern Europe, and more than in many countries in Western Europe as well.
 7. Bulgaria has had a female foreign minister, a female deputy prime minister, and even, briefly, a female prime minister.
 8. Since 2001, men, not women, have made up the majority of the registered unemployed.²³

Despite all this, Bulgarian women's NGOs incessantly focus on such stock phrases as the "feminization of poverty" in order to attract external donor funding.

One instance of the emergence of the new gender discourse and its foreignness in the Bulgarian context is the fact that the word *gender* in English has no direct translation into Bulgarian, where it is the same word used for *sex* (as in male or female). Bulgarian feminists simply adopted the English word *gender* with a slight alteration in its pronunciation. As *gender* is a recently imported word, therefore, most Bulgarian women do not even know what it means. Many of the NGOs, however, make sure to include the word *gender* in their names (e.g., Gender Project for Bulgaria, Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation), despite the fact that they are supposed to be representing Bulgarian women.

An even better indicator of how biased many of the women's NGOs are in favor of their Western donors are the publications they produce and disseminate in Bulgaria. In one women's magazine funded by the Netherlands Organization for International Development Cooperation (NOVIB), the editorial content was overwhelmingly about women's antagonistic relationships with men in society. The articles revolve around issues of domestic violence, prostitution, trafficking in women, infidelity, sexual performance, alcoholism, divorce, single motherhood, and child support. Most of the articles focus on the struggle between men and women—the ways in which men lie, cheat, and exploit women for their own gain. Furthermore, although there was a Bulgarian version up until 1999, now the magazine is only published in English due to lack of

²³ For comprehensive statistics on women in Bulgaria see the UDNP *National Human Development Report* (UNDP 2001b).

funding and therefore is linguistically inaccessible to the vast majority of Bulgarian women.²⁴

Another debate in Bulgaria that provides further insights surrounded the issue of child support after divorce. During communism the state automatically deducted child support from the father's wages and transferred it to the mother for care of the child. The shrinking of the public sector and the relocation of many men into private-sector employment has undermined the efficacy of this system. The courts are considered inefficient and corrupt; few women have faith in the legal system. As a result, many women no longer receive support from their husbands. Since 1997, the Bulgarian government and the multilateral lending institutions have vigorously promoted the independence of the market from state interference. Consequently, the government failed to pass new legislation regarding how women should collect their support. There are a handful of women's organizations such as the Bulgarian Association for University Women that are lobbying to reintroduce the state into child support collection. But most women's organizations absolve the state of its responsibility and instead point the accusative finger at the errant fathers, despite the fact that the system worked very well during communism. In many cases, NGOs' desire to help women is thus constrained by their necessary complicity with the neoliberal tendencies of their donors.

In addition, NGO projects that promote women's political participation are deeply informed by cultural feminism. In the postsocialist era, nationalists often view capitalism as masculine and aggressive (Gapova 2002), whereas communism is now reimagined by many as a political system that favored women (Verdery 1996). Communism unnaturally displaced men's inherent competitive instincts and created a society where the state was responsible for everyone's needs. Socialism was thus more beneficial to women because women are constructed as more naturally preferring to be taken care of than men (Verdery 1996). Cultural feminism fuels these kinds of biological arguments from the women's perspective. Women are constructed as being more inclined to crave the stability of

²⁴ *Zharava* was the Bulgarian version of the publication. The English-language magazine *Fair Play* has been resurrected with new funding. It now serves as the "Gender and Development Magazine" of the KARAT Coalition, a consortium of women's NGOs from across Central and Eastern Europe. To be fair, the new magazine is far more critical of globalization and capitalism than its earlier incarnation, but because it is only published in English it is inaccessible to most women in the countries of the KARAT Coalition. Interestingly, the magazine would be able to reach a much broader constituency of women if it were also published in Russian, but this is unlikely to happen for obvious political reasons (author's personal communication with Regina Indshewa in 1998, 1999, and 2000).

public-sector employment—they are more risk averse than men. As a result, women are supposedly less inclined to start businesses in the private sector and are more likely to be hurt by the shrinking of the public sector. Women's higher unemployment rates throughout the 1990s were blamed on women's "natural" aversions to work in the private sector and not on the structural lack of private-sector jobs available. Even now that men make up the majority of the registered unemployed in Bulgaria, women are still being perceived as the more economically vulnerable sex by international donors and NGOs.

Similarly, women are imagined as being more morally inclined and less attracted to power and politics—"kinder and gentler" than their male companions (Einhorn 1993; Holmes 1997; Jaquette and Wolchik 1998). Thus, the lack of women's political participation is a result of their intrinsic aversion to the dirty and corrupt realm of Eastern European politics in general. Interestingly, however, Jalušić and Antić (2000, 10) found that women in five postsocialist countries were more likely to be represented in centrist and leftist parties (i.e., Green, liberal, socialist, and communist) than they are in "right-wing parties (people's parties, Christian parties and parties of free enterprise, etc)." Thus, cultural feminist explanations of women's lack of political participation and the projects they propose to encourage women to run for office may be based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the problem. Women in postsocialist countries may not have a natural aversion to elected office per se, but they may have real political reasons for avoiding nationalist parties and parties that support a neoliberal economic agenda.

This creates an interesting dilemma for the international organizations that fund projects to increase women's political participation. If women are more likely to be on the political center or left, initiatives sponsored by the World Bank or the European Union to increase both the number of women candidates and the number of women at the polls could result in the election of an anti-World Bank or anti-EU government (i.e., a socialist or neocommunist government).

In Bulgaria, as elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, many NGOs also promote microcredit schemes for women or support women's entrepreneurship. Microcredit schemes extend small amounts of capital to groups of disadvantaged women. These women can use the money to either meet immediate basic needs or invest in some small income-generating project that will allow them to pay the money back after having made a profit. These profits are then used to pay for meeting basic needs or saved and put to use productively in some further income-generating scheme. Support for women's entrepreneurship picks up where micro-

credit schemes leave off. Once women have enough capital to move beyond meeting basic needs, they are given the training and encouragement to start their own businesses. The hope is that these businesses will be sustainable and will realize a continuous stream of profits that will allow the woman to meet her basic needs, reinvest in her business, and eventually be able to consume nonessential goods and luxury items. In other words, these kinds of projects help women become good entrepreneurs (i.e., capitalists) so that they can support themselves and ultimately get ahead (i.e., become consumers).

The problem with this model in Bulgaria is multifaceted. Microcredit schemes and microentrepreneurship promotion by NGOs assume that Bulgarian women are willing to borrow or work to pay for basic needs that were once provided by the socialist state. Under socialism these needs once existed as the basic rights and entitlements of the communist citizen. Indeed, one of the most lauded achievements of the communist countries was the high level of human development that they achieved. This was particularly true for women. In Bulgaria, women greatly benefited from generous maternity leaves, free education, free health care, free or subsidized child care, communal kitchens and canteens, communal laundries, subsidized food and transport, subsidized holidays on the Black Sea, and so forth.

In the postsocialist period, these rights and entitlements have all but disappeared. The collapse of communism in Bulgaria has relegated these rights to the status of needs for the first time in many women's lives. It should be no surprise that microcredit and women's entrepreneurship projects may not be welcome or useful in Bulgaria, where many women have not fundamentally accepted that it is their responsibility to meet these basic needs in the first place. Women in Bulgaria might have incentives to work for consumer items or to save money to travel abroad, but many may be resistant to the idea of taking loans to start businesses to make money to pay for the very same things they once had without cost. Instead of self-help, Bulgarian women may prefer to seek political solutions, which may explain their political affiliations with leftist parties.

Microcredit and entrepreneurship programs can help women through the transition to capitalism by increasing their access to economic capital. At the same time, however, they legitimate a system that forces women to bear the responsibility of caring for their families either by finding ways to pay for health care, child care, elder care, education, and so on or by providing these services themselves for free (because it is in their "natural" capabilities to do so). This then allows the state (at the request of international financial institutions) to make deeper cuts into social spending

(in the interests of macroeconomic stability) and exempts foreign investors and transnational corporations from providing the social services and employee benefits that were once an essential part of the socialist labor contract (in the interests of creating a business-friendly climate).

Finally, NGOs divert women from social movements and co-opt their potential leaders. Participation in NGOs that are entirely dependent on foreign funding breeds both cynicism and opportunism in the few committed women leaders who genuinely believe that free markets and liberal democracy are more desirable alternatives to communism. In informal conversations, Bulgarian women activists complained to me that capitalist civil society was really not too different from its communist counterpart. Being forced to digest the rhetoric of international organizations and propose only those projects that support American or European interests was really no different than being forced to regurgitate the Marxist propaganda once required under the old regime. Women's rights and women's issues were once again used as tools to support the dominant political and economic system.

Conclusion

Eastern European women have yet to embrace Western feminism despite more than a decade's worth of feminist activities in the region. Furthermore, there is a growing body of evidence that the economic transition did not negatively affect all women in the postsocialist world. It is possible that the success or failure of women in the post-1989 period may have less to do with their gender *per se* and more to do with the social class to which they belong. These findings contradict many studies that claim that women have been the net losers of economic transformation throughout Central and Eastern Europe. I suggest that these studies are based on a hegemonic, Western, cultural-feminist conception of gender as an essentialist category of difference. This view of gender fails to recognize the complexity of the postsocialist context and the importance of understanding emerging class distinctions in societies still very much in touch with Marxist-Leninist ideals of social justice.

The collapse of communism and the challenge of rebuilding these societies should force us to problematize the concept of gender outside of the capitalist context and resist the temptation to build a feminism-by-design. Western feminists must ask if gender on its own really matters as a discreet category of analysis in postsocialist Eastern Europe. Or is gender produced in different ways depending on the capitalist or socialist context, despite the fact that sex differences are always presumed, naturalized, and

perpetuated in both systems? The period of economic transition provides the perfect opportunity to study how the competing gender ideologies of socialism and capitalism come into conflict and how they are subsequently produced in opposition to each other. Furthermore, I argue that the importation and propagation of Western cultural feminism coincided with larger political tendencies that aim to undermine any possibility of a resurgent, local, class-based analysis in the face of declining living standards, soaring crime rates, and socioeconomic polarization across the region.

The feminism-by-design model as it is currently embodied in both international and local women's NGOs serves to erase important class distinctions. These class distinctions complicate an essentialist idea of "woman"—and these organizations do more to assist Western capitalist expansion in the region than they do to help improve women's lives. I suggest that the postsocialist context requires new methods of study, new theories for understanding, and new strategies for activism—not just the same old feminist templates recycled from the developed and developing worlds.

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