

Untangling the knot: A response to Nanette Funk

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I am delighted that the editors of the Open Forum of the *European Journal of Women's Studies* have allowed me the opportunity to respond to Nanette Funk's provocative and incisive article: 'A very tangled knot: Official state socialist women's organizations, women's agency and feminism in Eastern European state socialism.' As one of the nine 'Revisionist Feminist Scholars' named in Funk's article, I feel compelled to address the 'conceptual-philosophical analysis' presented in the article on its own conceptual-philosophical terms. I do not purport to speak for all of the 'Revisionist Feminist Scholars,' and I know that many of them have specific disagreements with Funk's reading of their research. But here I want to home in on the key claim that state socialist women's organizations did not have agency, or at least did not have the *right kind* of agency.

At the very outset of her article, Funk claims that she will offer a 'conceptual-philosophical analysis of the concept of "women's agency" and a concomitant reinterpretation of the historical evidence on official state socialist women's organizations' agency and feminism.' She argues that, 'Feminist Revisionist Scholars have overlooked important distinctions in the concept of "women's agency" that cast doubt on the extent of women's agency in official women's organizations.' It is clear from her opening remarks that Funk intends to provide a specific definition of 'women's agency' that will undermine claims that state socialist women's organizations were effective agents of positive change for women in their countries.

Funk, however, does not define 'women's agency' in her introduction. Instead, the first section of the article deals with how the establishment of state socialist women's organizations after the Second World War denied some women 'chances to act.' Funk cites a variety of secondary sources to establish that East European communist governments disbanded pre-war women's organizations and replaced them with official state women's organizations. Based on this evidence, she states: 'Thus, because of official women's organizations, many women throughout the region from 1945 to 1989 who

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“thought differently,” some in official state women’s organizations, *could not act as they would have liked*’ (my emphasis).

This is the first hint in the article that we get of Funk’s definition of ‘women’s agency.’ Certainly no one denies that communist governments in Eastern Europe severely limited political freedom, but surely the very concept of ‘women’s agency’ cannot require the freedom to act as one would have liked at all times and in all circumstances. Almost all states prevent me from acting *as I would like* (running red lights, not paying taxes, or downloading certain files from the Internet). Does this mean that one cannot enjoy meaningful agency in a context where some things that I would like to do are prohibited? In every extant political system there are some people who cannot act as they would like. This defines the social contract of all governments, communist or otherwise.

Indeed, Funk ignores that leftist women’s organizations in the United States, such as the Congress of American Women (CAW), Women’s Strike for Peace, or the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), were also subject to state surveillance and persecution, and in CAW’s case, forceful disbandment by the House of Un-American Activities (HUAC). Historians such as Kate Weigand, Landon Storrs, and Daniel Horowitz have shown that the first and second Red Scares in the United States silenced many Americans with leftist political sympathies, including many proto-feminists. Thus, there were many women who ‘thought differently’ who could not act as they liked in the 1950s in the United States. Does this show that subsequent second wave feminist organizations in the United States had no meaningful agency?

It is only six pages into the article that Funk addresses her own core question: ‘What kinds of agency?’ Here Funk declares that the only agency that matters is ‘proactive agency’ or ‘*acting because of one’s own will, policies, commitments or initiatives*’ (my emphasis). She writes, ‘It is only proactive agency, not just being active, that realizes the goal of a search for women as subjects and not objects of emancipation.’ She contrasts ‘proactive agency’ with ‘reactive agency,’ which is ‘acting because of the will of another.’ Based on this distinction between ‘proactive’ and ‘reactive’ agency, Funk concludes that, ‘Claims by members of women’s organizations that they “did a lot” ... may be true, but are ambiguous as to whether they were reactive or proactive. Thus, this body of research [that of the Feminist Revisionists] does not establish official women’s organizations or their members as proactive agents who benefitted women.’

However, contra Funk, it seems clear that the research of the ‘Feminist Revisionists’ definitively establishes that many women working for state women’s organizations were indeed acting because of their own will, policies, commitments, and initiatives. They wanted to improve the lives of women: to expand education, to provide kindergartens for working mothers, to ensure social safety nets for widows and divorcees, etc. These were their stated goals; these were their commitments. On the basis of Funk’s own definitions, it seems obvious that women in state socialist organizations were proactive agents. How then can Funk argue that these women were not proactive agents?

Perhaps Funk is assuming that these goals cannot count as the genuine commitments of individuals when those individuals are living under a communist regime. The idea would be that all agents under communism are by necessity ‘reactive agents,’ acting ‘because of the will of another.’ In this case, the Communist Party and the state are the

other, and women have no choice but to act in accord with their dictates. Thus, her argument might best be interpreted as follows:

Premise 1. The only meaningful women's agency is 'proactive agency.'

Premise 2. Proactive agency is only 'acting because of one's own will, policies, commitments or initiatives.'

Premise 3. 'Acting because of one's own will, policies, commitments or initiatives' is not possible under a communist regime.

Therefore, meaningful women's agency is not possible under communism.

On this construal of the argument, I would simply deny Premise 3. What if, for example, the women in question *believed* the ideals of the Communist Party? Much of the recent scholarship on state socialist women's organizations has shown that many of the women working in and with these organizations were in fact ideological adherents to the philosophy of Marxism–Leninism. They truly believed (and many of them still believe) that the abolition of private property and state ownership of the means of production would produce societies more conducive to sexual equality than capitalist free markets. Moreover, even if some of the women did not subscribe to communist ideology, they were still acting because of their own will insofar as their commitment was this: to improve the lives of women within the constraints of the society in which they lived. Therefore, by Funk's own definition of 'proactive' agency, women who believed in communism and acted out of their own beliefs, or women who believed in women's advancement and prioritized that goal above all others, were 'proactive' agents.

Funk presumably cannot deny the research that shows that some of these women were indeed committed to communist ideals, nor can she deny that others had the perfectly reasonable commitment of doing what they could within the constraints of communism. Perhaps her intended point is that some women opposed communist ideals and the constraints communism imposed, and that these women were not at liberty to act on this opposition. And that is fair enough. But, to make the overall argument work, Funk would then need a different version of Premise 3, something like:

Premise 3. Because not *all* women can act according to their own will, policies, commitments or initiatives, proactive agency is not possible under a communist regime.

But the revised version of Premise 3 implies that women's agency is not possible in *any* society, for there exists no society in which *all* women are free to act in accord with all of their commitments. Meaningful agency cannot require that all women in a society be able to act as they like.

Maybe Funk's idea is that there is something crucial about being able to act proactively *against* official state policies. Accordingly, one might rewrite Premise 3 thus:

Premise 3. Because some women who disagree with the policies of the state are not able to act according to their own will, policies, commitments or initiatives, proactive agency is impossible under a communist regime.

But once again, if we look across the world today, it is questionable whether there exists any nation where all women accept the dictates of their state, and are not prevented from acting according to their own will, policies, commitments or initiatives. Adult Mormon women in the United States who wish to live in polygamous unions are prevented from doing so. Americans who want a decent national health care system or stricter gun control laws live in constant opposition to federal policies. German women who desire to homeschool their children must accept compulsory schooling laws. So here again, if one accepts this version of Premise 3, the real conclusion would be that meaningful women's agency is not possible under any extant system of government.

A last attempt to make sense of what Funk might have meant would be to rewrite the premise this way:

Premise 3. Because women who believe in certain political rights and independent social organizing cannot act on those commitments, proactive agency is not possible under a communist regime.

Or, more succinctly,

Premise 3. Because women who hold beliefs anathema to communism cannot act on those commitments, proactive agency is not possible under a communist regime.

This final rendering of Premise 3 makes the most sense of Funk's article. However, it also exposes not only the lingering effects of Cold War thinking in her argument, but also makes manifest a particular philosophical bias, according to which the only meaningful agency for women is agency directed specifically at the liberal political goal of individual emancipation (the work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood on the Women's Mosque Movement in Egypt is most instructive here). Funk seems unable (or unwilling) to recognize that women can have any political commitments that are aliberal (as in not specifically concerning Western conceptions of political freedom as the *only* goal). Again, I would simply deny this version of Premise 3. Women (and men) can still be meaningful agents even if they are acting to promote communist ideals they believe in, or if they are acting for the goal of improving women's lives within the constraints imposed by a particular system of government.

I believe that Funk opposes the idea that any feminist might use her 'proactive agency' for an 'anti-democratic' cause (anti-democratic is her term from the end of her article). Accordingly, Funk might mean to *define* 'pro-active agent' as one who champions a very specific set of liberal, Western, political goals, and she might say that a belief in communism by definition makes you a 'reactive' agent. This would make Premise 3 come out true essentially by definition. Funk can define terms as she likes, but on this reading of the terms, I would deny Premise 1 in her argument: it is just not true that the only *meaningful* form of agency is her narrowly defined form. I stand by my claim that the women I describe in my research had a meaningful form of agency, notwithstanding the fact that they worked within a communist system of government.

The Romanian philosopher Mihaela Miroiu has argued that communist women's organizations did not promote individual autonomy for women, and were therefore not

'feminist.' In her seminal article, Miroiu defines 'feminism' as a project supporting women's individual autonomous will. This is why communist women could not be 'feminists,' because Miroiu was operating with a specific definition of feminism. Nanette Funk, too, seems to be operating with a specific notion of what it means to be a feminist; A feminist is not only someone concerned with individual autonomy, but also committed to political organizing that is independent of a state.

The women who led state socialist women's organizations were, for the most part, self-described communists, concerned more with improving the material conditions of women's lives than with a specifically liberal conception of political freedoms. No one is hiding this fact. The goal of much recent scholarship on state socialist women's organizations is to show how the communist ideology could lead to real improvements in women's literacy, education, professional training, as well as access to health care, the extension of paid maternity leave, and a reduction of their economic dependence on men (facts that even Funk does not deny).

One of the aims of my own scholarship is to expand the definition of 'feminism' beyond the achievement of personal self-actualization. There are many examples of what has been called 'state feminism' (particularly in the case of the Scandinavian social democracies), and even supranational feminism in the case of the gender mainstreaming initiatives of the European Union. If the goal of feminism is to improve women's lives, along with eliminating discrimination and promoting equality with men, then there is ample room to reconsider what Krassimira Daskalova calls the 'women-friendly' policies of state socialist women's organizations. If the leaders and members of these organizations acted because of their own will, policies, commitments, and initiatives (i.e. out of a belief in communism), then they must have been 'proactive' agents by Funk's definition.

Funk also writes that, 'If the new gender and women's studies in post-communist Eastern Europe builds on the legacy of an oversimplified past it risks tarnishing the reputation of gender and women's studies in the region.' In fact, those of us researching the history of state socialist women's organizations are struggling against the very sort of oversimplification in Funk's article, according to which communist women lack meaningful agency.

In the 21st century, feminist inquiry must make room for the notion that there exist multiple feminisms. One type of feminism might insist that the goal of achieving specific political rights is the *only* goal that even counts as expressive of genuine agency, but other forms of feminism emphasize issues of broader social justice and how to improve women's lives while building a more equitable society. I certainly welcome the call for greater nuance in the scholarship of 20th-century state socialist women's organizations. But I also hope that Funk will make room for we 'Feminist Revisionist Scholars' who 'think differently' about the history and legacies of women who sought an alternative path to women's emancipation.