

# WHY WOMEN HAVE BETTER SEX UNDER SOCIALISM

AND OTHER ARGUMENTS FOR  
ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

KRISTEN R. GHODSEE



Copyright © 2018 by Kristen R. Ghodsee

Cover design by Pete Garceau

Cover illustration © Heritage Images/Getty Images

Cover copyright © 2018 Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact [permissions@hbgusa.com](mailto:permissions@hbgusa.com). Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Nation Books

116 East 16th Street, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10003

[www.nationbooks.org](http://www.nationbooks.org)

@NationBooks

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition: November 2018

Published by Nation Books, an imprint of Perseus Books, LLC, a subsidiary of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Nation Books is a co-publishing venture of the Nation Institute and Perseus Books.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to [www.hachettespeakersbureau.com](http://www.hachettespeakersbureau.com) or call (866) 376-6591.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ghodsee, Kristen Rogheh, 1970– author.

Title: Why women have better sex under socialism : and other arguments for economic independence / Kristen R. Ghodsee.

Description: New York : Nation Books, [2018] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018015743 (print) | LCCN 2018025535 (ebook) | ISBN 9781568588896 (ebook) | ISBN 9781568588902 (hardcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Women and socialism—Communist countries. | Women—Employment—Communist countries. | Women—Communist countries—Social conditions. | Women's rights—Communist countries. | Motherhood--Communist countries.

Classification: LCC HX546 (ebook) | LCC HX546 .G476 2018 (print) | DDC 335.0082—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018015743>

ISBNs: 978-1-56858-890-2 (hardcover), 978-1-56858-889-6 (ebook)

LSC-C

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Hayden, Jo, and Nana



# CONTENTS

<i>AUTHOR'S NOTE</i>	<i>IX</i>
<b>INTRODUCTION: YOU MIGHT BE SUFFERING FROM CAPITALISM</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 WOMEN—LIKE MEN, BUT CHEAPER: ON WORK</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>2 WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU'RE EXPECTING EXPLOITATION: ON MOTHERHOOD</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>3 PANTSUITS ARE NOT ENOUGH: ON LEADERSHIP</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>4 CAPITALISM BETWEEN THE SHEETS: ON SEX (PART I)</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>5 TO EACH ACCORDING TO HER NEEDS: ON SEX (PART II)</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>6 FROM BARRICADES TO BALLOT BOXES: ON CITIZENSHIP</b>	<b>157</b>
<i>SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING</i>	<i>179</i>
<i>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</i>	<i>185</i>
<i>NOTES</i>	<i>189</i>
<i>INDEX</i>	<i>207</i>



**Elena Lagadinova (right, with Angela Davis) (1930–2017):** The youngest female partisan fighting against Bulgaria’s Nazi-allied monarchy during World War II. She earned her PhD in agrobiolgy and worked as a research scientist before she became the president of the Committee of the Bulgarian Women’s Movement. Lagadinova led the Bulgarian delegation to the 1975 United Nations First World Conference on Women. Because free markets discriminate against those who bear children, Lagadinova believed that only state intervention could support women in their dual roles as workers and mothers. *Courtesy of Elena Lagadinova.*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

**F**or the last twenty years, I have studied the social impacts of the political and economic transition from state socialism to capitalism in Eastern Europe. Although I first traveled through the region just months after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, my professional interest began in 1997, when I started conducting research on the impacts of the collapse of communist ideology on ordinary people. First as a PhD student and later as a university professor, I lived for more than three years in Bulgaria and nineteen months in both eastern and western Germany. In the summer of 1990, I also spent two months traveling through Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the soon-to-disappear German Democratic Republic. In the intervening years, I've been a frequent visitor to Eastern Europe, delivering invited lectures in cities such as Belgrade, Bucharest, Budapest, and Warsaw. Because I often travel by car, bus, and train, I've seen firsthand the ravages of neoliberal capitalism across the region: bleak landscapes pockmarked with the decrepit remains of once thriving factories giving way to new suburbs with Walmart-style mega-stores selling forty-two different types of shampoo. I've also studied how the institution of unregulated free markets in

Eastern Europe returned many women to a subordinate status, economically dependent on men.

Since 2004, I've published six scholarly books and over three dozen articles and essays, using empirical evidence gathered from archives, interviews, and extended ethnographic fieldwork in the region. In this book, I draw on over twenty years of research and teaching to write an introductory primer for a general audience interested in European socialist feminist theories, the experience of twentieth-century state socialism, and their lessons for the present day. After the unexpected success of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic primaries, socialist ideas are circulating more broadly among the American public. It is essential that we pause and learn from the experiences of the past, examining both good and bad. Because I believe in the pursuit of historical nuance, and that there were some redeeming qualities of state socialism, I will inevitably be accused of being an apologist for Stalinism. Vitriolic ad hominem attacks are the reality of our hyperpolarized political climate, and I find it quite ironic that those who claim to abhor totalitarianism have no trouble silencing speech or unleashing hysterical Twitter mobs. The German political theorist Rosa Luxemburg once said: "Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently." This book is about learning to think differently with regard to the state socialist past, our neoliberal capitalist present, and the path to our collective future.

Throughout this book, I use the term "state socialism" or "state socialist" to refer to the states of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union dominated by ruling Communist Parties where political freedoms were curtailed. I use the

term “democratic socialism” or “democratic socialist” to refer to countries where socialist principles are championed by parties that compete in free and fair elections and where political rights are maintained. Although many parties referred to themselves as “communist,” that term denotes the ideal of a society where all economic assets are collectively owned and the state and law have withered away. In no case has real communism been achieved, and therefore I try to avoid this term when referring to actually existing states.

On the topic of semantics, I have also endeavored to be sensitive to contemporary intersectional vocabularies. For example, when I talk about “women” in this book, I am primarily referring to cisgender women. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialist “woman question” did not consider the unique needs of trans women, but I have no desire to exclude or alienate trans women from the current discussion. Similarly, in my discussion of maternity, I do recognize that I am discussing those who are female-assigned-at-birth (FAB), but for the sake of simplicity, I use the word “woman” even though this category includes some who identify as men or other genders.

Because this is an introductory book, there will be places in the text where I don't go into full detail about the debates surrounding topics such as Universal Basic Income (UBI), surplus value extraction, or gender-based quotas. In particular, although I believe that they are absolutely essential, I don't spend a lot of time discussing universal single-payer health care or free public postsecondary education, because I feel these policies have been discussed at length elsewhere. I hope readers are inspired to explore more about the issues raised within these pages, taking this

book as an invitation for further exploration of the intersections of socialism and feminism. I also want to make it clear that this is not a scholarly treatise; those in search of theoretical frameworks and methodological debates should consult the books I've published with university presses. I also recognize the long and important tradition of Western socialist feminism, although it is not discussed in these pages. I encourage interested readers to refer to the books listed in the suggestions for further reading.

For all of the direct quotations and statistical claims made throughout the book, I include consolidated citations in an endnote at the end of the relevant paragraph. Few substantive endnotes accompany this text, so most readers can feel free to ignore the endnotes unless they have a question about a particular source. General historical material can be found in the suggestions for further reading. When discussing personal anecdotes, I have changed the names and identifying details to preserve anonymity.

Finally, with the many social ills plaguing the world today, some might find the chapters on intimate relations a bit too prurient for their taste; some might think that having better sex is a trivial reason to switch economic systems. But turn on the television, open a magazine, or surf the internet, and you will find a world saturated with sex. Capitalism has no problem commodifying sexuality and even preying on our relationship insecurities to sell us products and services we don't want or need. Neoliberal ideologies persuade us to view our bodies, our attentions, and our affections as things to be bought and sold. I want to turn the tables. To use the discussion of sexuality to expose the shortcomings of unfettered free markets. If we can better

understand how the current capitalist system has co-opted and commercialized basic human emotions, we have taken the first step toward rejecting market valuations that purport to quantify our fundamental worth as human beings. The political is personal.



**Valentina Tereshkova** (born 1937): The first woman in space, Tereshkova orbited the Earth forty-eight times in July 1963 on *Vostok 6*. After her career as a cosmonaut, Tereshkova became a prominent politician and led the Soviet delegation to the 1975 United Nations World Conference on Women. She is still widely viewed as a national heroine in Russia today. *Courtesy of Elena Lagadinova.*

# Introduction

## YOU MIGHT BE SUFFERING FROM CAPITALISM

The argument of this book can be summed up succinctly: Unregulated capitalism is bad for women, and if we adopt some ideas from socialism, women will have better lives. If done properly, socialism leads to economic independence, better labor conditions, better work/family balance, and, yes, even better sex. Finding a way into a better future requires learning from the mistakes of the past, including a thoughtful assessment of the history of twentieth-century state socialism in Eastern Europe.

That's it. If you like the idea of such outcomes, then come along for an exploration of how we might change things. If you are dubious because you don't understand why capitalism as an economic system is uniquely bad for women, and if you doubt that there could ever be anything good about socialism, this short treatise will provide some illumination. If you don't give a whit about women's lives because you're a gynophobic right-wing internet troll, save your money and get back to your parents' basement right now; this isn't the book for you.

Of course, some might argue that unregulated capitalism sucks for almost *everyone*, but I want to focus on how capitalism disproportionately harms women. Competitive labor markets discriminate against those whose reproductive biology makes them primarily responsible for child bearing. Today, this means humans who get pink hats in the hospital and the letter “F” next to the name on their birth certificate (as if we’ve already failed by not coming into the world as a boy). Competitive labor markets also devalue those expected to be the primary caregivers of children. Although societal attitudes have evolved in this regard, our idealization of motherhood means that most of us still believe that baby needs mama a whole lot more than papa—at least until the child is old enough to play sports.

Others will argue that unregulated capitalism is not bad for *all* women. Yes, for those women lucky enough to sit at the top of the income distribution, the system works pretty well. Although women at the executive level still face gender pay gaps and remain underrepresented in leadership positions, on the whole things aren’t too shabby for the Sheryl Sandbergs of the world. Of course, sexual harassment still hinders progress even for those at the top, and too many women believe that if you want to run with the big dogs, you may have to suck it up and ignore the groping and unwanted advances. And race plays an important role as well; white women do a lot better in aggregate than do women of color. But when we look at society as a whole, on average, women are comparatively worse off in countries where markets are less encumbered by regulation, taxation, and public enterprises than they are in nations where state revenues support greater levels of redistribution and larger social safety nets.