

Editorial: Communism/Postcommunism. Perspectives on Gender

Roxana-Elisabeta MARINESCU

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies

roxana.marinescu@rei.ase.ro

This issue of *Analyze – Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies* set to explore the complex relationship between ideologies and practices in different countries in Central and Eastern Europe in communist times and in the postcommunist period, with an emphasis on gender constructs and gender roles presumed and assumed in both the public and the private spheres. Starting from already well-known publications in the field¹, we aimed at enlarging the discussion and bringing it up-to-date, by including some young researchers next to already established ones. Clearly, the rapidly changing global social, political and ideological environment requires permanent updates, constant revisions and context-based re-evaluations.

The articles accepted for publication bring diverse contributions to the large spectrum of topics proposed. The authors recreated the communist and postcommunist gendered spaces and proposed reflection subjects in a variety of directions subsumed to women's rights, equal or equitable representation or access to resources.

There are some similitudes throughout the region regarding the prevalent Marxist ideology imposed at the end of the Second World War, with its presumed emancipating vision for women, called to engage in multiple public functions, as a model labourer, devoted party activist and effective political representative, as a result of their liberation from the capitalist family and work constraints which up until then had favoured the male model. Of course, we need to see to what extent this enlightened vision (at least in theory) embraced local particularities and how it managed to reconcile sometimes conflicting realities. Some of these refer to an already established (if sometimes sub-textual) emancipation of women – due for example to their substantial participation

¹ See for example *Gender Politics and Post-Communism* (1993) with Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller as editors, or *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender, and Women's Movements in East Central Europe* (1993) by Barbara Einhorn, Gail Klingman's *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania* (1998) or *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday's Life after Socialism* (2000), edited by Susan Gal, Gail Klingman. In Romania, Mihaela Miroiu, Laura Grünberg, Enikő Magyari Vincze, among others, have also brought valuable contributions to the field.



in the war effort, sometimes even in the front lines (as in Albania or former Yugoslavia) or to their contribution to their country's economies (for example as farmers in rural pre-war Romania). At the same time, this public productive role was superimposed on a private reproductive one and led most often than not to a double burden (if not a multiple burden) stoically carried by women throughout the communist period. Also, it is relevant to explore whether the *new man/ omul nou* (!), the communist presumably gender-neutre ideal, was in fact so, or rather it embodied the same masculine characteristics and patriarchal vision as in the previous epoch.

Gerard Weber's article "*I was both the man and the woman*": *Gender stratification in communist and post-communist Romania* looks from an ethnographic perspective into the gendering of work in communist times, followed by that of retirement in postcommunist years, with an emphasis on the inequality towards women in both eras. This inequality stemmed from gendered industrialization in communist times, with the feminisation of some industries (such as the light industry, textiles, food producing, health and education), with lower pay and consequently lower state pensions for the women who had worked in these industries.

The successive pension laws passed by the Romanian Parliament after 1990 were a clear example of gender inequality as they included the provision that women should retire up to five years earlier than men, due to their so-called double burden². The general claim is that women are "more tired" due to their double burden, thus need to retire earlier than men. In 2017, the Minister of Labour proposed some changes regarding the pension law, offering early retirement by six years for women with three children³ to the apparent satisfaction of the Romanian women who told the Minister they would have more children to benefit from this law. Of course, these legal provisions do not take into consideration obvious inequalities entailed in rights to promotion, for example, or the actual size of the pension (calculated per number of worked years).

The Albanian women's experience is treated by two authors in this issue of *Analyze*: Erind Mustafaraj who compares the situation of women before and after the Second World War (*Outside the Walls of Albanian Patriarchy*) and Lula Lutjona, who develops another type of comparison: between two of the harshest regimes in the Eastern bloc, Romania and Albania, and their treatment of the propagandistic detraditionalization of gender in communism, followed by its

² See for example Law 263/2010, which establishes the standard retiring age for women at 63 and for men at 65.

³ Cf. [www.news.ro](https://www.news.ro/social/mamele-cu-trei-copii-s-ar-putea-pensiona-mai-repede). 22nd August 2017. 'Mamele cu trei copii s-ar putea pensiona mai repede', available at <https://www.news.ro/social/mamele-cu-trei-copii-s-ar-putea-pensiona-mai-repede-vasilescu-mi-au-spus-femei-ca-vor-sa-mai-nasca-pentru-a-beneficia-1922402922352017082017163640>, accessed on 22 December 2017.

retraditionalisation in postcommunism (*Gender and Traditional Values During and After Communism: Detraditionalisation and Retraditionalisation in Albania and Romania (case study)*). The specific case of Albanian women lies in the gendered nature of the fight against fascism in the Second World War, with more than 500 women martyrs, which paved their way towards emancipation and an escape from patriarchal practices. However, this is not entirely valid, as, similar to the Romanian case, the roles of women in communism were purely symbolic and unsubstantiated in reality. Moreover, in postcommunism, there seems to be a certain reversal of women's roles towards the private sphere (see their reduced participation in political and economic institutions of the two countries). As the article mentioned above concludes, if detraditionalization was only formal and propagandistic, retraditionalization could mean simply going back to the period before communism, which is not possible, due to the historic global changes in the meantime.

A similar pattern can be retraced to the situation of former Yugoslav republics, with a consistent military involvement of their female population in the Partisan movement against fascism, which led to a shift in the understanding of gender roles in (semi)communist times (Veronika Tomova: *Yugoslav Communism: Gender and Power Discourses in the Constituent Republics*). The emancipation of South Slav women was due to the important roles they played in both World Wars and also due to some external factors (such as the implementation of the Convention for Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the creation of the Gender Task Force of the Stability Pact).

In the case of Romania, women faced a supplementary challenge in the latter period of communism: that of having their reproductive role shifted to the production line: through the infamous Decree 770/1966 women were called to participate with their wombs to the production effort of the country. Reproduction was considered a duty to the country and the party, and consequently an apparatus of supervision, control and imposition was set in place to ensure this duty was fulfilled. The effects of this brutal state intervention into the private lives of its citizens linger in the postcommunist period when the same power discourse can be heard: women have a patriotic duty towards increasing the country population, although now the Party is replaced by the Church.⁴ Moreover, anti-abortion laws have been proposed within a newly emerged neo-

⁴ An important Orthodox cleric held a speech at the *March for Life* in March 2017, in which he stated that each young family should have three children – one for the mother, one for the father and one for the church and country (cf.

conservative framework in postcommunism, but so far dropped after pressure from the civil society⁵. Some of the articles and personal stories in this issue refer directly to this policy, while others refer to it tangentially.

Mihaela Arsene's article *Haunting Impositions. Reproductive Policies* looks into the effects of the propagandistic gender equality policy (which was supposed to lead to the appearance of the "New Soviet Woman" in the USSR) on the lives of real women who lacked the promised state help to support their multiple roles. The same situation was encountered in Romania, where the pronatalist policy was accompanied by a very precarious state support system of institutions meant to cater for the new members of the socialist society: creches, kindergartens, schools, hospitals, etc., all inefficient and not enough for the boom in births at the end of the 1960's and the beginning of the 1970's. In postcommunist Romania, according to the author, "the communists' pro-natalist policies imposed on women have been replaced by anti-natalist policies self-imposed by women themselves or by the harsh economic realities they live in", opinion based on informal reporting on perceived attitudes at and following hiring interviews. The author's conclusion is that an excessive reproductive policy in the communist period and a lack of such a policy nowadays lead to similar outcomes for involved women, i.e. delayed motherhood.

One of the ways women assumed leadership roles to trigger change in their postcommunist societies has been within the civil society, in non-governmental organisations. In Romania, we are familiar with Laura Grünberg's work⁶, who documented the birth and development of AnA, one of the main postcommunist NGOs. As Laura Grünberg says, although at the beginning of the postcommunist period, the local organisations focused on imposed normative needs, brought to the fore by international organisations mostly through financial means (as they were the ones

Mediafax 2017, *Marșul pentru viață*, <http://www.mediafax.ro/social/galerie-foto-video-marsul-pentru-viata-2017-in-capitala-si-sute-de-orase-din-romania-si-republica-moldova-nu-s-ar-prabusi-romania-daca-toate-tinerele-familii-ar-avea-macar-cate-trei-copii-16208166>, accessed on 22 December 2017).

⁵ A new abortion law was proposed in 2012 by the (former) Democratic-Liberal Party (PDL), a member at the time of the Popular Parties Group in the European Parliament. The proposed law conditioned abortion by compulsory counselling and a period of consideration of up to five days before the procedure. The proposal was criticised as in the specific situation of Romania, it would have led to the impossibility of going on with the procedure for a considerable number of women who lacked the knowledge and the resources to access the state services repeatedly to complete it.

More recently, there were discussions in the Romanian Parliament regarding the impossibility of a woman to seek legal abortion without the consent of the conceived embryo's father (cf. Realitatea TV, 'Femeile însărcinate nu vor mai putea face avort fără acordul tatălui', 14th February 2017, available at https://www.realitatea.net/femeile-insarcinate-nu-vor-mai-putea-face-avort-fara-acordul-tatalui_2032806.html, accessed on 22 December 2017).

⁶ Grünberg, L. (2008), *BiONGrafie. AnA – istoria trăită a unui ONG de femei*. Polirom, Iași.

founding the local NGOs, and therefore tried to push their own agendas), only some of the items on these agendas addressed local women's real needs (concerning for example, the need to protect women from different types of violence). Other items did not seem important at the time (such as sustainable development, gender capacity building), but when transposed into a programme and translated locally, they proved to be beneficial on the long run.⁷

In this issue of *Analyze*, we have included Andrada Nimu's article *Women and Work in the Civil Society Sector - The Case of Romania and Poland*, which deals with the gendered work in NGOs in Poland and Romania, meaning that the women in these organisations needed to adapt to a flexible work style within a feminized field, with great fluctuations in income due to volatile funding. At the same time, this means specific leadership roles, styles and strategies in communication and decision-making under all kinds of pressures from stakeholders. The differences between the two countries is seen as stemming from their communist experience, with Poland more proactive in its anti-communist organised struggle (such as within Solidarity movement in the 1990's), in which women were involved. Thus, if in the postcommunist time, in Romania women started from scratch, with no experience, no resources and relying mainly on Western feminists met via the academia, in Poland, they built on previous experience and were separated mainly through their links to the Catholic church and position towards reproductive rights. In terms of features, in both countries women in NGOs were found by the author of this article to use the same kind of mentoring strategies, support mechanisms based on interpersonal relationships, encouraging staff and volunteers to assume responsibility and work-sharing to cope with difficulties in funding and organisation of activities.

An interesting point regards what the author calls the second generation of Romanian feminists, who "challenged the institutionalized and formalized ways of organizing and were more involved at the grassroots level." She also mentions a shift in the type of work women's NGOs are currently involved in: "The organizational type (mostly bureaucratic) that women's NGOs

⁷ The original quotation is below: "AnA și în general ONG-urile s-au axat mai curând pe acele nevoi impuse normative de comunitatea internațională, pe nevoile "știute dinainte", translatate sau impuse de lumea occidentală venită după 1989 să civilizeze Europa de Est. Uneori, aceste nevoi coincideau cu cele de pe teren (de exemplu, nevoia de protecție a femeilor supuse violențelor de tot felul). Alteori, erau tipuri de nevoi (dezvoltare durabilă, capacitate etc) care nu păreau prioritare, dar care erau bine transpuse într-un program, nu puteau face decât bine grupului social respectiv. Însă indiferent de tipul de nevoi la care ne referim este vorba despre nevoi văzute, înțelese și chiar trăite ce capătă o altă dimensiune decât stricta clasificare din buchea unei cărți." (Grünberg, 2008: 71)

developed throughout the years in Romania and the strategic orientation (educational, self-help) has been turning its point in the last couple of years to a more collectivist, cultural approach.”

This view rhymes to a certain extent with that of Florin Poenaru who in a recent book⁸ expressed his regret that Romanian postcommunist feminism has only been capable of producing PhD theses and policy briefs from within the academia or NGOs and to submit projects and publish research reports, and has been incapable of producing a real ideology of emancipation. (Poenaru, 2017: 266) The cause is found in the lack of real Marxist feminism (just individual feminists), as postcommunist Romania favoured a neo-liberal anti-communist discourse. Poenaru confirms Nimu’s view in that Romanian postcommunist feminism appeared and has developed within an academic framework, all self-claimed feminists come from an academic environment, with almost no grass-root level activists who had started bottom-up. (Poenaru, 2017: 265-266) Nevertheless, Mihaela Miroiu⁹ believes that these marxist, anti-globalist Romanian feminists, in permanent updated exchange through social media and transnational free movement to a larger global movement of the same type, will eventually create bonds with neo-liberal Romanian feminism. This will happen, according to Miroiu, as a common reaction to populist Western trends and the real temptation of populist illiberalism in Europe. (Miroiu, in Stan; Vancea, 2017: 123-124)

Oana-Maria Mazilu’s article *The Representation of Women in Cinema Magazine Advertising* considers the ways in which women were depicted in Cinema Magazine (1968-1974), the only film magazine published in communist Romania between 1963 and 1989. Of course, in advertising in communist Romania, the capitalist principles of free market and consumerism had to be adapted to the communist economy, strictly controlled and working on five-year plans. Especially that the products or services advertised were local ones, and so were the advertising companies and the models used. The ads analysed in this article mostly emphasize women’s domestic roles (housewife, mother), although within an emancipating paradigm (see the modern clothes and the ads captions), although there are some which favour a more glamorous image of women. All in all, advertisements seem to promote rational consumption rather than competitive purchasing, with women as main images for the products advertised.

⁸ Poenaru, Florin. (2017), *Locuri comune. Clasă, anticomunism, stânga*, Tact, Cluj.

⁹ Miroiu, M. (2017), ‘Despre femei, feminism și democrație’, in Stan, L.; Vancea, D. (eds), *România postcomunistă*, Polirom, Iași, pp. 109-132.

Also about women's representation in the media is Ana Mizil's article (*Princess Bodies, Commodities for the Wicked. A Marxist Reading of Disney's Animated Movies*), which proposes a Marxist reading of Disney's princess culture, starting from Marx's understanding of commodity and examining women's bodies as a symbolical space of power and ideology. The qualitative analysis on characters Ariel and Rapunzel in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Tangled* (2010) shows that they both represent "a value in use" (to use Marx's words) for other characters. As young women, they are manipulated by older women, who are only interested in either getting back their lost looks or extracting political power from ruling men.

A separate section of this issue of *Analyze* is entitled *Lived Stories. Told Stories. Personal Notes on Communism/Postcommunism* and it is dedicated to personal narratives which connect the two epochs through the voice of their authors. Daniela Drăghici (*A Personal View of Women's Sexual and Reproductive Lives in Romania*) and Mihaela Arsene (*Motherhood in Romania under Communism: A Personal Perspective*) evoke the communist period and their reaction when faced with the consequences of Decree 770/1966. Mariana Nicolae presents her view on gender in contemporary China from a Romanian postcommunist perspective, which she crystallized with the occasion of two visits to China and numerous readings (*Gender Issues in Today's China – A Glimpse from Post-Communist Romania*). This section brings a personal touch to the academic perspective and puts an accent of authenticity to the realities of communism and postcommunism respectively.

There are two book reviews included: *Familia în România între social și politic. O incursiune diacronică pluridisciplinară*. Anca Dohotariu (coord.), Ed. Universității din București, Colecția Gen, politică & societate, 2017 and *Women's Lives Around the World. A Global Encyclopedia*. Susan M. Shaw (general ed.) and Nancy Staton Barbour, Patti Duncan, Kryn Freehling-Burton and Jane Nichols (eds.), ABC CLIO Greenwood, 2018. These are brand new publications, which we invite you to read and reflect upon. If the first book, a collective volume of essays, deals with different aspects of the family in Romania since the 19th century to the present times, the second one offers a transnational feminist and intersectional perspective over women and their lives in 150 countries and territories around the globe.

Finally, as a coordinator of this issue of Analyze – Journal of Gender and Feminist Studies, I would like to express my gratitude to all contributors, reviewers, editors, and assistant editor, who made *Communism/ Postcommunism. Perspectives on Gender* possible. A special thank you to Laura Grünberg for her constant support and to Ana-Maria Despoiu for all the work done to make sure this issue is ready for publication.