

BULGARIAN WOMEN'S HISTORY AND SOCIALIST MYTHS

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SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Let me start with some theoretical aspects of myth¹. A first set of meanings could be named *popular*. The *popular* meaning relates myth with an invention, fiction, fairy tale, even an outright lie, in which people do not believe. The *second* set of meanings consider myth – and this is the meaning I would like to use for the purpose of this presentation - as “a particular set of ideas with moral content told as a narrative by a community about itself”². This meaning suggests that myth may or may not be related to historical truth but most often people who rely on the narrative, do believe that it is. Myth is also a way of structuring the chaotic past in a way that makes sense of it for the people from a particular community/society. Theoreticians tell us that universal structure of myth is a narrative of something evil, being overcome by virtue. All communities/societies have their own myths; they cannot exist without myths. This is to suggest why it is so difficult, if not impossible, to deconstruct myths and to make evident their falsifications. If some myths of a particular community/society are under attack, this particular community/society starts to feel itself assaulted. And this is especially true about myths that concern a larger part of the population and have been retold many times through various channels, most influential among them being the school/educational system and media. But at the same time – as one could argue - there can never be universal agreement among all the members of a community. And it goes without saying, that one person's myth is another's fact. Here comes solidarity as a substitute for agreement.

¹ See on this for example George Schöpflin. “The nature of myth. Some theoretical Aspects”. – In: Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers and Bernd J. Fischer (Eds.) Albanian Identities. Myth and History. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 26-30. See also: Nothnagle, Alan. Building the East German Myth. Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, p. 6

² Schöpflin, p. 26.

MYTHS CONCERNING THE STATUS OF WOMEN AND GENDER

Though Marxism attacked and disclaimed myth (in its *popular* meaning, as an invention) as being “irrational”, at the same time it did create myths of its own. The mythic aspects of communism and its ideology are obvious and have been commented upon for decades.

I will be talking about myths that were elaborated during the communist years and are still in operation in the present day Bulgaria. Some of these were articulated by the ideological prescriptions of Marxism.

I am going to present a couple of myths/narratives about women and gender relations in Bulgaria that I consider typical for other ex-communist societies as well. Needless to say, all of these are very much interconnected and their separation here is aimed for analytical purposes only.

1. One of the most wide spread myths of the post-communist Transition is that ideology of **feminism** is something imported from the West, something foreign and unnecessary for the Bulgarian conditions. While it is perhaps true that contemporary Bulgarian women’s organizations do operate with the strong support of international women’s organizations, the above mentioned opinion about feminism that has been dominating for years the discourses on women and gender reveal the lack of knowledge about the history of women and gender in the Bulgarian pre-communist society (which, by the way, is a feature shared to a certain extend by the East European societies as a whole). That’s why a feminist sensibility is something exceptional in the present day Bulgarian conditions. I am considering the history of the Bulgarian feminisms elsewhere. Here, because of lack of space, I am just going to outline how the historical tensions between feminism and socialism can explain the present day negative/stigmatizing image of feminism and feminists in Bulgarian and East European societies in general.

In the present day Bulgaria “feminism” is perceived as a threat to normal relationships between men and women and as an impingement on “traditional Bulgarian values” of love, marriage, and family. This stigmatization of feminism did not start during the communist era but has its roots in the history of socialism. As Karen Offen put it: “From a feminist perspective, organized socialism in Europe – and, more broadly, the

social-democratic left – has a lot to answer for not only in terms of stigmatizing and trivializing feminism, or portraying feminists as a “special interest group”, but also in terms of actively suppressing feminist activists and impulses and, given the opportunity, appropriating selected aspects of feminist history as well.”³ This negative image of feminism goes back to pre-communist period in Bulgaria when socialist movement in the country was very much influenced by the socialist ideas in Europe and especially by the German social democrats.

It is well known that socialists everywhere permanently criticized feminists as “bourgeois”, repeating the arguments developed by the *Second International Working Men’s Association* which claimed that women’s solidarity across class lines was impossible. According to the socialist vision of women’s emancipation, Bulgarian socialists believed that the “woman’s question” could only be resolved after the triumph of the socialist revolution. As for the family (private) sphere socialism in general and socialist women (socialist feminists?) in particular agitating for gender equality in labor relations and in public life, accepted traditional division of roles within domestic and family context.⁴ This applies to the feminists of “buergerliche” milieus as well. Man’s patriarchy in the domestic sphere remained unchallenged. Still, one may probably assume – thus accepting one of the socialist myths of the time - that the modernizing changes in the mentalities and manners did not leave power relations between husbands and wives or between brothers and sisters (within socialist families) untouched. But this is an empirical question to be investigated, and it was certainly different in different settings.

Another point seems to me worth making. Women-socialist had a feeling of being more “progressist” and radical and involved in the grand projects at the time, while they saw “bourgeois feminists” as standing behind them in their views. Though at the beginning Bulgarian socialist women (led by Vela Blagoeva) were among the founders (1901) of the *Bulgarian Women’s Union*, as everywhere in Europe, they afterwards embraced the (socialist) party line by condemning feminists for being “bourgeois” and

³ Karen Offen. *European Feminisms. A Political History. 1750-1950*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 11.

⁴ As pointed out by Alfred Meyer, the 20th century Marxist leaders were largely a product of the patriarchal Victorian culture, and they were not ready to relate the problems of women with things like sexuality, reproductivity, gender division of labour and patriarchy itself. See Alfred Meyer. *Marxism and the*

unable to defend interests of all women, especially of poor working class and peasant background.

In the period between the two world wars, the women's movement in Bulgaria followed and duplicated the goals and priorities of the international women's movement. It also mirrored the features, ambiguities, and tensions within the various world organizations of women. Socialists in general and women socialists in particular considered women's activism as part and parcel of the socialist emancipation movement rather than as a movement in its own right with specific goals. They believed that women's subordination was inherent in the capitalist system and saw socialism as panacea for all types of unjustifiable hierarchies, including those that concerned women. The resolution of the "woman's question" was linked to the victory of the socialist revolution and considered as coming automatically with it. For that reason, socialists rejected bourgeois feminists who focused on achieving gender equality within the existing social system. In the Bulgarian case this was especially true for the most orthodox and dogmatic branch of socialists. It was the reformist trend of Bulgarian socialism ("broad" socialism that evolved after World War I into social democracy) which developed a politically more active and publicly visible women's organization of its own. The leftist women's organizations – the one attached to Bolshevism and the other one affiliated with the social democrats – dissociated themselves from "bourgeois feminists". Following the instructions of the International socialist organizations, they suspected all feminist efforts of bourgeois tendencies and forbade the cooperation with bourgeois women's groups, naming them "separatists" (i.e. separate from the socialist movement). The socialist attacks and the developments within the international women's organizations led to a radicalization of the *Bulgarian Women's Union* and to the birth of the *Union Ravnopravie*, already at the beginning of the 20th C and after the establishment of the *Socialist Women's International* in 1907 (when socialist women declared their commitment to suffrage). From 1908-1909 onwards, the two organizations included the "struggle for women's civic and political equality" in their agenda. Bulgarian feminism as feminism elsewhere was the ideology of middle-class urban women. Bulgarian

Women's Movement. – In: Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail W. Lapidus (eds.) *Women in Russia*. Stanford, 1977, 85-112.

feminists as feminists elsewhere feared the misperception of their public activities. That's why in a series of articles published in the newspaper *Zhenski glas* during the 1920s, the chairwoman of the BWU Dimitrana Ivanova explained the meaning of feminism and rejected the attempts of some periodicals to identify it with the communist (*Bolshevik's*) understanding of women's emancipation. She argued against the misrepresentation of feminism as "woman's revolt against her 'natural' duties imposed on her by religion, family, and society" or as favoring "bubikopf, boulevard, and cabaret women, women of sports, of cigarettes, and alcoholic drinks" that nourished anti-feminist sentiment within society.⁵

The socialist attack against feminism was not the only factor responsible for its stigmatization. The traditionalist attack (even of well-known intellectuals and modernizers!) that ridiculed the image of the emancipated woman by substituting for it a popular caricature also contributed in this direction. Thus the comedy "Androfoba" (or "Men-Hater") by St. L. Kostov presents the feminist as a divorced woman-teacher, who substitutes for a dreamed of, but unfulfilled, marital happiness in political activities. In the polemics provoked by the performance, Prof. Assen Zlatarov – a well-known Bulgarian scientist – offered a Freudian interpretation of women's activism as sublimation of unsatisfied sexual energies.⁶

Already during the first days and months after communists came into power all "bourgeois" women's organizations were taken over by the communists and later disbanded. During communism women and men continued to be considered to have essentially different 'destination'. Against ingrained prejudice, reflecting entrenched power interests, and only at the expense of great effort, could women's fate be changed for the better, first in relation to education, then regarding professional chances, citizenship and political rights. The position of Bulgarian women in the domestic sphere and in family life during communism remained almost untouched. That's why before speaking about "re-traditionalization" of family life after 1989, one should first answer the question to what extent Bulgarian society under communism really departed from the

⁵ Dimitrana Ivanova, *Strahut ot feminizma* (The Fear of Feminism), in: *Zhenski glas*, 23, 11 (March 1st, 1926), 1f; Dimitrana Ivanova, *Feminizmut* (Feminism), in: *Zhenski glas*, 24, 14 (April 1st, 1927), 1.

traditional gender notions, roles, and practices. In fact, as many researchers of the post-communist realities in Eastern Europe have pointed out, the socialist “emancipation” of women only scratched the surface of gender relations, especially within the family. The women’s voices from oral history interviews⁷ gathered from three generations of women – mothers, daughters and grand-mothers - at the beginning of this millennium once again tell us that the massive, post-war influx of women into the labor force, motivated by the demand for workers in the “construction” of socialism, did not seriously question the power asymmetry and division of labor within the family.

The interviews (but also the unstructured informal talks) that I conducted during the 1990s and in 2003-2004 reveal that, with few exceptions, the leaders of women’s organizations emphatically disclaim “feminism”, to be more precise, some caricature of it. As elsewhere (see for example Nancy Cott re the situation of the early 20th C in the USA), feminism and “militance” are not the same thing, but common parlance linked them. Probably this is due also to the fact that instead of grass root women’s movement what we got in Eastern Europe is NGOization of women’s public activities...

Other myths about feminisms East and West which reveal some of the tensions within the international women’s movement at the beginning of 1990s (and which I think have gradually been overcome) are those presented by Laura Busheikin in her essay “Is Sisterhood Really Global?”. There she outlines the myth about “the international feminist brigade”, articulated by some East European (actually Czech) women (feminists?) against the “messianic Western feminists trying to brainwash hapless Eastern European women” and another, with Western origin – about “Our Backward Eastern Sisters”.⁸

2. Speaking about the experience of the former “socialist countries”, there is the common **myth of women’s emancipation and full gender equality: at the labor market and in education (the myth of women-citizens as having the same status as men)**. [Only gradually professional human rights activists in Bulgaria started to speak against the discriminatory for girls quota principle (50% women, 50% men) still in

⁶ About all traditionalist reactions to feminists emancipation ideas within the Bulgarian patriarchal context see my article” Krassimira Daskalova. Bulgarian Women in Movements, Laws, and Discourses (1840s-1940s). – In: *Bulgarian Historical Review*, 1999, No. 1-2, pp. 180-196.

⁷ See Krassimira Daskalova (ed.) *Voices of Their Own. Oral History Interviews of Women*. Sofia:POLIS, 2004.

operation in the elite Bulgarian high schools and Universities] As already mentioned, myths show some aspects of reality but at the same time they hide some characteristics of that lived reality. Women and men in the former socialist countries believed and many of them still believe in those myths. This is one of the classical examples of politically expedient wishful thinking that served as one of the founding myths of the socialist block after WWII.

As everywhere in post-communist East European countries, there are “deep seated notions of gender difference” combined with the idea of “a lack of any real sense of gender inequality”⁹. That is why a myth of “gender harmony” is being told by some East European scholars and women’s activists in contrast to the Western feminist idea of universality of gender power relations. From here, it is not difficult to reach the concept of “gender parallels”. It seems that the communist propaganda succeeded in silencing the “eruptions” and “flows”¹⁰ of the Western feminisms. The communist notion of emancipation and equality (equated primarily with “the right” to work), inculcated by the “old regime” in the minds of many people, still prevails.

3. And here we come to the third myth considering **labor as a means of liberation**. It prevents people to see the fact that labor could enslave/segregate/discriminate against women too. As pointed out by feminist historians¹¹, employment of women does not change substantially the traditional gender attitudes and roles within the family (both before and after the communist came into power). In a 1994 article published in the “Journal of Women’s History”, Maria Todorova¹² - using Barbara Jancar’s four stage model of evolution of gender equality¹³ argues that seen from a comparative (South-East European) perspective, the Bulgarian case is quite specific. According to Todorova’s analysis, in contrast to gender relations in

⁸ Laura Busheikin. Is Sisterhood Really Global? Western Feminism in Eastern Europe. – In: Ana’s Land. Sisterhood in Eastern Europe (Edited by Tanya Renne) WestviewPress, 1997, p. 12-21.

⁹ Peggie Watson. The Rise of Masculinism in Eastern Europe. – In: New Left Review, 198, 1993, pp. 71-82.

¹⁰ Those metaphors were coined by Karen Offen. European Feminisms, 1750-1950. A Political History. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.

¹¹ See for example Tilly, Louise and Joan W. Scott. Women, Work and Family. New York: Methuen, 1987

¹² Maria Todorova. Historical Tradition and Transformation In Bulgaria: Women’s Issues or Feminist Issues? – Journal of Women’s History, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Winter 1994), pp.129-143.

¹³ She speaks about women’s status in traditional, industrializing and industrial societies, and in postindustrial societies. M. Todorova, op. cit., p. 129.

other countries from the Balkan region prior to WWII, gender roles in Bulgaria (given the relative freedom of Bulgarian country women) were not, in fact, so markedly segregated but complimentary - something she ascribes to rural strategies of survival of families of smallholders. Hence Todorova thinks that after 1944 in Bulgaria there was no a drastic transformation and deterioration in the position of women (in terms of going to work and “double burden”). Although one could agree with Maria Todorova that Bulgarian women did work alongside men before the WWII and that the “double burden” has to be approached more realistically and explained in terms of cultural tradition, one should point out that during the communist period, more than ever before, the burden of paid work was simply added to the burden of domestic work, while earlier behavioral and normative stereotypes persisted.

If one turns to the present day “transitional” situation in Bulgarian, one can see that there is a discrimination against women in the labor market that appears in several forms and presents a continuation of patterns established in the previous periods (“bourgeois” and “socialist”). Despite the decades of self-congratulatory communist rhetoric, in the period of transition after 1989, when it was possible to think outside the ideological canons of the old regime, it transpired that women in Bulgaria were suffering discrimination resulting from the inherited structure of a segregated labor market. Women take up the majority of low-paid positions, performing the so-called ‘unqualified labor’. The structure of female employment in Bulgaria follows the global tendencies. Data from various sociological investigations univocally proves the feminization of the service sphere on a worldwide scale. Almost all contemporary societies have a low percentage of women occupying top positions in the political, economic and cultural sphere. Until recently the Bulgarian legislation did not have a definition for the notion of “gender discrimination”.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, despite the claims of the employers that they have no gender preferences for the candidates, management positions are often reserved for men while women get jobs with little or no-decision-making opportunities. It is mostly a ‘pragmatic’ approach of the employers, envisaging the implicit additional family duties traditionally associated with female gender. This, reports of the UNDP from 1990s

¹⁴ See on this: Open Society Institute, EU Accession Monitoring Program. Monitoring the EU Accession process: Equal Opportunities for Women and Men. Country reports. Budapest, 2002, pp. 57-122 (about Bulgaria), esp. p. 62.

reveal that at job interviews women candidates must answer questions about their family status, the age of their children or any plans to have children, while men were not asked anything unrelated to their future jobs. As the results of a number of projects of women NGOs have shown, there is no legal practice of penalizing gender-based discrimination. This results in a growing disparity of male versus female income: whereas in 1994 women earned 72% of what men did, in 1996 they got 68%, in 1998 – 58%, and in 2001 – 67%. This tendency is almost ubiquitous (in Europe and in the world at large), but according to UNICEF data Bulgaria has one of the largest gender pay gaps among the Eastern European countries. Women's pensions are generally lower than men's as women get lower salaries and work in sectors with lower social insurance and retirement privileges. These facts, however, do not mean that women are less qualified than men! Not surprisingly, more experts are starting to talk about 'the feminization of poverty' in Bulgaria (probably in tune with the increasing gender sensitivity in the society at large). A number of feminist economists have also shown that the definition of the so-called unqualified 'women's professions' is often unrelated to the actual qualification or skills required and that the definitions of 'qualification' are marked by gender related preferences (and certain types of labor are often perceived as inferior only because they are performed by women).¹⁵

Feminist analyses are not the only ones pointing out those facts. Thanks to increased number of translations, the Bulgarian reading public got acquainted with a number of sobering sociologist and cultural analyses, as for example, Pierre Bourdieu's "La domination masculine"¹⁶, in which he reveals 'the power of the male order' in the past and today. Being articulated by a well-known scholar these ideas are more welcomed in the male dominated Bulgarian society than those coming from the feminist authors (which are still suspected as not scholarly enough).

Another positive influence in the field of gender equality that sensitizes the Bulgarian society is the European Community legislation. Actually in all the EU accession states (new members from 2004 as well as those, like Bulgaria, still on the line to gain membership) there are well justified hopes for the improvement of women's

¹⁵ Anne Phillips and Barbara Taylor. *Sex and Skill: Notes toward a Feminist Economics*. – In: Joan W. Scott (ed.) *Feminism and History*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 317-330.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu. *La domination masculine*. Collection Liber. Paris: Seuil, 1998.

formal rights with the membership in the EU. As a country that has to join the EU in 2007 Bulgaria was obliged to introduce the *acquis communautaire* in the field of equal treatment of women and men. The main progress in this direction was the adoption the *Law on Protection against Discrimination*. A couple of other important laws in this direction include *Laws against Trafficking in Human Beings* and the *Law on the Ombudsman*, and the *Bill on Protection against Domestic Violence* (the last one passed the first hearing at the Parliament). The institutional mechanisms provided by this legislation, however, have not been established so far and gender equality machinery is at the beginning of its development.¹⁷

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Historical myths are both sincerely felt and manipulative. If one could simplify, myth could be defined as a concise world-outlook or ideology in miniature. As shown at the beginning, various scholarly traditions define myth differently: in its colloquial meaning that refers to something false, untrue, and distorted but also as an instrument of identity building (personal and collective/group identities). Myth joins things that can be partly true and partly untrue but their real “nature” notwithstanding, they act to homogenize a heterogeneous reality and demonstrate interconnectedness between things. Myth as a way of thinking helps overcoming contradictions and tensions between polar oppositions. More than that – it is also an instrument for accumulation of passionate beliefs and for energizing followers and mobilizing them for a collective action.

Myth gives the members of a community the sense of shared past – probably imprecise (“imagined” if we can borrow B. Anderson’s metaphor) but felt as authentic - and it implies also a common future. And this sense of a shared past and a shared future is what sustains the wholeness of a community. But again, while using terms of “collectivity” and “community”, one should keep in mind the complicated relations/tensions between “individual rationality”, i.e. individual vision about truth and

¹⁷ See Tatyana Kmetova, Magdanela Delinesheva. Legal and Institutional Framework of Gender Equality in Bulgaria. – In: NEWRletter (The newsletter of the Network for European Women’s Rights). December 2004, No. 3, p. 6.

“collective rationality”, i.e. collective norms which the individual has to obey in order to be accepted by the community.¹⁸

In order to be efficient, contemporary women’s movements across Europe should join together in the struggle against inequality and discrimination. This is a very difficult task, of course, keeping in mind that contemporary European feminisms (and women’s problems across Europe) are embedded in their particular historical, social and economic context. One of main questions concerning feminism in Europe is how to reconcile post-communist East European feminisms with their dilemmas between the values of old socialist solidarity and the individual liberal values of liberal feminism that entered East European societies after 1989.

¹⁸ Schöpflin, p. 28