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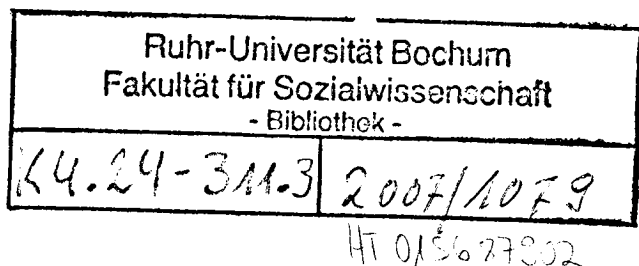
A Canon of Our Own?

Kanonkritik und Kanonbildung in den
Gender Studies

StudienVerlag

Innsbruck
Wien
Bozen

Die Herausgeberinnen danken folgenden Förderern für
die Unterstützung: Bundesministerium für Bildung,
Wissenschaft und Kultur in Wien, Stadt Wien (MA 7).



© 2006 by Studienverlag Ges.m.b.H., Erlersstraße 10, A-6020 Innsbruck
e-mail: order@studienverlag.at
Internet: www.studienverlag.at

Satz: Rosa Reitsamer
Umschlag: Gabi Damm

Gedruckt auf umweltfreundlichem, chlor- und säurefrei gebleichtem Papier.

Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen
Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über
<<http://dnb.ddb.de>> abrufbar.

ISBN-10: 3-7065-4340-0

ISBN-13: 978-3-7065-4340-8

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Raluca Maria Popa

Communist Women Speaking Internationally: A Revision of the 'East'/'West' Divide?¹

Introduction

The European discourse of East/West oppositions and hierarchies reached a particularly dichotomous and essentialist mode in its Cold War version. Ideas about gender and gender inequalities were shaped by, and at the same time informed, the hegemonic Cold War discourse in both its "Eastern" and "Western" versions. Recent scholarship on gender and (post)socialism has called for a departure from ideas about "categorical differences between East and West", with an accompanying recognition that "East" and "West" "constituted politically important audiences for each other" and "reacted to each other's actions" (Gal and Kligman 2000: 8f).

Analyses of the perceived differences between "Eastern" and "Western" women, but also feminist proposals for overcoming such barriers to gender solidarity have been an almost canonical feature of gender studies scholarship in the aftermath of systemic transformations in Central and Eastern Europe. Feminists, from both "East" and "West" started to speak about their differences quite early on in the 1990s, following a somewhat unsuccessful attempt at establishing a fruitful dialogue immediately after the fall of communism. Feminist politics has reverberated in gender scholarship also, leading indeed to an assumption of "categorical differences between East and West". The organizers of the conference "A Canon of Our Own?" at the University of Vienna invited contributors to discuss the notion of canon and canon formation in gender studies. I took their invitation as an opportunity to present an empirical analysis that would directly and critically address one "canonical" theme of (European) gender studies scholarship: that of differences between "East" and "West".

¹ This paper presents and analyzes preliminary findings from the research I am currently conducting as part of my PhD project, provisionally entitled *Female Comrades, Mule States? Women's political organizations and state-driven emancipation in state socialist Hungary and Romania: 1965-1990*.

The empirical analysis that I presented was concerned with a particular "Eastern" version of the Cold War discourse – that of the party-sponsored women's organization in socialist Romania, between 1965 and 1985. At that time, the only women's organization in socialist Romania was the *Consiliul Național al Femeilor* [Women's National Council] (CNF). The CNF was placed under the leadership of the Romanian Communist Party and one of its main activities was to "promote overseas the achievements of our socialist regime, aspects from women's work and lives".² International representation, the participation in international events, and the cooperation with organizations from other countries were a central task of the CNF. This is certified by their activity reports,³ but also by the budgets that the organization allocated to international activities (more than one-third in 1967, for example).⁴

I approach the discourse of the CNF on international women's issues as a possible case study for the potential dialogue between "East" and "West" that may have taken place at the time. While the organization endorsed the official oppositional discourse of the Romanian Communist Party vis-à-vis capitalist countries, it nevertheless also participated (physically, but also discursively) in an international space of women's activism. This space was defined, in the case of the women's organizations, in state socialist countries mostly by their involvement in the activities of the UN and its specialized Commission on the Status of Women, and in the activities of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF).⁵

² *Normele de organizare și functionare a Consiliului Național al Femeilor, comitetelor și comisiilor femeilor*, p. 4, in Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale ale României (hereafter, ANICR), fond CC al PCR, Cancelarie (2574), dos. 13/ 1969. The translation from Romanian is mine.

³ ANICR, fond CC al PCR, Cancelarie (2574), dos. 157/ 1971.

⁴ ANICR, fond CC al PCR, Cancelarie (2574), dos. 187/ 1967.

⁵ The WIDF was established in December 1945 as an outcome of an international congress in Paris, organized by the communist-led organization *Union des Femmes Françaises* (UFF). (See Rupp 1997: 47, and Offen 2000: xxviii, 386-87.) The WIDF was composed of predominantly official women's organizations from the Soviet Union, countries in Eastern Europe, Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and Arab countries. More than one hundred organizations were members of the WIDF, representing the same number of countries. (Shreir 1988: 377.) The organization had consultative status with the United Nations.

The treatment of international women's issues and feminism in the journal *Femeia*, from 1965 to 1985

Throughout 1965 to 1985, and further on, the journal *Femeia* – one of the official journals of the Women's National Council,⁶ and the largest circulated women's magazine in socialist Romania – featured a special section for international women's issues and other international reports. The content, geographical coverage and sheer size of this section varied over the years. Focusing on this discursive space, my analysis aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) How did the women's organization in socialist Romania construe "international women's issues" and how did they define the "international"?
- 2) What were the perception of and the discourse on feminism at the level of the women's organization in socialist Romania?

To answer these questions, I have conducted a content analysis of the journal *Femeia*, specifically of the issues published between 1965 and 1985. The analysis had two stages. First, I was interested in placing the topic of "international women's issues" in the larger editorial economy of the magazine. I have read through several issues of the journal from different years between 1965 and 1985 and coded them for main themes. I then used these codes to analyze all issues of the journal from the years 1965, 1975 and 1985. A picture emerged of the importance given to discussions of international women's issues, as the general outlook of the magazine changed.⁷ Then I was interested in mapping the specific content of reports and analyses that can be included in the topic of "international women's issues". In this second stage, I have selected all articles featured in the special section dedicated to "international women's issues" between 1965 and 1975 and read them searching for main themes.

⁶ At the time, the organization was publishing two more journals: *Săteanca* [The Rural Woman] and *Dolgozô Nô* [Working Women – in Hungarian]. The publication of the journal *Săteanca* ceased in 1974. It was restarted after 1990, with a new title, *Doina*.

⁷ See also the content analysis of the journal *Femeia* in Denisa Florentina Bodeanu.

"Politica demografică a regimului comunist reflectată în revista *Femeia* (1966-1989)" [Demographic politics of the communist regime, as presented by the journal *Femeia* (1966-1989)] in Cosma, Ghizela and Țârâu, Virgiliu (2002): *Condiția femeii în România secolului XX*. [Women's condition in 20th century Romania]. Cluj-Napoca: Nereamia Napocae.

The content analysis yielded several main findings:

- 1) The magazine had an unequal preoccupation with international women's issues over the two decades examined. Thus, international women's issues figured more prominently in the magazine from 1965 to 1975 than in the next period, 1976 to 1985.⁸
- 2) The two periods are characterized by distinct modes of representing the international, "international women's issues", and defining the "West". Common for all the years that I have analyzed is an affirmation of a fundamental opposition between socialist and capitalist countries, leading to a definition of the international as fragmented and dichotomous. However, during the first period (1965–1975), the women's organization uses, I argue, an 'integrationist' approach to the West, leaving room for possible commonalities of concerns and actions. Especially "peace" was affirmed as a possible ground for solidarity of all women. The main drive of the period remains nevertheless a continuous preoccupation with criticizing the "West" and proving the superiority of socialist states in their treatment of women.
In the second period (1976–1985), international women's issues figure less prominently in the overall outlook of the magazine, as the emphasis of the international pages shifts predominantly to negative portrayals of capitalist states. Reports about the "West" are obviously based on a careful selection which leaves out all positive features and augments the negative ones.
- 3) The main issue on the international agenda of the Women's National Council – as it comes across in the journal *Femeia* – was peace. The preoccupation with peace was premised on notions of motherhood and women's maternal roles. While discussing international issues, the organization did not acknowledge the existence of gender inequalities in socialist countries.
- 4) Finally, the discourse on feminism that surfaces on the pages of the journal *Femeia* (only in the first period, 1965 to 1975, as later on the

⁸ The year 1974 was a turning point for the publication of the journal *Femeia*. On May 1974, the journal was practically halved, from 40 pages to 24. Qualitative changes also came with this quantitative adjustment. That month, the publication of another women's journal – *Săteanca* – ceased.

issue is not mentioned) is an oppositional one which criticizes "feminism" and "feminists" in the West for their bourgeois class bias. The journal offers, however, glimpses of a socialist feminist discourse.

Defining the international

Most articles in the journal *Femeia* that I have analyzed integrate the presentation of international women's issues into an overarching comparison between the socialist world and capitalist countries, which aims to prove the superiority of the socialist regimes and, more specifically, of their treatment of women. The argument most frequently invoked directly follows the classical socialist theory on the "woman question": women's equality with men can be achieved only if socialist relations of production are established (with the central abolition of private property).⁹ The example below is a typical affirmation of the generally endorsed idea that socialism is a necessary precondition for the realization of equality between women and men:

It is a well-established fact that the regimes based on social justice and equity, which have been created in a number of countries where people overthrew exploitation and oppression, are the only ones able to provide the conditions for the *de facto* realization of the equality of rights, enshrined in the legislation, and for the conscious, competent and responsible participation of women in all areas of social life.¹⁰ (1)

Given this ideological position, "international women's issues" are most often read through the grid of a comparison between "socialist" and "capitalist" regimes – defined by their mode of organizing economic (productive) relations. As such, *the international appears a priori fragmented and dichotomous*.

In the period 1965–1975, there are, however, statements that seem to indicate an endorsement on the part of the women's organization in socialist Romania of the idea that certain women's issues cut across

⁹ By classical socialist theory on 'the woman question' I mean the theory of August Bebel in *Women and Socialism* (1879); Friederich Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), and V.I. Lenin's *On the Emancipation of Women* (year of publication?).

¹⁰ All translations from Romanian are mine.

national borders and differences in opinions, of the idea that they are truly global. The vice-president of the Women's National Council, Mia Groza, in an article from 1971, identifies peace as one such global issue of concern to women – possibly the only one. The rhetoric of her call to action in favor of peace belongs to the most radical tradition of women's activism.¹¹

[...] there are certain major problems in our contemporary world which concern all nations, all women of the world, and which often lead to a common denominator between the activities of women's organizations, of women leaders with diverse political or philosophical persuasions, from different countries on all continents, who are united in their determination to fight together the possible emergence of a new world war and to try to protect the life of their children. The year 1969 marked in different parts of the world strong movements of solidarity of women with the just fight of the Vietnamese people to protect their right to self-determination against the aggression coming from US and her allies. American women, led by the women's organization "Women, strike for peace" have also taken part in such movements [...] (Mia Groza, *Femeia*, March 1970:6)

Discussions of women's status in an international context are placed within the definition of "international" outlined above, and they are, at the same time, a means of reinforcing that very definition based on the presumed antagonism between socialist and capitalist regimes. Moreover, presentations of women's status internationally are important *because* they can prove the superiority of socialist regimes over capitalist ones. For example, in a 1967 report of the Union of Democrat Women in GDR on its activity, the author quotes Walter Ulbricht, president of the State Council of the GDR, saying:

Had our Republic achieved nothing else than the true emancipation of women, this would have been enough to prove the political and social superiority of our country compared to West Germany. (2)

¹¹ See Rupp (1997), Berkovitch (1999).

International women's issues: which issues and whose issues?

I have analyzed the articles published in *Femeia* that specifically addressed international women's issues only for the period 1965–1975, when their presentation is more nuanced and more detailed than in the subsequent period, 1975–1985. The latter period is heavily marked by a propagandistic will to vilify capitalist states. The 1965–1975 articles generally belong to four main themes: (1) critiques of capitalism; (2) the advancements in women's conditions in socialist states and achievements of the socialist women's organizations; (3) the effects of war on women and women's pro-peace activism, and (4) women's condition in different countries and regions of the world (India, South Africa, Africa, Columbia, Algeria and others).

What is striking about the content of the "international" section of the women's magazine that I analyze here is the absence of any discussion of gender inequalities in Romania.¹² Gender inequalities were considered a solved problem in socialist countries.¹³ However, many contributors to the journal *Femeia* remained concerned with the extent of gender inequalities in capitalist countries:

For us women in Romania, most problems that the Commission [UN Commission on the Status of Women] is debating may seem outdated. [...] From our point of view, these are goals that have been achieved, and they no longer concern us. It is, nevertheless, a reality that women in many countries of the world, even in the most advanced capitalist countries, do not enjoy equal pay for equal work with men, and this discrimination is more visible in qualified rather than not-qualified jobs. Moreover, these women's participation in the politics of their countries is very low. (3)

Besides not recognizing the existence of gender inequalities in socialist societies, the international section of the journal also only covers women's issues that may be defined as "public" (work, politics), but it never

¹² The statement that gender inequalities did not exist in socialist societies was sometimes contradicted by articles in the journal itself, which presented situations of inequalities between women and men at the work place – especially regarding women's access to leadership positions – spoke about the unequal division of domestic work, about men's privileges and the need to reform the family.

¹³ For an analysis of the treatment of the woman question in socialist regimes, see Lapidus (1978) and Buckley (1989).

mentions other issues such as domestic violence or sexual abuse. The topics that are selected as "women's issues" to be pursued in the international arena seem to be only those topics that directly bear on relations and politics among countries. Most notably, the journal devotes an extended space to the affirmation of peace as an ideal that all women endorse and fight for.

The importance of pro-peace activism is reiterated many times in different international events, which are covered in the journal over the period examined (1965-1975). In a report on the meeting of the WIDF in Budapest, from November 1970, the president of the CNF in Romania explained that the purpose of the WIDF was to promote

ways of expressing solidarity, of enhancing cooperation and developing friendship among all women of the world, who unite in their fight against imperialism, to support the efforts of protecting and consolidating peace among peoples and to solve specific problems of women's social condition. (*Femeia*, November 1970:16)

In June 1975, the CNF in Romania was preparing to join the International Women's Conference in Ciudad de Mexico. Lina Ciobanu, president of the organization at that time, gave the following account of the agenda of the CNF for the conference, published as an article in *Femeia*, in the issue of June 1975:

Our organization is actively participating in the events of the International Women's Year, representing the decision of millions of women in Romania and their feelings of solidarity with women everywhere. As part of the international women's movement, we stand for the abolition of the old imperialist, colonialist and neo-colonialist policy; for putting an end to the armament race and especially to the nuclear race and starting a general disarmament; for liquidating underdevelopment and the great inequalities between economically advanced and backward countries; for promoting new, democratic principles in international relations that should lead to establishing an atmosphere of peace and security in the world. (4)

The overarching purpose of the women's organization in socialist Romania, as presented by its president, was therefore to intervene in the politics among countries, in order to promote peace and development. It is very hard to imagine how the organization could have achieved such a goal, given its limited resources and indeed its very little influence in international politics. However, what is significant for my analysis here is that

the organization identified these goals as their most important issues for the International Women's Conference in Mexico, offering thus a good illustration of their construal of international women's issues.

The definition of international women's issues according to the women's organization in socialist Romania was also inextricably linked to a normative construction of femininity that placed motherhood at the center of any woman's identity. Indeed, members of the CNF in Romania, quoted in the journal, repeatedly stated that women are concerned with peace by virtue of their experiences as mothers. "Women, *mothers* cannot remain silent about the murders of the US government in Vietnam", stated the author of one article in the issue of March 1967. Elsewhere, Maria Groza, vice-president of the CNF, stated that

women in Romania support the foreign policy of the Communist Party and the Romanian government because they are aware that this is the only way to secure a prosperous and happy life for their children, for the future generations. (*Femeia*, March 1971: 8).

This statement binds women's perceptions of politics to motherhood, implying that women would always be guided by an almost "maternal instinct" in their political views.

The discourse on international women's issues of the women's organization in socialist Romania – which I have traced in the journal *Femeia* – reflects, in my opinion, an attempt to claim an international space for promoting the idea of the superiority of the state socialist treatment of women. As such, women's international activism conveniently served the purposes of the foreign policy of the Romanian state. In order to be able to argue for the superior treatment of women in their socialist country, the women's organization in Romania concealed gender inequalities in their society.

Defining the "West"

Viewed from the location of the widest circulated women's publication in socialist Romania, "East" and "West" are no less dichotomous and hierarchical categories, but the direction of the hierarchy is reversed. The magazine endorses an uninterrupted rhetoric of the superiority of the socialist states (compared to the capitalist countries), and the position of women in

socialist societies is used as proof of the advantages of socialist regimes over capitalist ones. Socialist regimes are "better" – so the argument goes – because they have granted women equality of legal status with men, access to jobs, and equal pay for equal work, and they also have reformed the family towards a more equalitarian model.¹⁴

Between 1965 and 1975, the journal *Femeia* creates and reproduces an image of the "West" that ideologically presents capitalist societies as oppressive to women and segregated by inequalities between women and men, black and white, poor and rich. The "West" is scrutinized through veritable socialist-feminist and even radical-feminist gender lenses. The reporters of the magazine *Femeia* are critical of capitalist countries for their commodification of female bodies and female sexuality via the advertising industry, the sex industry, and fashion competitions (5 and 6). They also critically discuss women's unemployment in capitalist countries (7); gender discrimination in pay, and women's lack of economic independence from men (8).

Feminists and feminism

In 1967, 1970 and 1972, a few articles in the journal *Femeia* comment on or express attitudes towards feminists or the feminist movement in the "West". The introduction to a 1967 interview with the French writer Colette Audry introduces her as a "militant of the contemporary feminist movement" (9), something which the author of the interview (a man) seems to admire, as he devotes half of the interview to a question about changes in women's condition over time. Colette Audry's answer to the question centers on the feminist theme of the unequal sex division of labor and the domestic burden of women:

¹⁴ It is not the purpose of this paper to examine in detail to what extent that was true. There is, however, by now a growing literature based on comparisons between socialist and capitalist countries, which argues that up to a certain point women's advancement (especially their work participation) in Eastern Europe preceded and exceeded developments in Western Europe (Fodor, 2003). Still, overall, the post-1945 tendency was one of convergence between 'East' and 'West' on different indicators of women's position such as inclusion in paid labor, or access to positions of authority (Fodor, 2003; deHaan, 2005). Based on such evidence, I would argue that hierarchies between East and West are never real, but always invented.

Last century's suffragettes should congratulate themselves on the improvements in women's condition in our contemporary world ... *Mais pas trop!* Women have gained the right to [paid] work, but not the freedom from domestic drudgery. [...] Many women are still prisoners of kitchen and domestic work. (9)

At the same time, the interviewer is cautious about the possible implications of feminism and his next question – “Are we heading towards a matriarchy?” – is rather an enunciation of a stereotypical male fear of feminism. The writer politely answers that whether or not women want a new matriarchy is not a concern – the real concern is their claim to equality and partnership with men.

Other feminists, like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, are also positively quoted in the journal on their anti-war views (10) and their fight for gender equality in the United States (8).

An event like the protests against the beauty contest ‘Miss World 1970,’ organized by supporters of the English women’s liberation movement, is presented in the journal *Femeia* with moderate sympathy. A reporter for the journal describes the protesters as ‘young, beautiful women’ who cannot be suspected of any pathological motivations for their actions [in the subtext – as some of the readers of the journal may have thought] (6).

However, another article from the same year, 1970, is not equally sympathetic to a different protest of the women’s liberation movement, this time in the United States. The article – entitled “Pink panthers?” [a play on the name of the black rights activists’ group, *Black Panthers*] – is an opinion piece about the women’s liberation movement in the United States. The article agrees with the claims of the “women’s lib” for equality with men, but rejects their performances and accuses them of class bias. The author of the article writes that the “lib fanatics” who refused to let their husbands into their homes on a protest day, and feminist leaders, like Kate Millett and Ti-Grace Atkinson, who ask for the end of sex differences, are “ridiculous”. At the same time, the author of the article thinks that the militants of the “women’s lib”, “who most often belong to the specific class of wealthy housekeepers” are just “hysterical ladies who are shouting so loud that they may silence those women who have real problems” (11). The author does not agree with the feminist revision of gender advocated by “women’s lib”, arguing in turn that some features of men and women are

inextricably different, thus the goal of complete sameness (the erasure of sex) can never be achieved.

In this respect, Maria Milczarek, president of the Women's National Council in Poland and of the League of Polish Women, briefly summarizes in a 1973 interview a typical position of women's organizations in state socialist countries:

The fact that we have abandoned the perspective of frustrated suffragettes and that we can discuss our problems today from the objective perspective of contemporary women who are joining men in building the new, more just, and more humane socialist society is a positive development. (12)

The dissociation from "bourgeois feminism" (suffragettes) is clear, and it is a resilient mark of the communist women's organizations.

Conclusion

The discourse on international women's issues that unfolds in the journal *Femeia* does not support the hypothesis of a genuine dialogue between "East" and "West", as it is centered on affirming a dichotomy between socialist and capitalist regimes. The way it contributes to a revision of the "East"/"West" divide is by reversing the hierarchy and giving an example of a discourse that aimed at proving the superiority of the regimes led by communist parties, using women's status as an argument. When set alongside triumphant post-Cold War discourses of capitalist superiority, some of which also premised on the idea that women in the 'West' fare better than women in the "East", I think such examples urge us to revise the very idea of hierarchy and caution us to be skeptical of any comparisons on the status of women that attempt to create such hierarchies.¹⁵

The fact that the journal *Femeia* opened a space for discussing international women's issues may have been motivated by the foreign policy needs of the Communist party leadership at the time.¹⁶ However, this space

¹⁵ Such comparisons have been and are still widely used for political purposes. They have characterized socialist thought since already the first half of the 19th century, and have also been a long-term feature of colonial and neo-colonial discourse. I thank Francisca de Haan for this point.

¹⁶ The Secretary General of the Romanian Communist Party, Nicolae Ceausescu became famous for his policy of openness to the West and independence from Moscow, in

also offered the opportunity for some journalists at the time to observe and comment on capitalist societies, some of them from what I *would* call a feminist perspective.

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