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Winter 2001

Review of "The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay" by Susan Gal; Gail Kligman

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BOOK REVIEWS


The Politics of Gender after Socialism offers reflections on a larger volume edited by Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism (2000), which has been reviewed separately in this journal. While the edited volume did not “try to apply uniform methods or analyses” (7), this book offers integrating reflections. The goal is to “explore how discourses and practices of gender play a major role in shaping ... the reconstitution of states and social relations in East Central Europe” (3) and in turn how this exploration “broadens our understanding about the relations of men and women to states and political processes” (115). Building on a rich body of research, Gal and Kligman offer a comprehensive attempt to integrate gender into our understanding of the rapid and varied transformations in eastern central Europe, one of the great challenges as well as opportunities for the social sciences.

Each of the four substantive chapters that follow the introduction addresses one major aspect of this gendered analysis. The first, “Reproduction as Politics,” asks how views and policies about human reproduction, childcare, and sexuality “constitute and reconstitute” the relations between states and their subjects. Though the chapters on reproduction in the larger volume focus on the communist period and the changes since the end of communism in three former communist societies, the reflections in this book are broader. The authors note the historical roots of the state’s interest in reproduction, with its focus on reproduction and maintaining the nation-state, and they discuss Michel Foucault’s theories on state development as well as nationalist discourse.

“Dilemmas of Public and Private” traces the linkages of these concepts to notions of masculinity and femininity, which were maintained to an important extent by legal and economic arrangements. The reaction to these linkages, in turn, created the context to which communist movements reacted through theoretical analyses, revolutionary goals, and concrete programs. The discussion of family, attitudes in the family, and emerging—though changing—roles during the communist period and after remains somewhat undifferentiated in this chapter. Past research has revealed more complex patterns across countries as well as subtle changes in the younger generations, which in some countries moved private life in a more egalitarian direction. These more complex patterns and attitudes are important for understanding the reactions to economic developments and changes in employment that have taken place since the end of communism, and they are important for comprehending political developments.

In “Forms of State, Forms of ‘Family’” the authors claim that there is “relatively little discussion in Eastern Europe of different sorts of state arrangements and the different possible effects of welfare schemes premised on, say conservative versus liberal versus social democratic ideals” (97). Even with the pressures to react to international economic institutions, this assessment seems too simple and does not take into account the differences among political parties. There has been considerable research on party development in eastern Europe since the end of the communist period. Attaining welfare arrangements similar to those in Sweden that the authors refer to, with income arrangements and parental support policies that have reduced the significance of particular family forms, will involve concerted political efforts within the more committed political parties. Yet in the chapter “Arenas of Political Action,” it is the nongovernmental organizations and women’s groups that are emphasized as being the agents voicing women’s concerns and redefining public discourse. When they have succeeded in influencing legislation, it is usually because they are linked to more powerful political structures. Women’s groups within political parties have also initiated significant changes. Malgorzata Fuszara’s chapter in the larger, edited volume discusses some of the differences among political parties in Poland and the Parliamentary Women’s Group that formed in 1991. Some of these findings on specifically political developments needed more reflection in this volume.

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The discussion of tensions between eastern and western women with respect to feminism reveal the difficulty of taking into account the different perceptions and positions that existed among the countries of eastern Europe and even within a particular society. One of the achievements of this volume is the recognition that, in east central Europe, women's interests are often pursued in ways that are strongly at odds with various western conceptions of feminism.

This is an important contribution both to gender analysis and to our understanding of postcommunist transformations. Yet three broad reservations should be noted. First, although the authors see the importance of giving equal attention to structural conditions, common practices, organizations, and institutions as well as to discourses and interpretations, the chapters often lean heavily toward a semiotic analysis of discourse. Closer attention to the interaction between structurally grounded problems experienced by women and men, the multiplicity of possible responses, and the articulations of projects by various associations and parties would have yielded a better understanding of the scant development of women's movements in east central Europe. Second, even though Gal and Kligman refer to a wealth of empirical studies, many assertions are put forth with little effort to establish their validity beyond anecdotes or case studies from one or two countries. Their often wide-ranging analysis is better in tracing the broad historical background of current developments than in offering systematic comparisons that establish or disprove a point rather than merely illustrate it. Finally, the portrayal of the condition of women in the communist political economies, a subject that is critical for any understanding of subsequent developments, remains ambiguous. While it is mentioned that women attained educational equality, that they gained access to labor force participation with important and effective social supports, and that they still value work outside the home, these facts are often devalued by ideological claims about coerced use of women's labor, about women's dependence on the communist state, and even about women's alliance with state socialism. Given that the negative features of communism and its achievements are still highly contested both within east European countries and between east and west, it may be difficult to attain a valid assessment of this historical background. But without that, the understanding of current developments remains uncertain and potentially distorted.

Despite these reservations, however, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism* is a volume of great value: it synthesizes a large body of work, seeks to give gender issues the central place that they deserve in the analysis of east European transformations, and makes assertions and identifies problems that will stimulate scholarly discussion for a long time.

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Like all multiauthored collections, this volume is a mixed bag. Some essays are related to the topic, which is the role intellectuals played in promoting the enterprise of nationality building. Other essays are more tangential, focusing on recent political developments in a given country (Romania) or on a specific “social-estate” (businesspersons in postcommunist Poland), all the while trying, with varying degrees of success, to relate these phenomena to nationality building. The approaches adopted by the nine authors also vary: some (Alexander J. Motyl, Janet Hart, Ronald Grigor Suny, Michael D. Kennedy) are theoretical in nature, others are empirical in the sense that they focus on and provide information about a specific aspect of nationalism, whether it be a nineteenth-century Armenian “national song” (Khachig Tololyan), east Slavic intellectuals in Galicia seeking an appropriate identity (John-Paul Himka), an early Soviet ethnolinguist (Yuri Slezkine), Polish intellectual elites in the late medieval period and nineteenth century (Andrzej Walecki), or political activists in postcommunist Romania (Katherine Verdery). Some of the authors are