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Susan Gal and Gail Kligman: The Politics of Gender after Socialism

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After Socialism

THE UNEXPECTED collapse of communism a decade ago changed the world. For the men and women of the former socialist states, Western freedoms and consumer goods seemed closer than ever before, but so did daunting financial uncertainty. For them, as for all of us, the familiar Cold War dualisms that divided Europe into West and East formally disappeared; the countries of East Central Europe and the former Soviet Union became members of a reconfigured global economy. As East Central Europe looked with hope to the West, Western politicians, bureaucrats, scholars, experts, and volunteers of all sorts headed east to help establish democratic practices in East Central Europe. In the years that followed, increasing class and ethnic differentiation, a rise in unemployment, and a decline in state subsidies were among the costs considered necessary to transform moribund socialist economies into thriving markets. These costs however, have been experienced differently by women and men.

It is our goal in this essay to explore how discourses and practices of gender play a major role in shaping the post-1989 reconstitution of states and social relations in East Central Europe. Since the end of state socialism, most studies have focused directly on the economic processes of marketization and privatization or on the political processes of democratization, constitutionalism, and the emergence of civil society. We propose, instead, to consider the processes of the postsocialist transformations from a gendered perspective. We contend that democratization comes more clearly into view if one asks how men and women are differently imagined as citizens, or how “politics” itself is being redefined as a distinctively masculine endeavor. Similarly, by examining how women and men are differently located in the emerging economies, one foregrounds the usually unremarked yet pervasive and often feminized phenomenon of small-scale, service-sector marketization. Attending to gender is analytically productive, leading not only to an understanding of relations between men and women, but to a deeper analysis of how social and institutional transformations occur. To this end we raise two crucial questions: How are gender relations and ideas about gender shaping political and economic change in the region? And what forms of gender inequality are being shaped as a result? By making central what

has been marginalized, this essay seeks to outline an alternative analytical agenda for research.¹

Recognizing that these processes are intertwined with events happening simultaneously in Western Europe, the United States, and elsewhere, we do not consider East Central Europe in isolation, but within a broader political geography. In discussing postsocialism, we will note parallels, interactions, and contrasts with other regions in policies and social trends, as well as in discourses. Of particular interest is the way that the public arguments about gender in one part of the globe influence those occurring in another; the way politicians can score points by aligning with or contrasting themselves to images and policies in other regions. The historical context of postsocialism is equally important in our analysis. As other scholars have noted, the sometimes subtle and hidden continuities with socialism are as powerful as the dramatic ruptures. Social actors all over the region have been reaching into the presocialist past, claiming historical models, inspiration, and justification of current political policies and gender arrangements. Nostalgia for earlier historical periods—different ones for different constituencies—is a pervasive aspect of making the postsocialist future. By attending throughout to historical comparisons as well as cross-regional interactions and contrasts, this work engages both the literature on East Central Europe, and also the broader feminist literature that has persistently asked: How are states and political-economic processes gendered? How do states and markets regulate gender relations?

Gender is defined here as the socially and culturally produced ideas about male-female difference, power, and inequality that structure the reproduction of these differences in the institutionalized practices of society. What it means to be a “man” or a “woman,” to be “masculine” or “feminine,” varies historically. Such cultural categories are formed through everyday interactions that are framed within larger discourses and within specific institutions. We argue that there are reciprocal effects here: Not only do state policies constrain gender relations, but ideas about the differences between men and women shape the ways in which states are imagined, constituted, and legitimated. Thus, states themselves can be imagined as male, even though both men and women are involved in their operation; social categories such as “worker” can be identified with a single gender as well, even if both men and women work. Such socially constructed ideas linking femininity and masculinity to other social categories are often embedded in state policies. Ideas about gender difference also contribute to the forms of market expansion. In shaping institutional change, ideas about gender difference interact with other central cultural constructions such as the nation, the family, the public good. At the same

time, the ideologies and policies that states promote, as well as the constraints and incentives of economies, circumscribe the range of possible relations between men and women. We therefore focus here on how gender relations both form and are formed by different kinds of states, different kinds of economies, and different types of political action.²

While the category of gender is central to social life, gender arrangements are diverse. One of the important lessons of empirical studies about the socialist past is that if there ever was a single gender regime of state socialism, it has long been replaced by many different ways of understanding the relations between men and women. Scholars agree, nevertheless, on some of the broad features of socialist gender orders. There was an attempt to erase gender difference (along with ethnic and class differences), to create socially atomized persons directly dependent on a paternalist state. Yet, women in socialism were also sometimes constituted as a corporate category, becoming a special object of state policy, with ministries or state offices dedicated to what were defined as their concerns. Women's full-time participation in the labor force was dictated by the state, on which women were more directly dependent than they were on individual men. In short, the ideological and social structural arrangements of state socialism produced a markedly different relation between the state, men, and women than commonly found, for instance, in classic liberal parliamentary systems or in various kinds of welfare states. Gender as an organizing principle, male dominance, and gendered inequality can be found in all these systems, but with profoundly different configurations.

Socialist gender arrangements themselves varied significantly over time and space. Indeed, socialist regimes were often characterized by contradictory goals in their policies toward women: they wanted workers as well as mothers, token leaders as well as obedient cadres. While officially supporting equality between men and women, the regimes countenanced and even produced heated mass media debates about issues such as women's ideal and proper roles, the deleterious effects of divorce, the effects of labor-force segregation—such as the feminization of schoolteaching and agriculture—and the fundamental importance of “natural difference.” These debates revealed the paradoxes and contradictions in official discourses, as well as more general tensions in both policy goals and the system of political-economic control.

Such diverse relations between official discourses and the everyday practices of men and women are a central focus of this book. People in the region reacted as much to the representations of themselves in official communications as to the often unforeseen and unintended consequences of state policies about reproduction, sexuality, and family life.

Observers—from both East and West—have made infamous the gap between image and practice in state socialism, between what was said, what was done, and what was experienced. Our reflections take this as a point of departure. The development of public spheres and capitalist mass media have swept away censorship and “official” discourse in this classic sense. There are now numerous alternative narratives—ways of looking at the world—that vie for popular attention, attempting to achieve persuasiveness and thus domination. Yet the apparent plurality and openness of mass media obscure the fact that certain issues remain undiscussed, some perspectives on gender relations and possible futures are suppressed. We argue that the disjuncture between public discourses and ordinary practices in a multitude of contexts has not disappeared. Rather, it now takes different forms and continues to be crucial for the maintenance of power differences and for understanding changing social relations in the region.

We intend this gendered perspective to be a part of the more general scholarly debates on what is happening after socialism. Therefore, we situate this work with reference to current frameworks for the study of East Central Europe. These frameworks differ in the way they analyze change in two key dimensions: space and time. With respect to space, the definition of the region itself is controversial. During the communist period, debates about the regional divisions of Europe, and the justifications for them, were coded ways for critical elites to publicly discuss different political alignments from those of the Cold War. They provided a means to express subversive visions of the future. But the idea of European regions has deep historical precedents. The countries to which we primarily refer in this essay—Poland, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech and Slovak Republics, and (East) Germany—undoubtedly have much in common, not least their geographical contiguities; some very general patterns of economic and political relations to earlier empires that were based to the east, west, and south; and forty years of communism. But we understand that definitions of regions and their boundaries are not self-evident categorizations arising out of uniform historical experience. Still less do they reflect cultural similarity. On the contrary, the image of unity is in part an effect of politically charged cultural constructions both in the West and the East. Indeed, the centuries-old European discourse of East/West oppositions—in which the East is the less civilized, less economically advanced pole—remains pervasive across the continent. The apparent separation of regions was and is a consequence of political economic relations and discursive interactions among them. The peace treaties following World War II put hard and definite borders around what had been the more shifting boundaries of “Eastern Europe,” “Central Europe,” “South-

eastern Europe,” “the Balkans,” without eliminating the differentials of wealth and power that the East/West discourse both marked and helped to create.³

The geopolitical borders and definitions of the region have, of course, shifted again. The events of 1989 along with the impetus of the Maastricht Treaty have brought the “hardness” of boundaries dramatically into question. Acceptance into Western political, economic, and military clubs has been a goal of many of the region’s countries. Some have been welcomed into NATO, others have been kept at bay. In keeping with these changes, scholarship itself has been deeply affected. The notable differences in access to money and influence between those studying East Central Europe from the “inside” and those coming from the “outside” to do so have increased since the end of communism, and interactions among scholars have sometimes been fraught. Some social scientists from the region have noted that, as in orientalist and colonial relations all over the globe, those native to the region and living there have often been assumed to be able to theorize only about the region itself; “Western” scholars, in contrast, seem to be empowered to make theoretical statements about social process “in general.” Without denying these very real tensions and inequalities, we suggest that in this case neither “side” is so simple to characterize. For instance, there are many historical models for the ways in which intellectuals from what is now called East Central Europe have contributed to the Western canon. And in the current scholarly context, it is indisputable that many groundbreaking conceptualizations now widely used in all of social science—soft-budget constraints, second societies—originated in the social science scholarship of East Central Europeans.⁴

Our own approach to these familiar dilemmas of scholarly interaction, and the relations between power and knowledge that they index, has been twofold. First, on a practical level, this essay emerged out of a collaborative and multidisciplinary research project on gender that we co-directed. We consider this book a companion volume to the original collaborative work. The project included scholars from East Central Europe as well as Western Europe and the United States; it attempted to bring these scholars together to create a broad framework within which we could raise questions about gender, conduct research, and then compare our results. But it did not try to apply uniform methods or analyses. In making our own points in the present essay, we highlight the evidence and theoretical insights of our colleagues who contributed to that project. In the spirit of intellectual and political debate—which was as present among the East Central Europeans in the collaborative project as between “East” and “West”—we sometimes argue with their positions.⁵

Second, on a more conceptual level, it is necessary to think analytically about Cold War discourse itself and scholarly participation in it. Predicated on underscoring difference, American social science during the Cold War implicitly limited the sorts of questions considered appropriate in discussions of communist countries. It kept discussion of communism in the East of Europe institutionally separate from the study of the capitalist West. This remained true despite the efforts of some scholars to make political and intellectual alliances across the divide. As a result of this separation, important parallels and their impacts were often obscured.⁶ For example, all over the former communist world, public discussions assume or assert that women were in an unholy alliance with the communist state, that women were specially favored before 1989. Certainly, state socialism claimed to “emancipate” women by ensuring their participation in the labor force. It frequently instituted liberal divorce laws and sometimes attempted to socialize some household tasks. Nevertheless, much empirical evidence suggests that far from enjoying an advantageous alliance with the state, women were in fact more at the mercy of state policies than men were. Communist states manipulated both men’s and women’s participation in wage work. But in the case of women, states also intruded significantly on reproductive lives, in a directly embodied manner. Yet the assertion of women’s advantageous position in communism continues as an aspect of public discourse, one that—we argue—serves to delegitimize women’s political activity in postcommunism. This makes it difficult to publicly formulate criticisms of neoliberal state policies adopted across the region since 1989 that have often resulted in higher rates of women’s unemployment and the dismantling of public services such as childcare and food kitchens that were of particular help to women.⁷

Interestingly, women’s relation to the state has become an equally controversial topic in the rest of Europe and the United States over the last two decades. As in East Central Europe, public discourses about this subject have palpable political consequences. Long-standing American representations of the dubious morality of “welfare mothers” played an important role in preparing public opinion for recent decreases in state support. Similarly, in the European Union, public discussions about single mothers, abortion, and social citizenship are highly contested. They raise the issue of women’s relation to the state in the face of EU pressures to streamline public spending. These pressures threaten the high levels of state provisioning that, in different ways in different countries, have been characteristic of Western Europe since World War II.

Until recently, such parallels between “East” and “West” were rarely analyzed. By assuming a categorical difference between them, Cold War discourse—in general public forums as well as in social science—took

largely for granted, and therefore left unexamined, the fact that “East” and “West” constituted politically important audiences for each other; as such, “East” and “West” reacted to each other’s actions. This was not limited to the arms race. Vivid and often questionable images of the other were used by both sides for internal and international political purposes. Frequently, the rivalry between East and West was veiled and indirect, each side assuming instead of mentioning the other’s existence as a competitive or negative model. Official discourses juxtaposed idealized images of self to more empirically real pictures of the other—to the other’s disadvantage. For Eastern leaders, the West was a foe whose defeat in economic and political terms would produce the ultimate legitimation of state socialist regimes. But the West also appeared in the East as a source of positive identity, at first for the disaffected, later for anyone importing blue jeans and rock and roll. Meanwhile, politicians in the West scored points by emphasizing the “totalitarian” aspects of “communism,” as an “evil empire” in implicit contrast with a democratic West. As a result, what could have been appreciated as the achievements of socialism, such as mass educational efforts, were ignored. In the Eastern version of Cold War discourse, communist leaders harped on imperialism, or on the drug abuse and violence that they identified as the deleterious consequences of too much “individualism.” They could thereby discount the significance of individual rights. Gender arrangements were part of this Cold War shadow boxing. Communist theories and policies about families were framed in part as critiques and responses to the West. Emblematic of the role of gender in this competition was the famous kitchen debate of 1959 when Khrushchev and Nixon met at a Moscow exhibit of American goods. Significantly, the two leaders argued about which system would produce the most and best labor-saving devices for women’s household work.⁸

One way of taking into account the effects of these Cold War assumptions on our own thinking is to include such mirroring and self-differentiating interactions in our analyses. We examine the former communist states not only in regional terms, but from a gendered perspective that deliberately attends to the construction of regional images in such interactions. The features that socialist states share with a variety of welfare states then become more evident. One advantage is that such comparisons raise questions not only about socialism and the trajectory of change in postsocialism. They also open the possibility that a view from East Central Europe can change our understanding of the West and of the gendered intellectual framework itself. For instance, we can analyze more precisely how, in the East, as in the West, discourses about women, family, and reproduction were and continue to be crucial in the legitimation of politics. As another instance, current patterns of political

activism among women in East Central Europe become more comprehensible if we see that women's politics are not immune to East/West competition and mutual stereotyping. In this way, the examples of East Central Europe can contribute to a renewed examination of the category of "feminism" itself as a social-political movement. Or, as yet another example, analysis of the postsocialist contraction of the state in East Central Europe, juxtaposed to simultaneous changes in European and American social provisioning, points to general questions about the nature and effects of state support in different contexts, and about the way states of different kinds structure the relations between men and women. The comparison also casts a new light on the dilemma of women's "autonomy" versus their "dependence" on men, states, and markets, which has been such a salient feature of recent feminist theorizing in the United States and Western Europe.

The issues we have just discussed revolve around the implications of spatial definitions and imagined boundaries. Another set of questions preoccupying studies of the region, and to which we wish to orient our own investigation, is the nature of social change after socialism. These questions involve analytical and popular notions of time and history. The massive dislocations provoked by the collapse of communism immediately gave birth to what English-language observers have called "the transition," in concert with common usage in the countries involved: *átmenet* or *rendszerváltás*, *Wende*, *tranzíție*, *tranzicija*, or *schimbare*. Thus "transition," like many social scientific terms, has been not only an analytical tool, but a part of everyday politics and common sense.⁹

But increasingly, scholars have been noting the disadvantages of using the metaphor of "transition." As many critics have remarked, "transition" is as consonant with Marxism-Leninism as with American modernization theory because it assumes evolutionary progress from one well-known "stage" of history to another. It thereby inadvertently continues the Cold War morality tale we have already discussed, one that pitted two "sides" against each other in an implicit contest for who was "ahead." The competition occurred even within the countries of the former Soviet bloc themselves, as each compared itself to the others, and was so compared by outside observers. It used to be a matter of who had the highest standard of living. But the competition continues today. Now it is often a question of whose economy is more privatized, which country most "Western," which the most "democratic," which is accepted into NATO or the European Union. Feminist analyses of women's situation in East Central Europe have not escaped this pitfall. Early studies bemoaned the lack of feminist activity in the region without reflecting on the relative lack of a strong feminist movement, let

alone a mass movement, anywhere else in the world during the late-twentieth century. The question too often has been: Which is better for women, communism or capitalism? And some feminist analyses simply reversed the valences of the discussion, asking: What have women lost in the transition?

Furthermore, the “transition” metaphor too readily invites one kind of comparison at the expense of another. Because “transitions” to democracy have arguably happened in the last twenty years in numerous parts of the globe, the term implies the primacy of typological comparisons among “transitions” as such, regardless of the contemporaneous historical circumstances in which they occur. In contrast, we are interested in “transitions” as parts of simultaneous conditions and transformations occurring in the world political economy and in widespread discourses that go well beyond the region’s shifting boundaries. Rather than comparing Latin American, for instance, with East European “transitions” as different examples of a single process, we sketch how East Central Europe’s interactions with other polities and economies, along with continuities and paradoxes from the past, produce patterned, if historically particular, results. We want to know how the pressures exerted at a particular historical moment by capitalist investors or the Catholic Church or the policy recommendations of the World Bank intersect with local debates about the proper roles of men and women and local forms of political action to produce present-day policies and patterns of action. By the same token, in the realm of discourse, we are observing a region in which the recent valorizations of the “individual,” “private enterprise,” and even “family values” echo similar emphases of neoconservatism farther to the west. This is not to say that “privatizations” of public services in the United States and Western Europe are the same as the contraction of the state in East Central Europe. They are quite different in process and effect. Yet we think it worth attending to their contemporaneity: they are justified by parallel arguments and ideologies and pursued by interrelated, overlapping groups of elites, who are often personally and corporately linked to each other in an increasingly globalized world.

Finally, another important criticism of the metaphor of transition from socialism—or for that matter transition to socialism—is that “transition” assumes a theory of history in which all aspects of society change in concert and in the same direction. This homogenizes state socialism, which, despite its distinctive ideological and systemic structure, nevertheless took many forms and had many phases in the different countries of the region. The approach also homogenizes capitalism, glossing over its varying and uneven forms, and the partially contingent, open-endedness of social change. Stage-thinking and the concomitant expectation

of predictable change make it as hard to notice genuine innovations as to take account of continuities with the past.

Thus, we join recent critics of “transition” studies in rejecting teleological assumptions and in giving causal weight to “pathways” from the past. With them, we recognize the significance of the dramatic political ruptures that captured the world’s imagination, but nevertheless insist that there are less salient but no less important continuities in many areas of social life. Some of the most interesting questions about social process are lost if we fail to note continuities between pre- and post-1989 East Central Europe, and between capitalist and socialist societies before 1989. Such continuities are repeatedly highlighted by a study of gender, and attending to them is indispensable for understanding the relations between men and women. For instance, gender segregation in the occupational structure is often longer lasting than political regimes; the division of household labor has changed at yet another pace. In this way, a gendered perspective reveals not only continuities, but quite different temporalities in the various processes occurring in the region and across the different versions of “transition” in different countries.

We depart from most critics of “transition” studies, however, in focusing on gender as an analytic category and on the dynamic discrepancies between discourses, institutional practices, and subjectivities. This allows us to note contradictory and paradoxical aspects of current processes that require novel conceptualizations. They are not easily categorized as either continuity, rupture, or path. We ask how social actors—institutions as much as individuals—working with the cultural and communicational materials at hand, and in the face of the open-ended contingencies of social life, create a sense of themselves and of social continuity. We examine how ideas about gender difference and sexuality are often recruited to construct continuities with the past, with nature, with the general good. They can thus be used to gain authority for postsocialist political institutions, practices, and political actors when there are not yet well established rules of the game for political activity.

Yet, some practices and institutions that seem continuous with those common under socialism are nevertheless experienced quite differently by social actors since 1989. They are reinterpreted and often revalued. Meanwhile, what seem to outside observers as novel activities and self-understandings, even new subjectivities, go unremarked because they are cloaked in the guise of continuity. They are categorized as another instance of something familiarly known. Notions of public and private, for instance, have been fundamental to imagining social life in the region for at least a century and a half. But when we trace the changing meanings of public and private—the activities routinely encompassed by each, their positive and negative valences, and their gender codings—we

find quite distinct changes between presocialist arrangements, the socialist period, and postsocialism. Sometimes, because the terms remain the same, they create the impression of continuity. At other times the terms shape perceptions so that some changes in political-economic patterns are more noticed than others. Indeed, the systematic ways in which legal systems, state policies, and people in everyday interactions manipulate discursive categories such as public and private to reconfigure, justify, and reinterpret their activities turn out to be important factors in the processes we examine, and a significant form of power. Our goal in analyzing such discursive distinctions is to propose new conceptual tools for scholarly understandings of how institutions and everyday life have changed since the end of socialism.

Each of the following chapters addresses a substantive issue central to a gendered analysis of postsocialism. Chapter 2, "Reproduction as Politics," asks how public discussions about human reproduction, childcare, and sexuality constitute and reconstitute the relationship between states and their subjects. We explore how states exercise power in molding and constraining reproductive practices and sexuality through legislation. But how and why are such laws instituted? Or posed otherwise, what is the role of reproduction—its discourses and practices—in the making of political authority?

In chapter 3, "Dilemmas of Public and Private," we examine how the economic restructuring of the region is constrained by gender relations and ideas about gender difference. But in order to do this we must reach back into the nineteenth century to trace the shifting understandings of public and private that have organized political and economic life in the region. There have been significant changes in the boundary between public and private, with varying roles played by classes, states, and social movements in marking that boundary. We set out the forms of masculinity and femininity that accompanied these imaginings in the socialist period. We use the notion of fractals to argue that a semiotic analysis of the public/private distinction, examined over a substantial time period, enables us to understand some of the currently emerging forms of economic stratification and polarization, and the gendered division of labor in the workplace.

Chapter 4, "Forms of States, Forms of 'Family,'" continues the investigation of the effects of gender on policy formulation and economic processes. The axis of comparison here switches from the past to contemporary welfare states in Western Europe and the United States. They too are responding to the needs of aging populations and to neoliberal pressures to limit spending and benefits. What can be grasped about the gender relations of socialist and postsocialist states if we consider them in relation to welfare states farther west, and examine them in the

context of contrasting “Eastern” and “Western” public discourses about states and families? We show how analyses of the postsocialist states of East Central Europe contribute to the ongoing feminist theorization of relations between women and welfare states, and to understanding the costs and benefits of women’s autonomy or dependence on states, markets, and individual men.

Feminist theorists have argued that only through active political participation and representation can women organize in their own interests. Therefore, in chapter 5, “Arenas of Political Action,” we turn again to politics. Women’s and men’s differential political participation in East Central Europe calls for a reconceptualization of the gendering of civil society, as well as for a discussion of the effects that international support for nongovernmental organizations has on political action. Furthermore, the example of East Central Europe invites a rethinking of “feminism” as social movement and “woman” as a form of political identity. It suggests an analysis of how such movements are defined, taken up, or rejected by social actors in particular historical circumstances.

There are, of course, many other substantive issues one could examine in trying to understand postsocialism as gendered. We have omitted many obviously relevant ones such as the increase in prostitution and the incorporation of East Central Europeans into the international sex trade; the forms of education for boys and girls; the differential incentives for and consequences of migration. Our aim is not to develop an exhaustive overview of substantive issues, but rather to open suggestive lines of argument and research.

In this extended reflection we maintain that gender is a crucial feature of the postsocialist transformations. In examining discourses of reproduction, the changing public/private divide, the range of current relations between women as clients, employees, citizens, and consumers in welfare states, and the differing political participation of men and women in East Central Europe, we hope to accomplish two goals: to include East Central Europe in some of the major debates of feminist theory, and at the same time, to outline an analytical agenda for examining the ways in which postsocialist change is powerfully shaped by the discourses and practices of gender.