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Complementary points of view

Communism and feminism

Brigitte STUDER

Did communism emancipate women? Is "feminist communism" a contradiction in terms? The annual review *Aspasia,* devoted to women's and gender history in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, organized a debate around those issues in its first issue, in 2007.[1] In her introductory contribution, Mihaely Miroiu, a Romanian political scientist, expresses the opinion that combining communism and feminism is impossible, because communism is nothing other than "state patriarchy," while feminism's defining characteristic is its demand for women's autonomy. In addition, according to Miroiu, even a woman like Alexandra Kollontai was fundamentally anti-feminist. Using a range of different arguments, the seven other female contributors to the issue contradict and/or qualify Miroiu's radical assertions. Russian historian Natalia Novikova focuses on Bolshevism's Utopian phase, until the mid-1920s. The American Jane Slaughter uses the example of the Italian Communist Party after 1945 to show that, although the relationship between feminism and communism may have been ambiguous, it clearly did exist. Krassimira Daskalova and Marilyn Boxer each base their arguments on the issue of defining the terms. In the Bulgarian historian's opinion, it makes more sense to talk about "State communism," because "communism" per se was the promise of

1 *Aspasia* 2007: 197-246.

an ideal state that never came into being. Refusing a simple dichotomy between the Eastern Bloc countries, where state socialism reigned, and the Western or so-called liberal democracies, she also questions whether women in the latter really had more rights, or were autonomous subjects of their own lives, any sooner. As cases in point, she reminds readers that French women didn't get the right to vote until 1944, or Swiss women until 1971. For the American, the problem lies in Miroiu's definition of feminism. Boxer – a historian specialized in both European socialism and in feminism, who defines herself as a "second-wave" feminist activist – rejects the idea that feminism has historically been built upon the notion of personal autonomy. All the less so in that, in the countries where the existence of "individual autonomy" can be assumed, like the United States and Western Europe, the individual in question was generally thought of as male.

What can be seen from those contributions? Despite differing approaches and empirical bases, all of Miroiu's contradictors agree that there is no such thing as "communism" per se – any more than there is such a thing as "feminism" per se. The idea is that not only must one define those terms carefully, but they must also be located in both place and time, and contextualized. In this short essay, I intend to address a few aspects of the (ambiguous) historical ties between communism and feminism, while taking into consideration the idea that both of those items must themselves be historicized. I will focus on the period that I know best, between the two World Wars; and on that branch of European communism whose national parties were profoundly embedded in the Communist International (the Comintern) and had strong political ties to the Soviet Union. Following three paths, my line of enquiry will explore the place that communist organizations allotted to women, both materially and symbolically; the approaches developed by two of the main Bolshevik theorists (one of whom is the aforementioned Kollontai); and some of the accommodation and/or adjustment strategies that might have been employed, based on the biographies of three women cadres in the Communist International in the 1930s.

Political equality: its ambiguities and contradictions

The new communist parties that emerged shortly after the war, as well as the new (Third) International, founded in 1919, inherited a platform of political equality between men and women from the Second International. In theory, women could hold any position in the political hierarchy. Insofar as women's acceptance as full-fledged members was hardly the norm in political parties at that time,[2] communist organizations offered women some institutional space for political and public activism that had scarcely existed hitherto. That space was filled in fluctuating proportions, depending on the country and the specific position. National political traditions, as well as the specifics of political mobilization and radicalization in different contexts, seem to have played a not insignificant role. Otherwise, how does one explain the disparities between such neighboring countries as France and Germany? While the French Communist Party counted no more than 2,600 women members (3% to 4%) in 1924 – a figure that fell to 200 (0.6%) in 1929 – the women's contingent of the German party reached 17% in 1928.[3] The Czechoslovakian party did even better: in 1924, one quarter of its members were women.[4] As for the Swiss Communist Party, the proportions were 15.4% in 1921, 12.5% in 1927 and 7% in 1935.[5] Women's share in the upper echelons also varied, although it was never equal to their proportion among rank-and-file members.[6] By the 1930s, the Comintern was publishing less and less data, but if we stick to the above-mentioned parties, the trend seems to be towards a drop in women's numbers.

As for the Comintern itself, a sociobiographical study of leading members reports that the figure of 4% women remained fairly steady throughout the 1920s and 1930s.[7] That may seem low, but put into the

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2 It depended largely on whether or not women had obtained full political rights.

3 Bard & Robert 1998: 323; Pennetier & Pudal 2014: 165. The Comintern gave a figure of just under 2% in 1924: Sturm 1924; Weber & Herbst 2004: 13, 33.

4 Sturm 1924.

5 Studer 1994: 293-338, 421-423.

6 In the KPD, the German Communist Party, women represented only 8.5% of leadership in 1928 (Weber & Herbst 2004: 33).

7 Huber 2007: 203.

context of the times, the figures represent a possibility for professional recognition and promotion that was uncommon in the world of politics in that era. Women's opportunities for becoming cadres were varied. Early on, they were found essentially in structures devoted to work "among women", particularly the women's international secretariat founded in 1920 and run continuously by the German militant Clara Zetkin, with the occasional collaboration of Alexandra Kollontai, who was Russian; Lucie Colliard, French; Dora Montefiore, Australian; Henriette Roland Holst, Dutch; Rosa Bloch, Swiss; Hertha Sturm, German, and Varvara Kasparova, Russian. On a national level, women's secretariats also offered leadership responsibilities in the parties where they existed. Then there were positions held by truly exceptional women. Elena Stasova, for example, presided International Red Aid until it was disbanded, in 1938. Two communist universities were also run by women: Klavdiia Kirsanova was the director of the International Lenin School; and Maria Frumkina, the rector of the Communist University of National Minorities of the West. Lastly, a certain number of women had important roles within the Comintern: among others, Bertha Zimmermann, from Switzerland, performed clandestine foreign missions for the (secret) department of international relations; and several women were heads of departments, including Serafima Hopner, from Ukraine, who was in charge of the department of agitation and propaganda before becoming co-chair of the department of cadres in the 1930s.

These careers in the vanguard were exceptional on two counts: not only did male-dominated society only rarely grant women access to high-level political and administrative responsibilities; but communist society was focusing ever more on promoting people of working-class origins, to the detriment of any others, and even going so far as to stigmatize a political apprenticeship in socialist and social-democrat political organizations. Yet most female activists had either had noteworthy political backgrounds prior to communism (as was the case for almost all of the women mentioned), or had considerable cultural capital (like Hertha Sturm, whose real name was Edith Schumann, and who held a PhD in political science) – or both. Despite their statutory openness to the principle of equality – a promise that was only kept under certain conditions, communist organizations still had a highly

gendered division of labor. Within the apparatus of the Comintern and the communist parties, most women worked in administrative positions, as secretaries, stenographers, or translators. In fact, the translation department was undoubtedly the one with the largest number of women.

A policy of emancipation of women?

The equality policies devised and partially implemented by the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution, including their limits and failings, are well-documented.[8] As Joy Chatterjee has pointed out, the new regime was the first one to conceive of a social state that would be responsive to women's needs.[9] While the issue of social redistribution was crucial to these efforts, also at stake was women's capacity to operate in the public sphere and – more generally although it was obviously related – the invention of a whole new way of life. To begin with, the idea was to free women from the "slavery" of housework, in order to open up to them new cultural horizons, which is clearly an emancipating vision.

The two main theorists of the idea that the socialist revolution could not take place without a radical transformation of daily life, Leon Trotsky and Alexandra Kollontai, both related social order to the gender question, but differed in their conception of women's sexual autonomy. In a series of articles published in *Pravda* in 1923 on "Life Style Issues," Trotsky pointed to the conservatism that characterized the so-called "private" sphere, the family and social relations between the sexes, arguing for the need for a radical overhaul. According to him, in order for that to occur, not only did husbands need a new awareness, but public authorities needed to take over housework and child-rearing.[10] Although his and Kollontai's contributions both criticize male privilege and the gendered division of labor in the private sphere, Kollontai's targets male domination more directly, vehemently criticizing the inequality inherent to the

8 Goldmann 2004.

9 Chatterjee 1999: 23.

10 Trotsky 1976 [1923].

dominant conception of love, which confines women and deprives them of their individuality:

> For the woman of the past, the infidelity or the loss of her beloved was the worst possible disaster, in imagination and in fact. But for the heroine of our day, what is truly disastrous is the loss of her identity, the renunciation of her own "ego" for the sake of the beloved, for the protection of love's happiness. She not only rejects the outer fetters, she protests "against love's prison itself", she is fearful of the fetters that love, with the stunted psychology peculiar to our time, lays upon lovers. The woman who was habituated to be absolutely consumed in love, even assumes an anxious stance towards love. She is constantly fearful that the power of feeling might awaken the slumbering atavistic inclination in her to become the shadow of the husband, might tempt her to surrender her identity, and to abandon her work, her profession, her life-tasks.[11]

So, unlike Trotsky and other members of the party, Kollontai criticizes not just the gendered division of labor within the family, but also the emotional norms within the couple, a relationship based on love that demands that women give up a part of their selfhood. Above all, she takes on the taboo of women's sexual freedom, whatever their marital status. For Kollontai, the "sexual virtue" by which women had long been judged was outdated:

> Whereas, at the time when women of the old type, raised in the adoration of irreproachable Madonnas, made an effort to preserve their purity, to make a secret of their feelings and to hide them, it is one of the characteristic traits of [the new woman] that she does not hide her natural physical drives, which signifies not only an act of self-assertion as a personality, but also as a representative of her sex. The "rebellion" of women against a one-sided sexual morality is one of the most sharply delineated traits of the new heroine. [12]

Yet she does not actually go so far as to depart from communist orthodoxy, projecting her hopes for a better world onto the working class:

> The new type of woman, inwardly self-reliant, independent, and free, corresponds with the morality which the working class is elaborating precisely in the interests of its class. For the working class, the accomplishment of its mission does not require that she be a handmaid of the husband, an impersonal domestic creature, endowed with passive, feminine traits. Rather, it requires a personality rising and rebelling

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11 Kollontai 1932 [1919].

12 Kollontai 1932 [1919].

> against every kind of slavery, an active, conscious, equal member of the community, of the class. [13]

Kollontai did not identify herself as a feminist. The term had negative connotations for the communists. Yet her views were most definitely feminist. Not only did she share the idea of female subjects' right to autonomy, she also believed that women were fundamentally strong. Which distinguishes her from other Marxists who wrote about the "woman question." For Beatrice Farnsworth:

> While not politically a feminist, she [Kollontai, B.S.] did share their view that women were inherently strong and needed freedom from the debilitating protection of men.[14]

Although Kollontai was unique among Bolshevik leaders, her theories were not unlike those of many female European communist activists in this initial phase of international communism. Women like Stella Browne in Great Britain, and Rosa Grimm in Switzerland, were defending ideas along very much the same lines.[15] In the Weimar Republic throughout the 1920s, and particularly from 1930 to 1932, the powerful German Communist Party campaigned for legalized abortion and for "sexual reform" with the slogan "Dein Körper gehört Dir" ("Your body belongs to you").[16]

Under the Soviet influence, minority ideas that could be described as feminist (though not generally identified as such), which had previously been tolerated, began to fade away as the communist parties distanced themselves from the cultural vanguards, and the sociological fabric of members wore thin. Within the Comintern apparatus, work on behalf of women soon lost both its status and its autonomy. In 1926, the last International Women's Congress took place; the last issue of the German-language journal *Die Kommunistische Fraueninternationale,* with a print run of 10,000 copies, was published, and the International Women's Secretariat was reduced from an autonomous branch to nothing more than a women's section, which

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13 Kollontai 1932: 62.

14 Farnsworth 1978: 197.

15 Rowbotham 1977; Studer 1988.

16 Grossman 1998: 143-145.

was itself done away with in 1935.[17] Within the Soviet Communist party, the women's department of the Secretariat of the Central Committee had already been abolished by January 1930.[18]

The Stalinism of the 1930s had proclaimed the process of emancipation complete and imposed a different conception of the "new woman". The regime needed to increase the labor force for its first Five Year Plan, so women were massively mobilized for both industrial and agricultural work. Then in the mid-1930s, a new campaign was launched to remind them of their duties as wives and homemakers; and in 1936, abortion was made illegal in response to policy goals of increasing the birth rate. Thus one could say that the regime had formalized women's "double burden", long before the model became established in the industrialized West – through other means, but for essentially the same social reasons – after 1945.[19] Similarly Barbara Evans Clements has spoken of "modernized patriarchalism".[20]

The Comintern's political evolution is studded with successive waves of resignations and new phases of recruitment. By the 1930s, there were very few women cadres left of the generation who had joined early in the previous decade and were profoundly influenced by the socialism of the Second International. These "Reluctant Feminists," as Jean Quataert dubbed them, or "Equivocal Feminists," as Karen Hunt has put it, did not consider themselves feminists, but their activities and objectives were often quite comparable.[21] Many of those women chose to leave the Party or were forced out of it; others stayed, but were politically marginalized. Others still, among those living in the USSR, were victims of repression after 1935. Based on a prosopographical study of leaders of the international communist women's movement, Bernhard Bayerlein has concluded that almost half of them joined one of the opposition movements, for the most part the anti-Stalinist left [*e.g.* Trotskyists].[22]

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17 Waters 1989: 49-50.

18 Clements 1992.

19 Studer 2004.

20 Clements 1997: 275.

21 Quataert 1979; Hunt 1996.

22 Bayerlein 2006: 45.

Living with contradictions

Few of the women cadres with political responsibilities in the Comintern in the 1930s had experience as leaders of the women's movement. That did not prevent several of them from exercising important, or even dangerous, functions. How did they reconcile their political duties with the Stalinist regime's new expectations of femininity and motherhood? Three cases will serve as examples, highlighting the conflicts these women were confronted with.[23]

Let us begin with the Romanian Ana Pauker, née Hannah Rabinsohn (1893-1960), who had joined the Romanian Social Democratic Worker's Party as early as 1915. After several years of exile with her husband in Prague, Berlin and Paris, Pauker was accepted at the International Lenin School in 1928. She soon became a close collaborator of Dmitry Manuilsky, who was then the principal head of the Executive Committee of the Communist International. In the autumn of 1930, Manuilsky sent her on a mission to France as an "instructor to the organization" of the French Communist Party (PCF). She spent two years there, but since her activity was clandestine, she could not bring her children with her. So she left her two-year-old daughter and her five-year-old son at the International Red Aid home in Moscow. Her political mission took priority over her role as a mother. Nevertheless, Pauker's case is still enlightening for several reasons. Although it demonstrates that political activity took precedence over child care, or, in a more abstract way, gender's role as a structuring social category, it also shows that in the early 1930s, the traditional family that the PCF would later defend did not necessarily have sway in communist circles. In practice, the notion of family was used with a broader meaning, which included Party members. Indeed, in late 1932, after she had returned to Moscow, Ana Pauker gave birth to a child whose father was Eugen Fried, a Czech communist and head of the group of Comintern emissaries in Paris. But as early as mid-1933, it was Aurore (the wife of PCF leader Maurice Thorez, but soon to be Fried's partner) and later Aurore's parents, who had custody of

[23] For more details: Studer 2015: 54-58.

the baby, Maria, while her mother was sent by the Comintern on missions to other countries.[24]

Dolores Ibárruri (1895-1989), aka "La Pasionaria", the charismatic leader of the Spanish Communist Party during the civil war, is another case in point. In order to be able to perform her revolutionary duties, she sent her two children, aged 11 and 14, to Moscow in the spring of 1935, and took them back only when the Civil War ended in 1939. The separation was of course the result of the difficult circumstances that Ibárruri was working in, but it was also in glaring contradiction with her public image – making it all the more significant. For in her public appearances, Ibárruri symbolically portrayed herself as a mother: in her dress, her manners and her speeches. Dressed always in black, she presented herself as the mother of the Republic, the mother of the Revolution; and when she spoke to the fighting men, calling upon their courage and their willingness to fight for the Republic, she did so as a mother.[25]

The third and last case is the American Peggy Dennis (1909-1993), née Regina Karasick. Like her partner Eugene Dennis (whose real name was Francis (Franck) Waldron), she worked as a Comintern emissary in several different countries in the early 1930s. In 1935, the couple (who refused to get married so as not to submit to a "bourgeois" institution) had to return to the USA, as Eugene was taking back his leadership role in the American CP. They had to leave their five-year-old son behind in the USSR. Having been raised in an orphanage, the child spoke only Russian, and the Comintern leadership had decided that he would present a risk for his parents' political activities. The separation, which was meant to be temporary, wound up being definitive, aside from a few quick visits. Tim made a life for himself in the Soviet Union. But the return to the USA had other consequences for Peggy: Eugene's near-constant absences due to his political role, then his incarceration during the McCarthy era, required Peggy not only to take on all parenting roles (they had had a second son in the meantime) but also to earn a living to support the family. This forced her, however unwillingly, to greatly reduce her political

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24 Levy 2001: 48; Kriegel & Courtois 1997: 216-218.

25 Byron 2004.

commitments, or even to give them up at times. As she described the situation in her autobiography, the choice was a tough one for her, but she consoled herself with the idea that supporting her partner was her work for the Party: "Gene and his work and his needs became sublimated into being my special political contribution."[26]

Is there an element of feminism in communism? Whatever the answer is, it requires contextualization. The Russian Revolution opened a historical window of opportunity by inscribing the principle of equality not only in its political doctrine but also in its initial governmental practice. Communist organizations offered women the statutory possibility of acceding to all political roles. However timidly, the Comintern and certain communist parties did set up structures that were meant to mobilize women and educate them about politics. Despite the symbolic barriers and the practical difficulties, many women were therefore able to become political players. Without articulating them as such, they did defend many of the same demands as progressive feminist movements. Nevertheless, the emancipation of women – which was not central to the communist political program, but had been seen more as something that would happen automatically when socialism had been achieved – soon faded in importance to communist leadership. In addition, the concept of emancipation was based on a definition specifically and more-or-less exclusively aimed at working-class women, at women as members of a class and not as representatives of a gender. Few female theorists, and even fewer male ones, devoted themselves to developing what was already a highly contested theoretical framework. In practice, the goal of the emancipation of women was not always shared by male "comrades", many of whom objected to or ignored orders to treat their female "comrades" as equals. Claude Pennetier and Bernard Pudal have pointed out quite correctly that, "for communist women, insofar as feminism existed, it was thwarted, denied and considered suspect: a sort of feminism without feminism."[27] Women's autonomous demands

26 Dennis 1977: 89.

27 Pennetier & Pudal 2014: 189.

were treated with suspicion. But even when the interests of women *as a gender* had practically disappeared, by the 1930s (even though with the rise of fascism, communist organizations had re-established large-scale women's movements, mobilized not against male domination, but against war), that did not mean, in actual practice, that women all conformed to traditional roles as women and mothers. Some, like "La Pasionaria", took on a maternal image as a protective cloak to justify their political roles in the conservative context of Spain and the almost all-male environment at the upper echelons of the Comintern. Yet in her self-presentation, Ibárruri portrayed herself as strong or even heroic.[28] For a communist woman in the 1930s, claiming autonomy meant walking a narrow path and making frequent adjustments so as not to be suspected of betraying "Party spirit".

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28 See her autobiography: Ibárruri 1966.

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