

RE-THEORIZING EMANCIPATION: REMEMBERING AND RETHINKING 'GENDER EQUALITY' IN EASTERN EUROPEAN WOMANIST THOUGHT

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“In the conception of emancipation, the pendulum had swung too far toward ‘equality,’ although it is beginning to move toward the counter pole of difference, individuality, and uniqueness....”

Zuzana Kicková and Etela Farkašová

“The Emancipation of Women: A Concept that Failed”

After the disintegration of the communist system in Eastern Europe, many people believed that the transition to a capitalist, democratic state would finally bring freedom and prosperity to the region. However, many anthropological and historical studies reveal the ways in which the transition has negatively affected various social groups. Women constitute one of the largest groups that have been harmed by the post-communist transformations. Immediately following the breakdown of the communist parties, post-communist governments restricted reproductive rights (except in Romania) and rescinded progressive maternity policies. Unemployment rose throughout the entire region, but disproportionately affected women. Additionally, women’s representation in government sharply dropped after 1989. Thus, the “woman question” reemerged in Eastern Europe only to be appropriated by politicians, social leaders, and other groups who sought to cultivate a moral basis for the new sociopolitical system through women’s social status.

In response to the many problems that women face in Eastern Europe, such as high unemployment and low political representation, a multitude of women’s non-governmental organizations have proliferated throughout the region. A small sample of these groups displays the different agendas of each: Feminist Network of Hungary, Hungarian Women’s Foundation (also

known as MONA), Prague Mothers, Union of Romany Women, Women in Black (Serbia), the Center for Women War Victims (Zagreb), and the Women’s Rights Center (Warsaw). In addition to the proliferation of women’s NGOs, a multitude of womanist writing has appeared in Eastern Europe, asserting that women occupy a secondary status and face discrimination in both the public and private spheres.

I utilize the term “womanism” to describe those individuals who claim that women are discriminated against in various spheres of life. I choose not to call them feminists because they reject feminism, a platform from which to end male dominance. Based on Eastern European women’s historical situation and experience with communism, womanism offers a distinctly different line of thought than feminism. Although women throughout Eastern Europe face different problems and different forms of discrimination in the transitional period, many women have a common experience of voicing opposition to gender based discrimination. In this context, I analyze womanist writing throughout Eastern Europe as a reaction to both discrimination against women in the post-1989 period and as a reaction to the patriarchal state of the communist period.

I distinguish womanism from feminism in three ways. First, womanist writing is characterized by a rejection of the category and label of “feminism” and “feminist,” although there are exceptions to this, such as The Feminist Network of Hungary, a westward looking group that asserts Hungary’s position as a “Western European” nation. Along with a rejection of feminism, a distinction is made between the formal women’s movement, represented by the communist parties’ women’s organizations, and an informal, grassroots movement that most womanists assert is nonexistent throughout the

region. Second, womanist writing stresses that men have not been their oppressors. Rather, if men had certain behaviors or characteristics that were detrimental to women, it was believed that a repressive public sphere caused negative behavior. Furthermore, womanists give much attention to the idea of universal liberation, stressing that women, men, and children are disadvantaged in society on account of the repressive nature of the public sphere during communism. Lastly, womanist writing is essentialist, believing that women and men have socialized differences as well as biopsychological differences, and that for women to be “equal” to men, these differences must be recognized and appreciated rather than comparatively ranked.

Before discussing womanist theory, it is necessary to recognize the historical situation that has influenced womanists in Eastern Europe. In *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* Katherine Verdery outlines the *zadruga*, or “parent-state,” model of socialism. Verdery emphasizes that the socialist parent-state was a quasi-familial construction placing the Party as the head of the “family.” She asserts that socialism, “went further than most [other political systems] in seeing society not simply as like a family but as itself a family, with the Party as parent” (1996:64). Verdery believes that an individual’s tie to the state was through dependency on the state, and that the state attempted to erase both class and gender to ensure that dependency.

The socialist state structure within which womanism developed accounts for womanism’s unique theoretical approach to gender equality, an approach independent from, albeit influenced by, feminism. To womanists, the state, which can be understood as a patriarch itself, rather than an agent for patriarchy due to its basis on patriarchal values that cannot be reformed without abolishing the state, is the focal point of their writing on oppression and emancipation.¹ Eastern European womanists’ writings reflect the state’s patriarchal role as breadwinner, provider, and caretaker of its subjects as they theorize and debate emancipation and gender in the post-1989 period. The location of oppression is not men, the family, or the private sphere. On the contrary, the family and the private sphere provided for both men and women an area of independence and safety from the communist state, as expressed in the anti-political writings of Konrad and Havel.² Emancipation from and independence of the state-patriarch is the central aspect informing womanist writing. Thus, we can arguably understand womanism to be a direct

criticism of the communist state, as feminism has been to the liberal state.

Additionally, womanist writing presents the particular way in which women came to embody the socialist nation. Women’s increased employment exemplified the state’s focus on and necessity for full employment. Additionally, some socialist states appropriated women’s reproductive labor. In the case of Poland, the state appeased Solidarity—an opposition movement deeply interconnected with the Catholic Church—by controlling women’s access to abortion, and in Romania the state restricted all access to contraception and abortion in an effort to boost the negative birth rate. However, womanist writing also shows the ways in which women opposed the state by controlling their bodies in such restrictive situations.

Various problems exist in the nature of feminist investigations into the position of women in Eastern Europe. In *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, Slavenka Drakulic tells the story of an invitation she received in the early 1990s from an American feminist asking her to write an essay for a book on women in Eastern Europe. The American feminist, specified as *B* by Drakulic, requests “‘*A kind of Critical Theory approach*,’” to the subject of Eastern European “feminist” interventions in the public sphere after 1989. Remembering a previous meeting with *B* in the United States, Drakulic writes,

B asked me about the position of women in Eastern Europe after the ‘velvet revolution.’ I also remember a kind of geographical map appearing in my mind: Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia too – we are talking about perhaps 70 million women there, living in different regions and cultures, speaking different languages, yet all reduced to a common denominator, the system they were living under (1991:123).

Drakulic’s experience with this American feminist and others points out a salient problem for Western feminism as it looks to women within Western culture and as it attempts to gage women’s positions in other regions: “women” become a homogenized group with no differential characteristics. This was a particular problem early in second-wave American feminism, which was

often criticized as a movement that only spoke to white, middle class women. In the case of Eastern Europe, language, ethnicity, and many other factors are ignored by Western feminists; Eastern European women become a uniform group characterized by their experience with communism. Although Drakulic criticizes Western feminism and its tendency to homogenize women as a group, she herself points out in an article titled "In their Own Words: Women of Eastern Europe," that there is a describable Eastern European, female experience: "[These women whom I spoke with throughout Eastern Europe] proved that for the past decade I had been right: there *are* common problems of women living under the same system, and we pinpointed them" (1991:47).

Like Drakulic, I attempt to individualize Eastern European women's voices and present them as subjects who are both influenced by their cultural and national situation, but who speak from personal, individual experience. Anastasya Posadskaya noted the importance for women from the former Soviet Union to speak as individuals, claiming, "[F]or decades all we heard about was 'all Soviet peoples,' this notorious phrase. Now when we [women] speak at meetings we speak as individuals, it is very important to have a really personal participation, and an ability to express your own personal concerns" (Molyneux 1991:140). A common experience and individual position within a state or region can both be articulated, and it is important to be able to retain individual experience as we draw regional connections.

Regional connections concerning women and the communist state are important to the overall study of the gendering of modern state forms. Eastern European women's testimonies are informative of the gendered particularities of the socialist state, one of many types of political and economic systems. Additionally, these writings help us to recognize and distinguish how gender, as a "primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated" (Scott 1986:1069), becomes implicated in comparison to the post-war welfare state. Lastly, it is important to note that the majority of the womanist writing I analyze comes from educated, urban women. These women also tend to be of the dominant ethnic group in their country. Additionally, these sources are from the early 1990s, primarily between 1991-1993, when socialism was still more fully intact in these countries and still extremely influential on their thinking.

Dismissing Feminism and the Formal Women's Movement

Womanist writing clearly distinguishes between a formal women's movement, sponsored by the communist governments, and a grassroots women's movement, which never arose during the communist period for reasons such as the basic absence of civil society. The formal women's movement of the communist period is characterized in womanist writing as an imposed, superficial and disingenuous movement directed from above. Additionally, the concept of feminism is dismissed as an ideology, and its position as such links it to the former ideologically focused and manipulating state.

Many early socialists, like Engels, theorized that capitalism, as the root of all oppression, was the obvious oppressor of women too, and believed that capitalism's abolition would free the whole of society. Chris Corrin, a Western scholar, believed that immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution genuine, revolutionary attempts were made to enhance women's social position, but that by the Stalinist years when the Eastern Bloc was formed, gender egalitarianism was no longer the case (Corrin 1992:18-19). Women were encouraged to enter the workforce and public life in the post-war years. In Czechoslovakia, in 1950, women were 38.4% of the total workforce, and by 1960 they were 42.8% of the workforce (Dijkstra 1997:120). By 1988, Czechoslovakian women made up 46% of the workforce (Dijkstra 1997:120). In Poland, in 1951, women were 33% of the workforce, by 1970 they were 40% and by 1988 they were 46.8% of the workforce (Dijkstra 1997:120). The communist governments also promoted equality in education for both men and women. Additionally, abortion laws were liberalized throughout the Eastern European countries, except Ceaucescu's Romania. Some women, such as Judit Kiss, a Hungarian writer, remembered this initial phase of emancipation as good, but note its long-term failure: "A whole new generation of self-conscious and active women emerged on the social scene in the post-war years, for whom working, playing active social roles, enjoying the benefits of social welfare, 'shaking the whole world' as the popular song said, was taken for granted" (1991:50).

Individuals remember early state attempts to promote equality as opportunistic rather than egalitarian, which discredited "women's liberation" as a concept from its inception in Eastern Europe. Anastasya Posadskaya noted in an

interview with Maxine Molyneux that the socialist state's "commitment to equality has always existed. But it was absolutely formal and absolutely instrumental, it was not a commitment on behalf of women as such but was pursued only to achieve other goals, economic or demographic" (Molyneux 1991:135). Alena Valterová, founder of the Political Party of Women and Mothers in Prague, also asserted this, "In the past the woman's question was of course debated in Czechoslovakia but only superficially, and only in reference to their position as economically active members of the society" (Castle-Kanerová 1991:164).

Both of these statements focus on the shallowness of state sponsored emancipation and reflect the ulterior motives of the state, both economic and demographic, as well as the fact that women became doubly worked bodies in both the public and private spheres. The push for women in the workforce was necessary to the industrial plans of the communist governments; the state needed every worker it could get to fulfill its industrial, multi-year plans. Later, women's bodies were essential in terms of human reproduction as birth rates began to fall. In the 1960s, pronatalism was promoted in the form of family tax cuts, allowances based on the number of children a couple had, and extended maternity leave. Alena Heitlinger, a Western scholar, affirmed that these policies were directly related to the fear of a future labor shortage (1979:177).

Furthermore, work came to be obligatory in the communist countries, making it hard to define work as a right. Jirina Šiklová, a womanist from the former Czechoslovakia, wrote in an article titled "Are Women in Central and Eastern Europe Conservative?" that "the emancipation of women was reduced to the necessity to have a job" (1997:74). This common womanist statement reflects the fact that the actual incentive for women to work was low wages rather than women's new accessibility to the public sphere. A. Geske Dijkstra, a Dutch economist, has written that even though governments promoted women in the workforce, "In practice, the strongest motivation for women to participate in the labour market was the generally low wages for everyone, which required two income-earners to make a reasonable family income" (1997:120). The negative association of emancipation and work also reflects women's poor working conditions. Women generally worked undesirable jobs, such as light factory work, and rarely attained

management positions. Gender discrepancy in pay also negatively affected women.³

Although women were brought into the public sphere, their duties at home remained as well. Besides the fact that men assumed few household chores, the state did not prioritize the production of time saving appliances in its industrialization plans. Few women owned timesaving appliances such as washing machines. A survey done in Czechoslovakia in 1959 reported that 8% of women used communal laundry services, 40% used personal washing machines, and 30% washed their clothes by hand (Heitlinger 1979:27). Few people used the public cantinas, and childcare was far from adequate in most of the Eastern European countries. Thus, women resented the obligation of formal employment because they also performed the majority of household work. Work was far from fulfilling and satisfying, and therefore hardly liberating, as it only doubled the total amount of work one had.

In addition to promoting mass employment involving women, the communist parties also supported women's organizations. Alena Valterová described the Czechoslovak Communist Party's women's group, the Women's Union, as a "social club comparable to a club of stamp collectors" (Castle-Kanerová 1991:162), inferring the organization's inactivity. She also noted that these women were subject to "cadre screening," and thus did nothing but what the party allowed. The Women's Union survived the velvet revolution though, and in the early 1990s was still taking part in government discussions of women's issues. Valterová claimed that this group was not valued for its representation of women, but for "the manner by which they work, that is by rubber stamping the dominant views of government" (Castle-Kanerová 1991:162).

A similar body existed in the USSR, called the Soviet Women's Committee, which changed its name in the post-communist period to the Union of Women. Because the members were not elected and thus represented nobody, and were still organized by the state, Russian womanists and women criticized them (Molyneux 1991:136). Posadskaya also spoke of quotas for women in the Soviet parliament, and noted that this system discredited formal equality because, "In reality the state was more concerned to have obedient women in parliament than women representing women's interests" (Molyneux 1991:136).

Formal equality has become associated with women's superficial presence in government,

through institutions such as quota systems in the USSR and the communist parties' women's organizations. Women representatives and women's groups are perceived to have failed to represent women's needs because of their obedience to the party and the state. Furthermore, the communist state had been claiming since the 1950s that the woman question had been solved, leaving little room for these groups to agitate for women's position because it was formally believed that women were socially equal to men. Because the state offered institutions to promote women's position in society, but did this superficially, womanists criticize the state sponsored, formal women's movement that failed to qualitatively change women's lives.

Alongside criticism of the formal equality of the state, there is a general dismissal of feminism in womanist writing. As in the United States and Europe, feminism in Eastern Europe is a misunderstood concept that often evokes images of man-hating, militant women. Although many Eastern European women might embrace actual feminist beliefs, feminism is understood to be a "bourgeois trend" and is considered just another "ism." In "Women's Priorities and Visions," Jirina Vrabkova, a writer from the former Czechoslovakia, wrote, "Feminism here means just another 'ism' – one ideology replaced by another one – or a vision of a militant, frustrated, unsuccessful (usually ugly) woman who is hostile and man-hating" (1997:73). Posadskaya commented on the immediate rejection of any ideology after a half-century of propaganda regarding socialism, egalitarianism, Marxism, and Leninism. She also asserted that many women might associate with feminism as a concept, but that women in the group that she had formed, the Independent Women's Democratic Initiative, would never embrace the word:

[F]eminism is like socialism – another label. It's seen as a bourgeois trend and caricatured as selfish, and stupid. Feminists are thought of as terribly worn and dreary women who look like men. Most women who are in [our association] and who are presumably going to join do not know what 'feminism' is other than this stereotype. They could be feminists in our own particular soviet way. But they do not call themselves feminists, and it would be difficult to attract them with this name. We want our organization to be an open one; not the kind of so-called open organizations, which were imposed from

above, and in which nobody was really involved or committed, and everything is planned from above. That is why in the title the key word is independent, which means independent from party control or state-organized control (Molyneux 1991:137).

Posadskaya elaborated that feminism was misunderstood, and that calling her group feminist would have limited its membership and organizational possibilities. Ostensibly, "feminism" would have linked the group to the old style organization that was directed by the state.

In her interview with Maxine Molyneux, Posadskaya speaks of "a real linguistic crisis" in regards to the language used to speak of women's position in society: "The danger now, however, is that we cannot use the old language because it was discredited by hypocritical usage; wonderful concepts like equality, emancipation, solidarity, can no longer be used. They were used to describe a reality which was quite their opposite... We have a real linguistic crisis, and this affects our ability to communicate" (Molyneux 1991:135). Likewise, this linguistic crisis also extends to Western feminists attempting to work with Eastern European women, and to scholars studying women and gender in these countries. However, the dismissal of the formal women's movement as imposed and artificially motivated must be recognized. Because the state offered women certain opportunities understood to be egalitarian, but did not provide for equality within that environment, state directed emancipation became discredited. The double burden experienced throughout Eastern Europe further discredited obligatory, often unsatisfying work. However, feminism, as an ideology, evokes the former reality of an all-consuming state and is not acceptable as a means by which to criticize the transition state. Perhaps it is inappropriate to call women who agitate for a better social position womanists, but they represent a distinguishable line of thought that criticizes the old state structure as well as the new. This linguistic crisis must be faced in order to define and describe this line of thought that reacts to the communist and transition experience.

Describing Universal Liberation

As womanists look to their experience with communism, they understand men to have been their partners in state oppression: everyone was a victim of the state system. Although many Eastern European women have argued since 1989

that men are better positioned in society by virtue of their sex alone, womanists still contend that the whole of society would benefit from a revolution in gender, class, age, and ethnic relations. Feminists as well believe this and rightly argue that the study of women necessarily reveals aspects of men's experience, but they lack an explicit focus on men. Womanism clearly argues for a universal liberation that will free women, men, and children from social constraints.

The Solidarity of Victims Before 1989

Konrád and Havel attested to the effects of living in a society so saturated with politics that personal autonomy was basically impossible (Stokes 1991:167).⁴ Ostensibly, their arguments referred to a state that was gender blind, causing all of society to be similarly robbed of civil and human rights. Although womanism recognizes that different people differently experienced oppression, they focus on the common experience of a repressive state too. The Feminist Network of Hungary, in their Declaration of Intent, described the effects of the communist state's overwhelming presence, writing, "The former omnipotence of the state power, disabling or deforming all members of society, destroyed support communities and exploited the natural forces of human life, including human relationships. Women, men and children have been forced to bear their burdens alone" (1993:172).

Womanism also identifies specific aspects of men's oppression, resulting from their party positions and occupations. Judit Kiss pointed out that men's bodies were particularly affected by the socialist system because men normally assumed the work offered by the second and third economy, which caused their health to greatly decline and their life expectancies to decrease (1991:51). The Feminist Network further divulged the specific damages done to men by the state: "Authoritarianism and paternalism [of the state], in addition to [men's] everyday burdens, have also made men vulnerable and distorted their personalities" (1993:172). Here, a specific point is brought up that reinforces the common belief that society's distorted situation resulted in distorted individuals who could not live normal lives. In other words, the state was to blame even for personal situations such as divorce, because even the personality could not be preserved from state influence. In this vein, Šiklová, in her essay "McDonald's, Terminators, Coca Cola Ads—and Feminism?" argued that women's access to the private sphere protected them from the state:

"Women in socialism never allowed themselves to be manipulated to the extent that men did, which I regard as fortunate. Women took refuge in their 'double burden,' in motherhood and in care for young children" (1997:79).

Slavenka Drakulic offers several examples that eloquently show the solidarity created by common victimization. Drakulic explains in an essay titled "The Language of Soup," that Eastern European women tend to not blame male partners for the demise of relationships because everyone lives "in the same mess": "It would be so easy to put the blame on them; our lives would be so much simpler. But something stops us. Maybe it's the idea that in normal circumstances, things might have been different" (Drakulic 1991:109). Again, this statement reflects the abnormal circumstances to which socialism exposed people, and explains that individuals blamed the state rather than friends, lovers, and family for personal problems. Drakulic elaborated on the common experience of personal repression and the group solidarity that it created:

In these endless, ancient, kitchens [across Eastern Europe], while the soup is boiling, we talk of men – sorrowful talk, as old as the smell of soup, as warm as a fireplace and the feeling of intimacy we share. It seems it's the same the world over, but there is a difference here [in Eastern Europe], because every such talk finishes with the system that shapes our lives. Sometimes it looks like a Minotaur, a monster we throw sacrifices to in order just to stay alive, a force larger than life, mythological and real at the same time, controlling us, dividing us, eating us up. That is what is uniting us in these kitchens, beyond the men, above them, this feeling of helplessness. And this is also what unites us with men. It's hard to see them as an opposite force, men as a gender, hard to confront them as enemies. Perhaps because everyone's identity is denied, we want to see them as persons, not as a group, or a category, or a mass (1991:111).

In a system that denied everyone autonomy, it was too much to see men as a homogenous group with similar agendas detrimental to women. The state was the ultimate enemy. When womanists reflect on the state they view it as patriarchal and paternalistic, but not for the benefit of men necessarily, as men too were

oppressed. State patriarchy functioned to perpetuate the state, benefiting it and those who played by the communist parties' rules (which were more often men).

Renata Siemienska, a Polish scholar, explained that anger about discrimination and repression was transferred onto the state because it dictated social circumstances: "Where the state grants certain privileges and rights—in the socialist countries, this is perceived as the case—citizens hold the state responsible for improper functioning or lack of satisfying rights. This should receive due attention since in the citizens' opinion it is not a better or worse employer, usually a man, who is held responsible, but instead the state, which is the basic employer and grants rights" (Siemienska 1986:242). Social solidarity was created against the state because the state was perceived to be so controlling.

Even in Romania, where the fear of pregnancy was omniscient and overwhelming, where women had multiple abortions throughout their lives, men and sex were not the enemy. In the Romanian case, we should think of the sexual act and the sexual body as resistance to communism. Romanians preserved their sexuality and bodies from state control by continuing to have sex though their state was appropriating sexuality, through the outlaw of abortion and contraception, for its own demographic purposes. Adriana Baban, a Romanian scholar, argued that Ceaucescu's policies affected both men and women: "So pervasive was its intrusion into the intimate lives and privacy of Romania's citizens that the first post-Ceaucescu government, on the very day that it assumed power, revoked all prohibitions against abortion and contraception. This political act represented the 'legal' liberation of male and female sexuality, both of which had been significantly, if differentially, influenced by the Ceaucescu policies" (Baban 2000:225). In Romania, the state was the obvious culprit in oppressing both women's and men's sexualities, and sexual privacy and freedom to contraception and abortion represent new ideals of the post-Ceaucescu period.

Post-1989

In the post-communist period, womanists assert that men have more rights than women, a factor that incited womanism. One Romanian woman tellingly explained her situation: "Abortion is the only thing that democracy has brought us [Romanian women]. Men have gained the right to be involved in politics and business; we have

gained the right to abort! What else have we gained with the change to democracy...? Food and things that we cannot afford to buy?" (Baban 2000:225). Peggy Watson, another Western scholar, has described the loss of women's rights as implicit in the transition process: "[T]he very uniformity of the Eastern European experience indicates that the re-creation of the gender order in the transition to capitalism is in fact *predicated* on the rescinding of a range of rights accorded to women under state socialism" (Watson 1993:71). In this vein, womanist thinking begins to diverge from its ideas about state patriarchy of the communist period. When discussing the post-1989 period, womanists believe that state patriarchy directly benefits men. Nonetheless, informed by their experience with common victimization, womanists still argues for the liberation of men in the post-1989 period, even if men have fared better in the transition period.

Womanists distinguish between real emancipation and state-sponsored, superficial emancipation, which mirrors their categorization of the informal women's movement and the formal one. "Real emancipation" is extended to men as well, creating a more holistic understanding of social liberation. The Feminist Network stated in their Declaration of Intent, "[We aim] to achieve...the realization of women's and men's real emancipation, and the abolition of all kinds of discrimination...Through dialogue and public debates we wish to reshape the structure of interests so as to make possible a real, rather than a forced and false harmonization of interests" (Feminist Network of Hungary 1991:171). They continue, describing their belief in universal liberation, stating, "The Feminist Network commits itself to the goal of extending to children, women, and men equal opportunities for self-realization with regard to gender, religion, nationality, racial origin, or social class. From this it follows that our understanding of emancipation is universal and is directed toward the whole of society" (Feminist Network of Hungary 1991:172).

The Feminist Network also described several means by which universal liberation might be promoted:

The concept of work must be redefined so that the work required to care for the family and children and the tasks needed to sustain everyday life should be included within the sphere of important activities deserving social and material

recognition. Men and women must be assured equal rights and obligations to participate in these activities. A high-quality system of childcare institutes and family services must be created out of public funds. A free and high-quality health system, including a more enlightened women's health network, is essential for the entire population. The availability of abortion must be legally guaranteed and contraception must become a responsibility of men as well as women (1991:173).

Many of these concepts were socialist goals and dreams, and the failure of the socialist systems to achieve them has not discredited these ideas with all social sectors. These concepts stress that the family is central to the happiness of both men and women, and are promoted in terms of creating universal liberation. Thus, a belief exists within womanism that parts of socialism could be conducive to universal liberation. Maria Adamik, a Hungarian womanist, poignantly pointed this out, noting the complete rejection of socialist ideals in the transitional period, "The Marxist baby has been thrown out with the Stalinist bathwater" (1991:166).

Anastasya Posadskaya also agitated for men's position in society, arguing that they were oppressed in certain ways within the family. For instance, an obvious detriment to men and children is the fact that women are almost always granted custody of children in the case of divorce; obviously not all women are more suited than men to raise children. Posadskaya stated, "I wrote an article titled 'Invisible tears', about men's tears, which talked about the fact that men cannot realize themselves personally, particularly in the family. I thought that men would understand this and there would immediately be a men's liberation movement" (Molyneux 1991:139). A men's liberation movement did not, however, emerge in Russia. Nonetheless, Posadskaya's ideas point to a possible amalgamated movement for men and women.

Judit Kiss described the possibility of a women's movement becoming the next universal movement for "freedom and democracy." Kiss first described the characteristics of ecological and peace movements that make them widely acceptable: "their issues appear as more general concerns. They have more 'public places of battle', dams, nuclear plants, tropical forests, which can serve as uniting, general symbols of confrontation,

argument, and hopefully victory" (1991:56). On the other hand, although a women's movement does have some general concerns, Kiss explained that the predominant invisibility of the victories in a women's movement makes it harder to keep alive as a movement. She described the real goals of a women's movement to be in private life: "[T]heir ultimate scenario is in the realm of everyday personal life: how one feels walking down a street, traveling alone, going to public places, how difficult it is to find a place in the productive system or to express interests through the media, how natural it feels to communicate with others, known or alien, men or women" (1991:56). Kiss pointed out that these goals, so embedded in personal, quotidian life, are exactly why all of society must be changed for them to be reached:

Women's movements can hardly present anything like this [the general concerns of ecological and peace movements], but they still can represent the other side of any current coin, on behalf of the threatened, oppressed, and humiliated. They may also fight publicly, and might even win in certain cases, but at the end of the day they can only win behind the closed doors of their homes. And for that, the whole society has to change. That is the reason why women's movements have the potential to become the new universal movement for freedom and democracy (1991:56).

Thus, a democratic, free society can be judged by women's position in them, and all of society must be implicated in this movement in order to create a truly democratic society that benefits everyone.

The Liberation of Essentialism

Within societies in Eastern Europe, there is an acceptance of essentialism on many different social levels. This acceptance includes advocates of women's rights. I have argued elsewhere that various Polish social and political groups utilized gender representations in order to garner moral capital for the post-communist sociopolitical system.⁵ These representations of gender stress essentialism in order to reject the communist system that supposedly warped both femininity and masculinity. Additionally, Catherine Wanner has shown in her work on Ukraine that the educational system has focused on gender essentialism in an effort to promote Ukrainian nationalism. Wanner reported that elite, private schools often promoted single-sex education, and

that “Several members of the faculty expressed the conviction that Soviet society contaminated and vulgarized the essence of masculinity and femininity in the course of pursuing gender equality” (1998:112). These faculty members argued that the Soviet system “empowered and masculinized” (Wanner 1998:112) women. In an effort to counteract this, some schools implemented “psycho-training” to “reformulate gender-based conceptions of the sexes which, it is believed, will contribute to the strengthening of the nation and state” (Wanner 1998:112). Thus, the re-feminized woman embodies the free, independent post-communist state, and many levels of society work to recast femininity and masculinity, believing that gender could not be expressed in the communist states.

Second-wave American feminism was partly characterized by its rejection of essentialism, which had been promoted by feminist foremothers like Elizabeth Cady Stanton in order to gain various rights. “Third-wave” American feminism however, is distinguished by its critical acceptance of certain aspects of traditional femininity and of essentialism. By severely criticizing communist versions of emancipation that ignored sexual difference, womanists go farther than American third-wave feminists in their acceptance of essentialism. Womanism points out that state granted emancipation forced women to become like men in their public roles, and that because sexual difference was ignored, important feminine characteristics were suppressed and devalued.

Moreover, Drakulic also shows us in her work that women used their gendered bodies to resist state control during the communist period. Drakulic wrote in *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* that “the communist ideal was a robust woman who didn’t look much different from a man” (1991:23). In the same essay, titled “Make-up and Other Crucial Questions,” Drakulic explained that gender expression through make-up and fashion marked resistance to the homogenizing state because make-up and fashion asserted individuality and thus political subversion.

In the communist countries, women spent enormous time and money acquiring makeup, cloth, and other means by which to mimic Western fashion. Although many of these women looked overdressed and over-primped, they did it “to cheer themselves up in a grim everyday life...In fact, they [were] doing it to show difference; there

[were] not many other ways to differentiate oneself” (Drakulic 1991:27). Drakulic described these women and their efforts to assert individuality:

Nothing is casual about them. They are overdressed, they put on too much make-up, they match colors and textures badly, revealing their provincial attempt to imitate Western fashion. But where could they learn anything about a self-image, a style? In the party-controlled magazines for women, where they are instructed to be good workers and party members first, then mothers, housewives, and sex objects next, - never themselves? To be yourself, to cultivate individualism, to perceive yourself as an individual in a mass society is dangerous. You might become living proof that the system is failing. Make-up and fashion are crucial because they are political (1991:26).

The distinctly gendered, badly made-up woman represented and embodied resistance to the state. She, in fact, removed herself from availability to the state and arguably lived within her own truth.

Although makeup and fashion are one type of feminine expression, womanists assert that there are many versions of the female experience, and they interpret essentialism in a specific manner that allows for variation. Some womanists assert that there are fundamental differences between men and women, for instance, that men are naturally individualistic and competitive and that women are more community oriented and giving. However, womanists allow for a widely interpretable definition of the female experience—and argue for the right to express each version through the gendered body—specifically because they lived in a state that prescribed so many roles. For example, Kicková and Farkašová believed that the communist experience broke down the female experience, ignoring women’s essential aspects (1993:89). However, they never actually described what they felt to be the female experience. One example of such states:

‘Emancipation’ over the last forty years meant a loss of dignity for women, who were reduced to a cheap source of labor that could be plugged in anywhere without regard to specific capabilities, prerequisites, and ambitions. It meant the loss of women’s identity, because women had to adapt themselves to the architecture of the ‘building’ [a metaphor

for the masculine structure of the state] and had no chance to become aware of and determine for themselves what it meant to be a woman and to express it in their lives, their social roles, and their personal expectations (Kicková and Farkašová 1993:89).

The lack of description regarding the female experience provides room for many different versions of what it means to be a woman.

Whereas there is a lack of description in womanist writing defining the female experience, there is ample description asserting that the universalizing principles of communism were based on masculine viewpoints. By “universal” womanists mean the state’s refusal to differentiate between individuals in terms of such factors as gender and occupation. Kicková and Farkašová explained that the state’s insistence on gender blindness when dealing with individuals was directed by more than just economics, demographics, and ideology. Communism’s universalizing approach, ostensibly derived from the Western tradition of Enlightenment thought, was based on a masculine framework. They wrote:

Not only ideological and economic factors account for the ignorance of sexual differences, but the conceptual orientation of abstraction from particulars. Tradition posits a humanistic universalism that elevates the universal qualities, rights, and needs of every human being to the greatest importance and posits that a better, more just world and all particular problems will be solved by the resolution of conflict at the universal level. The differences between men and women are regarded as marginal problems. But humanistic universalism veils the important point that the masculine principle is taken as the common human principle. The male value system, male thought patterns, and male ways of action become the patterns for the whole social structure (Kicková and Farkašová 1993:88).

Womanism’s tenet that the state universally approached its subjects from a masculine framework explains why women were still discriminated against in the workplace, in the party, and in the home. Because communist ideology failed to deal with the woman question in a meaningful way, the resultant masculine-oriented egalitarianism benefited men as it dealt with both men and women. Heitlinger defined this as “assimilation,” pointing out that “[A] predominantly masculinity-oriented equality may facilitate an increasing similarity between the

sexes without a parallel change in, and restructuring of, social institutions, thus leading to a double burden rather than to equality for women” (1979:1). Harsanyi also explained that traditional women’s work became devalued under such a system, although under communism all work should have been valued as socially meaningful: “Equality did not imply equal affirmation of and respect for different values for men and women, but treating women like men. Most women’s tasks were regarded as meaningless, legitimizing the inferiority of women; only paid work deserved respect” (1993:41).

The “universal” approach to liberation promoted by womanists is misleading because it is specifically based on difference and individual need in order to free all individuals. Implicit in womanism’s understanding of women’s emancipation and liberation is essentialism, which points out that there are different experiences for men and women, although women can have a variety of female experiences. In their Declaration of Intent, the Feminist Network stated that they aim to “achieve the recognition of specific female interests and viewpoints” (1991:171). To work for women’s rights in a patriarchal transitional state and to simultaneously ensure that the masculine-oriented egalitarianism of the past is not presented as the model for gender egalitarianism, womanism seeks to describe women’s interests and viewpoints in order that they become socially recognized, accepted, and valued.

Social and gender differences are the basis of egalitarianism in womanism, distinguishing it from second-wave feminism and, to a lesser extent, third-wave feminism. Judit Kiss explained the essentialism implicit in her understanding of social equality: “The proclaimed social equality did not consider the basic emotional, cultural, psychological differences between men and women. They did not form part of equality, although precisely the recognition of fundamental differences of any kind of minority should create the basis for their incorporation in a genuinely democratic society” (Kiss 1991:50). Šiklová and Farkašová echoed this, writing, “Formal equality appeared in the form of the sexual neutrality of many social roles and in the form of universalism. Real equality must start with sexual difference as a given; it should articulate the specific nature of female subjectivity and identity” (1993:93). This definition of equality is a direct result of women’s experiences with equality during communism. Informed by this

experience, advocates for gender equality envision a situation in which gender can be expressed in many ways and all forms are recognized and valued.

Conclusion

Although feminism and womanism have nonetheless influenced one another, it is crucial that we recognize them to be two distinct lines of thought that each criticizes a specific state structure and gender system. Feminism and womanism, like gender, are historically embedded, and reflect their historical situations. Womanism was incited by the post-communist, transitional state in which many rights granted to women by the socialist states were revoked, such as progressive maternity policies and liberal abortion laws, and in which women lost a certain level of access to work and politics. Many different social groups have assumed the discussion of women's identity and social position in order to attain power, money, legitimacy, or rights in Eastern Europe in the transitional period. Womanists are another social group presenting another picture of and scenario for women, yet they are the only group to offer women real choices and control over their lives.

Western feminism unquestionably influenced womanism as it began to critique the transitional state, but as womanism began to argue for women's rights it had to face a past in which egalitarian concepts were devalued. Womanism's redefinition of ideas such as equality, emancipation, and liberation are distinct from that of feminism. Because of womanists' experiences with the totalitarian communist states, womanism defines emancipation and liberation to be from the state and society rather than from the private sphere and individuals like husbands, partners, lovers, and fathers. Ideas about emancipation and liberation include men and other social groups such as children. Finally, womanism stresses the need to recognize difference, especially gender difference, in order truly establish equality. Both men's and women's experiences must become valued to achieve equality.

Eastern European women's experience with communism also shows how different states manipulated women's bodies through productive and reproductive labor. However, womanism importantly points out that women remained in control of their bodies and still expressed gender though the state tried to suppress and control it. Thus the presence of the gendered body, decorated

with fashion and makeup for instance, was a protest to the homogenizing state.

In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama predicted that Western liberalism's defeat over communism marked the end of history. However, if we define "history" as change and acknowledge that there are many levels of history beyond political and diplomatic history, 1989 simply marks a new phase in gender history, women's history, social history, and cultural history. The Eastern European experience has shown that history will continue because gender continues to be a changing category. Gender immediately began to be renegotiated after 1989 and it will continue to be redefined and re-situated indefinitely. Womanism marks the emergence of a new force in Eastern Europe that refuses to allow women's identity and social position to be dictated by individuals and groups interested in legitimacy, power, and money rather than in women's freedom and rights.

State socialism in Eastern Europe was an informative albeit disappointing experiment in the reorganization of the public and private, the family, and gender. Womanism is a direct result of this experiment, and both critiques and promotes certain aspects of that experiment. Galvanized by a transitional state structure that rescinded women's rights and questioned women's social role and position, womanism emerged as an amalgamation of different ideologies, ideas, and experiences, and perhaps will finally offer a meaningful, inclusive solution to the "woman question" in Eastern Europe.

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¹ For a discussion of the state as patriarch, see Connell.

² Although the private sphere can be discussed as a "safe" place from state violence, research increasingly shows that domestic violence has been and continues to be a serious problem throughout all of the former socialist nations. See for example Mršević.

³ Heitlinger reported that pay discrimination was apparent in feminized sectors of the economy as well. For instance, Heitlinger pointed out that in education women only earned 70% of what men earned. See Heitlinger, p155.

⁴ However, Joanna Goven argued that the gender roles implicit in anti-politics have undermined women's abilities to defend their interests in the post-1989 period. See Goven, p224-240.

⁵ See Part 1 of Harvey.