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Review article

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Neofeminism in Late-Yugoslav Society

The paper analyzes the development of neofeminism in Yugoslavia as a socialist and non-aligned country with self-management as the dominant mode of social organization. We set out to examine to what extent this social and political background influenced the appearance of neofeminism in the early 1960s, its development, transformations and branching out into different forms and eventual decline in the late 1980s. It is our contention that in the late-socialist culture in Yugoslavia, feminist theory was present from the 1960s to 1980s in different forms. Yugoslav female and male authors openly debated and wrote about feminist issues, they were also influenced by numerous translations of the works of feminist authors. The paper discusses two main branches of Yugoslav neofeminism: socialist neofeminism and Marxist neofeminism. In conclusion, we reflect upon the legacy of neofeminism in Serbia as a post-Yugoslav society.

Key words: neofeminism, socialism, Marxism, Yugoslavia

Неофеминизам у позном југословенском друштву

Чланак се бави анализом развоја неофеминизма у Југославији која је била социјалистичка и несврстана земља са самоуправљањем као доминантним обликом друштвене организације. Циљ је да испитамо до које мере је овакво друштвено и политичко уређење утицало на појаву неофеминизма у раним шездесетим годинама прошлог века, на његов развој, преображаје и гранање у различите облике и на крају урушавање. Сматрамо да је у касној социјалистичкој култури у Југославији, феминистичка теорија била присутна у различитим облицима од 1960 до 1990. Југословенске ауторке и аутори су отворено расправљали и писали о феминистичким темама, а на њих су утицали многобројни преводи радова феминистичких ауторки и аутора. Чланак разматра две главне гране југословенског неофеминизма: социјалистички неофеминизам и марксистички неофеминизам. У закључку промишљамо наслеђе неофеминизма у Србији као пост-југословенском друштву.

Кључне речи: неофеминизам, социјализам, марксизам, Југославија

INTRODUCTION

In this text, we will focus specifically on neofeminism in Yugoslavia, its background and the impact it had on Yugoslav cultural scene. Our intention is to point out different configurations within the field of feminist theories which appeared simultaneously in the Yugoslav society. Yugoslav feminists adopted several terms for the reappearance of feminist ideas: feminism, second wave feminism, Yugoslav feminism and neofeminism. We decided to use the term neofeminism since it was used by the leading scholars who witnessed, participated in and wrote about this movement (Ler Sofronić, Jančar, Iveković, Despot, Drakulić).

For a discussion on the feminist movements in socialist Yugoslavia in the Cold War era, (from the 1960s to the 1980s), we have to emphasize that these movements appeared as a result of a singular geopolitical position of Yugoslavia at the time. In order to avoid being controlled by the USSR or siding exclusively with the Western countries, Yugoslavia defined itself as a self-managed, non-aligned socialist country. Being one of the leaders of the Non-Alignment Movement meant that it was open to political and cultural influences of the countries in the Western block, but also countries like India, Egypt, Indonesia etc. which were non-aligned.

“The East still represented monolithic, strong ideological block which opposed any deviations from the course of the Orthodox Communist party politics.” (Papić 2012b, 280)¹ In comparison to the communist countries under the USSR, Yugoslavia had a softer ideological system. One of the reasons for this was the fact that Yugoslav society was open to Western cultural and political scene and in a dialogue with contemporary cultural and political tendencies. As Žarana Papić observed: “That is why we had the student movement, New Left movement, Youth counter-culture, various subcultures, modern artistic rock-and roll phenomena and that is why we had feminism.” (2012b, 280)

Thus it can be claimed that the appearance of new feminist trends was also linked to general liberalization of Yugoslav society during the 1960s. Massive import of foreign books enabled ideas related to the women’s freedom movements to reach a certain number of intellectuals interested in new social movements (Papić, 1989, 94). Student centers which were founded in all major cities together with youth magazines were crucial in the transformation of Yugoslav socialist culture. The centers were the scene where new theoretical frameworks and art trends were introduced and practiced. The impact of Western pop culture, movies, literature, and music was also decisive for the development of cultural and social flows in Yugoslavia (Denegri 1978, 5).

POSITION OF WOMEN IN YUGOSLAVIA, THE EASTERN AND WESTERN BLOCK

When we compare the position of women in society, prescribed gender roles and the level of patriarchy in Yugoslavia with those in the Eastern and Western block, we can detect striking differences. Socialist countries, including Yugoslavia, proclaimed that the “women’s question” was solved after the Second World War together with the question of class. Due to the fact that they fought in the Second World War alongside men,² women in Yugoslavia were celebrated as war heroes. As famous war hero Ida Sabo said: “Nobody gave equality to Yugoslav women, they earned it with their

¹ All quotes from sources in Serbian were translated by the authors of this article unless it is otherwise specified.

² Pantelić states that 100 000 women took part in the war against the German Army in Yugoslavia out of 800 000 soldiers. It is estimated that fourth of them, i.e. 25 000, lost their lives and 40 000 were wounded. 91 women were declared war heroes. 282 406 women were murdered in Nazi concentration camps in Yugoslavia. Out of 1200 000 people who lost their lives in Yugoslavia during the war, 620 000 were women (Pantelić 2011, 11, 35, 59)

participation in the war, massive participation with guns in their hands.” (Sabo 2017) Women occupied the highest positions in the government (president of Yugoslavia, president of the Yugoslav Parliament, ministerial positions, etc.), they were heads of companies and factories. The prevailing ideology was that a woman could and should be a worker, wife and mother. In general, women were allowed to put aside family roles of wife and mother in order to serve their country at various leading positions, particularly as heads of workers’ councils (Pantelić 2011, 192). Women had the right to divorce, have an abortion and be single mothers.

Due to socialist resolve to solve the class problem, women from poor and rural communities were taught to read and write, they became active in the workers’ or farmers’ councils and encouraged to improve their position through further education. Two organizations were created to enact these changes. One was the Antifascist Front for Women, which undertook the burden of educating women and including them in the work of political and workers’ councils. The second one was the Conference for the Social Role of Woman. In the opinion of one the leading Yugoslav feminist Rada Iveković: “[i]t has adopted a realistic style of step-by-step reformist and grass-roots activity among (mostly employed) women, rejecting any proposal of “feminist excess,” but nevertheless accepting, supporting, and pushing through many a helpful reform regarding women’s condition.” (Iveković 1984, 735)

On the other hand, women in the Western countries, especially the U.S., during 1950s struggled with the conservative patriarchal gender roles which pushed women from the public roles they occupied during the Second World War back into the domestic sphere. The figures of housewife and stay-at-home mum were idealized. Women were discouraged from pursuing higher education or careers and did not have the right to handle their own finances. For example, women in the U.S. did not have access to their bank accounts or property without their husband’s approval. Abortion was not legal until 1973. The second wave feminism was a direct result of the dissatisfaction of women with these limitations. The book *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, which was very influential at the time, questioned implied domesticity of women in America. As Friedan stated: “fulfillment as a woman had only one definition for American women after 1949 – the housewife-mother” (Friedan 1963, 15-16). Within the second wave feminism, women in the West became engaged both as scholars and activists in order to challenge patriarchy. Papić aptly comments that socialist women did not have to struggle against the notion of feminine mystique since they did not live in capitalist, consumerist societies (Papić 2012a, 197).

Although countries in the Soviet bloc were socialist, the conditions of women were different than in Yugoslavia. On the one hand, women got civil rights in the USSR in 1917. In the Second World War, 8000 000 women fought in battles with the German Army. Russian women in general were revered for sacrificing themselves during and after the war and encouraged to occupy leading positions in political organizations and workers' councils. As in Yugoslavia, many women who were previously poor and uneducated, got a chance to improve their lives and the lives of their family members. On the other hand, due to the much more conservative and dogmatic political structure than in Yugoslavia, women were under the strict control of the leading Communist Party and their success depended on following the party line. Many women ended up in gulags either because they questioned the party politics or because they were targeted for other reasons.

NEOFEMINISM IN YUGOSLAVIA

Neofeminism was undoubtedly part of the new paradigm of social emancipation in Yugoslavia. This despite the fact that in Yugoslavia, according to the official standpoint, feminism was an outdated phenomenon or movement since Yugoslav society was conceptualized as already emancipated. However, scholars who engaged in neofeminism showed that despite many positive trends in emancipation of men and women in relation to their class and gender, patriarchal models still existed and limited women's advancement in society. Women in Yugoslavia became interested in feminism under two major influences. One came from the inside, they investigated the processes in socialism (such as self-management) and their impact on the position of women in society. The other came from the Western second wave feminism. While they had social rights that many Western women still fought for, they were interested in the theoretical materials which examined the roles of women in varied societies: socialist and capitalist. According to Zsófia Lóránd,

Comparing women's situation in socialist and capitalist societies was a common feature of the Yugoslav feminist writings: while the authors always emphasized that state socialism provided several crucial rights for women, they also realized that despite these, women shared a lot in terms of their oppression. (Lóránd 2018, 43)

As position of women improved, the Conference for the Social Role of Woman started to be perceived as outdated and unwilling to accept fem-

inism which appeared in 1970s. This problem “became highly visible in 1978 at the first neofeminist conference in Belgrade.” (Iveković 1984, 735) Iveković underlines a significant difference between Yugoslav neofeminism and its counter parts in Western countries:

no big legal issue had to be fought (though many smaller ones would deserve it). Divorce, abortion, equal rights, etc., were all there as acceptable – though merely legal – possibilities. Furthermore, the impact of the Church in Yugoslavia is probably less dominant than in some other countries with a strong feminist movement (Italy, for example). (Iveković 1984, 735)

It is thus clear that Yugoslav neofeminism was contextually specific: women’s emancipation was performed within a socialist, but relatively open country. This relative openness meant that in socialist Yugoslavia, the development of these new discourses and practices was institutionally supported, if only within the university and student elite. There were some negative reactions of conservative party structures. However, the new generation of open-minded intellectuals was permitted to develop into an emancipated elite.

Jančar explained that the 1970s and 1980s were marked by many challenges, including economic crisis, liberal tendencies and rising nationalism (Jančar 1988, 7).³ For her, neofeminism was an elite phenomenon composed of academics and intellectuals of both sexes, primarily in their 20s and 30s, and it [had] its strongest base at university departments and in professional associations in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade. The intellectuals interested in feminist movement came from the disciplines of philosophy, sociology and political science (Jančar 1988, 2, 10). From an outside perspective, these practices were important for Yugoslavia as a non-aligned and self-managed country, belonging neither to the West nor to the East. The country particularly emphasized its liberalism in comparison to the Soviet bloc. In this context, women in Yugoslavia “have developed a sharp awareness of their own interests as distinct from all others” (Jančar 1988, 7). Pointing to the time scope of the first phase of neofeminism, Zsófia Lóránd notes that in Yugoslavia, “[t]he first *feminist* articles on feminism had appeared already in 1972.” (Lóránd 2020, 10) Neofeminism in Yugoslavia consequently functioned through several formats: 1) translations of materials by the western feminist writers to be

³ We would like to thank John Cox who enabled us to gain access to this text.

learned from and worked with: 2) originally written essays by Yugoslav feminists on significant social topics in various magazines and books and 3) formal or informal talks at self-education meetings.

The most significant event that marked much stronger presence of feminism in Yugoslavia was the conference “Comrade Woman. The Women’s Question: a New Approach.” It was organized by Nada Ler Sofronić and Žarana Papić and curated by Dunja Blažević in the Students Cultural Center in Belgrade in 1978. According to Jelena Vesić:

It was the first autonomous second-wave feminist meeting in former Yugoslavia, and beyond—the first conference of this kind initiated in non-Western-European context, and in a socialist country. Comrade Woman gathered a number of significant feminist theorists and artists from both sides of “the curtain,” and especially from various different cities in Yugoslavia. The discussions that took place in the different venues and spaces of SKC were accompanied by a thematic art program of exhibitions, films, and video-art screenings. (Vesić 2023)

It is very important to note that the conference was an opportunity for women to discuss the issue of the position of women in the official political context, sexism present in the media that treated women as sexual objects and as wives and mothers which was opposite to the party line of social progress and equality between men and women (Vesić 2023). Andrea Feldman similarly observed that the participants “considered the theoretical and practical problems of the development of feminist movements in the west and compared them to the situation in Yugoslavia (which at that time still seemed to be the only successful socialist project in Europe, and as such did not yet bear a rigid communist stigma).” (Feldman 1991, 419) This can be illustrated with a very important impression by Rada Iveković, one of the leading participants of the conference:

Before the conference we did not exist. We happened during that conference. We did not know each other. Žarana gathered us all at one place and we were not a group. We were not aware that we can represent something. During that conference, we realized that there were many women like us and that each of us was doing something for feminism. (Zaharijević, Ivanović & Duhaček 2012, 11)

The conference was as an official and public culmination of the neofeminist trends that began in 1970s. It gathered all Yugoslav female (and

to a lesser degree male) intellectuals who were interested in neofeminist analysis of gender relations in society. They were motivated to struggle against prejudice and to strive towards new forms of relations between sexes (Papić 1989, 95). Several groups were formed which dealt mainly with research on women's studies or women's practical problems. Neofeminist groups have promoted public discussions and lectures on many previously unquestionable matters. Many of their members have written articles for newspapers and magazines and statements for the radio and TV, thus helping to raise the consciousness of women and men. This had proven to be a very important and fruitful activity.

The contributions of various authors to women's studies was also important (in different disciplines – sociology, philosophy, theory of literature, political theory) and bore an interesting stamp of Yugoslav political and historical character. Publishing was the best possibility available for communicating ideas. Neofeminists had no papers or book publishers, but the traditional women's organizations, which were cooperative to some extent, did. There were also "women's magazines," mainly conservative, but with some occasional opening for neofeminists ideas." (Iveković 1984, 735)

Lydia Sklevicky who, with Žarana Papić, was a founding member of the new feminist movement, pointed to the (dis)continuities of Yugoslav feminism from the first and second wave feminism (Sklevicky 1996, 66-67). As we mentioned above, women were empowered in various ways through the Socialist and Communist movements which supported equality and women's progress from the end of 19th century to the mid-20th century. These socio-political movements made the first and second wave of feminism in Yugoslavia different from those in West countries. Yugoslav neofeminists examined first and second wave feminism in the West and commented upon them in their works. They developed a particular Yugoslav approach to general issues of women's position in society, turning to the "Western feminist literature for values and insights, and Western sociology for methodology and concepts" (Jančar 1988, 11).

SOCIALIST NEOFEMINISM IN YUGOSLAVIA

Neofeminism in Yugoslavia in 1970s and 1980s can be divided into two branches: socialist feminism and Marxist neofeminism. According to Anđelka Milić, the dividing line between these two orientations is not a particularly obvious one. She relies on the experience of European ne-

of feminist groups when she concludes that the main difference between these two branches lies in their engagement. While socialist feminism is more politically and directly involved with societal movements, making it more activist oriented, feminist neo-Marxism is more engaged in the field of social theories (Milić 2011, 153). Yugoslav socialist neofeminists used feminism to critically examine political and social trends in Yugoslavia in connection to the position of women in it. The most notable representatives of this branch are Žarana Papić, Rada Iveković and Dunja Blažević.

For feminists, woman is the subject of her own liberation (Zaharijević 2017, 147). They perceived a socialist country as a feminist country since the future of socialism included women as revolutionary subjects who changed their country as a whole. In her discussion of the history of neofeminism in Yugoslavia, Zaharijević significantly observes that

[W]ith socialist feminists, feminism ceased to act as a mere Western import. [...] The prevailing sentiment was that Western, and especially geographically closer European feminism, with its gradual and deliberate leftist leanings (Zuppa 1978, 68), could learn from Yugoslav feminism that women's liberation cannot be possible without human emancipation – that is, without socialism. What socialist feminists enabled was a central change in vocabulary. The key was not whether the woman's question was particularistic in its nature: women were placed at the heart of the universal struggle for emancipation of humanity. It was rather how the woman's question positioned itself in the whole array of "particularistic" struggles for the transformation of humanity itself. (Zaharijević 2017, 147)

It is worth noting that as a leading feminist scholar in Yugoslavia who was well read in Western feminist thought, Papić was of the opinion that women in the East should not feel pressured to follow experiences of the Western women because their struggle was supposedly more developed. She encouraged women in socialist countries, especially in Yugoslavia, to find their own ways of struggle against patriarchy. According to her, socialist feminists should be aware of Western feminism, they should be in touch with women from the West, but they should also create their own version of feminism which would be specific to their reality. "It is precisely this specific 'Eastern' forms of women's activities which will enable women to participate in pluralistic feminist dialogue and politics as equal partners – united in common struggle." (Papić 2012a, 198-199) In her book *Sociology and Feminism*, Papić suggests that:

[t]o start analyzing social position of women on the basis of the experience of women's movements, means to draw all implications of woman's destiny from the private sphere, to start getting involved, to initiate a change. (Papić 1989, 76)

YUGOSLAV MARXIST NEOFEMINISM

The other branch of neofeminism in Yugoslavia, as we mentioned, connected it with the new Marxist thought. We chose Jovan Đorđević, Blaženka Despot and Neda Ler Sofronić as representatives of this branch since in their works, we can find complex negotiations between socialist self-managing ideology and a desire to incorporate ideas coming from Neo-Marxism and Western feminism. Đorđević, Ler Sofronić and Despot emphasized that their position differs from the geopolitical positions that writers might occupy in other parts of the world. Their position was rooted in the consciousness that cultural and political background determines the discourses and practices that could be produced and performed in a society.

Đorđević edited one of the first collections of translated texts on the connection between Marxism and the woman's question. He also wrote a study on Marxism and women. He pointed out that the relation of socialism and woman's liberation was an organic one (Đorđević 1975, 17). For him, the revival of the interest and impact of Marxism was crucial, especially because in the context of socialism

the question of woman is [...] pushed aside [...] despite the acknowledgement that every further step in the realization of self-managing and the humanist, democratic and civilizing project of socialism is inseparable from the theory and practice of woman's liberation. (Đorđević 1975, 8)

Đorđević claimed that the truth of Marxism is:

that there is no liberation of the individual and specific groups without general and human liberation. Liberation and the social status of woman is the measure of civilization and general social liberation, as Marx emphasized after [Charles] Fourier. (Đorđević 1975, 12)

In response to the accusation that neofeminism was just another "bourgeois feminism" or another "Western fashion" due to its critique of bourgeois society, Ler Sofronić pointed out that women in Europe radi-

calized their fight “questioning the basic values and essence of civil society. Their goal was not equality in form of capital and gaining the legal equalities in form of civil society law.” (Ler Sofornić 1986, 106) Instead they sought “quite new social relations, therefore they represent powerful contribution and impetus for social changes in that part of the world.” (Ler Sofornić 1986, 106) She maintained that the value of Western neofeminism as a liberation movement of women lies in questioning the areas of Marxist thought which were still not discussed within the traditional Marxist position, such as the ideology of sex/gender inequalities and questioning of the hierarchies inherent in the organizing structures of leftist parties. (Ler Sofornić 1983, 7).

Blaženka Despot wrote that her intention was to “establish Marxist feminism” (Despot 1987, 144). She added that this was possible if there was an open Marxism: “Marxism understood as an epochal emancipatory idea and method” (Despot 1987, 144). Despot gave the most comprehensive theoretical explanation of the transformation of the content of the old feminism into the new one. She focused on the metamorphosis of the term emancipation which happened within the paradigm of new social movements, especially neo-feminist and ecological movements. For her, classical feminist movement was intrinsically a movement which fought for female emancipation inside the model of liberal democracy. That meant limiting the feminist movement to civil rights movement and (in some more contemporary variants), reducing it to a movement focused on the body. Neofeminist notion of emancipation must be differentiated from emancipation of women construed in classical feminism as well as in proletarian and socialist feminism. Despot brings two new meanings of emancipation: emancipation of women from the state and institutions in general and emancipation from the will to power which she interprets as the main regulators of the social life under the old paradigm. She does not interpret emancipation only within the sphere of the class conflict between labor and capital. For her, neofeminism represents radical critique of the old social paradigm and creation of the new theoretical and practical paradigm which enables discussion about modern society and needs of modern men and women (Pavlović 1990, 189).

Đorđević, Despot and Ler Sofornić believed that, in the historical period when Marxist neofeminism was formed, it was possible to “establish an organic relation between socialism and women’s liberation” (Đorđević 1975, 17). The global emancipatory spirit of the time, expressed from the socialist Yugoslav perspective, meant that the problems of women could not be resolved without the strengthening of socialism, Civil Rights Move-

ment, student protests, struggle for liberation of oppressed groups (colonized nations, workers, minorities) and ultimately without the potential of class wars (Đorđević 1975, 24). Despot links neofeminism and ecological movement, as we mentioned above, finding that both are caused by capitalist and patriarchal exploitation of those who are perceived as lower in the social hierarchy.

The feminist criticism of blindness for specific women's issues was directed against both dogmatic Marxism and the conservative left wing, which, too, was characteristic of socialist realist countries (Ler Sofronić 2019). Despite the fact that most neofeminist belonged to the new 1968 left wing, neofeminists also criticized inherent patriarchal system within it. Ler Sofronić recalls: "men usually appeared on the platform as speakers while women busied themselves with printers and hotplates for coffee-making" (Ler Sofronić 2019). She concludes that patriarchy of the new left wing was not different from the patriarchy in the traditional communist leftism. This was the common ground Yugoslav neofeminists shared with women from the East and West:

We wanted to meet face to face and talk about patriarchy, which, in spite of big differences between our and their socio-political contexts, was firmly rooted in both of our systems in an almost identical manner. (Ler Sofronić 2019)

All three of these scholars believed that despite the universality of women's question, the emphasis must be put on specific contextual problems of women. Therefore, women's question could not have been solved in the same way in different parts of the world due to different traditions, history of oppression and trajectories of development. This awareness of global emancipatory aspect of feminism together with particular backgrounds of separate movements within it, represents the biggest contribution of Yugoslav Marxist neofeminism.

CONCLUSION

The development of the neofeminist discourse took a different direction due to the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. In the opinion of Žarana Papić, feminist initiative in Yugoslavia contained very important political potential which enabled feminists after the break-up of Yugoslavia to stay away from nationalism, to avoid being nostalgic for communism and socialism (despite its positive results regarding the social change) and refuse to be seduced by euphoria related to introduction of parliamentary

democracy. It was clear to feminists that in these new structures women would not be present nor represented. Papić eloquently summarizes it:

The fall of the Berlin Wall and wars in ex-Yugoslavia showed to us, feminists and other activists, that there was a lot of work, that political mobilization was essential. That we had to work against the mainstream trends, against exclusion, against racism, against ethnic cleansing, against become enclosed in one's own little spaces. The principle was to constantly challenge limitations which women's group did consistently even when others did not. Here lies constant cooperation among women. Here lies continuity. (in Tešanović 2008)

Similarly, Lóránd notes that:

Creatively writing across Marxism, the language of Yugoslav self-managing socialism, Marxist revisionism and a broad range of feminist thought, the Yugoslav feminists managed not only to bring to life a complex feminist language specifically targeting the reality of women in state socialist East Central Europe but also organized feminist activist groups and set up the first SOS helplines for victims of domestic and gender based violence. Their work became the backbone of anti-war organizing after 1991. (Lóránd 2019)

New generations of feminists, along with the previous generations, started in the 1990s to deal with different aspects of feminism that were connected to peace efforts and struggle against military regimes in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is obvious that feminism had a strong and important function within the anti-war peace movements. Socialist feminist heritage, including neofeminism, was mostly sent into oblivion. Western feminism became global in the global neoliberal times. The phenomenon of Yugoslav neofeminism till recently stayed imprisoned in time to be recently rediscovered by post-Yugoslav feminist scholars.

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