

Living Gender After Communism

edited by Janet Elise Johnson and Jean C. Robinson
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The collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries is swiftly approaching its twentieth anniversary, marking a period in which a good deal of scholarly work exploring issues of gender in the new postcommunist states has been published. Whilst to a greater or lesser degree the social legacy of the communist era remains, these societies have also come under many new influences since the end of state socialism: from the growth of capitalism and the advent of the Internet to the EU accession pursued by many ex-communist states, gender norms and ideals are no longer subject to prescriptions of communist ideology as they were in the Soviet period. Economic, cultural and political links between the nations still referred to as ‘postcommunist’ are continually evolving, as are the societies themselves. Taking this into account, it is perhaps timely to examine the relevance of continuing to group them together in an academic context.

Living Gender After Communism, edited by Janet Elise Johnson and Jean C. Robinson (Professors of Political Science at City University of New York and Indiana University, respectively) is a multidisciplinary volume that tackles the reflexivity of the researcher as well as the experience of ‘living gender’. The editors argue that the postcommunist experience has led to ‘gender multiplication’ (p.2): that is, individuals do not necessarily adhere to one form of gender identity, but that they might employ different gender identities in different social contexts.

A notable aim of the book is to acknowledge the role of the researcher in the production of knowledge: it examines the experience of gender scholarship in these societies, seeking to explore notions of insider/outsider. The contributors question what it means to be an outsider or ‘Western’ scholar entering into another culture. Researchers whose origins lie within the former Soviet bloc are also amongst these contributors, and demonstrate the advantages or disadvantages that such an insider or semi-insider status can have to the research process and its conclusions.

Nine papers by different scholars are organised into four sections: Negotiating Gender, Denying Gender, Traditionalising Gender and Negotiating Gender Within Nationalisms. The book’s origins – an interdisciplinary conference on placing gender which took place at Miami University, Ohio, in 2000 – are apparent in the broad range of topics covered. Papers on national-political discourse, such as Anne-Marie Kramer’s on the abortion debate in Poland, are thought-provokingly placed beside papers on gender identity in art. This allows the book to tease out more general themes of postcommunism and gives it a coherence which is vital to collaborative publications of this kind.

The authors observe that it was their intention to involve junior scholars in the collection, including those from postcommunist states. Azra Hromadzic’s chapter, ‘Challenging the Discourse of Bosnian War Rapes’, is one of the most interesting examples of a younger scholar engaging reflexively with insider/outsider issues. Hromadzic interrogates previous academic discourse on the history of the Bosnian War through her intention to “*challenge, individualize and heterogenize the category powerless Bosnian raped women*” (p.169; author’s italics). As a former Bosnian-Herzegovinian national living in the United States, she categorises

herself as inhabiting the spaces of both insider and outsider in the research process. This allows her to determine her own best practice through the critique or assimilation of broader Western discourses and methodologies into her research.

Other particularly interesting contributions include Shannon Woodcock's 'Romanian Women's Discourses of Sexual Violence: Othered Ethnicities, Gendering Spaces', which examines the interrelated themes of gender and national identity in an analysis of the stereotype of the *tigan* (a pejorative term for a Romany male) as sexual predator. A paper by Anna Brzowska demonstrates the enduring negative associations of womanhood through an analysis of the feminised national discourse of the Belarusian state which, she argues, has historically characterised itself as weak and lacking in self-determination.

The comprehensive introduction usefully positions the contributions within the volume in addition to historically and theoretically contextualising gender studies in the region, both of which make the book more accessible to those unfamiliar with gender theory or the post-1989 context. An afterword by Nanette Funk (an experienced feminist scholar with regional expertise) ties the work together well: from the country- or topic-based primary research of the individual chapters, she leads us back out to an analysis of research practice after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She explores the difficulty for the Western researcher of see-sawing between the application of Western feminist theory and experience and acknowledging the agency of subject-participants and scholars native to postcommunist countries. Tracing this history has relevance to scholars of Funk's generation, who may have already considered their own roles in formulating knowledge about the postcommunist experience, but also to younger researchers, who might find that

Funk's piece provokes a useful dialogue on the importance of reflexivity in the fieldwork process.

The theme of agency, perennially significant to gender studies, is also examined in the book. The stereotype of the passive Slavic woman, one that has become popularly familiar through Western media treatments of the 'Russian bride', is challenged by Svitlana Taraban's findings that Ukrainian women exploit traditional ideas of femininity to 'sell' themselves to Western men on the Internet. Although many find it difficult to argue that this experience is entirely empowering to women, Taraban adds weight to the editors' argument that researchers should move beyond unquestioned narratives of female victimhood and be aware of the multitude of coping strategies employed by women to deal with the often difficult situations they have encountered in postcommunist societies.

Despite the relevance of these arguments, Johnson and Robinson take pains to clarify that the dominant gender norms explored in the book have remained, as under state socialism, disadvantageous to women despite the new opportunities that have emerged.

As gender options are multiplied, the relationships among and between men and women, private and public, and freedom and control are constantly renegotiated. Living gender after communism means living simultaneously with opportunity and constraint. (p.18)

Accordingly, they do not depart a great deal from the majority of thinking about gendered experiences in the postcommunist era, but rather seek to embed new ways of thinking into the research process. *Living Gender After Communism* communicates this aim successfully without detracting from the nuances of its original research pieces. It might be argued that

separating the papers into chapter headings is not entirely necessary; it is as if the editors wish to justify the inclusion of other themes, such as nationalism, in a book about gender scholarship. This justification is unnecessary as – especially for a work with such a potentially large scope of subject matter – it is in the main stylistically and thematically coherent. As a volume, the book gives a good overview of gender theory and research into gender identity in the region, making it a good source for undergraduates and researchers alike.

Overall, *Living Gender After Communism* serves to highlight the enduring relevance of ‘postcommunism’ as an academic field, despite the various experiences of different countries after the end of communist regimes.