

EN

WANT TO BE A MODERN SOPHISTICATED GIRL? DO NOT COMPLAIN

Is Slovakia in a post-feminist era?

ALEXANDRIA WILSON MCDONALD → 9. APRÍLA 2019



Deborah Azopardi - Freebird (2009) (c) Flickr.com/photos/gandalf/gallery CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

After I arrived in Bratislava in August of 2018, I could not help but notice how women so vibrantly displayed feminine aesthetics. Whether shopping at the mall, walking through the streets of Staré Mesto, or on their way to work, the women of Bratislava sported **stylish dresses, high heels, and flawless make-up**. In contrast, I remember feeling underdressed in public in my fashionably ripped jeans, boots, and a t-shirt.

This made me question why it is that so many young women in Bratislava seemed to accentuate their femininity with such pride. Is this because Slovakia lacks a robust feminist movement? Or is it more profound than that, is this a show of freedom on the part of young women – a representation of a world that their mothers and grandmothers could not have enjoyed under the communist regime? **Is this demonstration of femininity anti-feminist, feminist in the sense that the young women are exercising their autonomy to dress as they please, or perhaps Slovakia has transitioned to a post-feminist era?**

Hedonistic female phallicism

The cultural theorist Angela McRobbie posits in her book *The Aftermath of Feminism*, that in the West today “the idea of feminist content [has] disappeared and was replaced by **aggressive individualism, by a hedonistic female phallicism in the field of sexuality and by obsession with consumer culture**.”¹

This is what she calls a “post-feminist” world, a **world in which young women are taught that they do not need feminism because they can make their own choices and chart their own paths**. This unbridled individualism is intricately connected to a consumer culture in which women are told that they make their own economic choices, but in reality, these acts serve to maintain the patriarchal capitalist structure which characterizes the post-feminist era.

McRobbie argues that something entirely unexpected has happened.

“Elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on a vocabulary that includes words like ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice,’ these elements are then converted into a much more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new guise, particularly in media and popular culture, but also by agencies of the state, as a kind of substitute for feminism. These new and seemingly ‘modern’ ideas about women and especially young women are then disseminated more aggressively, so as to ensure that a new women’s movement will not re-emerge. ‘Feminism,’ is instrumentalized, it is brought forward and claimed by Western governments, as a signal to the rest of the world that this is a vital part of what freedom now means. Freedom is revitalized and brought up to date with this faux-feminism. The boundaries between the West and the rest can, as a result, be more specifically coded in terms of gender, and the granting of sexual freedoms.”

While McRobbie’s book focuses mainly on the experiences of women in Great Britain and the United States, I wonder **does this concept apply to Slovakia and Central Eastern Europe** more generally 30 years after the political and economic transitions?

Feminist Mobilizations

In some ways, this post-feminist era can be attributed to a decline in feminist mobilizations and the belief that equality has been achieved. Across the U.S. and Western Europe in recent decades there has been a **decline in the feminist mobilizations** which challenged the structures in which we live, accompanied by an acceptance of liberal, individualist principles.

The feminist mobilizations of the ‘60s and ‘70s in the U.S. and Western Europe challenged not only societies’ patriarchal stereotypes but also the way in which the **modern capitalist economic system disadvantaged women**.

In the U.S., for example, the Women’s Liberation Movement produced radical feminists that challenged the intersection of free-market capitalism and patriarchy as evidenced by the **proliferation of the prostitution and pornography industries**.²

In Germany, during this same time, feminist activists separated themselves from the politics of the left and created women-only groups which pushed for participatory democracy.³ In these groups, women sought autonomy from state policies in order to make their own life decisions about family and motherhood. One of the most important outcomes of this feminist activism was the idea that **“the personal is political.”**

As one Slovak activist conveyed to me, the concept that “the personal is political,” which has been a mainstay of Western feminism, **never resonated in Slovakia because the personal is not political here**, historically speaking. In fact, the personal (the home life) was the refuge from the political. Whereas, the home may be a place of violence in the west, in the east, it was also the **place to escape the violence of the state**, and in this realm women were the main power holders.

The Personal is not Political Here

Nevertheless, this moment of activism which called into question the benefits of a liberal democratic and capitalist system for women never took place in central and eastern Europe.

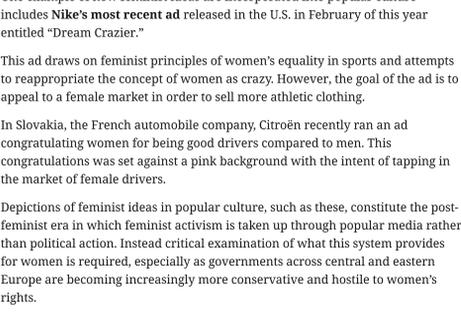
While there was a slight thaw and increased liberalization across some of Central Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, no mass mobilizations in the name of women’s liberation occurred. The women’s organizations that did exist operated as **part of the larger communist party apparatus**.

Following the transition process in the **early 1990s, many women throughout central and eastern Europe did not identify with feminism**, and the movement remained very weak. Some scholars claim this is because feminism was associated with leftist ideologies and people at the time rejected everything associated with communism. Others argue that women wanted the freedom to return to the home and private sphere of life, given that they were forced to work outside the home under the communist regime.⁴

Can Slovakia be post-feminist?

But most importantly the idea that “the personal is political” never resonated. How then can Slovakia be post-feminist if there was never a period of feminist mobilization in the first place? It is possible that in Slovakia, and Central Eastern Europe more generally, **women are living in a post-feminist era which is constructed by their interaction with Western culture**.

This interaction encourages the incorporation of feminist ideas into popular culture in order to appeal to liberal values. However, **incorporating feminist conceptions into popular culture gives the impression that feminism is not needed and gender equality has already been achieved** or at least is taken seriously by popular media.



One example of how feminist ideas are incorporated into popular culture includes **Nike’s most recent ad** released in the U.S. in February of this year entitled “Dream Crazy.”

This ad draws on feminist principles of women’s equality in sports and attempts to reappropriate the concept of women as crazy. However, the goal of the ad is to appeal to a female market in order to sell more athletic clothing.

In Slovakia, the French automobile company, Citroën recently ran an ad congratulating women for being good drivers compared to men. This congratulations was set against a pink background with the intent of tapping in the market of female drivers.

Depictions of feminist ideas in popular culture, such as these, constitute the post-feminist era in which feminist activism is taken up through popular media rather than political action. Instead critical examination of what this system provides for women is required, especially as governments across central and eastern Europe are becoming increasingly more conservative and hostile to women’s rights.

Democracy and Capitalism = Freedom

Why should we gaze with a critical eye on the much beloved democratic system? And why should we question women’s role in a capitalist structure that is supposed to be based on merit? In central and eastern Europe, democratization and the transition to a market-based economy did not necessarily bring liberation for women.

In Poland shortly after the transition, **women’s reproductive rights were revoked** as the Catholic Church was reinstated as a powerful political force. All across central and eastern Europe, women were the first to be **pushed out of the labor force**, as companies were restructured or shut-down by foreign investors and women saw their subsidized childcare and benefits taken away, which drove them out of school or work and back into the home.

Further east in Ukraine and Russia the transition brought with it massive corruption and a breakdown of the rule of law which allowed the **prostitution and pornography industries** to flourish, which continues to fuel the traffic in women and girls today. And in the former Yugoslavia, the turmoil of the transition period contributed to the resurgence of ethnic tensions which ultimately led to a **war in which the rape of women and girls was used as a military weapon**.

Many scholars believed at the time, that while it was unfortunate that women were suffering in these ways, that much of this suffering was a product of the political and economic transitions. **After democratic governance was consolidated and a free market system fully instituted, these problems would go away**.⁵

In contrast, what we see today is that there is a lack of state policies in central and eastern Europe to address violence against women. For example, a recent study by Amnesty International found that Czechia and Slovakia are among the European countries that **still do not recognize non-consensual sex as rape in their legal codes**.⁶

Additionally, throughout my time in central and eastern Europe many activists have recounted their shock at reading the results of a recent survey which stated that the **majority of Czech men and women believe that a woman is usually responsible if raped**.⁷ Activists cited these studies as a sign of how stereotypes regarding men and women are ingrained in society.

Additionally, women’s **reproductive freedoms** are under attack, constituting the current backlash against women’s rights. Moreover, there is backsliding by Central Eastern European states in the enforcement of human rights more generally, and even a Central Eastern European state that is employing democratic procedures to create an “illiberal democracy”⁸.

This is certainly not to say that democracy is bad for women, it’s the best system we have for making change, and it ensures that any bad choices on our part as a collective will not haunt us for too long before we get to make a different choice. In addition, capitalism can provide many freedoms when it’s not overlaid on an existing patriarchal system. However, this is to say that the systems in which we live cannot simply be accepted as is, rather they require constant evaluation to make sure that they continue to meet our needs.

From Post-feminist to Feminist

Maybe the presence of the **unquestioning woman**, in any part of the developed world today represents a re-institutionalization of the patriarchal form. Not necessarily of traditional patriarchy, but as a way of re-establishing a form of patriarchy in a region in which the transition process disrupted the patriarchal structure. That is, in bringing about freedom and choice, the transition paved the way for patriarchy to be re-instituted, with the help of conservatives and religious leaders and organizations.

Today there is a new form of patriarchal conservatism, a post-feminist one, in which the establishment of “choice” and “freedom”, allows for a feminist movement to be skipped over entirely. In the U.S. too, there has been a steady decline in feminist mobilizations since the late 1980s leading to the current post-feminist era, in which it is **believed that women are not structurally hindered in their individual goals**.⁹

McRobbie concludes, **“thus the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern sophisticated girl. Indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom.”** Let’s not allow our generation of women, whether in the U.S. or Slovakia, to concede to becoming unquestioning female subjects.

Footnotes

¹McRobbie, Angela. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: gender, culture, and social change*. Sage Publication Ltd.
² For a discussion of violence against women as a global issue see MacKinnon, Catherine. 2006. *Are Women Human? And other international dialogues*. Harvard University Press.
³ For a historical discussion of German feminist movements see Ferree, Myra Marx. 2012. *Varieties of Feminism: German gender politics in global perspective*. Stanford University Press.
⁴ For a discussion about why feminism was rejected in central and eastern Europe see Fojtová, Simona. 2016. “Contested Feminism: The East/West Feminist Encounters in the 1990s.” In *Czech Feminists: Perspectives on Gender in East Central Europe*. Indiana University Press.
⁵ For a discussion on the phenomena of trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation after the transition in Russia see Suchland, Jennifer. 2015. *Economics of Violence: Transnational Feminism, Postsocialism, and the Politics of Sex Trafficking*. Duke University Press.
⁶ “Women across Europe failed by outdated rape legislation”. November 24, 2018. Amnesty International. Accessed January 3, 2019.
⁷ “Defending the Rights of Women in Czech Republic”. August 19, 2015. Projects: Česká ženská lobby. czlobby.cz Accessed on December 15, 2018.
⁸ “Illiberal democracy” is a concept openly promoted by the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán. For more information regarding the current backlash against women’s rights in Europe see Kuhar, Roman and David Paternotte. 2017. *Anti-gender Campaigns in Europe: mobilizing against equality*. Rowman and Littlefield International.
⁹Faludi, Susan. 1991. *Backlash: the undeclared war against American women*. Crown Publishing Group.

← PREDCHÁDZAJÚCI ČLÁNOK **Máme prezidentku a to je dobre**

NASLEDUJÚCI ČLÁNOK **Nie je vtip ako výrok. Nie tie o znásilnení to platí dvojnásobne** →

PODOBNE ČLÁNKY

Is it still worth it to publish feminist texts on the internet?
 DANA VITÁĽOVÁ, 21. OKTOBRA 2019

“If you’re naked, don’t frown” – Slovak newspaper publishes the worst sex advice to women ever
 FEMINIST.FYI, 26. JULA 2017

Book review: how has Kat Banyard coped with proving legalized prostitution harmful?
 KRISTEN, 4. MAJA 2017

ČEKNIITE **NAJNOVIŠIE ČLÁNKY** z našej zahrádky

ZAUJÍMAVE **VIDEO**

Čo má porno priemysel spoločné s kresťanstvom? Napríklad SADIŽMUS
 DANA VITÁĽOVÁ, 12. APRÍLA 2020

Objednajte si do fyzickej schránky našu ČIERNU MAČKU
 FEMINIST.FYI, 22. NOVEMBRA 2019

Is it still worth it to publish feminist texts on the internet?
 DANA VITÁĽOVÁ, 21. OKTOBRA 2019

Ako by vyzeral deň muža v spoločnosti ovládanej ženami?



ČO MÁ PORNO PRIEMYSEL SPOLOČNÉ S KRESŤANSTVOM? NAPRIKLAD SADIŽMUS

DANA VITÁĽOVÁ, 12. APRÍLA 2020

Ďalším spoločným znakom je nenávisť k ženám.

Čítaj viac >



OBJEDNAJTE SI DO FYZICKEJ SCHRÁNKY NAŠU ČIERNU MAČKU

FEMINIST.FYI, 22. NOVEMBRA 2019

47 strán radikálneho feminizmu na tému Matky a dcéry môže prísť aj u vás doma

Čítaj viac >



IS IT STILL WORTH IT TO PUBLISH FEMINIST TEXTS ON THE INTERNET?

DANA VITÁĽOVÁ, 21. OKTOBRA 2019

Does publishing texts on the Internet make sense, if people won’t read them? And how is the abuse hurled at feminist writers affecting us?

Čítaj viac >

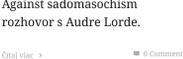


ROZHOVOR S AUDRE LORDE O SADOMASOCHIZME

DANA VITÁĽOVÁ, 13. OKTOBRA 2019

V roku 1982 vyšiel v knihe Against sadomasochism rozhovor s Audre Lorde.

Čítaj viac >

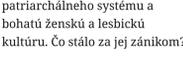


ZLATÝ VEK FEMINIZMU A ČO ZAPRÍČINILO JEHO ÚPADOK

DANA VITÁĽOVÁ, 10. OKTOBRA 2019

Druhá vlna feminizmu 60tych až 80tych rokov priniesla najhlbšiu analýzu patriarchálneho systému a bohatú ženskú a lesbičku kultúru. Čo stálo za jej zánikom?

Čítaj viac >



KOMIX O GRÉTE, ŽENY SI VYMYŠĽAJÚ OBŤAŽOVANIE, VTIP O NÁSILÍ

FEMINIST.FYI, 10. SEPTEMBRA 2019

Kto vyhral septembrový Patriarchálny prd?

Čítaj viac >



KÝM NÁSILNÍK ZAŤOČÍ NA ŽENU, VOPRED SI PRIPRAVI VÝHOVORKY

FEMINIST.FYI, 10. SEPTEMBRA 2019

Pat Craven vyvracia mýty o domácich násilníkoch.

Čítaj viac >



KTO SÚ TERFS A AKO SA STANETE JEDNOU Z NICH?

DANA VITÁĽOVÁ, 8. SEPTEMBRA 2019

Kým aj vy nastúpite do vlaku nazývania feministiek TERFkami, zamyslite sa a spravte si názor na základe viacerých informácií.

Čítaj viac >



TYPY NÁSILNÝCH MUŽOV PODĽA PAT CRAVEN: PÁN DOMU

FEMINIST.FYI, 5. SEPTEMBRA 2019

Pán domu nás prinúti robiť všetky domáce práce.

Čítaj viac >



TYPY NÁSILNÝCH MUŽOV PODĽA PAT CRAVEN: SEXUÁLNY OTROKÁR

FEMINIST.FYI, 1. AUGUSTA 2019

Sexuálny otrokár nás ovláda pomocou sexu.

Čítaj viac >