

Introduction

Bourgeois Feminism and Its Discontents

“Sex and Socialism.” That’s the name of the university class I started teaching back in 2003. Over fourteen or fifteen weeks, an interdisciplinary assortment of students and I embark on a semester-long discussion of the relationship between capitalism, socialism, and women’s emancipation. When I first offered this course at a small liberal arts college in Maine almost twenty years ago, socialism as a political ideology had been largely consigned to the dustbin of history. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Western triumphalism, Clintonomics, and the dot-com boom of the roaring nineties purportedly gave proof to the fantasy that liberal democracy and capitalism represented the “end of history.”¹ Even social democratic countries in Western Europe shrunk their social safety nets and pared back public spending and laws protecting workers’ rights. In the UK, Prime Minister Tony Blair removed Clause IV (calling for the common ownership of industry) from Labour’s constitution in 1994, abandoning the party’s semi-Marxist roots. My curious course on “sex and socialism” provided little more than a glance backward at a utopian project considered obsolete.

When I moved to the University of Pennsylvania in 2017, the political context had shifted. The global financial crisis, the Occupy Wall Street protests, and the near success of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic Party primary piqued renewed curiosity about alternatives to capitalism. My first course offered at Penn was “Sex and Socialism,” cross-listed with

Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies (GSWS). As before, my students and I investigated difficult questions by reading primary texts from the eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century thinkers who took a critical view of the supposedly free markets for human labor that followed the abolition of slavery and serfdom. Do rates of remuneration fairly compensate individual productivity? How do racist and sexist stereotypes about certain groups in society and imperfect information perpetuate inequalities in labor markets? And how have different proponents of various types of socialism historically sought to mitigate or abolish these inequities? To answer these questions, I often teach about the lives of women and men who have counted themselves among the enemies of capitalism.

In this book, you'll meet five of them. Lyudmila Pavlichenko: the world's most successful woman sniper with 309 confirmed kills in World War II. Alexandra Kollontai: the first Soviet Commissar of Social Welfare and a champion of sex positivity before we even had a phrase for it. Nadezhda Krupskaya: realizing the revolution through a radical expansion of education, literacy, and librarianship. Inessa Armand: the head of what was essentially the first ministry of women's affairs in the Soviet Union. And, finally, Elena Lagadinova: the youngest female partisan fighting against her Axis-allied government in World War II and the president of the Committee of the Bulgarian Women's Movement for twenty-two years. Although they each played a crucial role in forging new opportunities for hundreds of millions of women across the globe, their contributions get lost because they supported a type of women's activism that most Westerners have never heard of. I will never forget a conversation I had in the fall of 2017 with a fourth-year student who lingered after class. As we chatted about the day's lecture, she shook her head and said, "I'm graduating this spring and I can't believe I could have earned a GSWS major without ever having heard of Nadezhda Krupskaya or Alexandra Kollontai."

INTRODUCTION

I sighed. To this day, Western feminists dominate the historiography of the global women's movement. Early champions of women's rights such as the English Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill and the French Olympe de Gouges focused on individual rights. They asserted that, since women and men shared an inherent capacity to reason, differences between the sexes arose from differential socialization rather than from women's supposed "natural" inferiority. Access to education and the ability to make a living outside of marriage could liberate women from both ignorance and servitude. Activists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the United States and Emmeline Pankhurst in the United Kingdom built on these ideas to demand women's right to vote. Images of the suffragists animate the popular imagination as representatives of what is sometimes referred to as the "first wave" of feminism. In 1979, for example, the United States Mint chose Susan B. Anthony for its first coin featuring the image of an American woman. In 1999, *Time* magazine named Emmeline Pankhurst one of the "100 most important people of the twentieth century" for her role in winning women the franchise.

Western feminist icons of the so-called "second wave" included Simone de Beauvoir (author of *The Second Sex*), Betty Friedan (author of *The Feminine Mystique*), and Gloria Steinem (the founder of *Ms.* magazine). Like their "first wave" predecessors, these women largely focused on attaining increased rights and privileges for individual women. In her 1963 book, widely viewed as responsible for launching the U.S. women's movement, Betty Friedan focused on the idea of "self-actualization," a concept borrowed from the work of the American psychologist Abraham Maslow and his theory of the hierarchy of needs.² Maslow argued that physiological needs like food and shelter form the base of a pyramid of human necessities. Once these needs are met, people can climb up the pyramid by seeking out safety, love and belonging,

and esteem. Self-actualization (the individualistic fulfillment of one's inherent potential) is the apex of Maslow's pyramid. Although scholars critiqued Maslow's ethnocentric hierarchy for valorizing a hyper-individualism alien to many communally oriented societies,³ Friedan and other "second wave" feminists believed that the pursuit of "self-actualization" should be the primary goal of a feminist movement.⁴ More recently, women such as Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg have advocated for women's corporate advancement, admonishing individual women and girls to "lean in" and break through the remaining barriers that hinder their full equality with men.

But from the earliest days of the development of what we call feminism, there existed an entirely different group of women who, while agreeing that women have the same innate capacity for reason as men and are therefore deserving of political rights, fought side by side with their male counterparts to create a more equitable world for all through collective action. Women in Russia, for example, achieved the franchise in 1917 before most women in the West, and full coeducational access to all universities in Eastern Europe predated that in the United States by decades. Furthermore, women joined the labor force and entered traditionally male professions beginning in the 1920s, and by the 1930s and 1940s, Soviet women were earning doctoral degrees in physics and other natural sciences. A 1957 report of the American Manpower Planning Council noted, with some dismay, that "there are annually some 13,000 women graduating as engineers in the Soviet Union, compared to well under 100 in the United States."⁵ Although they did not have what we in the West would think of as a feminist movement, socialist women enjoyed rapid gains in societies where states made explicit commitments to promoting women's economic independence through the radical expansion of social safety nets and special programs to support working mothers.⁶

INTRODUCTION

Despite these achievements, most Western historians and gender scholars have ignored or downplayed the profound importance of socialists in shaping twentieth-century women's movements. Even the most prominent of these—Alexandra Kollontai, a theorist, teacher, speaker, politician, and diplomat who served as one of the first female ambassadors in the world and was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize—barely gets mentioned in Western textbooks. Her work is completely absent from the 2005 *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, the 2016 edition of the *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, and the 2016 (fourth) and 2021 (fifth) editions of the Routledge *Feminist Theory Reader*. Kollontai's unrelenting antagonism to capitalism apparently undermines her credentials as a “feminist theorist” in liberal circles, even though her ideas and her power to implement them as a politician in the early years of the Soviet Union arguably did more to realize women's full emancipation than the works or deeds of any other woman in the twentieth century (including Emmeline Pankhurst!).

Kollontai and the other women considered in this book placed themselves on the socialist side of the liberal versus socialist feminism divide (also referred to as “difference” versus “equality” feminism or “relational” versus “individualist” feminism).⁷ Many of these early thinkers were highly idealistic and questioned common ideas about the naturalness and inevitability of how labor markets were structured while, at the same time, trying to protect workers from the contemporary ravages of industrial capitalism. Although they often agreed with the initial aims of the liberal feminists, they felt these goals did not go far enough to help the majority of women in their societies. In nineteenth-century Britain, for instance, the right to vote was based on ownership of a certain amount of property and excluded all women. While suffragists focused on removing the sex exclusion, a different group

of women agitated for the removal of the property qualifications, arguing that voting access for only propertied women was a purely middle-class demand.⁸

Conflict between liberal and socialist goals in the fight for gender equality has continued into the twenty-first century. Consider, for example, Hasbro's 2019 creation of the mascot Ms. Monopoly—"Mr. Monopoly's niece and a self-made investment guru"—as a celebration of women's empowerment. With her black, high-heeled pumps, sleek gray blazer, and a disposable coffee cup labeled "boss," Ms. Monopoly represents the logical conclusion of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's brand of "lean in" politics whereby women win the game by becoming ruthless monopolists just like their male competitors.

In the Ms. Monopoly version of the Monopoly board game, all of the properties are inventions or products developed or designed by women. Instead of controlling Broadway and Park Place, players can buy Chocolate Chip Cookies and Stem Cell Isolation. Most importantly, players who identify as female collect \$240 after passing go, whereas players who identify as male only get \$200, leading Hasbro to brag that Ms. Monopoly is "the first game where women make more than men."⁹ This #girlboss feminism ignores the fact that, due to a lack of opportunities, connections, and resources, the vast majority of women have few chances of becoming self-made investment gurus and joining the economic elite. And are we really supposed to believe that Ms. Monopoly is "self-made" when Mr. Monopoly is her uncle?

"Lean in" feminism and #girlboss online activism fail to address the structural inequalities that continue to perpetuate sexism no matter how many women find their way into the C-Suite. Liberal feminism, in fact, often increases these inequalities by creating private clubs like The Wing which commodify exclusive access to women's networks in the name of empowerment.¹⁰ Similarly, women-centered investment

INTRODUCTION

funds like Ellevest, a financial services company “built by women, for women,” encourages risk-averse women to participate in the stock market in order to close the “investment gap” with men. Ellevest Private Wealth also offers a feminist version of “private wealth management for high and ultra high net worth individuals, families, and institutions.”¹¹ While it is true that “old boys’ clubs” perpetuate discrimination against women, liberal feminist projects like The Wing and Ellevest can only benefit a handful of women at most. With about 21 million American women living in poverty in 2018, Ellevest’s brand of women’s empowerment clearly ignores the needs of a large population of workers without savings to invest.¹²

While the challenges faced by working women are widespread, the burdens caused by gender inequity fall disproportionately on the poor, especially immigrant communities and communities of color. My own grandmother came to the United States from Puerto Rico in 1947 and gave birth to my mother two years later. Abandoned by her husband, my grandmother worked as a seamstress to support herself in the New York City garment industry. Lacking any form of social support or reliable childcare, my grandmother arranged for my mother to live with her grandparents back in Sabana Grande. When circumstances compelled my five-year-old mother back to New York, my Catholic grandmother sent her to live with the Baptistine nuns in their orphanage at St. Lucy’s School in Newark, New Jersey.

My grandmother left my mother with the Baptistines for *eight years* until my mother turned thirteen. “Grandma would come and visit maybe once or twice a month when she had money to come and see me,” my seventy-two-year-old mother recently recalled to me in a text message. “But at times she did not come for months if she did not feel well or didn’t have a ride to come see me.” Until her death in September 2021, my ninety-three-year-old grandmother and my mother still fought over my mother’s childhood. My mother resented the

abandonment and melted down in tears when asked about her life at St. Lucy's, while my grandmother swore that she had no choice but to put her there, and that she did her best to give my mother a better quality of life and education than she would have had living with my grandmother in Washington Heights. Where my mother blamed my grandmother for her individual choices, my grandmother blamed the system that made it impossible for her to work and care for my mother at the same time.

The tension between women's interests on the basis of their gender versus their economic interests defined competing brands of activism throughout the twentieth century. Alexandra Kollontai and other socialists perceived those who called themselves feminists as representing the fortunate Ms. Monopolys of the world, or what the German women's activist Clara Zetkin referred to as "the upper ten thousand."¹³ As in Britain, liberal feminists often fought to increase their own rights and privileges, arguing that incremental gains for wealthy women in the short term would eventually trickle down to all women. For socialist women, however, this liberal feminist strategy represented a threat to the long-term success of progressive movements because it harbored the potential to divide the working class and forestall what they saw as an inevitable progression beyond capitalism. Where many feminist movements tended to organize women separately to win access to the rights and privileges of a political and economic system reserved for men, socialist activists challenged the underlying system that created and legitimated the unequal distribution of privilege to begin with.

Socialist women's activists understood that capitalists benefited from women's oppression and would therefore fiercely resist demands that might erode their profit margins. When women fed, clothed, nursed, and nurtured the workers and future workers in their families, they provided an invaluable

INTRODUCTION

service to those who employed those workers, who could thus off-load the costs of maintaining healthy employees onto the private sphere. Attempts to value this labor through higher taxes on corporations or by promoting worker ownership and control of productive enterprises posed a threat to business owners. But these same business owners could extend some morsels of formal equality to wealthy women without changing the more fundamental structures that oppressed working women (such as property requirements for voting access). Socialist women complained that the liberal feminist approach—creating independent women’s organizations to promote formal equality—obsessed over access to a few spindly trees while missing the entire forest. And, in the particular context of tsarist Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Kollontai and her contemporaries believed that men and women had to work together to generate the numerical strength necessary to overthrow the tsar. This debate between socialist women’s activists and liberal feminists continues to this day.

Where liberal feminists often focused on legal equality, women’s activists on the farther left advocated for equity through the expansion of social safety nets in the short term and for a more just economic system in the long term. In addition to the franchise, access to education, and labor force opportunities, socialists demanded the expansion of paid maternity leave with job protection and free or subsidized childcare to support working parents. Liberal feminists disliked these objectives for reinforcing the expectation that women bear and raise children, and some encouraged fathers to “lean in” to care work within the family.¹⁴ Socialist women’s activists sympathized with these aims but recognized that the traditional idea of mothers as primary caregivers would not be overturned so easily. They chose to focus, therefore, not on achieving a more equitable distribution of unpaid care work *within* the nuclear family or encouraging wealthy women to

hire other (often poorer) women to perform domestic labor in the private sphere, but on the distribution of care work across a wider network of potential caregivers supported by the allocation of public funds.

While special programs for mothers might reinforce social expectations that certain members of society are more “naturally” suited to care work, fancy new laws guaranteeing *de facto* equality do not miraculously erase those expectations. Although some countries legally mandate parental leave (available to parents of all genders), new mothers consistently take longer leaves than new fathers.¹⁵ Nor can legal codes sway the market mechanisms that exacerbate inequalities between workers with and without care obligations. Employers use statistical averages about groups of workers who are more or less likely to leave the labor market, sorting potential employees into “reliable” and “less reliable” categories¹⁶ and paying those in the “less reliable” category lower wages. In monogamous families with only two parents, when one parent is forced to stay home to look after young children or elderly relatives (due to a lack of child or elder care), couples rationally choose the parent with the lower wage. But, if one particular category of worker is always the one to leave the labor market and stay home (mothers) then that very choice reinforces the stereotype that they are “less reliable” workers and therefore deserving of a lower wage. This cycle repeats itself ad infinitum. Unless we change the system.

Although debates between liberal and socialist feminism have historically revolved around issues of pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare, and some socialist feminists have embraced a natalist stance that many would find distasteful today (that is, believing that all women *should* be mothers), one can accept the value of their proposals around public provision of services without condoning their more traditional ideals about parenthood. In a capitalist economy, one obvious way

INTRODUCTION

of avoiding market discrimination against parents is to remain childless, and some might have compelling political and environmental reasons for choosing this option. Others might prefer to organize their private lives into more capacious, non-consanguine, multigenerational networks of care and comradeship without societal support. But we must not ignore the current reality that many adults still want to become parents and raise families in more conventional ways. Rather than deriding their supposed false consciousness or stubborn attachment to the nuclear family, we should be sympathetic about the difficulty of doing so in an increasingly precarious gig economy with few social safety nets (and, at least in the United States, crushing levels of student and consumer debt).

Efforts to address this difficulty, however, are complicated by the conflicting political demands of different classes of potential parents. More privileged parents might reject special treatment as parents because they fear it will limit their ability to advance within their chosen professions. In contrast to specific parental protections, legal equality for all workers increases opportunities for economic advancement, which allows privileged parents more resources with which to hire less advantaged workers (almost always women and usually women of color) to do the domestic work the professional parents no longer have the time or inclination to do themselves. In an economic system which favors those who start the game with the tallest pile of cash, a narrow concern with legal equality between the sexes primarily benefits the wives and daughters of the existing elites who have access to the financial resources to benefit most from these opportunities. Ms. Monopoly wants the opportunity to make more money so she can hire a better nanny. In contrast, laws or policies which support *the public provision* of services specifically for working parents allow for the redistribution of societal resources to support a higher standard of living for the whole population and not just those lucky enough to rise to the

top. How much happier, I often wonder, would my mother's childhood have been if my grandmother could have dropped her off at a daycare center attached to the garment factory or if a local elementary school had provided a free afterschool program?

In the end, demands for procedural equality rather than specific parental services coexist easily with capitalism because they require few resources. Promoting women into executive positions may save their employers money (as women are generally paid less than men) and appointing more women onto corporate boards may actually increase profits for corporations.¹⁷ The expansion of social services, on the other hand, costs money, and that means raising taxes or promoting more radical means of redistribution and thereby reducing private profits. A more fundamental way to fight the discrimination against parents embedded in competitive labor markets is to challenge the system that makes it so difficult for people to become parents and raise children. This is why the Red Valkyries attacked the capitalist economic structure that created these imbalances in the first place, and why their stories have been largely ignored by history books and in university classrooms. Learning about the lives and works of these revolutionary women of Eastern Europe illustrates both how and why liberal feminism became "capitalism's handmaiden."¹⁸

The unique geopolitics of the Cold War exacerbated the long-standing tension between liberal and socialist feminists. The conflict extended to include the "woman question," as it was called in many socialist countries, and this became an important node of superpower rivalry¹⁹: whether capitalism or socialism could be more successful at increasing opportunities for women's emancipation. To better understand the global context of these ongoing debates, I have spent the last twenty-five years immersed in ethnographic and historical research about women's emancipation in Eastern Europe before,

during, and after the Cold War. I have written eight books and many articles and essays about the gendered aspects of ordinary life in Eastern Europe and what the socialist path to women's emancipation looked like in practice. Since January 2019, I have hosted a podcast on the life and work of Alexandra Kollontai and spoken in popular media about socialist feminism, women's issues, and East European history.

This book builds on my previous work and focuses specifically on four women from Russia/Soviet Union and one woman from Bulgaria (the Balkan country where I have conducted most of my primary research over the years). Despite my focus on Eastern Europe, I want to acknowledge the diverse and wide-ranging history of socialist and communist women's activism, which includes individuals from many countries outside of this region. If I had more time (and more pages), I could include important figures like Flora Tristan (France/Peru), Dolores Ibárruri (Spain), Claudia Jones (Trinidad and Tobago), Thyra Edwards (USA), Maryam Firouz (Iran), Jessie Street (Australia), Nguyễn Thị Bình (Vietnam), Vilma Espín (Cuba), Rosario Morales (Puerto Rico), Deng Yingchao (China), Aoua Keita (Mali), Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (Nigeria), Hertta Kuusinen (Finland), Umi Sardjono (Indonesia), Kanak Mukherjee (India), Naziha al-Dulaimi (Iraq), and Iijima Aiko (Japan), among many others. I hope the mini biographies in these pages inspire further research and writing on the many other lives worthy of study, particularly those of women of color in the West and those struggling for justice in the Global South.

We must all write what we know best; as a professor of Russian and East European Studies, I focused my efforts on five of the women I've taught about for almost two decades. I chose Lyudmila Pavlichenko because, over the years, my students always seemed the most fascinated by the remarkable achievements of her life, and because she forged a close friendship with American first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and

RED VALKYRIES



A monument celebrating men and women partisans during World War II in Sofia, Bulgaria

became something of a celebrity when she visited the United States in 1942. I included Alexandra Kollontai because of my fascination with her life and work, and Nadezhda Krupskaya and Inessa Armand because they were Kollontai's comrades in exile before the Bolshevik revolution and her primary accomplices in crafting Soviet policy on women's issues in the years immediately following 1917. Finally, I count Elena Lagadinova among these Red Valkyries because I had the honor and privilege of interviewing her over the course of seven years between 2010 and 2017. In the pages that follow, I provide a short outline of their lives, looking for lessons, strategies, and tactics that might help us today. Within each chapter, I also offer brief reflections on how their experiences illuminate present-day issues and, in the conclusion, consider nine

INTRODUCTION

specific characteristics that helped each woman become successful revolutionaries, even if their stories didn't always have happy endings. Some saw their comrades killed or their work undone, others went to an early grave, but the fire that animated their various struggles is nonetheless inspiring.

I also want to acknowledge that there have always been leftist women activists in the West who shared in similar struggles against capitalism. But, at least in the United States, socialist women activists found themselves subsumed under liberal feminist ideologies that upheld the capitalist status quo. With its focus on increasing professional opportunities for privileged women at the top of the income distribution, liberal feminism supports a worldview wherein everything is just fine as long as women have better access to wealth and power. Over a century ago, socialist women understood that the "bourgeois feminists" of the West showed little interest in the lives of working-class women. They imagined a political project that challenged the exploitation of unpaid labor in the private sphere as part of a wider program to overcome the injustices perpetuated by a free-market system that produces systemic forms of discrimination.

The historical context of tsarist and Soviet Russia as well as that of state socialist Bulgaria differs from the contemporary political landscapes of North America, the countries of Western Europe, and the nations of the Global South. The women profiled in these pages focused primarily on the tensions between gender and class identities, rather than on race, sexuality, ability, gender identity, or other categories of difference that animate present-day conversations about social justice and the need for progressive change. Tsarist autocracy, European fascism, and the savage immiseration produced by capitalism served as the primary targets of their theoretical and practical interventions. But this does not mean that their insights and experiences are irrelevant to us. Even if their historical and cultural contexts differed from our own, their



Elena Lagadinova and Angela Davis on Davis's visit to Bulgaria in 1972

victories and failures have in many ways helped to shape the world we have inherited today, both directly and indirectly.

When the American civil rights activist Angela Davis visited Elena Lagadinova in Bulgaria in 1972, for instance, Davis's goal was to highlight the incompatibility of American claims to upholding democratic freedoms with their poor record on civil rights. Persistent accusations from the Eastern Bloc about U.S. domestic racism played an important role in forcing political progress in the United States.²⁰ Rather than being intersectional, women like Angela Davis or Elena Lagadinova were *confluent* in their politics. Instead of focusing on the fixed points where different social identities or movements

INTRODUCTION

meet (that is their intersections), socialist women often viewed categories like race, class, and gender as distinct rivers flowing into each other from different tributaries, rivers which can mix and grow larger and more powerful. A familiarity with the wider history of socialist women's activism might inspire new ideas for strategic interventions in our contemporary political context.

Both the Western press and her own Bolshevik colleagues once referred to Alexandra Kollontai as a "Valkyrie" after the legendary female warriors of Norse mythology. I have adopted this word for my title because each of the women profiled in these pages, in their own way, fought like superhuman warriors to support causes that defined the twentieth century. Their personal stories reveal certain similar characteristics that they shared, characteristics that made them successful in their quests to create, further, and defend social change. To face the many challenges of the twenty-first century, we need a broader vision of emancipation that targets the forces that produce and exacerbate inequality at all levels of society.

The Red Valkyries can help show us the way.