

## **Review of Gal and Kligman's *Reproducing Gender and The Politics of Gender after Socialism***

***Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism* edited by Susan Gal and Gail Kligman. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.**

***The Politics of Gender after Socialism* edited by Susan Gal and Gail Kligman. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.**

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Susan Gal and Gail Kligman have devoted much of their careers to looking at women and socialism and women and postsocialism. In particular, each has written some of the most important work looking at reproduction and politics—an intersection that too often has been overlooked by academics and professionals in both the East and West. In *Reproducing Gender* and *The Politics of Gender*, their most ambitious projects to date, Gal and Kligman have produced an edited volume of articles that analyzes the complex relationships between ideas and practices of gender and political change and, following this, a coauthored and more theoretical work that synthesizes and expands on the findings and discourses of the edited volume. As will be discussed in greater detail below, both works significantly add to the knowledge and understanding of the intersections of gender and the dynamic changes (and continuities) of post-1989 East Central Europe.

This review looks at both works because they are directly connected, offering complementary insight and knowledge into the

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broader analysis of gender and postsocialism. The edited volume *Reproducing Gender* came into being through a conference held in 1994 that then turned into a book project codirected by Gal and Kligman. Articles in the edited volume are grouped according to three themes: “reproduction as politics,” “gender relations in everyday life,” and “arenas of political action: struggles for representation,” and they range from political economic analysis of the service sector in Hungary to analysis of the discourse on women and women’s problems in Bulgaria. By the time the edited volume went to press in 1998 and then was published in 2000, much had changed in East Central Europe but, as is stressed throughout both books, the ongoing nature of the changes and continuities of the region is an important characteristic of the region. Gal, Kligman, and their edited volume contributors return to this theme in their analyses time and again.

The goal of *The Politics of Gender* is to take what was learned through the edited volume and synthesize the analyses into broader observations and discussions about “how [the] discourses and practices of gender play a major role in shaping the post-1989 reconstitution of states and social relations in East Central Europe” (*The Politics of Gender*, p. 3). The two questions they use to organize the book are, “How are gender relations and ideas about gender shaping political and economic change in the region? And what forms of gender inequality are being shaped as a result?” This is much more of a dialectical approach to women and politics in the postsocialist era than has generally been seen in the literature and yields more generalizable results (i.e., for social science in general) than would have otherwise been possible. This in itself is an important contribution to the literature.

Of crucial importance to any review of these works is how the authors define their key variable, gender. To Gal and Kligman, “gender is defined . . . as the socially and culturally produced ideas about male-female difference, power, and inequality that structure the reproduction of these differences in the institutionalized practices of society” (*The Politics of Gender*, p. 4). In addition, something that is repeatedly stressed by Gal and Kligman, as well as the authors of the chapters in the edited volume, is that

phenomena and environments in East Central Europe cannot be analyzed singularly; they must be analyzed in ways that bring to the surface the “structural opposition” inherent in them and that defines them. While this assertion is present in other works on women and politics, as well as postmodernist analyses in general, Gal and Kligman and their colleagues, in deciding to discuss it explicitly as well as fold it into their analyses more implicitly, produce a clear discussion of the interrelationships of social phenomena that is so often obscured in nontraditional analysis and absent in traditional ones.

Both books are important records of the changes that have been taking place in East Central Europe, but they are also important for their analysis, which can be used for other regions and other phenomena. This book is part of a larger literature on women and politics, culture, economics, as well as women and postsocialism, but it differs from other work in that it seeks to analyze postsocialism/postcommunism through gender instead of the “women and X” style of analysis. This enables the edited volume *Reproducing Gender* to blend together better than other edited volumes on women and postcommunism.

The different focuses of the authors in the edited volume—indeed, their different disciplines and research methodologies—strengthen and add a historical perspective to the overall thrust of the book that straightforward economic or political analyses might lack. Both volumes, by providing ample background on such important developments as European feminism in the twentieth century, are able to put current developments in comparison with “normal” times (*Reproducing Gender*, p. 127), as well as break down many of the stereotypes and biases that have been involved on the ground in East Central Europe and even been part of the academic analysis of politics, society, and economics of the region since 1989.

A focus of both books that should be highlighted here is the state and the importance that is ascribed to it. While academics in the West, and in a very different way, their counterparts in the East, foretold a “withering away of the state,” the state continues to play an important, though not completely central, role in the dynamics of postsocialism. Gal and Kligman, as well as their

coauthors in *Reproducing Gender*, analyze the state—particularly society-state relationships—and put this analysis into their larger discussion of the dynamics of postsocialist change and continuity. What is most impressive is Gal and Kligman’s ability to show the dynamics involved in the creation of state institutions and policies—not as linear functions but as dialectical transformations that interact closely with society and the international system.

Both volumes explicitly critique “transition” as the analytical tool of choice for looking at and trying to understand—or at the very least, describe—what has happened in East Central Europe since 1989 (*Reproducing Gender*, p. 11). While their criticism is not unique, they go to some trouble to explain why and how the concept of “transformation” might better describe postsocialist change and continuity—and offer better analytical tools for research—than the more common “transition” rubric. Therefore, these books about “women,” or even gender, more broadly, are much more than that; they are about analyzing transformations: describing not only what has happened but searching for why.

One of the most important achievements of these books, seen most concretely in *The Politics of Gender*, is the breaking down of the public/private divide that so often still comes across in social science analysis—even in feminist social science analysis. Not only do Gal and Kligman provide one of the most clear and concise explanations of the development of the public-private debate, but they also discuss how this dichotomy has and does affect social, political, and economic relations in postsocialism and the academic analysis of it. A fascinating finding of this discussion concerns the “naturalizing” power of such “natural” dichotomies as male-female as well as public-private, particularly when politics of exclusion are involved. “Exclusionary politics are often articulated through ideas about gender. Such metaphorical use of gender stereotypes to talk about other matters strengthens the force of the stereotypes themselves” (*Reproducing Gender*, p. 16).

The need to naturalize difference as a tool of power is also made clear in Gal and Kligman’s discussion of nationalism in the twentieth century, particularly the relative lack of attention paid

to gender as a key element of nationalist rhetoric. While other feminist critiques of mainstream nationalism literature have pointed out this glaring omission, Gal and Kligman analyze why gender may have been left out of the analysis of nationalism. The main thrust of their conclusion posits that individuals and groups often ground nationalist rhetoric in gender difference to appear that they are acting for the “good” of the nation. Since gender difference is presented and discussed as “natural,” this use of gender to gain political legitimacy throughout the twentieth century (and before) has often been successful to the point of seeming a natural part of politics itself.

There is really very little to criticize in these two books. Each is well conceived and concisely and clearly presented. The research is new and challenges common conceptions of state-society relations and male-female dichotomies. And in addition, both present the reader with a potential research agenda that provides concrete steps to furthering analysis on the transformation taking place in East Central Europe and how gender is intimately involved in it.

However, perhaps one could quibble with which countries were chosen or which issues were *not* raised in the edited volume and then in the coauthored book, but Gal and Kligman have already pointed out these potential “shortcomings” themselves. One also might contend that the intermixing of different levels of analysis in individual chapters and throughout the two books is sloppy social science analysis, but I would contend that the intermixing that is done is done intentionally and with the express goal of showing the biases of “traditional” social science analysis. The books not only offer the reader multiple perspectives of social, political, and economic phenomena but also give the reader the tools to question, analyze, and critique the material as presented. Again, this reinforces Gal and Kligman’s contention that what has been and is still happening in East Central Europe is not a transition from one system to another but a transformation of the complex relations between people and institutions.

These volumes add significantly to the important case study and theoretical analysis done by Marilyn Rueschemeyer; Barbara Einhorn; Joan Scott, Cora Kaplan, and Debra Keates; Nanette

Funk and Magda Mueller; and Tanya Renne, among others.<sup>1</sup> In addition, they add to the literature on “transition” (or as Gal and Kligman argue, the “transformation”) in East Central Europe and even transformations in other regions. *The Politics of Gender* and, to a lesser extent, *Reproducing Gender* are important additions to feminist social science.

Interestingly, while these books are explicitly analyzing social science phenomena through a feminist lens, the research and analysis are not only, nor specifically, concerned with feminism, particularly feminism in East Central Europe (*Reproducing Gender*, p. 10). These books, particularly *The Politics of Gender*, are concerned with larger social science questions, and they should be given the respect that more traditional approaches to analyzing change in postcommunist Europe would enjoy. What makes Gal and Kligman’s work stand out, however, is that they set out to prove—and are successful in doing so—that gender is an important variable in social science analysis and should be treated as such.

I would like to close by quoting Gal and Kligman from the conclusion of *The Politics of Gender*. It speaks directly to the lasting contribution of Gal and Kligman’s insightful analysis and to the work of those who contributed to the *Reproducing Gender* volume: “A gendered perspective is central to understanding the dynamics of postsocialism” (p. 117).

1. Marilyn Rueschemeyer, ed., *Women in the Politics of Postcommunist Eastern Europe* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998); Barbara Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market: Citizenship, Gender, and Women’s Movements in East Central Europe* (London: Verso, 1993); Joan W. Scott, Cora Kaplan, and Debra Keates, eds., *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Nanette Funk and Magda Mueller, eds., *Gender Politics and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Tany Renne, ed., *Ana’s Land: Sisterhood in Eastern Europe* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).