

Mihaela Miroiu

The road to autonomy: Feminist political theories

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To Mihaela Miroiu we owe the revival of feminism in post-communist Romania. Since feminist scholarship was nonexistent before the 1990s in this country,^{<1>} one can safely argue that she is the first Romanian feminist to contribute to the field of feminist philosophy.

Miroiu is the author of several volumes, including the first general introduction to feminist philosophy for the Romanian public, a book on feminist ethics and several publications on the Romanian post-communist transition. Her latest book, *The Road to Autonomy*, is Miroiu's best thought-through and most mature book to date and definitely the most interesting one for the foreign philosophical public.^{<2>}

The Road to Autonomy is meant to be several things at a time. First, it is a plea for the need of feminist politics in Romania, addressed to a larger intellectual public, and at the same time a lucid account of what makes it such politics so difficult. Second, much of it is intended as a handbook for students of feminist political theory. Finally, it contains the personal contribution of the author to the field of feminist political theory, although drawing all the philosophical conclusions of her analysis does not seem to be the author's main concern. The present review will attempt to do justice to the last, and therefore will focus on the third part of *The Road to Autonomy*.

The first part of the book, entitled "Feminism and its historical evolution" explores the cultural background of women's marginalization and introduces the reader to the history of feminist movements. Many of the author's insights into the connection between the typically female experience and women's subordination are already familiar from earlier writings of Miroiu. Their main function is to bring about a demystification of the women's image in the Romanian culture and to make obvious the need for a feminist consciousness.

Part two, "Core orientations in feminist political theory," is an informative introduction to feminist political theory. Although it does not, for reasons of space, offer an in-depth analysis, it represents nevertheless the most comprehensive overview of the various orientations in feminist political theory—liberal feminism, socialist and Marxist feminism, radical feminism, ecofeminism and communitarian—currently available in Romanian. This part is meant to serve as a basic course for students and as an introduction to diverse feminist political theories for the general readership.

Part three, “Communism, post-communism,” is by far the most interesting one for the non-Romanian public, as it contains the most original—and controversial—insights of the book. Its chapters are suggestively entitled: “Communism: emancipation through work and state patriarchy,” “The patriarchies of post-communist transition,” and “State Men, Market Women. The Effects of Left Conservatism on Gender Policies in Romanian Transition.”

The first chapter looks at what happened to the communist ideal of equality between the sexes in the context of real-life communism in Romania. The result of the complex interplay between traditional Romanian patriarchy, both culturally and politically,^{<3>} and the ideal of equality promoted by the communist ideology was state patriarchy. Economically speaking, instead of the promised equality, women under communism had to put up with the double workday (although one must also mention that equal pay for similar jobs and almost equal access to all types of occupation were realities during communism in Romania). From a political point of view, women’s power was the same as men’s: purely nominal. Under the conditions of a single political party and systematically falsified elections, the political dimension of citizenship was meaningless. The greatest misfortune of women during communism, though, was the unlimited intrusion of the state into their private lives, most strikingly expressed by draconic anti-abortion policies that did a lot of harm, both physically and psychologically, to huge numbers of women. Power itself was structured according to a thoroughly patriarchal model of one-man-ruling-over-the-entire-people (especially during the 70s and 80s) and the Romanian public culture was defined by age-old patriarchal traditions. Against a background of hostility to any ideal of personal autonomy, the initial communist ideology of women’s emancipation unavoidably lapsed into radically anti-feminist practice. The resulting ideology, being both nationalist and morally conservative, portrayed women as the property of the nation (identified with the party), thus precluding any move towards individual freedom.

The political ethos inherited from communism has evolved, after its downfall, into new kinds of patriarchy, framed by the new ideology of democratization and the free market. Miroiu’s work goes on to uncover the patriarchal faces of post-communist transition: an absence of women from high-ranking politics and the newly-formed economical elite, at cultural environment hostile to any feminist self-identification, unacknowledged domestic violence and an expectation that women perform all the housework.

One of the distinctive features of Miroiu’s writing is her ability to use language creatively. Over the past decade, she has introduced several new expressions which became established terms in the current literature on political theory—feminist or not—in Romania. The most important of these terms, both of them theoretically charged, are “left conservatism” and “room-service feminism.”

The term “left conservatism,” which was coined by Miroiu in one of her previous publications also refers to the allegedly typical Romanian reality. After half a century of communism, the only possible conservative trend in Romanian politics is leftist, argues Miroiu. The reason being that the only political institutions and habits that could be preserved from the past are the communist ones. But the 'left conservatism' works against women's best interest. Basing her argument on a recent sociological study, Miroiu draws the picture of a world in which the welfare state redistributes poverty in ways that are deeply unjust to women. Most women, she

argues, work either in the official market economy, being taxpayers, or in the under-paid, low-prestige state sectors. By contrast, most of the men who are still employed by the state earn higher wages although the sectors in which they work are bankrupt (and their jobs are artificially protected for electoral reasons). Thus, the welfare state redistributes the money taxed from the 'market women' to the 'state men,' tending to the social security of the male workforce, and neglecting the highly feminized sectors of public health and education. By exercising "state patriarchy", Romanian authorities prevent significant numbers of women from becoming the autonomous economic actors they would have already become in a more laissez-faire regime.

Arguably, one of the truly important conclusions of those who read this book may be that, at least in non-ideal theory, it is not always the welfare state that best promotes feminist aims. Under conditions of frail and ever-changing institutions, significant levels of corruption and not entirely accountable governments, most women's interests may actually be better served by a minimal state which would allow most of them to benefit from their already-gained market skills.

As the title of her book suggests, Miroiu's conviction is that the most valuable contribution feminist politics could make to women's lives in Romania is to give them a sense of autonomy and the means to lead a self-governed life. But who could be the beneficiaries of feminism in Romania today? On the one hand, in a society that still lacks a proper middle-class, the majority of women is too poor and not sufficiently educated in order to embrace political feminism. The very language of feminism—especially the one "borrowed" from the West—is too remote to their world of every-day struggle for subsistence. On the other hand, there is a minority of "self-made" women who naturally tend to identify with post-feminist goals. They do not seem ready to constitute themselves in a class of women with common, specific political goals, capable of bringing about a much-needed feminist agenda, and of putting it onto the political agenda, too. Connected to this, the paradox arises: is it too early or too late for feminism to be politically meaningful in Romania?

Against this background, Miroiu coins the other term of theoretical importance "room-service feminism." It engenders the less controversial claim that feminism, like many other ideals "imported" from abroad into Romania, is still lacking substance. Much of what (little) legislation and political action that has been done for the benefit of women was in fact the result of political pressure coming from the European Union and, for this reason, remained blood-less formalities. Since grass-root feminist movements are not yet possible, feminist movements proceeded in a top-down way, often missing to address the most acute problems of Romanian women.

Again, Miroiu's suggestion seems to be that the only political approach capable of advancing feminist goals is economic liberalism, sustained by a minimal state, in order to help Romania achieve that level of modernization that will set the framework for any meaningful future feminism.

How deep is the bite of Miroiu's argument? To a certain level, it is an extremely interesting illustration of the extent to which political theory is born out of, and relevant to, particular political circumstances. The ethical and political value of the welfare state is differently perceived from the standpoint of (relatively) old liberal democracies than from the perspective of

(relatively) devastated post-communist societies. On a different, maybe deeper, level though, one may argue that Miroiu's commitments to women's welfare and autonomy should compel her to adopt the same political long-term views as her U.S. and Western European peers. Some of her writing is concerned with criticizing not the welfare state *per se*, but its unsustainable present form and its wrong sense of priorities. Miroiu explicitly commends some welfare structures that support women, such as day-care centers. Another problem with her view is that she entirely eludes the question of what to do about those who inevitably would find themselves with no safety net, at all, under the conditions of a minimal state, some of whom would, of course, be women.

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