

Taking the Pulse: Feminist Human Rights Activists in Belgrade

Author: Elise Matatall

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Celeste Montoya, Women and Gender Studies

Committee Members:

Dr. Deepti Misri, Women and Gender Studies

Dr. Janet Jacobs, Sociology

University of Colorado at Boulder

April 2013

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Women and Gender Studies

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Abstract

Feminist human rights activists make up but a small subsection of civil society in Serbia. These activists embody the epitome of active citizenship through their resistance to the hegemonic culture of denial, nationalism, and sexism. Establishing the link between civil society, transnational feminism, the alternative movement, and the contemporary feminist movement in Serbia became a pivotal site of inquiry for this research. To gain a fuller understanding of the current manifestation of this feminist subsection of the alternative movement, the investigation focused on how feminist civil society has changed and what additional dimensions the emerging generational dynamics have added as well as the role of globalization.

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with three generations of feminist human rights activists in Belgrade. Each interviewee had a multifaceted conceptualization of the research question, which allowed for a variety of additional issues that had been invisible during preliminary research to materialize.

The generational dynamics referred to above played a notable role in respondents' answers. It became clear throughout the research that the evolution of the movement has resulted in an evolution of the feminist theories and approaches needed to tackle contemporary concerns. However, the diversity of feminist approaches and activists shows the maturity of the movement and its ability to take on these issues on a wide, even global, scale by taking the pulse of the society and focusing energy on what will have the greatest effect at the most opportune time.

Why Human Rights? Why Feminist?

Beyond the feminist and human rights focus, civil society in Belgrade flourishes, with numerous nongovernmental organizations and spaces for political activism. This vibrant civil society makes Belgrade similar to other post-conflict societies that foster a space for political activism in an effort to rebuild. Yet, former Yugoslavia's history and geographical location make it a region full of unique complexities alongside the larger themes of post-conflict transformation, civil society organizing, and feminist mobilization. Civil society in Serbia is made up of diverse organizations, activists, and projects.¹ Acknowledging this diversity is key to understanding why feminist human rights activists specifically are important to study: because of their ability to engage with similar activists while separating their goals as even loftier.

During the final month of a semester abroad studying post-conflict transformation in Serbia, Bosnia, and Kosovo/a, primary and secondary research were conducted during fieldwork in Belgrade, Serbia. I chose to investigate the current state of a small niche of civil society in Serbia by looking at feminist human rights activists in Belgrade.² Through this research, it became clear that activists within civil society continued to fight against the hegemonic culture of denial, victimhood, and nationalism that has been associated with politically active rightwing parties in Serbia that have recently regained much political power. The dearth of current scholarly research on Serbia shows that Serbia is not commanding as much interest by social scientists, partially given the democratic changes since the ousting of the regime attributed to Slobodan Milošević. Yet, human rights activists in the region recognize that many of these changes are nominal and the space within the state for substantive change has yet to open up.

¹ Orli Fridman, "Alternative Voices: Serbia's Anti-War Activists, 1991-2004" (PhD Dissertation, George Mason University, 2006), 109-158.

² However, one of the interviewees was active outside of Belgrade, in a town called Kruševac.

Furthermore, the activists who participated in this research were also feminist activists who have taken it upon themselves to continuously question and problematize the status quo even amongst their progressive allies. Their focus is both internal and external as these feminist activists question their internal dynamics while focusing outward to deconstruct wider societal discourses; even questioning the rhetoric of human rights itself.

Additionally, this research takes place within the midst of an ongoing debate concerning the relationship between Western feminists and Eastern European feminists. While the “transitology” research boom has begun to level, there remain a number of tensions between Western and Eastern European feminists. Some Eastern European feminist theorists feel that their experiences have been distorted through Western research or used for the gain of Western academics. Laura Busheikin’s “Is Sisterhood Really Global?” addresses this debate head on. Busheikin states, “Now it has become fashionable in the West to talk of ‘race, class, and gender’ as intersecting lines of oppression, but this doesn’t offer a framework that can fully account for Eastern European women’s experience.”³ Some feminist scholars, such as Barbara Einhorn and Charlie Sever, have nominally addressed the power dynamics between Western and Eastern feminists in their discussions of “emerging” women’s movements and civil society in post-socialist countries. Still scholars rarely find a middle ground in trying to theorize about this type of interaction, often taking extreme stances. But activists can transverse political boundaries through the solidarity of feminism, while oftentimes reproducing the hierarchies embedded within imperialism and the neoliberal interactions of activists’ respective nation-states. This research will describe and analyze feminist organizing in Belgrade, not as “emerging” but rooted and developing in response to the political opportunities in Serbia and the changes taking place

³ Laura Busheikin. "Is Sisterhood Really Global? Western Feminism in Eastern Europe." In *Ana's Land: Sisterhood in Eastern Europe*, ed. Tanya Renne, 19. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

within a larger global women's movement. By positioning feminist organizing in Belgrade within a larger global women's movement, transnational interactions and transversal politics become salient as both descriptive and forward-looking theoretical lenses.

Busheikin argues that Western feminists are to some extent "importing feminism" in activist and academic interactions; but this assertion ignores the diversity within feminist scholarship and the numerous feminisms.⁴ In describing current feminist organizing in Belgrade, this research will point to the diversity of perspectives and theoretical approaches of each individual activist interviewed. Likewise, Busheikin adds that in traveling to a new context to study and engage non-Western feminists, "[a Western feminist] has to try to understand a whole different history and culture as well as explain her own...She has to resist the eager quest for similarities, which too often leads to false analogies, and at the same time seek for the commonalities that hold the relationship together."⁵ In the following research, there is a balance between pointing to commonalities between Serbian feminism and Western feminism, or appropriations by Serbian feminists, while also acknowledging unique applications of transnational feminism.

Locating these Feminist Activists in Contemporary Context

While examining the commonalities and uniqueness of Serbian feminism in the larger transnational feminist framework, it is also important to locate Serbian feminist activists in their contemporary context. Mirroring trends in similar post-conflict societies, Serbia is facing the

⁴ Ibid, 19.

⁵ Ibid, 19.

“brain drain” of many of its citizens and intellectuals.⁶ This brain drain is an important aspect of the context for this study. And yet, all of the participants, whether formally educated or otherwise, chose to remain in Serbia throughout the war period or chose to return after coming of age in another country. Almost all of the activists I spoke with were active in the anti-war scene during the 1990s or the anti-regime movement in the 2000s. This decision to stay was revealed during informal conversations with activists throughout the data collection semester and prompted an initial interest in this particular group. The participants are not only resisting their own system but resisting the urge to follow the brain drain trajectory by remaining in Belgrade. It is notable that they chose to remain in a situation where their activist voice is oppressed rather than look for a place where their political views would be welcomed, or at least acknowledged.

Secondly, despite nearly a decade of relative peace in Serbia, many of the issues that feminists faced in the nineties during the wars and the period closely following remain present in contemporary Serbia. The tumultuous political history in the post-war period, from the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003 to the violent attacks on the Belgrade Pride Parade in 2001 and 2010, represents the most shocking examples of this. Yet, as the outright violence begins to fade, feminists in Belgrade continue to articulate feelings of confusion and marginalization. Multiple participants pointed to the pervasive nationalism, sexism, xenophobia, and fascism that continue to plague this region but also—they were quick to note—the world.

Author Orli Fridman referred to this sentiment, explaining that there was an immense feeling of excitement and energy after the overthrow of Milosevic on October 5th, 2000 but the

⁶ “There is the momentous fact that some 300,000 urban, young, educated people left Yugoslavia. That shows everywhere, including the peace movement. A high percentage of young people answer the question of what would they like to do in life by saying they would like to leave their country. And they do in droves, voting with their feet.” Sonja Licht and Slobodan Drakulić, “When the word for peacemaker was women: war and gender in the former Yugoslavia,” *Research on Russia and Eastern Europe*, Vol. 2 (1996): 111-139.

http://www.zenskestudie.edu.rs/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=128&Itemid=38
(Accessed: May 5th, 2012.)

assassination of Zoran Đinđić, considered a forward-looking politician by many, prompted fear amongst activists that in the wake of the October 5th Revolution, October 6th never came.⁷ The election climate in which I conducted research illustrated further this alleged “stagnation.”⁸ The election results from May 6th, 2012 shocked many in Belgrade, when it was revealed that the infamous party of Slobodan Milošević, the Socialist Party of Serbia, had made a surprising comeback. The Socialist Party of Serbia is associated with wartime politics that employed nationalism and sexism as their main tools. For many liberal activists in Belgrade this signaled a frightening return to (or continuation of) the rhetoric of the 90s, emphasizing a need for continued feminist critiques and activist efforts.

In addition to the brain drain and political stagnation, activists and citizens are affected by the globalization of movements and ideas, which is exemplified currently through Serbia’s process of European Union (EU) accession.⁹ Multiple respondents alluded to EU mechanisms and rhetoric as sources of pressure and abuse. It is intriguing that many potential interviewees were unavailable the first week of this research because they were attending an international AWID (Association for Women’s Rights in Development) conference in Istanbul.¹⁰ Although I joked that all of the feminists in Belgrade were in Istanbul when needed for this study, this exchange exemplifies globalization and the intermingling of ideas at its finest. Intrigued by this reality, research questions were geared to explore if and how the global aspect of a women’s movement has impacted feminist activists.¹¹

⁷ Fridman, “Alternative Voices: Serbia’s Anti-War Activists, 1991-2004,” 109.

⁸ Fridman, “Alternative Voices: Serbia’s Anti-War Activists, 1991-2004,” 164.

⁹ Serbia gained candidate status to the EU on March 1st, 2012.

¹⁰ Yes, all contacts were women.

¹¹ This aspect will be referred to as transnational throughout the paper.

Moreover, it was important to understand the Belgrade women's movement's current relationship to the state. There are various interpretations of the state as a source of change or impediment, a collection of ideas that reflects the diversity within feminism itself. Most pertinent to this research are the liberal and radical approaches. A liberal interpretation of the state views the state as a neutral set of institutions that reflect the interests of the groups using those institutions. A radical theory of the state views the state as inherently patriarchal and oppressive, a mirror of society.¹² The friction (or maybe they are too far removed from one another to create friction) between the state and Belgrade's women's movement is immediately apparent. An internet search for Serbia's Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women report produced the "*Alternative Report to the CEDAW Committee*" from the Autonomous Women's Center (a women's organization in Belgrade) that laid out the problems a few prominent women's organizations saw with the Serbian Committee's results.¹³ The largest critique of the CEDAW report was that there had been no consultation of women's nongovernmental organizations when crafting the report. The irony of the words "alternative" and "autonomous" should not be ignored, given that they reflect the position of the feminist movement within Serbian society. In addition to the relationship to the Serbian state signified by the CEDAW interaction, several of the interviewees pointed to the non-implementation of countless EU check-listed gender mechanisms and the fact that many things had changed on paper but not substantively. The EU accession process and the EU's emphasis on "gender mechanisms" allows for a better view of the women's movement's relationship to the state because of the weight that the EU accession process currently holds in Serbia.

¹² October 4th, 2011. Lecture on "The State" in Gender Politics and Global Activism at the University of Colorado-Boulder with Celeste Montoya.

¹³ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women will be referred to as CEDAW.

Objectives of the Study

Belgrade is situated within a climate of geopolitical uncertainty and a culture that often produces hostility for feminist activists. It is with these aspects of the context in mind that this research investigates the conscious decision by activists to stay and/or return to Belgrade to be active citizens in the society. When speaking about her own activism in the region of former Yugoslavia rather than elsewhere, Slobodanka Dekić stated, “And yet, I come back here every time I leave and I know that this is the only place that I can function in. However much there is no system, it’s only here that I have the feeling that I can be a part of the story that builds it.”¹⁴ Dekić’s feeling that there is “no system” reflects the continued need for a space for activism and civil society in Serbia.

Repudiating the ‘myths of transition’ that will be discussed in relation to theoretical reconceptualizations of women’s mobilization in Eastern Europe, this study operated based on the assumption that the women’s movement in Belgrade did not arise after the fall of state socialism in the 1990s but had been active for a number of years. The history of the women’s movement will be delineated within the literature review to help establish this point, through secondary research. However, a key goal of this investigation was to understand how this contemporary movement understands its role within a civil society whose major defining moment had been during the 1990s and 2000s. In this way, this study tends to divide activism into Milošević and post-Milošević periods. The discussion of the concept of civil society will establish this connection between oppositional activism and civil society during this period and the research findings will point to some of the changes apparent in the post-Milošević organizing.

¹⁴ Slobodanka Dekić. “Making Waves or-How to Turn a Mire into a Place where Something is Happening?” in *20 Pieces of Encouragement for Awakening and Change: Peacebuilding in the Region of the Former Yugoslavia*, ed. Helena Rill, Tamara Šmidling, and Ana Bitoljanu. (Belgrade-Sarajevo: Centre for Nonviolent Action, 2007), 43-49.

Generational dynamics proved to be another salient piece of the alternative, liberal circle of civil society that this research investigates, affecting cohesion and assigned roles within civil society. Research conducted earlier in the semester with human rights activists uncovered that activists can be broken down into a new generation, the middle generation who came of age during the Balkan wars of the 1990's, and the oldest generation who founded many of the first nongovernmental organizations during the war. Despite overlap and acknowledgment that these generations build off of one another, it appears that the older generation is invested in documentation and dealing with the past while the younger generation is focused on developing democracy and educating and involving youth with a middle generation balancing the two goals. These generational differences reflect the different contexts that each generation came of age within. The newest crop of interviews provided interesting perspectives on the perceived harmful dynamics added by the different generations to the women's movement in Serbia.

Aware of these dimensions, this study raises the following questions: Why were women's NGOs so prominent in the antiwar (and anti-regime) movement of the 1990s and has that affected their current role? How do feminist human rights activists understand their role within civil society in Belgrade today? How are the challenges different for activists who were operating in the opposition to the wars Serbia was waging in the 1990s to 2000s and the younger generation(s) of activists who came of age after? The context has indubitably shifted from antiwar and anti-regime to something quite different. What are the shifting challenges that activists face?

Discussion of Major Concepts

Civil Society

Civil society is the enigmatic, much debated concept that served as the backdrop of this study. However, to some extent civil society is not readily definable. To some parties, civil society may mean any organization of citizens including soccer hooligans and fledgling political parties; to others, it may be the space between the family and the state, which has come to be most visibly embodied by nongovernmental organizations.¹⁵ Civil society can be considered the third sector between the government and the family represented by the actions of citizens in that third sector. Einhorn and Sever note that this conceptualization of civil society is rooted in an understanding that civil society is in relation to liberal democracy. A postmodern analysis of civil society nuances this conceptualization by positing that this space is where activists challenge, subvert, and often reproduce the dominant discourse.

For the purpose of this study, “citizen” will be used specifically because this idea of citizenship and responsibility carries immense weight in the region of the former Yugoslavia and Serbia. As citizens of Serbia, study participants were engaging in activities that they felt compelled to take on precisely because the state did not have the capacity or will to take over these activities, such as providing services to vulnerable populations. Kaldor, Kostovicova and Said argue, in relation to a global civil society, “Civil society is about agency—it is about the ideas and activities of individual human beings in different circumstances who choose to link up

¹⁵ Zdenka Milojević states that many definitions of civil society only incorporate the “positive, constructive, liberal agendas.” Zdenka Milojević, *Civil Society in Serbia; Suppressed in the 1990s-Gaining Legitimacy and Recognition After 2000*, 39. CIVICUS Civil Society Index Report for Serbia. Belgrade, 2006. http://www.civicus.org/new/media/CSI_Serbia_country_report.pdf

across borders or in other ways to magnify their capacities to act.”¹⁶ Citizenship, agency, and feminist activism in search of a just society are the axis upon which this research rests. However, while I personally have a particular concept of civil society, I deliberately chose to leave the term undefined in interviews, allowing the interviewees to comment based on their own understandings and framework. This proved useful because there are disagreements about whether or not civil society’s role is to engage in the projects that the state should have responsibility for, or if civil society is separate from the state and the family entirely.

Transnational Feminism and Transversal Politics

Transnational feminism has emerged within feminist scholarship as both an explanatory and prescriptive theory for how to acknowledge sites of difference while communicating across these boundaries. I became aware of the need for introducing this concept into my research when I came head to head with the AWID conference as mentioned earlier. To begin, as our societies become more interconnected and globalized, social reality moves beyond the international into the *transnational*, bringing with it new dynamics of both positive and negative consequences. For example, the United Nations would be considered an international body while Women in Black, an organization and network that many of my participants belong to or were active in previously, would be considered transnational because it operates across boundaries rather than above them. Women in Black is a network of women’s groups with assemblies in eighteen countries, including Serbia. All Women in Black offshoots share the same core values of feminism, anti-militarism, peace and anti-fascism. Through organizing workshops, creating publications, and public vigils, Women in Black support and learn from one another with a clear feminist analysis. Feminist activism, this study posits, has taken on this transnational

¹⁶ Mary Kaldor, Denisa Kostovicova, and Yahia Said. “War and Peace: The Role of Global Civil Society,” 2006, 94. <http://www.gcsknowledgebase.org/wp-content/uploads/0607-06-ch4-red.pdf>

characteristic as demonstrated by the conference, Women in Black, and most importantly the responses of interviewees, many of whom felt they were fighting global issues as well as their own system.

Deriving directly from transnational feminism is the novel concept of transversal politics. The evolution of transversal politics helps to highlight its theoretical underpinnings. Nira Yuval-Davis's article entitled, "Human/Women's Rights and Feminist Transversal Politics," describes the progression of identity politics from the 1970's with the second wave of feminism: she states, "The argument of 1970's feminism, however, went even further to say not only that all women are sisters, but that they all share the same condition of oppression, and the same situated gaze of the world."¹⁷ For simplicity, this is the basest definition of identity politics. She explains that this "conflation of individual and collective identities" led to fragmentation within the global women's movement with organizations being founded by specific groups, such as lesbians, to address their needs unambiguously.¹⁸ The universal bond of sisterhood was lost to individual identities whose unique interests had previously been ignored.

Identity politics can be situated within the context of Serbia during the 1990s conflicts; Yuval-Davis states, "Feminist activism, related to situations of ethnic and national conflicts and wars, has been another significant front for the development of an international women's movement."¹⁹ This shows how solidarity based on the identity of "woman" was a rallying point for feminists during times of conflict because they could relate violent aggression during war to gendered oppression. But, she elucidates that from identity politics developed standpoint theory,

¹⁷ Nira Yuval-Davis. "Human/Women's Rights and Feminist Transversal Politics." In *Global Feminism: Transnational Women's Activism, Organizing, and Human Rights*, eds. Myra Ferree and Aili Tripp. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 276.

¹⁸ Yuval-Davis, "Human/Women's Rights and Feminist Transversal Politics," 278.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 279.

advocacy work, and—in this context of ethno-national conflicts—transversal politics were born because women “could not say they had the same gaze.”²⁰ What separates identity politics from transversal politics is the addition and embracing of standpoint theory. Standpoint theory, which is closely related to social construction, rests on the assumption that individuals’ perceptions are influenced by their experiences and location in their respective social systems. “Differences are important but, on the other hand, notions of difference should be encompassed by, rather than replace, notions of equality. Such notions of difference are not hierarchical and assume a priori respect for others’ positioning, including acknowledgment of their different social, economic, and political power.”²¹ She maintains that transversal politics resist the urge to essentialize women based on their different identities, but also maintains “a constant flow of communication both horizontally and vertically—hence the name ‘transversalism’.”²² Further, “transversal politics are used both descriptively, referring to political activities and organizing that have been taking place in a variety of locations, and normatively, as a model of political activism that is worth following.”²³ Yuval-Davis’s article was pivotal for shaping an understanding of transnational feminism but more importantly transversal politics. Transversal politics provided a framework for analyzing feminist activists’ roles within civil society in Serbia. Finally, transversal politics help deconstruct the loaded interactions between Eastern European feminists and Western feminists at the site of knowledge production and offer a way to maneuver these relationships.

²⁰ Ibid, 279.

²¹ Ibid, 281.

²² Ibid, 281.

²³ Ibid, 281.

“Druga Srbija”

Oftentimes movements must begin by defining themselves as wholly different from what they are opposed to in an effort to define what exactly they are in opposition to. Alternative actors were doing just this type of oppositional positioning in Druga Srbija. A term originating from the 1990s, Druga Srbija was used to describe in whole or in part the opposition to Milošević’s regime. Literally in the local language “Druga Srbija” means “Other Serbia” or “Second Serbia.” This space was a site of alternative discourse, opposition, and critique, at a time when alternatives were repressed and demonized. Initially—and ignorantly I might add—I had hoped to investigate the current state of Druga Srbija. In my understanding this term embodied the type of utopian liberal civil society that Marxist feminists fantasize about being a part of, with a distinct connection to the alternative, critical activist circles in Serbia and Druga Srbija.²⁴ However, this idealism was quickly shattered. There have been and still are critiques of how cohesive this alternative scene was. Interestingly, as a concept, Druga Srbija still exists and is being mulled over even now as contemporary groups ironically call themselves the Third Serbia today.²⁵ Fridman describes the “common threads that bound together the antiwar efforts—from street activism to documentation, legislative efforts, educational and cultural activities—all that created an alternative scene in Serbia, a Druga Srbija that challenged the dominant discourse and the culture of denial.”²⁶²⁷ Bearing in mind Yuval Davis and Kaldor, Kostovicova and Said’s assertion that immense collaboration and feminist activism emerge during times of conflict, a

²⁴ In this context “liberal” is meant to represent leftist politics, especially in the Serbian context. However, later in the paper when the term “neo-liberal” is utilized while referring to the capitalist, globalized version of the word which when used by respondents means the opposite of this current meaning.

²⁵ Informal conversation with the author, Belgrade, May 7, 2012

²⁶ Fridman, “Alternative Voices: Serbia’s Anti-War Activists, 1991-2004,” 109.

²⁷ One limitation of this study is a failure to address the culture of denial and the concept of dealing with the past in feminist activist circles in Serbia, in the future this could be a central area of study.

clear focus of the research became making the connection between civil society and Druga Srbija both currently and at the time of its forming.

Methodology

Techniques

Formal interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation were the main tools used during fieldwork in the spring of 2012 during a semester study abroad program with School of International Training entitled Serbia, Bosnia, and Kosovo: Peace and Conflict Studies in the Balkans. In addition to calculated observations throughout the semester, I conducted six semi-structured interviews with feminist (and sometimes overlapping self-identified human rights) activists in Belgrade during our month long independent study project. One of the participants practices her activist work in Kruševac; however, she is well connected with the scene in Belgrade. Transcribing, coding, and identifying themes throughout the interviews provided the bulk of the collected data, though reading current events and participating in an internship with the organization the Youth Initiative for Human Rights were also immensely helpful. The Youth Initiative for Human Rights is a regional network of non-governmental organizations with offices in the major cities of the Balkans (Belgrade, Pristina, Podgorica, Zagreb and Sarajevo) that operate autonomously but also work together to increase youth engagement in transitional justice and democracy within the region. I interned at the Belgrade office for one month from April to May 2012.

There are a number of feminist organizations in Belgrade and the research was designed to include interviews both with elites within the organization and informal volunteers or activists. For the purpose of this research, an “elite” was defined as professional activists who either

founded the organization or consider their position within the organization a career.²⁸ This research included women from the multiple generations; however, unfortunately most of my contacts fell in the middle generation and it would have been ideal to have more access to activists from the ends of the spectrum.

Semi-structured interviews were used as a tool to gain insight into people's perceptions and experiences. Questions about their identities and personal histories elicited narrative that elucidated these perceptions and experiences. Through this narrative, many of the interviewees commented extensively on their perceptions of the so-called women's movement within Serbia and often the corresponding generation's role in the women's movement in Serbia. Due to language constraints and timing, I did not attend many local feminist events; however, I did conduct a comprehensive search of publications from various women's organizations as well as compilations of firsthand accounts by activists in the region, many of them feminists from Belgrade. I was able to find different types of activists such as professional, artistic, and grassroots activists. However, it is important to note the balancing act faced when trying to separate organizations from activists, personalities from organizations, and activists from the movement itself. Possibly due to the research design itself, the resulting data often treads the line between the collective and the individual, perceptions and descriptions. Part of this is also due to the makeup of the feminist subsection of civil society where single personalities are often the backbone of a single organization, and yet many especially middle generation activists, are involved with multiple overlapping initiatives. This is particularly salient when reading feminist scholarship from the region, as there are a handful of Serbian feminists that are widely cited and

²⁸ It is important to note the negative connotations that the word "elite" has in the Serbian civil society context. There is a pervasive negative perception in Serbian society that activists who make activism their career are war profiteers and Western traitors.

quite prolific.²⁹ Informal discussions among activists that I met regarding the categorization of feminist human rights activists helped me view interviewees' responses in relation to their positionality in a certain branch of activism such as elite, grassroots, academic or other.

Because of the changing nature of activism and communication Facebook was indeed a tool to contact potential interview participants through the organization's Facebook page. This is important to note this because of the rising emphasis in social movement analysis on social media as a mobilization tool. I contacted five additional organizations through their websites whose stated goals matched the feminist values implicit in this research; however, only one woman responded and I relied more heavily on contacts through my local advisor during my semester abroad.

Orli Fridman's "Alternative Voices: Serbia's Anti-War Activists" was important for framing an understanding of different approaches to activism by providing a breakdown of the different departments of anti-war activism and civil society during the 1990s such as "the education department, the legal department, research and documentation department, and the department of street activism."³⁰ However, these departments continue to be most relevant for human rights activism now rather than feminist activism, which may reflect the development from antiwar and anti-regime activism to social justice activism within feminist camps. The women interviewed represented, officially or unofficially, various nongovernmental organizations in Serbia. These organizations fell into two categories: service providing feminist organizations or legal and social activism. A brief overview of some of these organizations will help to contextualize the activists as they are often referred to through their associations. The SOS Hotline, which has locations in Belgrade and Kruševac, as well as the Incest Trauma Centre

²⁹ Dašha Duhaček and Lepa Mladenjović are two that have consistently arisen in the literature.

³⁰ Fridman, "Alternative Voices: Serbia's Anti-War Activists, 1991-2004," 109.

provide services such as counseling to women in Serbia. Žene na Delu works for the economic empowerment and emancipation of women through workshops and consciousness raising activities while ACT Women is an “art-ivist” group that uses art and theater to raise awareness about issues facing women. Labris also focuses on lesbian human rights while blending the legal, social and service providing activism.

My Positionality

When beginning a project of inquiry that attempts to describe a specific social phenomenon, it is important to locate oneself as a researcher both geographically and within the existing dialogue. As a Western researcher in academia my location shapes the way I engaged with this research. I employed reflective practices throughout this exercise to make sense of my research question and to understand my station within this dialogue. Nancy Naples established that, “...reflective practice informed by standpoint analyses of positionality encourages feminist scholars to examine how gendered and racialized assumptions influence which voices and experiences are privileged in ethnographic encounters.”³¹ I have chosen to study a specific population that is laden with preconceptions that go beyond merely gender and race. My decision to investigate a post-conflict society forced me to reflect on my assumptions and position throughout the research process.

Furthermore—as postmodern feminist scholars, including Nancy Naples, have come to understand—knowledge production itself is a site of socially constructed discourse that is not separate from power dynamics. Naples states:

Postmodern feminist scholars emphasize the ways disciplinary discourses shape how researchers see the worlds they investigate and how ‘without critique of the

³¹ Nancy Naples, *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 23.

metanarratives that theoretically and practically sustain the structures and discourses of academia, research operates to reinsert power relations, rather than challenge them.³²

Geopolitical power relations shape the knowledge production process and a keen awareness of this fact is the first step to deconstructing it.

My position as a Western (and American) researcher inevitably biased my own interpretation as well as how my interviewees received me. I revealed to a couple of my interviewees my struggle with being an American researching in a post-conflict society, especially when I could be examining my own country's impact on that society. I made every effort to understand Druga Srbija and feminism within the local context and to convey this to my contacts whether by researching their organization before our meeting or knowing enough about the current elections to hold a conversation before our recorded interview started. It was a refreshing that my contacts seemed to have confidence in my knowledge of the region and did not spend a fair amount of time explaining history to me but rather were very forthcoming about their interpretations of the current state of the women's movement in Serbia and their individual process with becoming involved in activism. I crafted the interview questions in an effort to show a deeper knowledge of their context, so that I could hear their perspectives rather than rhetoric or an explanation of the history.

I consider myself a feminist and have encountered very few situations in which I felt unable to identify myself openly as such. I will be using a feminist perspective in my analysis and believe feminist theory was instrumental throughout my research process. However, I acknowledge that "feminist" is a very contentious term in this region—and also worldwide—therefore, I sought out individuals that seem to demonstrate the qualities that I view as feminist

³² Naples, *Feminism and Method*, 22.

through their activities and associations (i.e. equality, social justice, etc.). Through my interview questions I allowed my participants to either embrace or reject both the term “feminist” as well as “human rights activist.” Values and goals were ultimately more important to the research study than labels. I had anticipated some resistance to the term “feminist” but was met with overwhelming enthusiasm, which is more representative of my sample population (as activists) than the general population. All of my contacts firmly and openly embraced the term feminist, though a few vehemently rejected the description “human rights.”

Major Turning Points

One of the largest turning points in this research occurred when I received a response to an interview request that openly stated, “I am willing to help you with your research though I have to admit that I am quite skeptical towards that term and concept of Druga Srbija.”³³ I had done regrettably few interviews up to that point and my contacts had conveyed to me the outdated use of the term “Druga Srbija,” but had been timid in expressing their personal reaction to the term itself quite possibly because of my identity as an outsider. This interview helped me understand more fully how the feminist sphere of civil society in Belgrade has distanced itself from the mainstream even within a liberal scene. This turning point also emphasized the need to build upon previous interviews and introduce the topics that preceding interviewees had felt strongly about to compare and contrast their views. As can only be expected, certain contacts felt very strongly about one topic while another may have brushed it off easily which highlighted the importance for me of using semi-structured interviews that allowed my participants to openly discuss the topics they felt were the most pressing for their organization or themselves at this time.

³³ Email correspondence with the author, Belgrade, April 19, 2012.

Limitations

Language was a huge barrier in at least two interviews. Not only were the concepts investigated abstract and far removed from everyday vocabulary, even respondents who were fluent or nearly so became frustrated that they were unable to express themselves in their native tongue. Often a single word in the local language, that was regrettably untranslatable, best encapsulated their thoughts. Additionally, despite her best efforts, one of the respondents became so frustrated that open-ended questions were met with yes or no answers and there was very little room for prodding. I encouraged this participant to send me any additional thoughts in her native language through email, which I was willing to have translated. I hoped to include her candid thoughts in my study but the participant did not send additional thoughts.

Though I conducted six substantial interviews that produced an abundance of material, I had hoped to interview even more activists especially as I grasped a better critical understanding of the topics and could conduct more in-depth interviews. There were a handful of activists who were unable to meet in person but who offered to fill out my questions and email them back to me. Again, none of these contacts sent their responses. However, I wholeheartedly acknowledge how busy these women are, they are activists after all, and I greatly appreciate the time that the women who granted me interviews took out of their busy lives to meet with me if even for an hour or two.

Theoretical Re-conceptualizations of Feminist Mobilization in Eastern Europe

Serbia and the former Yugoslavia³⁴ have become destinations for much research, especially for scholars in the field of women and gender studies. In numerous anthologies, however, the region is pointed to as *sui generis*, focusing heavily on antiwar organizing or simply left out of analyses theorizing women's participation in post-communist states, given that their participation materializes differently from standard Western interpretations. Einhorn and Sever argue against the popular idea that women have not organized in post-socialist societies. In their article "Gender and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe", Einhorn and Sever point out that the theorizing about women organizing in Eastern Europe relies primarily on civil society as a construct of liberal democracy which "[has] defined the very nature of civil society activity such as women's movements as they are 'expected' to arise" as well as the strategic concerns that they are intended to have.³⁵ In the boom of scholarship addressing transitioning (to liberal democracy), the authors identify two "myths of transition" which have arisen.³⁶ The first myth pertains to the time of state socialism in which women were nominally equal but "politically inactive."³⁷ The second myth asserts, "women in Central and Eastern Europe rejected feminism" during the transition period and "failed to take advantage of this opening and the opportunities it provided for increased political involvement."³⁸ These myths have shaped the way Western feminists and Eastern European feminists have understood the burgeoning women's movements in post-socialist states. Einhorn and Sever's analysis provides two case

³⁴ Though there were multiple manifestations of "Yugoslavia," I primarily refer to Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was in existence from World War II to the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in 1992.

³⁵ Barbara Einhorn and Charlotte Sever, "Gender and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 5:2 (2003):167-170.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 165.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 165.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 165.

studies on vibrant women's movements in Poland and the former Yugoslavia to debunk these myths. The significance of these case studies is not that they are the exception to this overarching perception of women's organizing in post-socialist states but that our theories about transition have been limited and require nuancing.

Einhorn and Sever are swift to note the differences between organizing in the US and organizing in post-socialist states. And furthermore *between* these countries, stating, "An analysis of these differences and the ideological power relationships that underpin them is essential in destabilizing the 'myths of transition.'"³⁹ This need to point out the differences is certainly in response to critiques from Eastern European feminists that Western feminists were not acknowledging their unique activities. Theorizing is an important part of knowledge production, allowing us to make sense of our world. However, as the process of knowledge production continues scholars must continually strive to adapt their theories to include situational specifics while pointing to the shared experiences of women regionally and throughout the world.

Marina Blagojević's central argument in "Creators, Transmitters, and Users: Women's Scientific Excellence at the Semi-Periphery of Europe" pertains to the lack of epistemological production from the area that she calls the "semi-periphery." Blagojević defines the semi-periphery as the geographical area close to—but not subsumed within—the imperiously assumed center of the world. In her view, the core is considered Western Europe and North America where social science in particular is recognized as originating from. Though largely discussing feminist scholarship and knowledge production from the position of academia, her discussion is predominantly relevant for this research on feminist activists in Belgrade because of their

³⁹ Ibid, 168.

interactions with feminist scholarship from “the West”. Additionally, many of the interviewees were involved with the Belgrade Women’s Studies Centre, which primarily relied on translated texts from Western feminist authors. Though they may not be aware of it, Western feminists consider themselves the center while approaching “semi-periphery” feminists to discuss their experience as a “supplementary activity” to add to the central ideas of feminism that originates from the Western perspective.⁴⁰ Blagojević intimates that knowledge produced from and by the semi-periphery is lacking a theoretical foundation (as considered by the core).

Former-Yugoslav feminisms are part of this continuum between semi-periphery and core. Many of the anthologies attempting to mediate the lack of publications from Eastern European feminists caution that Yugoslav feminism is different and unique from both Western and other Eastern European feminisms. In the context of the EU enlargement, Blagojević points out that these semi-periphery (or transition) countries are not quite different enough but certainly not European enough, at least not yet: “So wherever the process of enlargement is slowed down, it is due to the lack of [sic] ‘modernisation’” rather than a difference in experience or goals.⁴¹ Blagojević ties this into knowledge production when she points out the dependency on core country funding and their ability to invite semi-periphery theorists but with their own agenda in mind.⁴² The issue of core country funding will be addressed in relation to transnational interactions later in the paper.

Blagojević next tackles the idea of epistemological production through the analogy of “scientific excellence,” questioning throughout her text whether or not knowledge produced by

⁴⁰ Marina Blagojević, “Creators, Transmitters and Users: Women’s Scientific Excellence at the Semi- periphery of Europe,” In *Gender and Excellence in the Making*. Brussels: European Commission Research Publications (2004), 136.

⁴¹ Ibid, 136.

⁴² Ibid, 137.

the semi-periphery could ever be recognized as “excellence” by the core. Blagojević proposes something related to but beyond standpoint epistemology, stating:

In a way, standpoint epistemology should be advocated both for the core and for the semi-periphery, or periphery. However, the precondition for the cognitive leap is not in [sic] summarising different standpoints, but in creating a deeper understanding of why and how different ways of knowing and different knowledge are shaped by those standpoints.⁴³

A “deeper understanding” can only be achieved by locating research within the historical context of the region being theorized. The research itself should endeavor to examine the interactions between the semi-periphery and the core with an understanding that the interactions are continuously shaping both parties. Blagojević adds:

Standpoint epistemology, although the only heuristically fruitful position of the social scientists at the semi-periphery, bears a high risk of producing both marginal knowledge and marginality of scientists, especially in the conditions of the absence of wider epistemic communities at the semi-periphery, capable of creating adequate context for scientific evaluation.⁴⁴

There is a need for a new epistemological base. One emerging response within feminist circles is *transversal politics*, a concept to be discussed later in relation to Nira Yuval-Davis. Blagojević’s critique of core hegemony does not ignore the debate between Eastern and Western feminists about this topic, specifically during the early post-state socialist transition period up to now. She credits the responsive dialogue to emerging post-colonial feminism and the fact that semi-periphery feminist critiques were met with “openness and benevolence.”⁴⁵

Contrasting Blagojević, Allaine Cerwonka’s “Traveling Feminist Thought: Difference and Transculturation in Central and Eastern European Feminism” poses an alternative to

⁴³ Ibid, 139.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 140.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 143.

Blagojević's idea that the semi-periphery is different from the core but not different enough to be given the chance to create new ways of knowing. Cerwonka proposes:

Understanding how various discourses and institutions, both patriarchal and feminist, circulate transnationally and are manifest in particular local contexts is crucial for understanding the true complexity of power relations within the discipline of women's and gender studies in a global era. And, ultimately, understanding the transculturation of feminist theory can enable us to create more nuanced theory.⁴⁶

Cerwonka summarizes much of the existing critiques of this dilemma, aptly posed by Blagojević as the core-semi-periphery-periphery continuum, by showing how each author has acknowledged the power dynamics between Western feminists researching Eastern Europe and the early failure to see Eastern European feminisms as legitimate. Cerwonka describes how Western feminists over generalize when applying their theories, but then Eastern European feminist backlash over generalizes in reaction, pointing to difference, through the use of standpoint theory.⁴⁷ She posits that the solution in this feminist circle has been to allow Eastern European women to “articulate their difference” in special editions of journals and conferences.⁴⁸ Cerwonka alludes to the recent emphasis on and critiques of multiculturalism in North American, describing how the “Western feminism doesn't apply to Eastern Europe” line of thought allows Western feminists to acknowledge their discomfort but “on the condition that [Eastern European feminists] display their difference.”⁴⁹ Blagojević supports the idea that Western feminists reward Eastern European feminists for “displaying their difference”. Both analyses emphasize the *process* of knowledge production in feminist scholarship. Feminist thinking asserts that theory is lived experience, but

⁴⁶ Allaine Cerwonka, “Traveling Feminist Thought: Difference and Transculturation in Central and Eastern European Feminism,” *Signs* 33:4 (2008): 811.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 816.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 817.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 817.

understanding the relationships and power dynamics that occur behind the scenes of theory production allows us to see how representations themselves can reinscribe power relations.

Cerwonka, however, considers bipolar displays of difference simplistic because of the differences within Central and Eastern Europe and even more so, within countries themselves.

Acknowledging the stark rural/urban divide in many of their contexts, she claims:

Thus, for instance, some women in Serbia in the 1970s may have had more in common with women in France than they had either with lower-class women in their own societies or with women in Belarus, a country with a very different form of state socialism.⁵⁰

Yet, the pendulum swings both ways, and criticism of Western feminism usually points to a few theorists who do not necessarily represent the current debates within feminist scholarship, or they contradictorily use American-based scholars such as bell hooks to critique Western hegemony.⁵¹

It is this, Cerwonka argues, that problematizes crediting certain theories to distinct locations or identities without acknowledging the diversity or continuously changing nature of feminist scholarship.

Cerwonka considers this process transculturation, which asks the central questions: “how [have] feminist ideas from elsewhere entered these societies, under what circumstances [do] they circulate, and how have they been creatively transformed[?]”.⁵² Cerwonka poses that “teleological frameworks continue to haunt feminist scholarship and activism” by assuming that the ultimate goal is that all feminisms are the same or all feminisms are different. She concludes that they influence one another through transculturation. I argue that if theory is lived experience, then by developing new theory from Eastern European feminists’ experience that doesn’t

⁵⁰ Ibid, 821.

⁵¹ Ibid, 822.

⁵² Ibid, 826.

reinforce difference but rather shows the exchange and production of knowledge, feminists can create new theory.

Literature Review

History of the Women's Movement in Serbia and Yugoslavia

Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia: An Encyclopedia lays out a picture of an urban women's consciousness during the interwar period between World War I and World War II, both of which affected Yugoslavia greatly and contributed to the Balkans' crude characterization as "Europe's powder keg." This consciousness revolved around women's educational achievements as a means to rediscover a South Slav national identity through history and language.⁵³

"Yugoslavia" itself means Land of the South Slavs. After World War II and into "the 1970s, women constituted almost half of those attending institutions of higher education."⁵⁴ Yugoslav women's presence within higher education is notable for countering the common misperception that socialist states supported uneducated masses; however, as Cerwonka noted, there was a diversity of experience within Yugoslavia itself and this educational achievement does not explicate the rural/urban divide within Yugoslavia. As the capital of Yugoslavia, Belgrade offered more educational opportunities to women, which certainly influenced the decision to study feminist activists within Belgrade.

The *Encyclopedia* describes early women's mobilization during the 1930's in the First Yugoslavia (before Josip Broz Tito formed the People's Republic of Yugoslavia) and then

⁵³ John Allock, Marko Milivojević, and John Horton, eds. *Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia: An Encyclopedia*. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1998), 329.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 329.

during the Partizan struggle of Josip Broz Tito against the Axis forces in Yugoslavia during World War II.

Women's participation in the "national liberation struggle" (the war against the Axis powers in Yugoslavia) of 1941-1945 was a critical factor in the extension of their rights. The official figure for women's participation on the Partizan side was 2 million. Some 100,000 were soldiers in the Partizan forces, a quarter of whom were killed; approximately 2,000 women achieved officer's rank.⁵⁵

Women's involvement in the US military is still a contentious issue, and this speaks volumes to the state of women's position in the early Yugoslavia. After World War II the Yugoslav constitution solidified some of the "civil and economic rights" gained by women during the war, but, as the *Encyclopedia* asserts, "there was virtually no improvement in Yugoslav women's status after 1945."⁵⁶ As the country looked toward rebuilding itself and Tito focused on creating a strong Yugoslavia within the Non-Aligned Movement, this period of transition and stagnation left a void for women's political activism that was filled by party politics and Yugoslav solidarity. Yugoslavia is often pointed to as a unique case of socialism because it was non-aligned during the Cold War, opening it up culturally and economically to both the East and the West. Cerwonka's theory of transculturation is important in the context of Yugoslavia as a non-aligned country; the migration of ideas and the ability to travel that many other citizens of socialist countries did not enjoy are but two of the tangible embodiments of transculturation.

In line with this interconnectedness, Yugoslavia was not removed from the political energy of the 1970s that was seen in the US and elsewhere. The *Encyclopedia* describes the blooming women's movement of the 1970s in the cultural centers of Zagreb (the capital of Croatia) and Ljubljana (the capital of Slovenia). *State Society Relations in Yugoslavia 1945-1992*, explains that the 1970s were a time of underlying upheaval for Yugoslavia, "with

⁵⁵ Ibid, 329.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 329.

Yugoslavia losing its stateness...and its republics gaining statehood during the same period.”⁵⁷

The decline in Yugoslav centralization was linked with Tito’s declining power. Understanding this transformation is important for understanding the Yugoslav women’s movement as well as the impending breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The *Encyclopedia* further adds that Zagreb’s women’s group was not associated with the Community Party and was explicitly feminist.⁵⁸ The autonomy of Zagreb’s women’s organization points to the unique type of socialism that Yugoslavia operated under, particularly as part of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. Later, in the early 1990s, Belgrade feminists were able to form the Women’s Party of Belgrade, ŽEST, and the Democratic Movements of Women. These organizations point to the political energy apparent at the time.

The national independence of each of the republics and the resulting conflicts exposed a demonization of women’s organizing that was not in support of the independence (or in the case of Serbia, holding together) of the state.⁵⁹ “The Balkan Wars and the Breakup of Yugoslavia” in *Women, The State, and War* charts the antiwar organizing by women at the beginning of the war period that emphasized anti-nationalism and peace, but as the conflict became more divisive and the individual state regimes became more oppressive, it became harder to maintain this coalition across ethnic lines.⁶⁰ Many of the women organizing still held onto a Yugoslav identity that superseded the ethnic identities maintained by the individual republics. *Women, The State, and War* points to the difficulty of distancing from their national identity while supporting peace,

⁵⁷ Valerie Bunce, “Conclusion,” in *State-Society Relations in Yugoslavia, 1945-1992*, eds. Melissa Bokovoy, Jill Irvine, and Carol Lilly, 349 (Scranton, PA: Haddon Craftsmen, 1997).

⁵⁸ Allock, Milivojević, and Horton, *Encyclopedia*, 330.

⁵⁹ Fridman, “Alternative Voices: Serbia’s Anti-War Activists, 1991-2004,” 145.

⁶⁰ Joyce Kaufman and Kristen Williams, “The Balkan Wars and the Breakup of Yugoslavia,” in *Women, The State, and War: A Comparative Perspective on Citizenship and Nationalism*, ed. Joyce Kaufman and Kristen Williams, 79-114. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

especially for Serbian feminists whose government was seen as the aggressor. Eventually, the Women's Party, ŽEST, in Belgrade was disbanded over the divide. A piece by two Belgrade feminists from the period entitled, "Belgrade Feminists 1992: Separation, Guilt, and Identity Crisis," illustrates this struggle over national identity and feminist identity.⁶¹ Feminists who had initially come together to promote their interests as women were faced with a dilemma over claiming their national identity and thus implicitly supporting the actions of their government or denouncing the powers that had manipulated that identity in pursuit of power.⁶²

Balancing these interests proved difficult even within the antiwar movement. From 1996, Sonja Licht and Slobodan Drakulić's "When the Word for Peacemaker was Women: War and Gender in the Former Yugoslavia" provides an overview of women's involvement in the peace movement and transition in former Yugoslavia by complicating the often essentialist discussions that point to women's inherent feminine peace-loving nature. Essentialism reduces men and women to specific traits that are supposedly natural and biological rather than social constructed or reinforced through institutions and society. Licht and Drakulić point out that, "The first anti-war demonstrations were organized by an alliance of three women's organizations: the Women's Parliament, Women's Lobby, and Women's Party."⁶³ On the other hand, Licht and Drakulić explore how women's mobilization was manipulated in service of political and ethnic regimes, as mothers—who were not against war itself but against their sons fighting for the wrong side—organized protests.⁶⁴ This essentialist manipulation reflects the need to study *feminist* civil society organizing specifically.

⁶¹ Lepa Mladjenović, and Vera Litricin, "Belgrade Feminists 1992: Separation, Guilt and Identity Crisis." *Feminist Review* 45. (1993): 113-119.

⁶² Kaufman and Williams, "The Balkan Wars and the Breakup of Yugoslavia," 95.

⁶³ Licht and Drakulić, "When the Word for Peacemaker was Women: War and Gender in the Former Yugoslavia."

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Cynthia Cockburn examines this feminist activism by looking at the wartime organizing of the notorious Women in Black network in Serbia, or *Ženu u Crnom* in Serbian. Cockburn herself is a member of the international network of Women in Black and praises the Serbian faction for their commitment to reflexive practices and feminist analysis. *Žene u Crnom* was highly active throughout the wars; through public protests invoking silence and notions of citizenship and responsibility they voiced their resistance to the Milošević regime. She also notes that *Žene u Crnom* was not alone in their feminist consciousness and Belgrade hosted a vibrant group of feminists.

A conscious gender analysis of the unfolding realities in Yugo-space has always been *Žene u Crnom*'s strengths. . . . But the analysis didn't come from them, *Žene u Crnom*, alone. They were the mechanism that kept up the street action, but they weren't the only feminist initiative in Belgrade. The analysis, the slogans and campaigns were generated by several feminist projects, linked by overlapping membership and a shared feminist, anti-nationalist and antimilitaristic politics.⁶⁵

The previous discussion of the history of the women's movement in Serbia and Yugoslavia shows how this feminist, anti-nationalist and antimilitaristic consciousness developed through hard struggles within the larger movement. Cockburn's examination of the Belgrade feminist enclave will be discussed in greater detail in relation to some of the greater insights about the movement.

"The women's movement in Serbia and Montenegro at the turn of the millennium: a sociological study of women's groups" by Andjelka Milić is a broad analysis of women's groups in Serbia and Montenegro in 1994 (at the time, one country). The author advocates for an institutional mechanism for gender equality rather than the diffuse network that currently exists. She concludes, "Spontaneity prevails over formal organizational elements that could lead

⁶⁵ Cynthia Cockburn, *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism & Feminist Analysis*. (London, UK: Zed Books, 2007), 86.

towards the institutionalization of the movement at the national level in the near future.”⁶⁶ An institutional mechanism has been the measurement of many countries’ women’s movements but may not be the best fit in a country with little state support. This study was helpful in filling in gaps in the data collected in Serbia for this research. Through surveys and interviews, Milić investigates the visibility of women’s groups within Serbia and Montenegro as seen and understood by the public as well as activists’ own perceptions of their efficacy and goals. She then compares this to data collected from prominent female figures within Serbia and Montenegro. She also notes the distinct generational differences between women in prominent positions and local women’s group activists. Milić finds that the tenacious ignorance of feminist goals and negative image of the feminist movement within the region are the largest deterrents in the face of effective feminist organizing.

An important document originating directly from the region is "Voice of Difference from Serbia: Alternative Report to the CEDAW Committee." This document is from a number of women’s groups that came together in 2007 after the CEDAW committee received the official CEDAW report on Serbia.⁶⁷ Much to their dismay, the report was wholly inaccurate and limited in scope. The alternative report lays out statistics and points of contention with the official report on issues ranging from human trafficking to women’s political representation. Important for this research were sections on women’s leadership from “the shadows” in the NGO sector which delineated the autonomy of women’s organizing, separate from the state, but chastised the state report for failing to mention the work that women’s organizations have done before, during, and

⁶⁶ Andjelka Milić, "The Women's Movement in Serbia and Montenegro at the Turn of the Millennium: a Sociological Study of Women's Groups," *Feminist Review* 76 (2004): 81.

⁶⁷ The groups include: Voice of Difference – Group for Promotion of Women’s Political Rights, Autonomous Women’s Center, ASTRA, Incest Trauma Center, and Women in Black

after the wars.⁶⁸ This alternative report was pivotal for a broader understanding of the women's movement in Serbia by describing its often-stated faults but also undeniable strength and resiliency.

Development of Civil Society in Serbia and Women within Civil Society

As Kaldor, Kostovicova, and Said state, “While war tends to polarize and reduce the space where people can debate freely, it can also, paradoxically, promote civil society—many significant groups and organizations were founded in reaction to war.”⁶⁹ Though civil society has evolved in the post-conflict era and the history of women's organizing shows that a civil society space was present before the wars, civil society in Serbia has been inextricably linked with the antiwar and anti-regime movement of the 1990s. Additionally, the antiwar and anti-regime movement had a visible, and often pointed to, prominent female presence.

At the beginning of this research in April 2012, the global community commemorated the Siege of Sarajevo, marking twenty years since it began. After two decades, civil society and activism have evolved noticeably. One activist, Svetlana Kijevčanin, describes the idea of “peacetime activism” as the shift from “intervention to prevention.”⁷⁰ Though the author's context is Bosnia and Herzegovina, and thus separate from Serbia, the significance of her point applies. Activists did not dissipate following war; instead, they have remained present and focused their efforts on other aims. For example, whilst the “intervention” Kijevčanin mentions translates to the anti-war movement effort in Serbia, the “prevention” has manifested itself in social justice foci. Several of the interviewees exemplify this transition—that from intervention

⁶⁸ (March 30, 2007). Voice of Difference from Serbia. Alternative Report to the CEDAW Committee. Belgrade, Serbia, 45.

⁶⁹ Kaldor, Kostovicova, and Said, “War and Peace: The Role of Global Civil Society,” 94.

⁷⁰ Svetlana Kijevčanin, “Reflections on Activism,” in *20 Pieces of Encouragement for Awakening and Change: Peacebuilding in the Region of the Former Yugoslavia*, ed. Helena Rill, Tamara Šmidling, and Ana Bitoljanu. (Belgrade-Sarajevo: Centre for Nonviolent Action, 2007), 59.

to prevention—with their current effort for LGBT rights. This progression from anti-war intervention to social justice and/or prevention proved to be a prominent point for investigation.⁷¹

Paul Stubbs' article "Civil Society or Ubleha?: reflections on flexible concepts, meta-NGOs and new social energy in the post-Yugoslav space" is a key work on the development of civil society in former Yugoslavia, the shift from movements to organizations as well as the creation of meta-NGOs.⁷² "NGOization," or this shift from movements to organizations, has been a dirty word in the last couple of years, particularly in feminist circles.⁷³ According to Stubbs, meta-NGOs are emerging organizations that are NGOs that consult and fund smaller NGOs. One example of a meta-NGO is the Women's Reconstruction Fund in Serbia. None of the respondents work for this meta-NGO but the Women's Reconstruction Fund was brought up in numerous discussions, especially while interviewing one activist whose organization (ACT Women) shares an office with the Women's Reconstruction Fund.⁷⁴ Stubbs' discussion of "elitist anti-nationalists" reflects some of the feminist critique as well as generational dynamics heard in interviews about the concept *Druga Srbija* itself. Stubbs states, "The elitist claimant to 'genuine' civil society, whilst no longer a source of positive social energy, continues to prevail in the public sphere."⁷⁵ I first became aware of the generational interactions during a presentation by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights when one of the activists noted the "old school tactics" of

⁷¹ In fact, Serbia proper did not experience war on its own territory until the 1999 NATO bombing campaign.

⁷² Paul Stubbs, "Civil Society or Ubleha?: Reflections on Flexible Concepts, Meta-NGOs and New Social Energy in the Post-Yugoslav Space," in *20 Pieces of Encouragement for Awakening and Change: Peacebuilding in the Region of the Former Yugoslavia*, ed. Helena Rill, Tamara Šmidling, & Ana Bitoljanu, 215-228 (Belgrade-Sarajevo: Centre for Nonviolent Action, 2007).

⁷³ NGOization did not figure itself prominently in respondents' discussions as a pressing challenge for them as activists.

⁷⁴ Despite multiple attempts, an interview was never secured with an activist from the Women's Reconstruction Fund.

⁷⁵ Stubbs, "Civil Society or Ubleha?" 226.

⁷⁶ There is research abound on the development of civil society in Serbia as well as research initiatives to assess the current state of civil society. One such initiative proved useful for a broader view of civil society in Serbia as a whole, a report by the organization CIVICUS called *Civil Society in Serbia; Suppressed in the 1990s-Gaining Legitimacy and Recognition After 2000*, the Civil Society Index Report for Serbia from 2006.

some of the older generations of activists. She was adamant that the Youth Initiative for Human Rights was looking toward the future while older generations of activists were stuck in their old ways. This dynamic will be addressed later in this paper.

Findings

Feminist vs. Human Rights

This discussion begins with the question that often set the tone of an entire interview and greatly reflected the approach that each contact took with their activism: Do you identify yourself as a human rights activist and if so, what does that mean to you? Additionally, do you identify yourself as a feminist and if so, what does that mean to you? This discursive framing is important for understanding how activists brought certain theoretical orientations to their work. The answers fell into three categories, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The first was a genial acknowledgment that the two are undoubtedly related. “Among other things yes, of course, because I think feminist activism of course is a part of human rights activism and also as well as pacifist activism so yes, definitely, I would.”⁷⁷ Especially in connection with the 1990s anti-war movement, pacifism in the region can be perceived as closely linked with human rights activism. By acknowledging that all of these ideals are interconnected and related, the respondent reveals a tactic similar to liberal feminism: that feminism, human rights, and pacifism are merely tools used to gain a higher goal, but that as tools, they are neutral.

Two respondents agreed that human rights and feminism were connected, but felt a primary affinity for feminism. One in particular defined herself as a “feminist lesbian activist,

⁷⁷ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 19, 2012

anti-fascist activist and feminist counselor.”⁷⁸ When asked if she identified herself as a human rights activist she stated, “I’m primarily a lesbian feminist activist and an anti-fascist activist, I cannot really separate the two things.”⁷⁹ But if other people were using the term human rights she would go along. This was not a matter of contention for her. In her view, however, social movements and feminist movements have been mainstreamed. She believed that this mainstreaming had not fundamentally changed the way that society operated, clarifying that the only way for this “classical, patriarchal society” to mainstream these movements was to talk about “rights rather than needs.”⁸⁰ This view reflects her work as a feminist counselor working with the trauma and emotions of survivors of “male violence.”⁸¹ This view is separated from the first because though there is a hierarchy of what is most appropriate and vital, feminism and human rights agendas are not considered in contention. Another respondent articulated this viewpoint of interconnection by stating:

I cannot see human rights activism as something separate, it’s similar for me. If you do not have any awareness of feminist issues or women’s rights issues then how can you be a human rights activist?⁸²

This category reflects an approach that supports a human rights agenda but sees a feminist lens as more active and specific.

Farther along the spectrum were the respondents who were ultimately critical of the human rights rhetoric and thus felt it was important to maintain their feminist identity as paramount because it needed to be clear that “this is a gendered issue.”⁸³ An activist from Žene na Delu or “Women at Work,” who brought the problem of the term Druga Srbija to the forefront

⁷⁸ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 15, 2012

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 23, 2012

⁸³ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 25, 2012

of this research, further complicated the notion of an inclusive, humanist interpretation of human rights advocacy.

No, I would say I am a feminist activist. Of course it goes along with the concept of human rights and if you asked me this question a few years ago I would probably say yeah human rights blah blah but I feel that the concept of human rights has to be challenged in certain areas because human rights has become so mainstreamed and so flattened... and I see feminism as both an ideological and theoretical position that has to challenge things immediately, you cannot be satisfied.⁸⁴

Both of these activists were extremely critical of the European rhetoric associated with human rights and how it has been misused or remained on the level of rhetoric and has not led to concrete action. The activist from Žene na Delu pointed to the abuse of the Roma population under the guise of “human rights” by relocating entire settlements without addressing the fundamental issues at hand which are poverty and discrimination.⁸⁵ These activists believed that feminism is needed as separate from human rights because human rights, in its current manifestation, fails to recognize not only the gender issues it ought to include, but the critical gaze that a feminist perspective brings.

This division between women’s rights and human rights mirrors the larger global debate occurring presently. Some of the respondents admitted that “a few years ago” they would have identified differently. The evolution from women’s rights to women’s human rights and now to feminism has been an interesting one. Yuval-Davis discusses the development of the “women’s rights as human rights approach” which emerged as rhetorical tool during the UN Conference in Vienna 1994 specifically (which the older generation respondent attended and reminisced about

⁸⁴ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 24, 2012

⁸⁵ Ibid.

fondly).⁸⁶ But other respondents are noticeably critiquing the “rights” rhetoric as not adequate or analytical enough.

In *Feminism and Method* Nancy Naples addresses the concern that the institutionalization of issues close to feminists’ hearts often leads the issues to be coopted, depoliticized, or to lose their critical feminist lens.⁸⁷ The process of reinterpreting power inequalities makes them vulnerable to co-optation. According to Naples:

Ruling relations and resistance are evident in both the processes that generate a particular social movement frame as well as in the way the frame is circulated, interpreted, and reinscribed with alternative meanings, and taken up by potential allies as well as opponents.⁸⁸

Feminists in Belgrade are particularly wary of having their cause “taken up” because they foresee greater harm than benefit in many cases.

Though this debate is taking place on the global stage as well, the transformation and contention will be looked at specifically in the Serbian context. What has changed or stayed the same since the 1990s? As feminist resistance in Serbia evolved from anti-war to human rights, feminists in Belgrade realized that the universal applicability of human rights was being abused and so there was a greater need to accentuate feminism and social justice. The stagnant political context and the process of EU integration show that the rhetoric of human rights has not provided enough of a revolutionary change for women’s position in the Serbian context and not only that, it has been co-opted by politicians during the integration process. Co-optation by the state remains an ever-present threat for women’s movements in various countries. Furthermore, the EU accession process has led many Serbian politicians to espouse human rights rhetoric but

⁸⁶ Yuval-Davis, “Human/Women’s Rights and Feminist Transversal Politics,” 276.

⁸⁷ Naples, *Feminism and Method*, 89.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 91.

these politicians were and are part of the system that perpetuates the problems as can be seen by the recent reemergence of the Socialist Party of Serbia.

Einhorn and Sever's second myth of transition that, "women in Central and Eastern Europe rejected feminism" during the transition period and "failed to take advantage of this opening and the opportunities it provided for increased political involvement" is clearly refuted by these activists.⁸⁹ Not only do they embrace feminism, many of them are rejecting the use of human rights rhetoric because of its association with "liberal democratic" abuses. In addition, the "political involvement" available to these activists is largely within the third sector of civil society. To posit that these women lacked political involvement is to ignore their positions of leadership within non-governmental organizations and their politically conscious activism.

Blagojević incorporates the use of standpoint theory into her concept of the semi-periphery, which can both be used to view the embracing of feminism by these particular "semi-periphery" activists. What is it about former Yugoslavia's historical and physical location and unique collective experiences that made these Serbian women more likely to identify as feminist than many other Eastern European women activists? This question is large and evasive but Serbia's physical and ideological location on the semi-periphery of Europe may be the first place to look. The carrot of EU accession was talked about often in political commentary about which party was "pro-Europe," a statement that communicates that Serbia is not part of Europe but could be. Furthermore, European identity was an enigmatic concept that flitted in and out of my awareness during field research. At one point my homestay mother during my study abroad program commented that when a food tasted spectacular it was common in Serbia to say, "This is Europe." Equating feminism to European identity is certainly simplistic. Many women in the

⁸⁹ Einhorn and Sever, "Gender and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe," 165.

EU do not consider themselves feminists; however, explicitly feminist activism does have a long history in Europe and the physical location on the “edge” of Europe would have made the exchange of ideas much easier.

Druga Srbija: Critiques Both Then and Now

Druga Srbija was another interesting point of divergence for many of the respondents; this connects to the discrepancy between contacts that described themselves as “feminist activists” versus “feminist human rights activists.” Though relevant for some at the time of Milošević’s regime, it quickly became clear that the term was hotly contested. Informal conversations throughout this research revealed that many felt that Druga Srbija was relevant as a descriptor during this period because activists had a “common enemy” (i.e. the regime), which the alternative movement now lacked. Generally, opponents to the term fell into two categories, those who felt that the term was too broad and encompassed too many clashing perspectives and those who felt that it created divisions and represented a class or privilege issue.

“Druga Srbija” as Too Inclusive

In connection to Druga Srbija, Fridman’s research lays out the difference between antiwar and anti-regime activism during the 1990s and its relationship to responsibility and dealing with the past. In this research, which reflects the sample population of *feminist* activists, transitional justice was not the point of contention for these activists but rather patriarchy and sexism.⁹⁰ For one of the respondents, the reason Druga Srbija is no longer relevant is because of the fragmented nature of civil society now.⁹¹ There is little collaboration or even agreement among the liberally minded blocks of civil society in Serbia, especially when it comes to the

⁹⁰ Fridman, “Alternative Voices: Serbia’s Anti-War Activists, 1991-2004,” 115.

⁹¹ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 19, 2012

continually controversial issue of feminism. But for some, it was more fundamental than just lack of collaboration on leftist political issues. One activist who primarily works for a women's organization in Kruševac provided an anecdote in which she was speaking with a liberally minded man during an Occupy Belgrade demonstration, whose profession as a musical conductor, prompted her to ask if he could suggest someone who might be able to provide piano lessons to her eager daughter. He responded that girls couldn't be good pianists. Despite her rage at the ridiculousness of this comment she was able to articulate the following:

I thought to myself how can someone like that be part of the movement and [we would still] call it Druga Srbija? If we have Druga Srbija we cannot neglect the question of gender equality, you cannot neglect the fact that we are feminist. That's why I said I cannot regard being a human rights activist and not a feminist and so if you call yourself a human rights activist and you have opinions like that in 99% [Occupy movement] then what change are we talking about? This is why there is not the existence of Druga Srbija, these are the crucial questions that intellectuals are divided about.⁹²

This activist's anger with a sexist activist within the Occupy movement relates to feminist frustrations about the current manifestation of human rights rhetoric. In their view, the Occupy movement's goals clearly align with the feminist aim of equality and yet activists within the Occupy movement perpetuate patriarchy with their actions. In this way, Druga Srbija as a space for progressive goals should have easily aligned with feminist objectives and yet activists within the movement may have harbored sexist and even nationalist sentiments.

In a similar vein, another activist whose work spans multiple organizations but often emphasized a focus on LGBT issues through a lesbian rights organization called Labris, specified:

I think that here in this context it is a concept that is very broad. Under that concept there are lots of things that can be put there that don't belong there. And I think it's really important for the women's movement here not to associate in that way, not to be

⁹² Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 23, 2012

underneath some kind of umbrella that takes lots of things. And here it is any kind of opposition to the mainstream government is considered Druga Srbija and basically lots of that really had nothing to do with whatever we [feminists] are here standing for.⁹³

This activist in particular was also critical of the human rights rhetoric and her thoughts on the term Druga Srbija envisage a way for a feminist perspective to be *more* representative of the position she stands for. For these activists who positioned themselves in such a way, a feminist identity is *supra* Druga Srbija and human rights.

“Druga Srbija” as a Divider

Two women stood out as vehemently opposed to the concept of Druga Srbija for related but distinctive reasons. The first activist was of a younger generation and mainly involved with theory and the Belgrade Women’s Studies Center, an alternative education organization in Belgrade. Speaking perhaps both about the idea now (when I asked if it was still a relevant term) and in the past. When asked if she identified with it personally, the activist described her opposition in a few ways. For her the idea of a Druga Srbija now, especially during the election period, represented the same elite, “intellectual circles against war [and] against nationalism” from the 90s that created a “ghetto” for themselves.⁹⁴ Throughout the interview it became apparent that she was critical of the rhetoric of victimhood and ghettoization as well as the moral argument employed by an older generation of activists, a critique heard among middle class liberal families as well.⁹⁵ At one point this respondent said:

I don’t think that in everyday life I’m in the position of the victim. I’m thinking about how much they [the older generation] start from that position of victim and I don’t like

⁹³ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 25, 2012

⁹⁴ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 22, 2012

⁹⁵ The “moral argument” can be traced to the human rights activism of older generations and organizations such as Humanitarian Law Center and Women in Black, which advocate dealing with the past and acknowledging the crimes done in Serbia’s name.

that because I'm a woman and I'm not feeling that way, it's not my starting position and I don't want it to be.⁹⁶

On the one hand, this activist may be critiquing the identity politics that Nira Yuval-Davis describes from the 1970's; however, her statement does not go so far as to suggest a unique standpoint, which she also rejects. In this activist's view the idea of an Other Serbia is also naming the Serbian context as unique—uniquely worse than other situations. She described her frustration when older activists decried the emerging nationalism and re-traditionalization of Serbian society. Though the re-traditionalization of the society (and related nationalism and fascism) was a problem for her, she did not believe that Serbia's context was unique and thought that these were issues everywhere, “even in America.”⁹⁷

The second critique of *Druga Srbija* came from the activist from *Žene na Delu* who opposed the term both as a class issue and as a manner of creating divisions rather than unifying a society. On the personal level she mentioned the fact that her family had been quite nationalistic and for her it felt uncomfortable to say, “that is the First Serbia and I am the second, [because] we are still the same family.”⁹⁸ Related to her positionality as an activist in an organization that focuses on the economic emancipation of women which was founded in response to her perceived lack of an economic lens within the existing movement, she verbalized:

The term Other Serbia was kind of empty because it was never defined what we were actually [for]—yes, it made sense in terms of opposition to Milošević and opposition to this nationalistic position but other than that it didn't offer anything new regarding different economic approach to issues or anything else related to this.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 22, 2012

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 24, 2012

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Additionally, she examined the term from a place of privilege and the hierarchy implied in the term. “A lot of people were using that in the sense that it implied some sort of elitist approach. ‘Druga Srbija’ like these educated people who travel, people who have seen the world.”¹⁰⁰ The rejection of Druga Srbija was based on the idea that it was a divider that simultaneously ghettoized activists while creating a sense of superiority for those employing the term. This idea of travel and access is also related to generational dynamics, which I will refer to next.

Generational Dynamics

In asking the question “In your opinion, do different generations of feminist (or human rights) activists have a different role in civil society?” I hoped to enumerate some of the ways that different generations distinguish themselves from one another in their approaches and possibly their goals. However, I vastly underestimated how complex this question was and given more time this question could be developed even further into a larger research project. From a methodological standpoint it was difficult to encourage respondents to comment on their own generation, instead there was generally more commentary on the other generations, mostly the oldest and the youngest.

Hierarchy and Power within the Movement

One issue that consistently arose in the interviews was that of hierarchy and power within the movement. For multiple activists this problem was clear and looming. One activist mentioned the power that the older generation held over finances and “funds from Europe.”¹⁰¹ Another pointed to a tendency for the older generation of activists to “not give into the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 22, 2012

democratic way of deciding” on things.¹⁰² A third feminist described this as an abuse of power and “patriarchy within the movement.”¹⁰³ One concrete example was related to competition for a secretarial position in a women’s organization that went to an older, prominent personality in the Belgrade feminist circle rather than this younger feminists who was interviewed. Power struggles may not be unique to the Serbian context; however, the public prominence and central feature of personalities within civil society in Belgrade introduces an additional power dynamic to Belgrade’s activist scene. These prominent personalities are almost all from the oldest generation. The critiques of hierarchy and power within the movement show how oppression is internalized and reinscribed even within actors that seek to disrupt the larger inequalities.

Neoliberalism and Youth

As with all things in life, there were also criticisms from the other side towards the younger generation of activists. One criticism I heard throughout the field research period from human rights activists to parents was the negative influence of “neoliberalism” on the budding young activists of Belgrade as well as the youth in general. In an interview, a middle generation human rights (judging from her associations, not actively feminist) activist stated that for the younger generation of activists, activism was “just a job” and she alluded numerous times to how younger activists were just trying to build a résumé.¹⁰⁴

Echoing this sentiment, another middle generation activist from Kruševac explained how much it bothered her that many of the younger women applying to the Belgrade Women’s Studies Center were mainly doing it for their CV (résumé):

What bothers me is that it has to do with [this] neoliberal concept that we are living in now because a lot of young people they are all now probably worried if when they finish

¹⁰² Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 25, 2012

¹⁰³ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 23, 2012

¹⁰⁴ Interview with the author, Belgrade, March 17, 2012

their university they have to find a job so then they go to different things and get it on their CV and for them it's important.¹⁰⁵

This issue of neoliberalism and résumé building reflects the changing milieu that younger feminists are forced to operate within especially within Serbia. The unemployment rate among youth in Serbia is roughly 50%, which has contributed greatly to the brain drain referred to earlier.¹⁰⁶ None of the participants referred to this fact when pondering the harmful effects of neoliberalism.

The former Yugoslavia has seen many changes in the past three decades, not least of which is the transition to capitalism. From competition to deregulation, the emphasis on “neoliberalism” in Serbia is a new phenomenon. In the eyes of respondents, neoliberalism is the sociopolitical and economic extension of this philosophy, which often means the soulless competition that is in conflict with the moral and ethical motivators activists *should* have when taking on their work. I will discuss the different contexts that each generation operates within after discussing the various approaches to activism.

Differing Approaches

Fortunately, a few participants did comment on the positive ability of new generations to mobilize as well as the new methodology of ICT's (Information and Communications Technology, i.e. the internet, among other things). In the same breath as the statement above regarding increasing conservatism among youth, the middle generation activist stated, “But also they are kind of easier to organize because they have social networks and everything so they are

¹⁰⁵ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 23, 2012

¹⁰⁶ Katica Djurović. “Youth unemployment rates reaching epidemic proportions.” Southeast European Times, April 23, 2012. http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/features/2012/04/23/feature-04 (Accessed on: May 12, 2012.)

very connected.”¹⁰⁷ Another activist described her work on a web portal saying, “I’ve been working with this group of really young, enthusiastic group of feminists that are young, early 20s.”¹⁰⁸ During the field research period, Belgrade hosted their second annual SHARE conference, which focuses on these technological innovations and the social movements they have aided in and inspired. Though related to social movements and activism it seemed to be largely ignored by local feminist activists.¹⁰⁹

The youngest activist among the respondents echoed this sentiment about antiquated tactics. She felt very strongly about the power dynamics within the movement but, as discussed previously, also the rhetoric of victimhood and morality. She shared, “they are talking about collective responsibility, [saying] you know you are guilty. It’s all so abstract. We don’t have the real results of [those] politics and that activism here.”¹¹⁰ For this activist it was more important to understand the process rather than fall into a cycle of rhetorical victimhood.

One activist imparted her concern that the approaches of feminist activists had not changed since the 1970’s and were still rooted in the second wave identity politics mentioned earlier. It was her belief that the approaches needed to move away from second wave feminism, though to what she did not say. I experienced not only these identity politics but also a glimpse into the power dynamics with the oldest activist interviewed. In our first email correspondence I suggested that we meet at a café called Brat Fidel (Brother Fidel), at which point she informed me that though she did know the café “Fidelinka,” we would be meeting at a different restaurant

¹⁰⁷ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 23, 2012

¹⁰⁸ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 23, 2012

¹⁰⁹ “ This year, SHARE conference will once again gather more than two thousand activists, bloggers, engineers, programmers and artists from Serbia and internationally, in three days of interesting lectures, workshops and meetings at the Dom Omladine.” The SHARE Conference was held from April 26-28, 2012. Though I was unable to attend, a young activist friend of mine who I met through the Youth Initiative for Human Rights presented on the current situation in his home country of Myanmar, which brought my attention to the conference.

<http://www.shareconference.net/en/about>

¹¹⁰ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 22, 2012

owned by a woman, signing her email “IN SISTERHOOD.”¹¹¹ When I arrived she explained to me the practice of making male names feminine (Fidelinka) from the theory of Virginia Woolf. After this she insisted that I read the entire list of interview questions at once so that she could touch upon them as she saw fit during our meeting. At first I lamented the fact that my interview questions had not been answered in a way that were easy for me to code and synthesize into my data collection; however, the interview experience showed me a great deal about dynamics within the interview process and the power held by a seasoned activist.

Differing Contexts

Standpoint theory is crucial for understanding how our social location and experiential differences shape our perspectives. The activist from Žene na Delu relayed that, “In Serbia it doesn’t mean that they [the younger generation] are necessarily more progressive. Usually they are much more conservative because they have grown up in the time of war and they are really xenophobic and homophobic and racist and sexist.”¹¹² Earlier, this particular activist pointed to the elitism implied in the term *Druga Srbija* during the 1990s, as it was accessible only to those few enlightened souls who were able to travel and see the world. The ramifications of isolation (xenophobia, homophobia, etc.) are a key issue in contemporary Serbia and indicate the different contexts that each generation grew up in. For this youngest generation of Serbian citizens, isolation was a pervasive part of their reality until recently. It was not until 2009 that the EU waived the visa requirements for Serbian citizens to travel.

The path to feminist activism was different for each activist but each unique path shows how activists understand their activism. One activist from the middle generation disclosed that

¹¹¹ Email correspondence with the author, April 15, 2012

¹¹² Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 24, 2012

she had been swept up in activism because of the context of the 2000 student demonstrations against Milošević that she was raised in.

Well basically political activism here was something that we all had to take part in, when it comes to my generation, from a really young age because from the moment that I got into high school there were lots of protests against Milošević brewing here and it was an imperative to somehow take part in students protests. Even though we were not students at the time we were taking part in the movement. There were demonstrations every day and there were clashes with the police. It was also in part parallel to the women's peace movement here. I wouldn't say that I was aware really at that age of all the issues going on, but I took part maybe instinctively or maybe just out of rebellion to this type of ruling because it was obvious to me that it was something other than what I stood for.¹¹³

This activist's impulse to join in out of rebellion and later understanding of the issues may turn out to be how a newest generation will take on feminist organizing, first through résumé building and then out of a commitment to the ideals.

Other (older) activists pointed to their upbringing in an open Yugoslavia as crucial to their activism. The ease of travel contributed to a Yugoslav identity and thus a sense of sisterhood with women throughout the region, especially during the 1990s. Intermingled with her stories about solidarity and sisterhood during the wars, the oldest activist provided an anecdote about a hitch-hiking trip all the way to Vienna for a demonstration against psychiatry, the forum where she later attended the 1994 UN Conference on Human Rights.¹¹⁴ She also illustrated her process of becoming involved with activism during the 1970s in protest against the institution of psychiatry, eventually becoming disillusioned with patriarchy within the movement, shifting focus to lesbian issues, feminist issues, and later the antiwar movement in Serbia. Crossing borders to visit one another during the wars was by no means easy, but this urge to help *fellow Yugoslavs* occurred during a much different context. For young feminist activists, issues of

¹¹³ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 25, 2012

¹¹⁴ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 15, 2012

nationalism and xenophobia may seem like the norm rather than temporary and worth vehemently fighting against. Many young people may also feel that their priority is unemployment and that fighting these issues may an added benefit of gaining a job that deals with important issues rather than the ultimate goal.

The differing feminist theoretical approaches that each activist employed strengthens Allaine Cerwonka's claim that diversity within Eastern Europe renders homogenizing depictions of feminism mute, especially those credited to a specific location. "Belgrade feminism" cannot simply be characterized as either similar to Western feminism or different from Western feminism. Activists who came of age reading Virginia Woolf have appropriated pieces of Woolf's theories but this singular reading does not characterize her whole approach to feminist activism. Similarly, the words "autonomous" and "radical" speckled the vocabulary of the activist from Kruševac. Marxist feminism could clearly be seen in the analyses of the activist from *Žene na Delu* (Women at Work). And yet, I also met with younger generation activists from the Youth Initiative for Human Rights who openly claimed the label "feminist" but advocated much more liberal strategies such as increasing women's representation in political parties.

Transnational Influence and Interactions

Social movements throughout the world have begun to rely on the migration and exchange of ideas, people, and techniques. The feminist movement in Serbia is no exception. By attending conferences, working in international organizations, and relying on international funding, feminist activists in Belgrade interact with and contribute to a transnational feminist movement. One participant described her work translating texts of feminist authors from other countries, mainly the US, into the local language and another respondent works for a Swedish

women's organization with an office in Belgrade. From the pioneering Women in Black, which started in Israel and now has spin-offs in countless other countries, to the interactions between local feminists and feminists from across the globe at the AWID conference, solidarity and transnational sisterhood have been hallmarks of feminism in Serbia.

Almost all of the respondents brought up the impact that the sharing of experiences with other women had on their organization or them personally. An older lesbian activist and feminist counselor respondent described the support and solidarity she received during the war, especially through “international meetings of women’s solidarity and peace,” held every year by Women in Black.¹¹⁵ She also described the exchanges and learning opportunities:

We also gave a lot in exchanges, in our movements [with] violence against women [campaigns], we wouldn't have done half of it if we hadn't been part of the international community. Really lots of things have already been worked on before, so why invent warm water we say. You integrate different things into your social context but the principles, for example of feminist counseling, [are] universal.¹¹⁶

This activist's assertion that after the exchange of knowledge, “you integrate different things into your social context” aligns with Cerwonka's theory of transculturation. Theories aren't just produced—they are interpreted and integrated.

Unfortunately, with the globalization of ideas and increased connection across borders come the negative effects as well. One example of this can be seen in the numerous activist's negative response towards the Western and European human rights rhetoric. One respondent described her belief that the Serbian women's movement has avoided the limiting effect of ascribing to a European context through transnational networks. She stated, “We recognize that

¹¹⁵ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 15, 2012

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

there is a specific added value to this context which cannot be reduced to the European model of operating.”¹¹⁷

And of course, there is the much-theorized issue of donor agendas. The contact from Kruševac elaborated on the idea that organizations are continuously applying for grants and aware of the mission of each foundation or project and thus forced to use their language or tailor projects toward the foundation’s stated goals. She humorously adds, “Of course, we have free will, if you want to be a real radical feminist you shouldn’t apply to anything but then you can’t do anything.”¹¹⁸ One activist mentioned the fact that these donors were unaware of the local context, which showed through their insistence that the women’s organizations should focus on institutionalization. She states, “We have this huge pressure, mainly from the outside, to push those processes onto the state which we don’t trust, which is not capable, does not have the interest, or the will to take upon itself.”¹¹⁹ This incapable and unwilling state at the municipal level demonstrated its lack of interest in working with the contact from Kruševac very abruptly, when it ceased funding (even the very politically safe) SOS Hotline in Kruševac that she was working with. The contact from Žene na Delu described ŽND’s work in past years publishing a magazine that was available in almost every village in Serbia, and the detrimental effect that donor policies, who stopped funding the magazine, had on their outreach programs.

When we stopped there was this big gap in misinformation so that’s what we tried to do with this ICT program but that program is much more directed towards the organizations and the magazine was prepared for the women in general and that was, for many women, that was the only way they were receiving relevant information about it.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 25, 2012

¹¹⁸ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 23, 2012

¹¹⁹ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 25, 2012

¹²⁰ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 24, 2012

In a post-conflict context where international donors are the only source of funding, many organizations are vulnerable to the whims of their donors. Busheikin discusses this as one of the largest sources of discomfort between Western feminists and Eastern European feminists in “Is Sisterhood Really Global?”¹²¹

For two of the interviewees transnational feminism was merely the frame that they operated in. With one participant this became apparent through her critique of the rhetoric of victimhood and moral superiority, because the issues such as nationalism, fascism, sexism, homophobia and xenophobia were not unique to the Serbian context.¹²² She was fighting these phenomena everywhere through her work in academia and feminist theory. With the other respondent, I became curious about her decision to stay in Belgrade as she described her work with a Swedish organization, her degree in Spanish language, and her feeling of being ghettoized as a lesbian, feminist activist in Serbia. When asked about her decision to stay and fight against her own system rather than going somewhere easier to operate within, she exclaimed that these were “global issues,” that nowhere was utopian but also that it was a matter of “taking responsibility for your own position or location.”¹²³ As a new theory, transnational feminism continues to be mulled over by activists and scholars. However, the need to take responsibility for one’s own context has risen to the surface as a key lesson for feminist activists hoping to responsibly affect change.

A small aside to demonstrate how the issue of responsibility is being mulled over in Serbian society currently and its transnational interactions: during my semester abroad a prominent Serbian feminist named Daša Duhaček lectured for our class on Hannah Arendt’s

¹²¹ Busheikin, “Is Sisterhood Really Global? Western Feminism in Eastern Europe,” 19.

¹²² Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 22, 2012

¹²³ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 25, 2012

theory of political responsibility and the uses for Serbian society as it faces its role in the Balkan wars of the 90s. This is significant for a number of reasons. Daša Duhaček, who was a co-founder of the Belgrade Women's Studies Centre, was educated in the United States at Rutgers University and relies primarily on a German-American political theorist for her discussion of political responsibility. Cerwonka's theory of transculturation aptly applies to how a Serbian feminist appropriated a specific Western (some would argue feminist) theorist to address her local context.

Hopes and Fears for the Future

All of the participants voiced a number of concerns about the future in regards to their movement, its relationship to the state, and the threat of burn out for individual activists. A couple of activists mentioned the issue of centralization of the movement in Belgrade, which represents the ever-present rural/urban divide, which can be seen in Serbia. One activist described her place of privilege as an activist in the urban center of Belgrade:

We are sitting on information sources like money sources, contact sources and because it's a city we have the opportunity to profile our work and do specific work but if you are the only organization in a place then you have to do everything.¹²⁴

This sentiment of a sole organization having to do everything, especially in the non-Belgrade context, echoes the participant from Kruševac's very clear emphasis on burn out. She described the pressure to fulfill a donor's project that may not be the most relevant at the time, while simultaneously reacting to all of the daily occurrences. She stated, "One person is doing the work of five."¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 24, 2012

¹²⁵ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 23, 2012

A few activists feared that they had not left sustainable models. “We [the older generation] did not leave enough of the models or writings or archives or documents of how we did it so that it can be simulated by women.”¹²⁶ A second activist echoed this in relation to funding:

We still didn’t come up with some sustainable model of operating and I don’t think that should be the task of one organization or one small group of people but in Serbia I don’t know of some sustainable model of organizing independent from this foreign money or so on.¹²⁷

Unfortunately, one of the only sustainable sources of funding comes from the state. As one feminist explained, the state is gladly taking over initiatives formally but many of the processes that needed to take place in this post-conflict society such as lustration never occurred. Thus the state can continue to tackle issues of gender purely on the rhetorical level but the politicians who created many of the problems are still in power.¹²⁸¹²⁹ Earlier the stagnation visible in Serbian politics was described as part of the operating context for feminist activists but lack of lustration goes farther than stagnation. The same individuals who were instrumental in the wartime politics of the 1990’s and 2000’s continue to affect foreign and domestic policy, though they may have tampered various streams of rhetoric and incorporated others. Because the feminist movement in Serbia was part and parcel with the antiwar movement and many of the attacks on antiwar demonstrations were gendered attacks, these feminist activists remain particularly vulnerable. During the NATO bombing campaign in 1999 Vojislav Šešelj, who is currently running the Serbian Radical Party from The Hague, called for one woman from Women in Black to be tied to

¹²⁶ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 15, 2012

¹²⁷ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 24, 2012

¹²⁸ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 25, 2012

¹²⁹ Lustration is the political process during a transition period (mostly notably from Communism) with which individuals in positions of authority from the past regime (associated with human rights abuses) are removed from their institutional post. No formal process of lustration occurred in Serbia.

a tree as a target for every NATO bomb that fell.¹³⁰ This issue of lustration becomes even more apparent with the recent election in which Slobodan Milošević's party, the Socialist Party of Serbia (or SPS), made a huge comeback gaining 44 seats in Parliament.¹³¹ The avoidance of carrying out transitional justice in Serbia and in the region will continue to affect the women's movement here, especially its relationship to the state.

The activist from *Žene na Delu* insisted on the need to focus energy on grassroots activism rather than institutionalization. It is interesting to note that at the time of the interview her organization was in the process of closing due to the lack of funding. She feared that the focus on gender mainstreaming and state-level gender mechanisms, which have proven to be merely smoke and mirrors, might have been at the cost of the grassroots level feminism.¹³² Additionally, when looking at what should be important in the future she reiterated time and again the need to focus on the class issue which was ever more apparent to her in light of the recent "relocation" of Roma in Belgrade.¹³³ Though there has been a move to distance feminism from human rights by some of these activists, her reference to Roma issues shows that leftist politics and human rights are still a focus of feminist activism in Belgrade. This insistence on focusing on class issues may signify the shift from anti-regime activism to human rights activism and now social justice activism in Belgrade.

More than one of the interviewees voiced their fears that what their movement lacks is a younger generation. Both of them were activists from the middle generation and expressed

¹³⁰ One common accusation against Women in Black was also that they were prostitutes. Fridman, "Alternative Voices: Serbia's Anti-War Activists, 1991-2004," 145.

¹³¹ "Latest results leave Radicals without Parliament seats" B92, May 7, 2012. (Accessed on: May 12, 2012) http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics-article.php?yyyy=2012&mm=05&dd=07&nav_id=80127

¹³² Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 24, 2012

¹³³ Marija Ristic and Gordana Andric. "Belgrade Continues Mass Eviction of Roma Families," Balkan Insight, April 27, 2012. (Accessed: May 6th, 2012.) <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/belgrade-forcibly-evicted-roma-families>

feeling “depressed” when they go to conferences and realize that, though in their thirties, they are still the youngest. “It’s very depressing to be a younger generation when you’re 34, so what does it say about our feminist movement?”¹³⁴ However, other activists pointed to the fact that “some young women do work but outside the known feminist circles.”¹³⁵ The activists from the Youth Initiative for Human Rights that sat down for coffee with me to discuss their ideas of feminism clearly considered themselves feminists but participated more in conferences that pertained to their organization’s mission or political activities surrounding the election. It will be interesting in the coming years to see how a younger generation of activists makes itself visible to these older generations. Additionally, our definitions of activism and indeed the embracing of a staunch feminist label will influence how these changes are interpreted.

“Taking the Pulse” (Concluding Thoughts)

The landscape of civil society in Serbia has indeed changed since the 1990’s when Druga Srbija first came into being. The borders have opened and the European Union is in Serbia’s sights. But in other ways, the dominant culture itself has not changed: many of the politicians still proudly wear their nationalism upon their sleeve and sexism and homophobia have not been noticeably weakened. In this way it is clear that discourses are wide and diffuse, making them still harder to dismantle directly. This context—or discourse—has necessitated the continued presence of an alternative, critical voice.

The aim of this research was initially to understand why and how feminist human rights activists participate in their society. But the society in question has grown to encompass a global society. Feminists are compelled to address these global issues because feminism does not have

¹³⁴ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 23, 2012

¹³⁵ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 24, 2012

blindness to the suffering of others like nationalism.¹³⁶ As with all social movements, feminists will continue to evolve, build off of one another, question and revolutionize the methods used before them. It became clear throughout this research that an older generation of activists was relying heavily upon the identity politics of the 1970's and that a younger generation was beginning to question this reliance and offer newer solutions.

Allaine Cerwonka's theory of transculturation has proven to be one of the most useful conceptual tools for looking at manifestations of feminist activism in Belgrade. As theories travel they are changed, appropriated, and dismissed by the actors interpreting them. Each activist interviewed located herself within the ongoing feminist dialogue and brought with her not only her experiences and social locations, but also theoretical orientations. Previous discussions of former-Yugoslav feminism have pointed to the historical strength of the movement but not to the diversity within it. This project attempted to show how dichotomous and over-generalized descriptions of "Eastern European feminism" are inadequate for understanding the true dynamics of a diverse movement.

In this current climate of pervasive nationalism, doubt surrounding politics, continuous funding troubles, uncertainty about internal dynamics and the myriad other challenges facing Serbia's women's movement, it becomes ever clearer that activists' work is not nearly done. Hierarchy within the movement, growing fascism reproduced by the state, and burn out among activists were rarely given the same weight by each activist. The critical feminist analysis evident in each contact's multifaceted conceptualization of the research question points to a diversity of approaches, utilized to tackle the dominant discourse strategically at various points. This lack of consensus on which issue is most pressing should be viewed not as a disadvantage

¹³⁶ One interviewee aptly stated, "nationalism is a blindfold." Interview with the author, April 24, 2012

but as reflecting a mature movement. A movement that is self-critical and cognizant of its role within society, as well as the tasks to come.

One activist described her role in the feminist subsection of civil society as “always taking the pulse” of the current climate to understand what action would have the largest effect at this particular point in time.¹³⁷ Postmodern analyses posit that there are multiple pulses in society and each department of activism whether internally or externally focused, is equipped with the skills and passion to address these issues strategically with multiple sites for resistance available. Transversal politics may be the next strategic tool available within this global civil society; encouragingly, elements of transversalism are already evident amongst Belgrade’s feminist activists. Transversal politics chart a path for how to communicate vertically and horizontally across these multiple sites to assess the needs and priorities of each actor—whether those actors are North American, Eastern European, older, younger, liberal or radical.

¹³⁷ Interview with the author, Belgrade, April 25, 2012

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

General Questions:

- I. Please introduce yourself.
- II. Can you tell me a little bit about your professional/educational background?
- III. Can you describe your process of becoming involved with activism?
 - a) What about feminist issues? Were they simultaneous?
- IV. Would you identify yourself as a human rights activist and if so, what does being a human rights activist mean to you? Feminist?

Civil Society Perception Questions:

V. What is your primary form of activism? How do you see that form's role in civil society of Belgrade? In comparison to other organizations or types of activism?

VI. In your opinion, do different generations of human rights (or feminist) activists have a different role in civil society?

VII. What types of challenges does your organization face in achieving their goals and in your opinion have they changed at all from when you first began with this organization? If so, how?

VIII. Can you describe to me your understanding of how civil society has evolved since the wars of the 1990's?

IX. Do you see your organization as part of a larger transnational movement? How does your organization interact (or is impacted by) outside organizations or movements?

X. In other interviews I have heard some skepticism towards the term "Druga Srbija". Do you identify with this term? Do you think that Druga Srbija still exists?

X. When do you think the need for an alternative civil society will begin to disappear, if ever?

Appendix B: Preliminary List of Relevant Organizations

Women in Black

<http://www.zeneucnom.org/>

Labris

<http://www.labris.org.rs/en/>

Belgrade Women's Studies Centre

http://www.zenskestudie.edu.rs/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1

Reconstruction Women's Fund

<http://www.rwfund.org/en>

Žene na Delu (Women at Work)

<http://zenergija.org/content/about-us>

Autonomous Women's Center Belgrade

<http://www.womenngo.org.rs/english/>

Incest Trauma Centar

http://www.incesttraumacentar.org.rs/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=112&Itemid=2&lang=en

Association for Women's Rights in Development
<http://www.awid.org/About-AWID>

The Humanitarian Law Center
http://www.hlc-rdc.org/?page_id=14390&lang=de

ACT Women
http://www.facebook.com/pages/ACT-Women/157191677679969?sk=map&activecategory=Photos&session_id=1334700506

Youth Initiative for Human Rights
<http://www.yihr.org/en/>

Additional Resources:

<http://www.shareconference.net/en/about>

http://www.canvasopedia.org/legacy/content/serbian_case/otpor.htm

<http://www.occupypatriarchy.org/>