

Book Reviews

Katalin Fábián and Elżbieta Korolczuk, eds. *Rebellious Parents: Parental Movements in Central-Eastern Europe and Russia*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. 364 pages. ISBN 9780253026675.

The twelve chapters collected in this well-researched and carefully edited volume discuss civic movements of parental groups that have emerged since the 1990s in several countries of the formerly Soviet-controlled part of Europe and in post-communist Russia. Two chapters each discuss Russia and the Ukraine, one chapter each is devoted to Bulgaria, Poland, the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and Hungary, while three chapters discuss developments in the Czech Republic. The contributors' research is interdisciplinary in that it covers several disciplines from the social sciences: sociology, anthropology, political science, gender studies, and disability studies. Several chapters use photographs to add a visual dimension to their discussion.

The editors, who are also authors and/or co-authors of some of the chapters, are established experts in the fields of women's and gender studies and feminism in Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. Katalin Fábián, Professor at Lafayette College, is editor of *Domestic Violence in Postcommunist States: Local Activism, National Policies, and Global Forces* (2010) and author of *Contemporary Women's Movements in Hungary: Globalization, Democracy, and Gender Equality* (2009) as well as of numerous other scholarly contributions, while Elżbieta Korolczuk, Lecturer at Warsaw University and Researcher at Södertörn University, is co-editor of several volumes on motherhood and fatherhood in Poland and Russia, such as *Dangerous Liaisons: Motherhood, Fatherhood and Politics* (2015) and *Civil Society Revisited: Lessons from Poland* (2017). As Fábián and Korolczuk explain in the volume's introduction, their use of the term

“parental movements” in lieu of the more familiar “parents’ movements” stems from the latter’s more limited concern with custody, welfare and health care, whereas parental movements operate at the intersection of parenthood, gender, national identity, and citizenship thus covering a much broader range of issues. Most notably, the contributions have been selected beyond an expected focus on women’s activism and motherhood; instead, several chapters highlight the often overlooked engagement of men and fathers, which along with research on parental activism is an emerging field in the region generally — and, as the editors point out, wrongly — perceived as characterized by a weaker civil society compared to the so-called West.

Moving away from a focus on activism framed within the much older tradition of women’s rights and more particularly motherhood is an important methodological nuance. By choosing the gender-neutral term “parents” rather than “mothers”, and adding an emphasis on “fathers” in some cases, these parental movements in formerly communist countries reflect significant downward trends with respect to the symbolic position of motherhood and mothering and to women’s social and political position in post-communism in general, along with a return to more conservative gender and family values. By no means have the parental movements under scrutiny always embraced a liberal-progressive and inclusive stance beyond the heteronormative family model but have rather been coupled with traditionalist, nationalist and essentialist ideas harking back to sometimes idealized pre-communist family models presented as more “authentic”, even “natural” and in line with “our” traditions. This anti-communist and anti-modernist neo-traditionalism interestingly often goes hand in hand with a critical view on post-communist neo-liberal capitalist developments and their erosion of some of communism’s achievements viewed in a more positive light, such as state-funded healthcare and child support. Thus these recent manifestations of parental activism in the other Europe happen at an intersection of various ideological influences. Ina Dimitrova’s term “reactionary techno-progressivism” in the chapter on reproductive technologies in Bulgaria expresses very well this combination of a (usually anti-modernist) conservative discourse with that of technological and scientific modernization.

However, regardless of whether the different activist groups position themselves along a more progressive or a more conservative agenda, what they have in common in the different post-communist countries is that they generally reject authority coming from above, be it the state and its institutions or experts (most notably in the medical field) both at home and abroad. The collection's most important contribution to scholarship is thus its invitation to a rethinking of the dominant theoretical conceptualizations of civil society. Although these parental movements from Central-East Europe and Russia do not fit a liberal definition of civil society, one that emphasizes difference, equality and plurality, they are nevertheless manifestations of civic engagement, as ambiguous (and sometimes retrograde) as their agendas may appear to be.

The chapters are organized along three thematic clusters. The first cluster (chapters 1, 2, and 3 by Tova Höjdestrand, Olena Strelnyk, and Ina Dimitrova, respectively) examines conservative parental activist groups in Russia, Ukraine and Bulgaria. Especially the chapters dealing with Russia and the Ukraine show that this type of social activism, although most immediately concerned with the welfare of children and parents, i.e. what is generally regarded as the private sphere, is connected to much broader political discourses and public issues in their respective countries. These include questions all the way from sexual education in schools and fears about homosexuality to national sovereignty and geopolitical considerations regarding the EU and the West in general.

The theme linking the second section of the volume (chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, by Elżbieta Korolczuk/Renata E. Hryciuk, Pelle Åberg/Johnny Rodin, Iman Karzabi, and Steven Saxonberg, respectively) is the activism of fathers' groups in Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic. It is interesting to see some common threads regarding gender policies and misogyny between the Polish case and comparable groups in various Western countries, including Canada, but also significant differences in the focus of fathers' groups from one country to the other, from the conservative-nationalist tone of the Polish activists and anti-feminist sentiments of Czech fathers' groups to the progressive (mainly urban middle-class based) daddy-schools in Russia (Saint Petersburg).

The third and last part of the book (chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11) is concerned with parental groups' resistance of state-imposed medical and healthcare structures and practices, such as mandatory vaccination in the Czech Republic (Jaroslava Hasmanová Marhánková), the situation of children with disabilities in the three Baltic states (Egle Sumskiene), and alternative childbirth movements in the Czech Republic (Ema Hrešanová) and in Hungary (Katalin Fábíán). Fábíán's chapter is particularly interesting as it demonstrates the transnational profile of the Hungarian home-birth movement through the case of Dr. Geréb.

In the conclusion, the editors summarize their book's findings and reflect on its theoretical contributions regarding a more nuanced definition of civil society, one that would take into account the complex political developments and realities of post-communist countries while still remain in a dialogue with Western liberal ideas. Although the parental movements discussed in the collection certainly have their local specificities contingent on their particular historical and cultural differences, the discourses they use and many of their aspects and concerns demonstrate that there are also significant commonalities between them, and also between them and similar groups in the so-called West. Studying post-communist civil society can thus help us see how interconnected the contemporary globalized world is without taking away from local specificities and concerns.

Extensively researched, with a very solid literature review to support and explain the positions of the editors and the volume's contributors and how their research differs from and builds on existing scholarship, this volume will be an important addition not only to any university library collection but also a valuable reading both for scholars researching the impact of globalization on gender and civil society and for any undergraduate or graduate course dealing not only with Central and Eastern Europe but gender studies in general.

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