

We Still Need our Old Marx

Interview with Nada Ler-Sofronić conducted by Dubravka Đurić



Nada Ler-Sofronić, photo: Branko Belić

Nada Ler-Sofronić was born in occupied Sarajevo, in 1941, in a respectable Jewish family. After hiding, running, and being incarcerated in concentration camps during the Second World War – along the route from Sarajevo to Dubrovnik, Korčula and Bari – only the members of her immediate family eventually returned to Sarajevo in 1946. Almost two decades later, in 1965, Nada Ler finished her studies of psychology at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade and began to work first as a lecturer and then as a professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo, teaching a course on social psychology. Since the early 1970s, she has written about issues relating to the social position of women. She obtained her PhD degree in 1982, at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade, with a dissertation entitled *Marxism and the Liberation of Women*, which was the first feminist thesis to be defended in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. One part of this thesis was published in 1986, in a book entitled *Neofeminism and the Socialist Alternative*. Among other things, Nada Ler-Sofronić initiated the well-known feminist conference *Comrade Woman*. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, she resided in Rome, Belgrade and Budapest, and afterwards returned to Sarajevo where, until her retirement, she managed the Center *Women and Society*.

In the recently published book *Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina*,

¹ which presents over fifty important women in the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nada Ler-Sofronić is pointed out as one of “the first and most significant feminist theoreticians and activists in our region”.

To begin with, please tell us something about your education in the socialist Yugoslavia.

My education began immediately after the Second World War, in 1947, in the Ninth Elementary School in Sarajevo, which was situated on the left bank of the River Miljacka: now, in this beautiful building of neo-Oriental style, which, by contrast, was badly neglected during the war, is the Embassy of Iran.

I could not wait to enroll at school, so when I finally seated myself in a school desk, I became the happiest child in the world. The school, student desks, blackboards, sponges and pieces of chalk, teacher’s desk, books – all these were and still are the natural setting in which I have always felt the best.

It was a time of “restoration and reconstruction”, work actions, food shortages, ration coupons and stamps which were used to obtain necessary food, a time of DDT and Pepein powder for killing hair lice. Most children, including me, had pulmonary infiltrates and “expanded hila” due to undernourishment. When once my mother managed to scrounge from a ministerial warehouse a packet of butter, I thought it was soap.

All over the walls of the institutions were the pictures of Stalin, Lenin, Marx and Engels, and Tito. Since 1948, it was mostly Tito that remained, often accompanied by Marx and Engels, who to me were some kind of mythical bearded fellows reminiscent of Santa Clause. Gone from the walls were the slogans “Hail comrade Stalin”, and the ones that remained were “Hail comrade Tito”, “Hail the Communist Party”.

I knew what antifascism and socialism were, this is what, at home, I heard people talk about the most. The topics of social organization, of course, in accordance with my age, profoundly interested me. By the way, my mother always used to recount with a smile on her face the anecdote that once, when asked what was good in socialism, I replied off the cuff: “The fact that girls and boys are equal”. It was unusual to hear this uttered with such great seriousness and self-confidence by a girl who had just begun going to school.

Later on I attended and graduated from the Classical High School in Sarajevo, to my mind, the world’s best school at the time. This is where the foundations of all my subsequent education were laid. In this traditionally prestigious school (it was also attended by Nobel laureates Ivo Andrić and Vladimir Prelog), we learned Greek, Latin, the history of arts,

philosophy, psychology, visual art, living languages... Such education, in such an environment, helped to shape my humanist worldview, my anti-authoritarian instinct, my critical attitude to injustice and discrimination. This is where I also shaped my credo that empathy, compassion for the most vulnerable and the most heavily oppressed, is the starting point of any kind of social engagement. This, too, is the place where I shaped my criteria for beauty and the love of nature.

At that time, what were the professors or protagonists on the Yugoslav theoretical stage that were crucial to your work?

I enrolled at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, Department of Psychology, where I also graduated. Encouraged by Professor Nikola Rot, who taught social psychology, I began to read the authors of the Frankfurt School, that is, the critical social theory – Adorno, Fromm, Marcuse, Habermas, and Horkheimer. At that time I read *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* by Wilhelm Reich.

In fact, I read all the authors who were focused on demystification of the social structures that dominate human beings and oppress them. The central target of neomarxist criticism was a complex socio-psychological construct called authoritarianism. During the early 1970s, when I was already immersing myself into neofeminism, I came across data on the first Italian women groups for raising self-awareness (1966), who were called DEMAU – demystification of authoritarianism.

The authoritarian structures that I believed were the oldest, the most resilient and the most adaptable to all social systems are the ones that are conducive to the millennial oppression of women – patriarchy and the principle of antagonism between men and women.

I think that, when it comes to social engagement in humanities, it is of utmost importance to be keenly sensitive to social injustice. That sensitivity was nourished and instilled in me, before anybody else, by my mother Edita. Her influence was crucial. She was a sharp-minded intellectual woman, a leftist, an idealist, with great love and understanding of human beings. When she was a judge for minors, her own delinquents loved her and considered her a friend.

She encouraged me to speak my mind freely in public, not to be afraid of the audience, and not to let myself be overpowered by stage fright, for she herself was extremely afraid of speaking in front of an audience and saw this as a serious, typically women's handicap. She never discussed anything even in party meetings.

As far as theoretical stage is concerned, I had an affinity with the theoreticians of the Praxis, even though their sensitivity to “the women’s issue” was really deficient.

While I read it, your book Neofeminism and the Socialist Alternative, published in 1986, raised many questions in my mind. Could you tell us something about the Yugoslav Marxism of that time?

At that time, the leading journals for social theory (*Marksizam u svetu* [*Marxism in the World*], *Marksističke sveske* [*Marxist Notebooks*], *Pogledi* [*Views*], *Opredjelenja* [*Affiliations*], *Argumenti* [*Arguments*], *Vidici* [*Horizons*]...) began to publish antidogmatic texts which criticized state socialism and some of the cemented Marxist dogmas. Foreign authors, who held similar views, were translated.

For example, I was writing and proving that the emergence of private property was not the primary cause of social antagonization, that this Marxist dogma was wrong because the subordination of women, the oppression of women, and trafficking in women had been in existence long before the emergence of private property. The idea that the working class is the exclusive agent of revolution was also undermined. New social movements opened up a variegated spectre of potential engines for radical social changes – from neofeminism as the most influential movement, to the ecological, antinuclear, disarmament and world peace movements.

In 1983, in our region also appeared the translation of a famous book by André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class* (written in 1978), in the edition of *Alternativa*, which also published my book. Gorz’s book was edited by Miroslav Pečujlić and Vukašin Pavlović, and its excellent preface was written by Zoran Vidaković. This text greatly altered the traditional Marxist dogma of the working class as the exclusive agent of revolution. The assumption that the only important antagonistic relation is between work and the capital was also undermined. The notion of a new class was beginning to be articulated, one that sprang, as someone said, from the marriage between neoliberalism and globalization. It was named the precariat. In my opinion, women, with all their characteristics of the “weak layer” reserve army of labor, play a central role within the precariat.

Main Currents of Marxism, a monumental work by Leszek Kolakowski, was published in 1978 and, in our region, translated in 1983. At that time, it was the most voluminous critical analysis of Marxism. In those days, Eurocommunism was softening and democratizing a considerable number of communist parties in the West.

You introduced the notion of neofeminism into the context of the socialist Yugoslav scholarly community. What did it mean back then?

Over the course of the 1980s, with the rise of neofeminist initiatives in the advanced countries of the West, the relationship between Marxism, on the one hand, and the ideas and theories of the Women's Liberation Movement on the other became the very center of the worldwide social research then current. The proliferation of literature and research papers in all the social sciences dealing with the position of women and the possibilities of their liberation testifies to this. Neofeminism was emerging in multiple critical relationships: with the civil society and its retrograde processes; with the static, conservative, dogmatic and political structures of state socialism; and with the anachronistic, obsolete ideas of a significant portion of the working class movement.

The women's revolt that, in my papers, I call neofeminism was gaining the specific dimension of a potentially massive socio-historical change. Within this area of critical theory appeared an ever-increasing number of critical discussions based on Marxist premises and, even more importantly, with a polemical stance on Marxism. It is roughly into this group that my book, too, (*Neofeminism and the Social Alternative*) should be categorized.

Yet, of course, it was not only the theory dealing with women in contemporary society that was relevant to my work. For example, the appearance of Deleuze and Guattari's 1971 monumental work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which in our region was translated quite belatedly, was immensely important to me. This kind of criticism against institutionalized Marxism and psychoanalysis supported me in my belief that I had not been wrong in taking up sociology, Marxism and political theories, although my primary university education was psychology. So it happened that I obtained my PhD degree in interdisciplinary studies at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade.

In simplified terms, these are the coordinates of my entire scholarly and activist engagement based on which people began to view me as a feminist.

My next question is related to the significance of the year 1968 and youth revolt in the world as well as in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Where were you in these events?

Back then, I was an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Sarajevo. I remember the spirit of that time, full of elation and enthusiasm. All around the globe, the young were seizing their right to revolt, they fought against the increasing social differences, in our country against the red bourgeoisie, against the export of our work force, and against similar phenomena. It was the last global leftist movement that affected the entire Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

In Sarajevo, the people kept a watchful eye on what was going on in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana... The students in Sarajevo took to the streets and, of course, were beaten by the police. They were showing solidarity with the students who took massive beatings at a New Belgrade underpass. I watched on TV how mercilessly the police were beating the young and forcing them to retreat. I remember being particularly appalled by the way they were beating girls – I noticed that they were taking the worse beatings because they stood in the first lines and were the last to retreat. I recall well that I wondered what was going to happen to these girls – whether they were going to be in the first lines when, in case of our victory, social power got to be distributed or, as always, they were going to be pushed to the margins. And already in the Resistance itself they were on the margins – they never appeared on the platform as speakers, they never made any specific women’s requests, they were not leaders. Somehow I got the impression that, throughout the entire 1968 movement, the girls, though present in large numbers, were almost invisible in terms of their influence, and that they obediently respected their male comrades from the hierarchy of the Resistance.

In women’s leftist circles in the West, the neofeminist revolt happened even before 1968, but it did not take any important part in 1968 turbulent events. But still, my feminist engagement stemmed directly from 1968, with disappointments because this leftist movement did not take into consideration any of the specific women’s issues and because it did not assume a critical stance on patriarchy and androcentrism in its own lines. It was then that I realized that in all leftist movements it is important for a women’s movement to be autonomous and to articulate its revendications independently, bringing them to public attention in its own authentic voice; that it should not wait for some other, “more important” issues to be resolved and expect the time for women’s issues to come naturally in the end.

Like the traditional communist leftists, the 1968 Movement also failed to bring to light the notorious truth that, in everyday life, the working woman, the countryside woman, the mother woman, the child-bearing woman, the party comrade woman, is in her own status the man’s worker. That is why we decided that the famous motto of the Conference we were going to organize in Belgrade ten years later would be: “Proletarians of the world – who is washing

your socks?” alluding, of course, to Marx and Engels’s call from the Communist Manifesto: “Proletarians of the world, unite”.

It has been 40 years since the first international conference on the position of women in the world and in our region, Comrade Woman, New Approach? It is considered the cult point of feminist memory in the former Yugoslavia, and last year, in March, the Il Manifesto published your text – “The Ogre (of feminism) is knocking on the door of the East” – dedicated precisely to the anniversary of this conference Comrade Woman. What was the socio-cultural and political context in which you organized it?

We organized it in a country which back then was called the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. In a broader global perspective, that was a time when, in the advanced industrial world, rose new libertarian social movements: the neofeminist, ecological, antinuclear, and world peace ones. It was a time of awoken utopian energy. The most powerful and the most influential of all these movements was precisely neofeminism.

The feminist criticism of blindness for specific women’s issues was directed against both dogmatic Marxism and the conservative left wing, which, too, adorned our socialist realist country, and also against the new 1968 left wing, which most of us were part of and within whose movement men usually appeared on the platform as speakers while women busied themselves with printers and hotplates for coffee-making. We criticized the androcentrism of the new left wing which was not so different from the one that characterized traditional communist leftism.

Our criticism was directed against the gender neutral theory and the practice of the Western democracy, democracy with no women holding key decision-making positions. We invited women from our country and from the industrially advanced countries of the West, with whom we shared similar beliefs: women from universities, women journalists, artists, sociologists, writers, psychologists, and philosophers, who had already articulated their critical positions. We wanted to meet face to face and talk about patriarchy, which, in spite of big differences between our and their socio-political contexts, was firmly rooted in both of our systems in an almost identical manner.

Who made the conceptual and organizational core of the conference?

I had come from Sarajevo, where, at that time, I was an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences, and suggested to my junior colleague, Žarana Papić, that we

should try and organize the conference in Belgrade, which she wholeheartedly accepted and then passed the idea on to Dunja Blažević, who, at that time, was the director of “Studentski kulturni centar” (“Student Cultural Center”). That is how it all began. Jasmina Tešanović had brought the Italian women, for, at that time, she lived in Rome.

Who participated in the conference?

The list is long, but it is significant to name those who were present as well as those who never appeared although they had been announced. So, from Great Britain came Helen Roberts, Parveen Adams, Jill Lewis, and Diana Leonard-Sarkar; from France – Naty Garcia, Nil Yalter, Christine Delphy, Catherine Nadaud; from Poland – Ewa Morawska. From Hungary appeared Judit Kele, from Italy came Dacia Maraini, Carla Ravaioli, Chiara Saraceno, Ane Marie Boetti, Manuela Fraire, Anabella Miscuglio, Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, and Adele Cambria. From Germany came Alice Schwarzer. The largest number of participants were from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: from Zagreb came Gordana Cerjana-Letica, Nadežda Čaćinović-Puhovski, Slavenka Drakulić-Ilić, Ruža First-Dilić, Božidarka Frajt, Đurđa Milanović, Vesna Pusić, Vesna Kesić, Lidija Sklevicky, Jelena Zuppa; from Belgrade – Vesna Dramušić, Rada Đuričin, Rada Iveković (she lived between Belgrade and Rome), Dragan Klajić, Anđelka Milić, Miloš Nemanjić, Živana Olbina, Borka Pavićević, Vesna Pešić, Milica Posavec, Vera Smiljanić, Vuk Stambolović, Karel Turza, Ljuba Stojić, Sonja Drljević, Biljana Tomić, Danica Mijović, as well as the above-mentioned Dunja Blažević, Jasmina Tešanović and Žarana Papić. From Novi Sad came Katalin Ladik, from Sarajevo Zoran Vidaković and I, from Ljubljana Silva Mežnarić, and from Rijeka appeared Mira Oklobdžija and Slobodan Drakulić.

It was established that the gathering was also attended by Letizia Paolozzi, Luciana Viviani, and Giuliana Sgrena from Italy; Ivette, Julie and Else Bon from France. The invitees who did not attend the conference were as follows: Ann Oakley, Branka Magas, Juliet Mitchell, and Sheila Rowbotham from Great Britain; Elisabetta Rasy, Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, Dario Fo, Franca Rama, and Ida Magli from Italy, as well as Helene Cixous, Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva from France; Susan Sontag and Lucy Lippard from the United States; Ilona Lowas from Hungary, and Ida Biard from Croatia.

What was the atmosphere like at the conference?

That was the first appearance of Yugoslav neofeminism on public stage. A tumultuous gathering; panels with no chairpersons; overcrowded halls; discussions beyond agenda late into the night; debates going on; the personal is political, the private is public; films shown; exhibitions on sexism around us; the foreign feminist women will not allow men into the hall, our feminist women say this makes no sense; Slobodan Drakulić, though a true feminist, was almost forced out of the hall.

The reputable journalist Slobodanka Ast, one of the few who were on our side, described the gathering in the following manner: “What was it that kept the audience interested and maintained high temperature? After all, it may have been the new approach, new views, a new language, and the unconventional tones in which ‘the women’s issue’ was discussed. At the end of this five-day gathering, everything seemed far from that report-like inarticulate, stuttering, coded language that is difficult to swallow even with litres of mineral water...” This was published in the weekly newspaper NIN, on November 12, 1978.

What kind of impression did the conference leave in the public?

The *mainstream* politicians and the media met the conference with great hostility. We were “the bourgeois feminists” and, paradoxically, at the same time described as “the Trojan horse of the new left wing”, while feminism was “a product imported from the West”. But nonetheless, the *Comrade Woman* had broken the ice. In its aftermath, nothing would ever remain the same. Nobody could say ever again, without seeming ridiculous, that, in our region, the women’s issue had been resolved, that discrimination and the overexploitation of women’s labor in our self-governing socialism was not in existence, that, in our country, there was no violence against women...

Among all the serious Yugoslav journals for social theory and practice minding their reputation, there was not a single one that would not ask for our texts and would not begin to publish them.

In what sense was the Yugoslav context different from that of the other countries of the Eastern Bloc behind the Iron Curtain?

Owing to its openness for new ideas in the social sciences and culture, and also to its intellectual and cultural cores of feminist social criticism, Yugoslavia was the first country of the Socialist Bloc to be affected by the so-called Second Wave of Feminism. The conference

was held in a country of real socialism, in a socio-political environment where feminism *per se* meant something bad from the viewpoint of leftist party dogmatism as well as in the patriarchal and sexist public opinion. In the eyes of the dogmatic party-state apparatus, to advocate the specific interests of women, the right to be different, was a serious heresy. In our country, the bureaucratic party apparatus kept sweeping the issues of women's position under the rug, and we did not want them to stay there. If nothing else, at least to start with, we did make them visible.

“What do these women want?” the bourgeois public opinion wondered. And those were the times of the crawling retraditionalization of women's role and the desecularization of society which, as we can see now, has come a long way.

What, before anything else, was the sword of women's revolt and criticism pointed at in Yugoslav real socialism?

We were not content with the reality in which women from the first lines of the revolution had, to a large extent, been already pushed to the margins and expelled from the centers of power and decision-making. We invoked the idea that gender equality was not only the normative ideal but also one of the important strategic objectives of the socialist revolution. The growing feminization of poverty began to speed up. Women were the first to be fired when crisis prevailed. Even Tito said that it was not necessary for all members of a family to be employed so that a woman should leave her job if someone really had to!

The women's movement, which was relatively autonomous – that is, which was not under the rigorous bureaucratic party control – had already been suffocated. It was replaced by the bureaucratic Conference for Women's Social Activity, a stiff, sterile “transmission belt” of the Party and its Central Committee. *The Comrade Woman* had been able to, more or less, shake off its patronizing yoke, and that must have certainly been one of the reasons behind the attractiveness and freshness of this gathering, but, of course, also a reason for political slaps and assaults.

Still, unlike other countries of the Socialist Bloc, Yugoslavia was open for new impulses – we were able to travel, read contemporary literature, and exchange our experience, which were things that women in the countries behind the Iron Curtain could only dream of. I had a close affinity with the Italian feminist theory.

Has your feminist stance changed over time and what is your view of the situation related to this during the post-Yugoslav war years and in today's evermore globalized and neoliberalized world?

I would not say that my feminist stance has changed. It only turned the sword of its criticism toward different burning global issues, and toward the issues of the so-called transitional societies that have been afflicted by a dramatic erosion of women's rights. When I was writing my book *Neofeminism and the Socialist Alternative*, the global process of socialism seemed to be on the rise. What we needed was a critical encounter between Marxism, on the one hand, and the theory and practice of neofeminism on the other, or, in other words, the re-evaluation of the left wing's relationship with the new women's movements as being important to the then-current political moment and the future of socialism. However, instead of the global socialist alternative that we had dreamt of, we found ourselves in a world which is the complete opposite.

Today, the so-called free market is conducting a radical deregulation and privatization, aimed solely at gaining profit, to which everything else is subordinate. The socialist feminists ironically describe "the free market" as free plunder. Market fundamentalism is, therefore, the ideology and practice of a globalized market by means of which the world's greatest economic, technological, military and political powers gain profit at whatever cost, regardless of the social consequences. It pushes the vulnerable countries and the vulnerable layers of society into ever-deepening misery, dependence, and despair. It is on these grounds that different kinds of religious fundamentalism are most likely to emerge, ones that recruit the marginal social groups, the distressed and the impoverished.

Speaking of the globalized world, we need to make clear that globalization in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary – the ability to communicate; to exchange information; to diminish the cultural, social and individual distance; to spread progressive ideas by means of state-of-the-art information technologies – all of these are enormous civilizational achievements. But the problem with global capitalism and market fundamentalism is that it globalizes its supremacy by means of advanced technologies, that is to say, it is used by the most powerful to increase their welfare, while at the same time it dramatically impoverishes and exploits human and natural resources. In this way, it dramatically devastates the environment, bringing the otherwise "weak layers of society", among which women are the weakest link, into an even more difficult situation.

Women as a particularly vulnerable layer of society are possibly the biggest losers of the controversial post-socialist and post-war transition. In combination with the authoritarian political culture as deeply pervaded by patriarchy or a more or less overt loathing for women, this environment is producing the following devastating effects: it is driving women out of the centers of social and material power; it is driving women from the regulated market of labor and into the spheres of black and grey economy where they work without health, social, disability or retirement insurance; it is turning a multitude of women and girls into white slaves that are ignominiously trafficked for the purpose of prostitution all over the region; a quiet propaganda is being slipped against the right of a woman to control her own body so that she would be turned into a child-bearing, reproductive machine, and the same propaganda is imposing on her a sense of guilt about “hindering” the nation’s demographic balance, while at the same time the heartless, socially irresponsible tax policies are dramatically increasing the prices of food for children, diapers, medications, and reducing the prices of alcohol, expensive cars and luxury goods.

Postmodern social theory cannot cope with these social processes, and the institutionalized left wing, if such a wing is to be found anywhere at all, is unable to grapple with this drama. As for the feminist movement, it still has not articulated its theoretical fabric or demands befitting the new circumstances in which the contemporary world has found itself. Today feminism often suffers from being influenced by show business and festivals, and with its soft activity, it looks as though it has become blended with the logic of liberal capitalism and serves it well.

Today, in a time of globalized capitalism, there are more and more voices calling for rereadings of Marx. He precisely described all of its characteristics in *The Capital*, for he was its wisest analyst. We can see, therefore, that Marxism is not a thing of the past and that the course of time has not rendered it obsolete. On the contrary, as long as capitalism lives and dominates our lives, we will need our old Marx.

Translated by Goran Petrović

¹ <https://zenebih.ba/o-knjizi/>