
Reviewed by Emiliya Karaboeva
Published on H-Travel (November, 2008)
Commissioned by Patrick R. Young

Feminism, Cultural Capital, and Tourism

Kristen Ghodsee is assistant professor of gender and women’s studies at Bowdoin College, Maine. Her book, *The Red Riviera: Gender, Tourism, and Postsocialism on the Black Sea*, offers a provocative discussion of the widely neglected interrelation between gender, tourism, and postsocialism. The author chooses the tourism industry in Bulgaria as a main object of her study because “it was the sector of the communist economy that employed the highest concentration of women who had almost daily access to Western tourists” (pp. 4-5). The purpose of the book is to examine the particular processes through which some women were able to adjust to capitalism using interpersonal, educational, and material resources designed for survival under communism—a radically different social, political, and economic system. Its main thesis is that “women are in an even better position in the postsocialist economy because of the particular way the communist state gendered (the) distribution of cultural capital” (p. 156). The book is very welcome, because although there are many studies on the relation between tourism and gender in different countries, such studies on postsocialist countries and particularly Bulgaria are scarce. Still, Ghodsee’s, like other studies in this field, would benefit greatly both from a more critical use of its source information, and from a more critical and detailed understanding of the intricate workings of communist societies and the dynamics between official propaganda and actual values and perceptions. Ghodsee’s argument is fundamentally based on the “trajectory adjustment theory” developed by Gil Eyal, Ivan Szelenyi, and Eleanor Townsley in their study *Making Capitalism without Capitalists* (2001), a book that combined the “capitalism-by-design” theory and “path-dependence” theory of how capitalism would be built after the collapse of communism. Drawing on this theory, Ghodsee uses both qualitative and quantitative sources with strong emphasis on the qualitative ethnographic study of the actors and their everyday life environment. Ghodsee conducted 100 formal interviews and undertook participant observation that brought her closer to the perspective of her respondents and provided her with interesting insights on the issues that topped their individual and collective agendas during the fourteen months of her field work in Bulgaria in 1999-2000. She bases her arguments principally on the personal accounts of those Bulgarian women working in tourism during this transitional period in Bulgaria.

The introduction and each of the five chapters of the book are organized around the personal story of one successful Bulgarian woman during the transition period, including Desi (a waitress), Dora (a chef), Gergana (a chambermaid), Sonia (a receptionist), Prolet (a reservation manager), and a director of a feminist NGO. The introduction justifies the choice of the topic and presents the main actors in the book, as well as some theoretical issues and strategies. The subsequent chapters oscillate between in-depth case studies and examination of the different contexts of tourism in Bulgaria. Thus Ghodsee leads the reader through the specific features of communist Bulgaria, then through the economic prob-
lems of the transitional period and restrictions of the labor market, especially in tourism. She analyzes the development of tourism in Bulgaria for the light it sheds on the value of different kinds of capital in the postsocialist period, and their relationship to processes of institutional and social change after 1989 (involving privatization, foreign investment, the mafia, etc.). The book concludes with one of its most challenging and interesting chapters, discussing the role and significance of women’s NGOs in Bulgaria. Ghodsee argues there for unemployment as the main issue facing Bulgarian women, whereas NGOs concern themselves mainly with sexual harassment and domestic violence–problems the author’s informants deem not to be significant ones for Bulgarian women.

The author’s overall approach is one that yields some valuable dividends. One of her most interesting points is that, similarly to the “capitalism-by-design” perspective on postsocialist societies, the “feminism-by-design” approach presupposes existing problems and imports Western feminist ideas as their solution. Yet in neither case are the presupposed problems and solutions fully relevant in particular cultural and gender situations like the Bulgarian case. Moreover, Ghodsee argues that the focus of women’s NGOs on issues of violence and discrimination can actually help reproduce a discourse of victimization. The author also very skillfully uses her informants to illustrate larger conceptual points. She uses the story of Desi, for example, to demonstrate the relevance of her overall theoretical framework. Gergana’s story to reveal the economic context of employment in tourism in Bulgaria after 1989, etc. (On the whole however, the author’s methodology and research strategy too often remain rather implicit. On many occasions it seems that Ghodsee has not made explicit her critical distance from her sources and thus the accounts overall lack critical analysis of the respondent’s answers as well as of other sources employed (informal conversations, anecdotal evidence). For example, in providing background information about one of the important actors in the book, the young woman named Svetla, Ghodsee suggests that the university entrance exam in tourism is more competitive and complicated than the exams for law and medicine (pp. 2-3). This claim will likely surprise a Bulgarian (such as myself), as degrees in law and medicine have been among the most desirable and highly competitive in Bulgaria before as well as after the fall of communism. Certain other claims in the book are only supported by interview material and the criteria behind them is left unclear, as for example in her assertion that “Balkantourist was the seventeenth largest hotel chain in the world” (p. 88). Along similar lines, the author could have done more to justify her core terminology. Using terms such as “privileged job” and “prestigious work” throughout the book, Ghodsee never explains precisely enough what she means by them. According to her survey, the women prefer to work in tourism because it is pleasant and easier than other jobs, and provides opportunities for using foreign languages and traveling abroad (table 6, p. 180). Still, it is not clear how this survey proves that these “easy” and “pleasant” tourism jobs are also more prestigious than, say, jobs in banking, law, medicine, and education, which are no less feminized in Bulgaria. In the case of Gergana, who according to Ghodsee earned BGN 200 per month working as a chambermaid in 2003, neither the position (which does not provide opportunities of using foreign languages or traveling abroad), nor the salary are such that her job might be considered more prestigious than the work of a teacher or a doctor. At that time, according to official statistics, the average salary in education was BGN 255 in January and BGN 328 in December, while in healthcare it was BGN 269 in January and BGN 328 in December.[1]

In talking about the attractiveness of the tourism sector, Ghodsee likewise does not distinguish explicitly enough the periods before and after the fall of communism. Before 1989 tourism was indeed one of the few sectors in which Bulgarians were able to receive information about the world beyond the Iron Curtain, to smuggle in consumer goods, or to receive tips in hard currency that could be spent in the special currency shops. After 1989 however, all these attractive possibilities gradually started to fade away along with the restrictions on traveling abroad, and there was also a rise in the number of emigrants and in imported consumer goods.

Ghodsee could do more to distinguish the different positions in the tourism industry, as she seems to treat them as equally prestigious–from the chambermaid and laundry operative to the hotel manager or director. That fault is partly attributable to her use of the “trajectory adjustment” theory, in which symbolic capital is altogether omitted. Although Pierre Bourdieu argues that symbolic capital informs issues like prestige and values, Ghodsee’s approach emphasizes the cultural capital possessed by the women to the exclusion of symbolic capital. The main such example is the waitress Desi, who “has the equivalent of a master’s degree in English philology, and she speaks four languages” (p. 2). The implicit suggestion of the book seems to be that it is not symbolic capital, but rather the worker’s education itself (i.e., cultural capital) that defines a job as prestigious. Social capital, though
mentioned, also is not considered by Ghodsee as important for achieving a good job. A more convincing explanation of the relative importance of these three different forms of capital in conditioning outcomes for the interviewees is needed.

The arguments in the book are sometimes inconsistent as well. While one of the main concerns of Ghodsee about NGOs is that they promote the poverty of women and their general inability to cope with free market economy (p. 149), in fact many of her stories suggest exactly the same picture of poverty and victimization. For example, a senior expert from the Ministry of Economy is shown as a poor woman who is not even able to provide potato chips for her son (p. 27). In the context of the "rapidly declining living standard at all levels of society" (p. 27), even the examples of "success" given by the author, seem more as sacrifices in order to survive in a hard economic crisis (Desi’s story).

Another example is when Ghodsee argues through the voice of Desi that unlike in other countries, "Bulgarian women are strong and the Bulgarian men and women are equal" (p. 146), which she presents as an outcome of communist gender policy. On the other hand, Ghodsee claims elsewhere that while "Communist ideologies had advocated for the emancipation of women and the equality of the sexes ... in reality there remained a gendered division of labor between men in the factories and women in socialism’s less prestigious areas--law, banking, finance, medicine, and tourism" (p. 108). Ghodsee also claims that "state socialism led inevitably to the infantilization of both men and women, who became equally dependent on a paternalistic state that met all of their basic needs." (p. 39). Yet, she argues later (p.165) that the same paternalistic policy was the most important achievement of socialism, and that after 1989 these rights were transformed into needs to be satisfied by the individuals themselves. Thus, women’s situation had in fact worsened, as women still expected the state to cater to these "basic rights in Bulgaria" (p. 166). These examples show both an insufficiently critical use of the source information and the pitfalls that some myths about gender and communism can create. Unfortunately, Ghodsee does not avoid these pitfalls, due both to her rather heavy reliance on the interviews and because of the implications of her theoretical framework.

Though in general clear and correct, the picture of the privatization process Ghodsee presents is also at times ambiguous. It is quite strange, for example, that in the discussion of mafia and privatization in Bulgaria, the name Multigroup does not appear at all. The holding group Multigroup (reputedly a mafia organization) was one of the most powerful structures in Bulgaria until 2003 when its leader Iliya Pavlov was killed. The group is particularly important for this research because it bought Balkantourist and destroyed it over the years through poor management and money laundering. Indeed, it still owns Balkantourist as well as some of the important Bulgarian resorts. Overall, Ghodsee presents a very welcome point of view in her principal reliance on the voices of women in Bulgaria rather than on preconceived Western theoretical schemes. She also provides a vivid and impressively rich picture of daily Bulgarian life. The author’s success in convincing her informants to trust her and reveal some personal stories, issues, and feelings is equally impressive. The book is also very well designed in terms of structure and its use of clear, accessible language. The author largely succeeds in highlighting issues, power struggles, and societal dynamics that are often neglected in mainstream writing on the topic of women in postsocialist transitional societies. It is only regrettable that despite these qualities of the work, the theoretical framework chosen is rather limited and not really adequate and Ghodsee seems at times to be overly trusting of her sources. While not pretending to be the definitive work on the subject, *The Red Riviera* is rather an invitation for further discussion and study of those complex and challenging topics.

Notes

