

Book Review

Gordana Subotić. 2022. *Gender, Nation, and Women Politicians in Serbia and Kosovo. A Political Ethnography*. London / New York: Routledge (Routledge Studies in Political Sociology). 192 pp., ISBN 9781032045139 (hardcover), ISBN 9781032045146 (paperback), ISBN 9781003193562 (eBook), £104.00 / €31.19 / £31.19

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Ever since Margaret Thatcher, former British prime minister, became *the* woman in politics, it seems that it is out of bounds to expect women to do politics differently from their male counterparts. Early notions of what women would do once they were let into the realm from which they had been historically barred due to their gender included the belief that they would bring compassion to the workings of reason, peace to what was almost perpetual warmongering, internationalism to ethno-nationalism. Women soon proved these expectations wrong, however. Indeed, the first opportunity they had, during the First World War, if not to cast their vote then at least to express their political will, saw them advocate warfare. To this day, women have not substantially changed the way politics is run. In fact, while the field of politics has become more accessible to women, this has not contributed to peaceful internationalism. Ultimately, one is not born a feminist (politician), but becomes one. Or not.

This is particularly pertinent to contested regions where politics (still) primarily revolves around defining territorial borders, and where these volatile borders frame the identity politics that (still) shapes the political realm at large. Such is the case in Serbia and Kosovo, on which Gordana Subotić's political ethnography focuses. *Gender, Nation, and Women Politicians in Serbia and Kosovo* is certainly not the first book about the post-Yugoslav region to deal with the contentious issue of gender and nation. It is, however, the first to tackle this tangled issue from the perspective of the women who actively do politics.

The general approach thus far has revolved around the question of what politics has done to women: how women became “re-gendered” through postsocialist, conflict-related re-patriarchalisation, how they became involuntarily ethnicised, and what actions they took against such impositions. This could be the shorthand description of the feminist refusal “to be deceived by their own” – one of the enduring slogans of the Women in Black in Belgrade, the Serbian section of the international Women in Black network (womeninblack.org), dedicated to achieving peace and justice and to challenging patriarchal and militarist discourses in societies

around the world. Subotić herself was a “Woman in Black”, and it is from this position, it seems, that she analyses whether such refusal can, or should be, applied to the women who chose to use their agency in the proper political arena, rather than by doing politics in the streets.

Subotić finds that Serbian and Kosovar women politicians, perceived as actors with a certain kind of power, do both gender politics and nationalism. She consistently uses Anthony Smith’s concept of *ethnie*¹ to refer to the premodern elements of the group to which the women doing politics in Serbia and Kosovo belong. To complicate matters, there are three *ethnies* under scrutiny – Serbian, Albanian and Bosniak. Subotić’s fieldwork was a combination of “deep hanging out” and multisited ethnography, and her approach to women doing politics combines Third World feminism with the framework of feminist standpoint theory.

The book is divided into seven chapters with revealing titles. The first focuses on *ethnie*, birth, tragedy and the transition from “I” to “we”. The second is about blood and roots, while the third tackles symbols, myths and rituals. The fourth chapter sees women as biological reproducers, the fifth as political, ideological and symbolic boundary markers and transmitters of culture. The final two chapters then demonstrate what it means for a woman to participate in nationalist projects – especially when these are also projects of democratisation.

The story that Subotić weaves begins with the ancient and primordial *ethnies*, whose contemporary political representatives are also women, who merge their personal lives – often tragedies – with the plights of their nation, romanticising “the nation’s obsession with land and descent” (24). The personal here is indeed political, and the oppression of the nation is underscored. This, however, does not take the shape of the oppression of women within their own *ethnie*. Rather the politics of the women discussed in the book is developed around the struggle of the *ethnie*, oppressed by another *ethnie* in the shared geographical space. Significantly, the “personal” could become a part of the collective narrative only on condition that it is bound to the nation’s destiny and sacrifice.

Both destiny and sacrifice are expressed through the notions of blood and roots, the two most common signifiers of *ethnie*. Blood is described as having been spilled in the past and transferred through birth, that is, mythicised as a natural link between the ancestors and the collectives that have grown out of these blood-soaked roots. The trouble is that “*ethnie* and national identities in the Balkans are built on constant processes of the rootedness of self and the uprooting of the other”, and that women politicians use the “natural right to rootedness” (46) to promote their collectives and advance their own positions within those collectives.

1 Smith, Anthony D. 1988. *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley–Blackwell.

Subotić shows that this advancement is neither easy nor inevitably feminist: to ground their claims, women politicians draw on traditional, patriarchal gender roles to underpin their own, distinctive contribution to their *ethnie*. Although at times critical of these roles *within* it, they are never, Subotić claims, critical of the domination or patriarchalism of the *ethnie* itself. This conundrum was considered by Anthias and Yuval-Davis more than three decades ago,² and Subotić follows in their footsteps, developing her own approach to the three nations under scrutiny. In a territory where everyone is a “victim” of “occupiers” and “conquerors”, giving “birth becomes politics” (90). The act of giving birth is, however, typically accompanied by gendered archetypes, through which symbolic boundaries are drawn. These boundaries, purportedly shielding an ethnic identity from other dominant identities, prevent women from making political contributions that seek to move away from traditional roles and expectations. Thus, “by using traditional gender norms to promote women’s contribution to the *ethnie*/nation, women politicians end up reinforcing strict gender, political, ideological, and symbolic boundaries that, most of the time, work against them” (110).

When women enter the political space, encouraged by processes of democratisation, they enter a space that is structurally carved by “historical processes, and patriarchal gender and *ethnie* hierarchies” (153). It is for this reason, according to Subotić, that when doing politics women situate themselves within their *ethnie* first, and only secondarily within their gender, which precludes the formation of new political sisterhoods. This is a disheartening conclusion. The fact that only one interlocutor in Subotić’s entire study claimed that “nationalism leads to radicalism and radicalism leads to conflict [...] I think that the role of women is [...] to prevent conflict”, paints a bleak picture of politics in Serbia and Kosovo, whoever is ultimately doing those politics.

2 Anthias, Floya, and Nira Yuval-Davis, eds. 1989. *Woman – Nation – State*. London/New York: Palgrave Macmillan.