

MARTA BOTIKOVÁ & ZITA DEÁKY
(2022)

**LÁNYOK, ASSZONYOK SZLOVÁKIÁBAN
ÉS MAGYARORSZÁGON (1955 – 1989)**

AHOGY KÉT ETNOLÓGUS NŐ LÁTTA

**DIEVČATÁ, ŽENY NA SLOVENSKU A V MAĎARSKU
(1955 – 1989)**

OČAMI DVOCH ETNOLOGIČIEK

[Girls, women in Slovakia and Hungary (1955 – 1989)
Through the eyes of two ethnologists]

Budapešť: ELTE, Bratislava: Filozofická fakulta UK, 339 p.

A lot has been written about the period of state socialism. Methodological and interpretative difficulties are typical for ethnographic research of life during the rule of the ideology of state socialism. If we want to comprehend the complexity of that period in our history, we need to continue in research and focus on marginal topics and experiment with diverse methodologies. The publication written by two ethnologists – Marta Botiková and Zita Deáky is the product of courage to approach difficult topics through a non-standard lens. It is historical ethnographic writing with the fragments of autoethnography which provides description and explanations about fundamental social and cultural processes that influenced the mundane and festive time in lives of women in state socialism.

Firstly, we mention the distinctiveness in their methodological approach. The publication has got the features of the autoethnography. Their aim was to interpret the way of life of women and girls in Slovakia and Hungary from 1955 to 1989. The analysed period is very personal, both authors were born in

1955. Further the publication is not built on traditional comparative research, but it is the result of the common dialogue – the dialogue of the two ethnologists from different countries that are bounded by history; two women that were born in and lived part of their lives in socialist state. As they stated „The book is a product of our long dialogue that lasted many years and showed us that the quality of our relations is up to us.“ (Botiková & Deáky, 2022, p. 311). The material for their professional and personal dialogue were their experiences and knowledge from field research, contemporary laws and legal regulations, further ethnological, sociological, historical literature and visual material such as photographs from museums and private archives, and Women's magazines, mainly *Nők Lapja* a *Slovenska* (Botiková & Deáky, 2022, pp. 21-22).

Symbolically they expressed the results of their dialogue in two languages. The aspect of the shared history is present in the fact that the publication is written in Slovak and Hungarian. This symbolic gesture expresses more than geographical and historical closeness of the countries, it is about dialogue and searching for answers - How did the lives of women in Slovakia and Hungary look like? What was similar in their lives and what was different? And why?

The second perspective of difference from up to now written ethnological publications about socialism is thematic orientation and researched social and cultural problems. Botiková and Deáky decided to focus on marginalized research topics - lives of women. They pay attention to the mundane and festive life cycle rituals and everydayness. In eight chapters they describe basic activities, social and cultural processes in family and intimate lives, eating habits, trends in fashion, hygiene and ideals in body image; calendar customs, political holidays and ritualized events. It is a very ambitious goal. Authors were aware of the inevitable reduction of the interpretation and acknowledged fragmentation and absence of some information. Concretely, in this publication big historic events are in the background, it is the story of everyday life. They focus on analysis of the process of adaptation and keeping the tradition. Authors intend to:

(...) show, introduce how people in these countries followed their traditions and at the same time tried to survive and adapt; how new phenomena created by socialist ideology and heritage of the past coexisted in social relations. For us it is important to present the process and changes that caused that coexistence (Botiková & Deáky, 2022, pp.16-17).

They emphasize not only the complexity of the analysed period but also the importance of the investigation of the status of women for understanding of the broader social and economic process and changes. The diversity of life trajectories of women from different social classes are described through a plethora of examples. Authors ask how the women experienced the mundane and festive culture through the eating habits, clothing styles, hygiene and car-

ing for bodies, in their intimate space, in their family and workspace. They describe mechanisms of gender socialization of women, their continuing and changing gender roles. They reflect on how the state ideology influenced the transformation of traditional gender roles, group and social norms that determine the lives of women. On the plentiful examples they illustrate how the ideological attempts brought more public and domestic burden for women. For example, the state attempts for secularization of the greatest Christian festivals and Holy days – Christmas and Easter – was accompanied by the processes of consumerism that loaded women with more tasks and responsibilities.

The main argument of the publication is that women tried to live their lives as best as they could due to the limits of the oppressive system. Although state socialism controls intimate family and social environments through laws, regulations and systematic surveillance, many women strategized how to meet all the demands of private/family and public life and the needs of personal preferences and dreams.

State policies related to fertility are accurate examples when personal, family and public demands on women merged. Authors do not skip that very important topic and in a chapter *Family. Structure of the family* give a very brief overview of the social attitude and norms on abortion from the 18th century till the rule of state socialism. They point to the complexity and intricacy of the decision to have or not to have an abortion. It is a very hard life decision that is influenced by broader political, social and economic circumstances in the country. They demonstrate the ambivalent attitude of the then regime to this topic and prove that laws on safe access to abortion were seemingly liberal but in reality were conservative and negatively affect the freedom, safety and health of women.

Through the interpretation of the material authors challenge the narrative of state socialism about the independent and free socialist woman. In each chapter we can find examples of the inherent ambivalence of the state narrative on the status of women and the everyday experience of women. A good example of this paradoxical attitude of the regime to the status of women is the celebration of the International Women's Day. Typically, women were during this day being gifted with red carnations, dish towels or other things that represent the women's domestic role.

Marta Botiková and Zita Deáky in their publication do not provide deeper analysis of the chosen topics. Their aim was to outline the development of the mundane and festive life and interpret the material in the context of the broader contemporary political and economic structure. The significance of that publication is in the diversity of the topics that are marginal in the ethnological research of socialism. Authors through their work enrich the professional and public discussion and knowledge about socialism with the critical reflection on the life and status of women.

The publication *Girls, women in Slovakia and Hungary (1955 – 1989)* have several attributes. Its approach follows the expectations and professional program of the ethnology and sociocultural anthropology – focus on parallels, common experience, differences. It is accessible and easily read for a diverse group of people – in our families aroused the attention, went from hand to hand and encouraged our mothers and grandmothers in sharing their memories. It is an expert analysis – entangling ethnographic and historical perspective in the interpretation of how social change impacts the lives of women. It is documentary in nature – presenting contemporary family pictures, advertising posters or magazine covers. Visual material is not part of the interpretations, it grippingly accompanies the text. Moreover, the publication of the Marta Botíková and Zita Deáky encourages us to have an iterative dialogue – dialogue in which we will attentively listen to the stories and memories of the people we perceive as others. It is an important message that we need as a society now more than ever.

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