Communism and Gender: Historical and Global Perspectives
GENS 5019 - Department of Gender Studies
Winter AY 2019-20, 4 CEU credits, 8 ECTS.
Cross listed with History Department

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Syllabus

Course Description:
This is an introductory course in the developing field of studies on communism, women and gender, in which we will explore historical, theoretical and global perspectives on the topic. We will discuss the complex question of what communism was (or is), emphasizing the need to distinguish between communism as an ideology, a political movement, or a regime, and, regardless, the need to carefully historicize and contextualize the phenomena in question. The dominant anti-communist discourse homogenizes “communism” and tends to conflate it with the dictatorships of Stalin and Mao. Such a view leaves out large parts of the history of communism worldwide.
For many decades of the twentieth century, millions of women and men around the world were active in communist or communist-inspired or supported political movements for social justice and national independence, and many gave their lives in struggles to establish or defend socialist or communist states. As well, for millions of people around the world, the Soviet Union, the first socialist state, was a land of hope. The Soviet Union had achieved impressive economic growth by the 1950s, it promoted women’s emancipation, anti-racism and anti-colonialism, and supported progressive movements worldwide. An understanding of either the Soviet Union or China as one-dimensional totalitarian and patriarchal states cannot explain their achievements in promulgating and implementing women’s rights, nor where their “women-friendly” legislation and policies came from. The history of communism cannot be understood either without taking into account the various forms of anticomunism, including the military and economic campaigns the USA waged against (alleged) communist movements and countries worldwide.
This course will explore what we can learn about the history of communism if we move beyond the still common totalitarian, Eurocentric, androcentric, and gender-blind approaches and include questions about women and women’s organizations, and about gender and “race” in these histories; if we explore the role of communists in European and global struggles against fascism, racism, colonialism and imperialism; and if we consider the attempts to undermine communism. This will allow us to begin to rethink the meaning of “communism” for women and men around the world in more complex and encompassing ways.
Learning activities/Teaching methods:
Classes will combine lectures on broader developments and key concepts; seminar discussions of the mandatory readings, guided by questions; watching and discussing various videos in class; the possibility of student presentations; the writing of a short reaction paper on one of the readings in the syllabus; and preparing and writing a term paper.

Learning outcomes:
The course provides students with a basic knowledge of the main socialist and communist ideas on women’s emancipation and social justice more generally. They will learn to critically engage with mainstream, generally male-centered and Euro-centric narratives on the history of communism and understand the importance of applying a critical and global perspective to this topic. Students will also become acquainted with key recent publications in this rapidly developing field.

Assessment:
Your grade will comprise of the following elements:
- Active participation in class: 25% of the grade
- One reaction paper or in-class presentation: 25% of the grade
- Term paper: 50% of the grade

Reaction paper:
The reaction paper must provide a coherent summary (2/3 of the paper) of and reflection (1/3 of the paper) on one of the readings included in the syllabus; length 1.5 to 2 pages (spaced 1.5).
Deadline: week 4, date tba.

Student presentations: to be discussed in class 1.

Term paper:
To prepare the term paper, you must submit a 1 to 2-page term paper proposal that includes the paper title, a short introduction of the topic, the central question, the structure of the paper, and the literature and sources you intend to use. The term paper must engage with some of the theoretical issues and questions discussed in the course and your bibliography will include some of the readings for the course as well as literature that you have found yourself. The term paper has to be around 10-12 pages in length (spaced 1.5).
Deadline term paper proposal: Week 6, date tba.
Deadline term paper: tba.

Reaction paper, term paper proposal and term paper are to be submitted by email. You can send them as a pdf optionally (extra) but you must send them as word doc.

Make sure you avoid plagiarism or even the vague possibility of plagiarism. Note that copying from the internet or even taking ideas from internet sources without proper citation is also a form of plagiarism, not only copying from paper based texts. Paraphrase the
arguments whenever possible and add proper citations from the original text. Quote if absolutely necessary. Students who plagiarize will get a warning first, and if we encounter another incident of plagiarism they will fail the course.

Course Schedule

Part 1: Historical Context and Early Socialist and Communist Thinkers on Women and Gender

Week 1:
Session 1: Course Introduction
Required reading:

Session 2:
Required reading:
Mary Buckley, Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), Ch. 1: “Marxism, Revolution and Emancipation in the 1920s,” 18–59 (including notes).

Week 2: Marxist Classics and Women and Gender
Session 3:
Required reading:

Session 4:
Required reading:

A second excerpt will be added.

For Bebel’s the whole text, originally published in 1879, see: http://www.marxists.org/archive/bebel/1879/woman-socialism/index.htm?utm_source=lasindias.info

Week 3: Alexandra Kollontai and Women’s Organizations
Session 5:
Required reading:


Session 6:

Part 2: Socialism in the USSR

Week 4
Session 7:
Required reading:

Session 8
Required reading:

Week 5:
Session 9:
Required reading:

Session 10:

Week 6: Bolshevik Feminism in Central Asia
Session 11:
Required reading:
Chapter 3: “The Revolution and Rights for Uzbek Women,” 53–75 and

Session 12:
Required reading:

Week 7: Women in Yugoslavia
Session 13:
Required reading:

Session 14:
We’ll watch the historical documentary “Pine and Fir Trees: Women’s Memories of Life during Socialism (2002)” by Sanja Ivekovic

Part 3: Global Perspectives on Communism and Women’s Activism
Week 8: Women and Communist China
Session 15:
Required reading:

Session 16:
Required reading:

In class: a 30-minute documentary on women in China, past and present: “From Iron Girls to Left-Over Women.”

Week 9: Black Communist Women in the USA
Session 17:
Required reading:


Session 18:
Required reading:


Week 10: Cuba and Latin America
Session 19:
Required reading:

In class: short documentary

Session 20:
Required reading:

We read the English, unpublished version of it: "The Women’s International Democratic Federation and Latin America, 1945–1970s."

Week 11: Feminism, Communism and Global Socialism, 1945 - 1995
Session 21:
Required reading:
Part 4: Varieties of Anti-Communism
Session 22:
Required reading:

Week 12
Session 23:
Required reading:

Session 24:
We will watch the 2017 documentary “We Have No Fear,” made by Eloisa Betti, University of Bologna, et al.

AND Course Conclusions.