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Modern Women Thinkers: an Introduction

This issue of *Radovi*, the Journal of Croatian History, is dedicated to research into the intellectual history of women. It is a partial result of the international project that was conducted in Zagreb from 2018 to 2023. What was the main motive behind this endeavour? The generation of women that came of age in the final decades of the 20th century first became aware of what was at the time the new and exhilarating discipline of women's history at the moment of collapse of the Cold War order, the transition to democracy and the Croatian war of independence. Although women's history as a discipline had been established in the United States and other European countries already in the 1970s, it was neither discussed nor accepted in Croatian, and indeed South-East European historiography in general. The question that arose after almost fifty years was: what has that generation managed to leave behind in lieu of results when it came to the research and writing of women's history? One has to agree with American-Canadian historian Natalie Zemon Davis (1928-2023), who already in 1976 explained: "Our goal is to understand the significance of the sexes, of gender groups in the historical past."¹ But how were these efforts perceived by the community of historians in Croatia since that time?

For many decades, established historians as well as institutions had been opposed, if not nakedly inimical, to women's history and to some extent even women in the historical profession. Women's history had not been systematically taught at universities and an occasional elective course was little more than an orphan in our history departments, an exception that served only to prove the point. It is therefore not surprising that, faced with such an aversion towards women's history as a research topic, women interested in researching women's history have not managed to produce more substantial results. Very often paired with feminism as an inspiration, women's and indeed gender history was regarded not only with contempt from the position of power but also with a certain ennui. It is easy to recall certain highly-esteemed Croatian intellectuals and journalists who could not conceal their tedium over the demands of the then emergent women's movement.² As Dorothy Keyton, an extraordinary attorney and civil rights advo-

¹ As cited in: McMAHON & MOYN, 2014: 94.

² MANDIĆ 1985.

cate who served as the American delegate to the UN Commission on the Status of Women (1946–1950) remarked on the boredom, or “the emotional state men often displayed when the subject of *women* was raised, the assumption that ‘the woman’s question’ is tediously devoid of interest or trivial and frivolous.” She interpreted this as “‘a shield, a protection of some sort’, a strategy which gave men permission to ignore intractable problems.”³

Boredom and trivialization have not prevailed, however, since interest in researching women’s history has proven persistent, first and foremost due to the individual efforts of Lydia Sklevicky (1952-1990), a veritable pioneer in women’s history research, who also laid the foundation for the study of the intellectual history of women.⁴ After her tragic death, a new generation of historians emerged who are attempting to answer new questions about women in the past. Some of these questions are behind the efforts of the group of scholars who contributed to this issue of *Radovi*. At its root is the foremost and rather complicated question of whether the intellectual history of women exists at all. Linda K. Kerber recalled what William Hesselstine, a historian of 19th-century American history and a mentor to generations of young academics, said about the topic: “Writing intellectual history is like trying to nail jelly to the wall.”⁵

Have women ever thought at all? What did they think about? Did feminism, as the ideology of the women’s movement, manage to influence our research and has it influenced the objects, as well as subjects of our research? How has it fared with other ideologies that burgeoned during the periods under examination? We were interested not only in the still under-researched contribution of women to the intellectual capital of society, but even more so in posing questions about the relationship between education, political activism, professional accomplishments and the national as well as transnational aspect of women’s engagement and their ever-changing roles in societies.

A component of our project’s primary aim was to construct the intellectual history of women in Croatia and to detect ideological changes in the understanding of the concept of woman in the 20th century. The selected group of collaborators endeavoured to explain the intellectual origins of the modern woman in the context of changing historical as well as societal circumstances. Over several years of research, the authors managed to trace the development of ideas formulated by women in their intellectual endeavours, with the accompanying influences and criticism, and changes in their social status and definitions of categories of intellectuals.

³ KERBER 1997:305.

⁴ On Sklevicky’s contribution see, most recently, FELDMAN & KARDUM’s introduction to SKLEVICKY, 2020.

⁵ KERBER 1997:202.

The title of our project, Modern Women Thinkers (*Moderne misleće žene*), was chosen intentionally after some deliberation. Taking into consideration Hilda L. Smith, whose use of the term referred to the women thinkers of the pre-modern and early modern period of European history, our introduction of this term as distinctive from the term intellectual and simultaneously as a research category was necessary to broaden the concept, since it referred to the wider scope of women's activities inside and outside of institutionalized academia. It strived to encompass the variety of experiences of women who were not necessarily educated on the same level as men in the periods under research, and were only just entering the professions and beginning to engage in political activism and public life. It is also noteworthy, as we have observed while conducting research, that the term *misleće žene* (literally "thinking women") has been in use in Croatian sources since at least the 19th century, and our decision to employ it represented more than a nod to our predecessors and our common traditions.

The research focused on the Croatian, South Slavic and Central European spaces from the final decades of the 19th to the end of the 20th centuries. This was a period that witnessed the more active involvement of women in social and public life with the intention of achieving political and legal equality for women. The interdisciplinary research encompassed theoretical and practical insights in fields as diverse as history, education, literary theory, anthropology and philosophy. International and domestic literature was consulted and, more importantly, this first women's history project funded by the Croatian Science Foundation helped researchers gain extensive access to archival sources in several countries. The project revealed the mechanisms for the construction of complex women's identities (both individual and collective) with reference to their national, religious, gender, class and cultural components. We wanted to understand the life of women across the different political systems that reigned in this area for more than a century. The research results facilitated a complex understanding of structural changes that took place amidst great economic, social, cultural and political tumult. It managed to encompass personalities and ideas that changed the understanding of the status of women and to reveal the ways and forms of their social organizations and public activity (women's organizations, intellectuals, journalists, schoolteachers, professors, physicians, artists, scientists and social elites). The quest for sources produced diverse data that were frequently disregarded. Focused on hitherto unpublished archival sources, researchers discovered unconventional private and public sources that illuminated the lives and activities of women in the past.

The dynamic research team included Croatian and international academics, women's history experts well-versed in the 19th- and 20th-century history, alongside young multidisciplinary researchers from renowned universities to whom we had the good fortune of introducing in this issue. The final step of the project

was the international conference held at the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik on 6-8 June 2021, where their initial papers were delivered. We specifically acknowledge our project consultants Andrea Petó and Tiina Kinnunen, whose contributions as keynote speakers inaugurate this collection. Two papers, each presenting distinct perspectives and geographical foci, provide a comprehensive view of the evolution of women's history. Kinnunen reflects on early attempts in Scandinavian countries, while Petó addresses the contemporary issues confronted by women's and gender history in the new political landscape of Central Europe. The examples of Scandinavian authors to some extent serve as a reminder of the rich tradition of women's initiatives and experiences frequently shared across national borders. After all, the first Finnish and Swedish women authors explored similar themes to those in this collection – seeking new sources, biographies of notable women, and actions of women's associations. Kinnunen also emphasizes an emotional aspect that connected early scholars to the subjects of their research. Petó's engaged analysis, on the other hand, contextualizes this collection within ongoing dialogues concerning specific sources, positioning, and the perspective of women's history in post-communist societies. Building on the premise that women's history and gender studies in Central Europe draw more on the political tradition of neoliberalism than feminism, aligned with a distinct post-communist historiography, Petó explores how pivotal political and historiographic moments (the fall of communism, the 2008 economic crises, the war in Ukraine, and the establishment of women's history as a counter-canon) influenced significant shifts in this historical discipline's paradigm.

The topics explored in this issue reflect with the project's objectives. They span from the late 19th to the latter half of the 20th century, with a geographical focus on Central and South-eastern Europe, aligning both thematically and in affinities of their authors. The volume offers a rich array of biographies that shed light on various aspects of women's life stories, as well as intertextual analysis of women's writings. The research and assessments of the work of women's associations promoting women's professional activities, the actions of female magazine editors or how magazines shaped new gender and body concepts and finally the reactions of women to the challenges of the Second World War encompass an analysis of over a century of women's intellectual development. These works encapsulate a significant exploration of women's intellectual history: identifying modern women thinkers, examining their creations and achievements, and evaluating their correlation and contributions to key ideologies and processes (feminism, modernization, nationalism, etc.) They highlight the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches by incorporating methodologies from history, literary studies, and anthropology and they draw upon a broad spectrum of sources, ranging from diverse ego documents, literary works and women's magazines to conventional historical sources like archives and personal records.

The women who emerge from these texts were mostly very well educated for their time, professionally active, and socially engaged. They worked as educators, writers, journalists, philosophers, dancers, actresses and ethnographers. Yet their professional choices, notably in earlier times, were markedly limited and socially dictated, forcing the protagonists of these analyses to seek different strategies for self-realization. For instance, Pavlina Bogdan Bijelić, dissatisfied with teaching, delved into ethnography, seeking intellectual stimulation. Conversely, throughout the 20th century, pioneering women emerged in various professions, such as Dinka Jeričević, the first stage designer in the region, and Valéria Dienes, the founder of the orchestrics school. Across these stories, we witness women grappling with personal and collective gender identities, striving to shape them amidst the intersection of tradition and modernity, limited opportunities, patriarchy and feminism. However, their social impact and significance, as well as their potential as subjects and objects of historical analysis, surpass these efforts. They were involved in feminist, national or labour movements, shaping or being shaped by consumer society, and providing their insights, experiences, and interpretations of contemporary events. Thus, while reaffirming that women's history may be sidelined, they demonstrate that a history without women remains incomplete and insufficient.

We owe to a special debt of gratitude to the editorial board of *Radovi* and its editor-in-chief, Inga Vilogorac Brčić, who expressed an interest and willingness to publish the proceedings of our conference in this issue. During the process of this publication's preparation, many anonymous historians participated as peer reviewers, and their helpful insights and critiques greatly improved the quality of the contributions.

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