

Revenge of the tampon: Gender and materialisms (new and old) in the 20th century Central and Eastern Europe

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Opening Note

I wrote this talk specifically for this conference and so my ideas are still raw. I am also not an historian, although my ethnographic research is deeply inflected with the oral historical narratives of my subjects. This is an exploratory text, still very much in progress, and I hope you will forgive the tentative nature of my reflections.

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Part One

I’m going to start with an image of a tampon and a sanitary pad. I begin with these images to commemorate a moment about 31 years ago when the Croatian journalist and feminist, Slavenka Drakulić, stood before a packed audience in New York City and held aloft, for all to see, one tampon and one sanitary pad before beginning her talk. The late Ann Snitow recalled the moment this way:

And then, I heard about Slavenka Drakulić’s talk at the Socialist Scholars’ conference in the spring of 1990 when she held up a tampon. I think it was actually a pad, anyway this big visible object, and she made sure the men in the room knew what it was. She said, ‘Communism failed in part because it couldn’t provide us this.’ I’m so sorry I missed it, but her talk was a wild sensation (Snitow 2015).

Suzanne LaFont also described the same moment to explain why women’s emancipation under communism could be considered a general failure:

Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić, speaking at the 1990 Socialist Scholars’ Conference in New York, shocked her audience by holding up a tampon in one hand and a sanitary pad in the other. She asserted that the unavailability of these products in Bulgaria (where she had recently visited) was evidence of the communist system’s lack of commitment

to the emancipation of women... The example is apt. The fact that the communist states could send people into space, and yet could not, and would not, produce a basic product to meet women's monthly needs says more than quotas and statistics about their lack of commitment to women (LaFont 2001).

In her popular 1991 book, *How we survived Communism and even laughed*, Drakulić herself expressed this very sentiment, using the lack of single use, disposable feminine hygiene supplies to question the socialist state's commitments to women:

After all these years, communism has not been able to produce a simple sanitary napkin, a bare necessity for women. So much for its economy and its so-called emancipation, too (Drakulić 1991, 30).

That same year Drakulić reported for *Ms. Magazine*, recalling conversations she had repeatedly with:

[...] women in Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, Sofia, and East Berlin: "Look at us—we don't even look like women. There are no deodorants, perfumes, sometimes even no soap or toothpaste. There is no fine underwear, no pantyhose, no nice lingerie. Worst of all, there are no sanitary napkins. What can one say except that it is humiliating?" (Drakulić 1991, 31).

Later, in a 1993 interview with the *Los Angeles Times* (Kirka 1993), Drakulić was asked:

You use everyday things to attack communism. Why did you choose to write about tampons and mops in a political context?

[...] This is my style—to approach huge historical and important events from an everyday perspective... You try to bring out the details of everyday life... ("How we survived Communism and even laughed") was just to show that communism didn't fail on a grand scale. (It) failed because it didn't fulfill the simple needs of people—as simple as toilet paper.

In my own research in Bulgaria, women told me stories about the humiliating lack of sanitary supplies they faced in their country, especially when dealing with solidarity exchanges with women from Africa (Ghodsee 2019). In one case, an English interpreter picked a visiting Ethiopian politician from the Sofia Airport in a private car in the early 1980s. The Ethiopian woman asked the Bulgarian interpreter to stop by a pharmacy on the way to the hotel to buy some tampons. The Bulgarian knew what the Ethiopian needed but did not know how to explain that they didn't have what she wanted in Bulgaria. Instead, she just ran into the pharmacy and returned with a large roll of cotton-wool batting to give to the woman who looked horrified but did not ask any further questions. Another Bulgarian women's activist who worked as the treasurer at the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in East Berlin recalled with some irony a letter they received also in the 1980s from an anti-

apartheid activist jailed in a South African prison. The South African claimed that her human rights were being violated because her captors failed to provide her with feminine hygiene products. The Bulgarian women's activist was incredulous, saying: "No Bulgarian woman had even seen a tampon, and here was this woman claiming that tampons were a human right!" (Ghodsee 2019, 194).

Single use, disposable diapers or pampers for babies were also lacking in the Eastern Bloc. This useful good, so essential to limiting the domestic labor of new mothers, were somehow deemed inessential by the economic planners and Communist Party leaders of the Central and Eastern European countries. In a wonderful scene in the 2003 German film, *Good-bye Lenin*, a family is forced to reproduce the material world of East Germany to preserve the health of an ailing mother who does not realize the Berlin Wall has fallen. The adult daughter rages against the idea that her child will have to go back to wearing plastic pants over inconvenient cloth diapers. In reunified Germany, pampers had transformed from an unimaginable luxury to a "basic necessity" almost overnight.

The call for papers for this conference stated that it aimed "to provide a platform for discussion of various ways material objects served to regulate and determine gendered behaviors and identities and reconfigure individuals' understanding of the social world in the context of Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th century." On reading this, I thought immediately of Drakulić's early work and the way that women's experiences in the 20th century in Central and Eastern Europe were often refracted through the lens of her writings for Western audiences, including for me, a 21-year-old university student when *How we survived Communism and even laughed* first appeared in English. To my young mind, steeped as it was in Cold War stereotypes about the East, the lack of tampons, sanitary napkins, and pampers presented me with proof positive that all of the claims about women having more rights in the East compared to the West must be so much communist propaganda. After all, a state could never be said to look after its women's needs if it couldn't or wouldn't supply such "basic necessities."

Indeed, Drakulić's book, as well as her subsequent texts, cataloged a world of material poverty for impressionable minds, as if she tailored her message to appeal specifically to my young adult need for self-making through acquisition. To buy myself into the identities I was still trying on as I sought my place in a world that valued external appearances and prized those who displayed the most accouterments of success. It was the early 1990s and I had grown up surrounded by bumper stickers in southern California that read "he who dies with the most toys wins." For me, as for

so many other young American women my age, a new shade of lip gloss or the right gladiator sandal provided the approved pathways to social acceptance and desirability. More than any stories about the gulag, the purges, or the secret police, Drakulić's descriptions of shopping dystopia reached Western women readers. She writes:

Without a choice of cosmetics and clothes, with bad food and hard work and no spare time, it wasn't at all hard to create a special kind of uniformity that comes out of an equal distribution of poverty and the neglect of *people's real needs*. There was no chance for individualism—for women or men [...]. If only they had had cosmetics, it might have changed their lives. On the other hand, it might not. But shouldn't they have had the right to find out that for themselves? (Drakulić 1991, 23-25).

In another passage, when describing Western women's magazines, she opines:

Living under such conditions and holding *Vogue* magazine in your hands is a very particular experience—it's almost like holding a pebble from Mars or a piece of a meteor that accidentally fell into your yard. "I hate it," says Agnes, an editor at a scientific journal in Budapest, pointing to *Vogue*. "It makes me feel so miserable I could almost cry. Just look at this paper—glossy, shiny, like silk. You can't find anything like that around here. Once you've seen it. It immediately sets not only new standards, but a visible boundary. Sometimes I think the real iron curtain is made of silky, shiny images of pretty women dressed in wonderful clothes, of pictures from women's magazines..." (Drakulić 1991, 27-28).

Drakulić then reflects:

What do we care about the manipulation inherent in the fashion and cosmetic industries? To tell us they are making a profit by exploiting our needs is like warning a Bangladeshi about cholesterol... (Drakulić 1991, 28).

Later she also describes a trip to the Bloomingdale's Department store in New York City:

Coming from the world of shortages, one's idea of plenty is mainly of fruit, meat, vegetables, of shampoo, soap, or toilet paper. Here, you are murdered by variations on each of these and by the impossibility of distinguishing the differences. First you discover an immense greed, a kind of fever, a wish to buy everything—the primordial hunger of consumerism (Drakulić 1991, 121).

Drakulić's prose echoes the sentiments of the Polish poet, Czesław Miłosz, writing about the Stalinist era of Poland:

In the countries of the New Faith, cities lose their former aspect. The liquidation of small private enterprises gives the streets a stiff and institutional look. The chronic lack of consumer goods renders crowds uniformly gray and uniformly indigent. When consumer goods do appear, they are of a single, second-rate quality. Fear paralyzes individuality and makes people adjust themselves as much as possible to the average type in their clothing, gestures, and facial expressions (Miłosz 1953, 62-63).

I'm interested here in the idea of “people’s real needs,” the “primordial hunger of consumerism” and the “chronic lack of consumer goods” that “renders crowds uniformly gray.” In so many accounts of daily life under 20th century state socialism, the constant discussion of shortages and of desiring special goods imported or smuggled in from the West contributes to an image of permanent deprivation, uniformity, and unfreedom. This trope of the east European “economy of shortage” to use the technical phrase popularized by the Hungarian economist János Kornai in his widely influential book, *Economics of shortage* (Kornai 1980), pervades the popular understanding of the materiality of life behind the Iron Curtain. Yet, the socialist East was actually awash in goods, as the anthropologist Krisztina Fehérváry (2013), the historian Judd Stitzel (2005), and many others have argued. The problem was that these were substandard, undesirable goods which had been mass-produced by communist enterprises with little care for what people actually wanted. In his book, *Fashioning Socialism*, for example, Stitzel discusses the overabundance of polyester clothing produced in East Germany long after the fabric had gone out of fashion in the West. The East German state had spent hundreds of thousands of marks importing machines to make polyester fibers just as Western fashion houses switched to using natural fibers like cotton, silk, wool, and linen.

When I was doing research on the Committee of the Bulgarian Women’s Movement, I also found a variety of letters in the archives from the Committee’s president, Elena Lagadinova, who often wrote to protest the quality of clothing being produced in Bulgaria: “The clothes which can be found now in the stores for our citizens are the ugliest that can be seen.”¹ She complained that the Ministry of Trade and Services was not doing its job: “Jersey dresses, which are very practical, are rarely available in the stores. When they are, there are only limited sizes and are not in the most fashionable styles.” She also went on to state that while the supply of men’s underwear was adequate, “women’s and youth underwear” was only available in limited quantities and “not in all the sizes or patterns or colors that the population is seeking.”² I actually once asked Lagadinova why the central planners in Bulgaria refused to make tampons or pampers, and she explained that it was a matter of priorities. Bulgaria needed first to ensure that social goods like kindergartens, creches, cafeterias, and schools were built and functioning for women and children, and only when these capital expenditures were made properly, and every child had a guaranteed place in a childcare facility

1 TsDa-F417-O5-ae496, 34 (For archival sources from the Central State Archive, I use the standard form of Bulgarian citation, e.g., *Tsentrallen Darzhaven Arhiv* (TsDA), F-417, O-5, E-96, L-9~22 where F = *fond* (the archival collection), O = *opis* (a sub-unit within the main collection), E = *edinita* (an individual folder) and L = *list* (the page numbers).

2 TsDa-F417-O5-ae496, 34.

could the central planners turn their attention to disposable consumer goods. For Lagadinova, the shortages were regrettable, but they were a necessary sacrifice for the building of the bright socialist future to which she aspired. Unfortunately, most of her countrywomen did not feel the same.

It was as if all those tampons, sanitary pads, pampers, lip glosses, bottles of perfume, and other western trinkets had been small soldiers, little armies of capitalism slowly invading from the West to undermine the Eastern economies. Like Trotsky and the Bolsheviks dropping leaflets to German soldiers on the front lines during World War I (to convince those German boys to revolt, take up arms against their overlords, and join the great proletarian revolution), those little trivialities of capitalist production, those innocuous sanitary pads sweetly wrapped in pink plastic packaging with flowers and butterflies to highlight the inherent femininity of the product, seduced many socialist women to reject their economies of constant shortage and rush headlong into the arms of the West and give in to the “primordial hunger of consumerism.” It was as if those goods were agents in their own right, as if those pampers and pads acted independently of the corporations that made them. Which brings me to a brief interlude on the idea of “new materialisms.”

Part Two

The theoretical school of new materialisms has infused many disciplines since its appearance in the late 1990s, but it has been particularly influential in the field of anthropology and cultural studies. New materialists propose to decenter the strident anthropocentrism central to the history of Western social sciences and consider the agentic capacities of inanimate objects as a way of destabilizing the imagined boundary between the physical world of things and the ideational world of human thoughts and action. Whereas non-Western cultures and pre-industrial Western societies once believed that rocks, mountains, trees, rivers, and streams were animated by spirits that lived within them, the rise of Enlightenment scientism rendered these things dead. Indeed, the English word “animate” comes from the Latin root *anima* (life or soul) through the Latin “*animat*” which means instills with life or soul. Thus, the word “inanimate” means without life or soul, suggesting that the world of things is fundamentally passive.

As in the title of Jane Bennett’s germinal book, *Vibrant Matter*, new materialists and post-humanists tend to think of things as “lively,” “dynamic” “agentic” or “alive,” animated by some capacity for action and meaning making (Bennett 2010). Diana Coole and Samantha Frost assert that inanimate objects possess a “[...] force, vitality,

relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable” (Coole and Frost 2010: 9). Jane Bennett calls this implied agency “thing-power,” and proposes that when humans see matter as alive and capable of action, they are more likely to live in harmony with the natural world. She writes:

Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence of aliveness, constituting the outside of our own experience (Bennet 2010: 14).

According to Bennet, matter acts through assemblages formed through the relationship between human and non-human agents.

Karen Barad, a prominent new materialist with formal training in theoretical particle physics and quantum field theory, also challenges the assumption of a human-centered concept of agency: the idea that things must be animate in order to act upon the material world in an agentic way. Instead, she proposes that humans and objects always act together, as co-agentic forces—in contingent and unpredictable manners to create a material world that is always in the process of coming into being (Barad 2007). On the question of supernatural spirits inhabiting inanimate objects, new materialists are either staunchly opposed to the idea or vague and non-committal, preferring to speak in slippery metaphors that leave open the possibility that our pre-modern ancestors in the West understood something about the “lively” nature of matter.

But the general idea is that objects can have power over human actors (whether or not they are metaphysically “alive” or not), because we imbue certain objects with power and the ability to make meaning. Those objects can act on us in return. In the case of post-socialist Bulgaria, objects from the recent past also have odd agentic powers to evoke a wide range of human emotions: nostalgia, sorrow, loss, national pride, and political frustration with the present, to name but a few. Given the role of Western goods in taking socialism down, it is perhaps not surprising that it is in Eastern goods (those much-maligned products of a much-maligned economies of shortage) where the memory of socialism and its unique challenge to the world of the “primordial hunger of consumerism” lives on.

One nice example of agentic objects was the exhibition and subsequent publication of the *Inventory Book of Socialism* (Genova and Gospodinov 2006). Yana Genova and Georgi Gospodinov collected an assortment of 502 Bulgarian-made things from 1956 to 1989. These included quotidian objects like a paper fruit and vegetable bag from the NarMag store, a tube of Rila glue, Balkanton vinyl records, and a Femina cigarette package. Excavated from basements and closets, the items cataloged in “The inventory book of Socialism” preserved the materiality of a recent past as one

set of Bulgarian-made objects were being replaced by the material overproduction of Western capitalism. This sudden shift in the quality, quantity, and character of the things of everyday life—the replacement of *Bългарasko Pivo* and *Bira Galata* with Heineken and Stella Artois, the substitution of *Fin Mlechen Shokolad* and *Destski Shokolad Veselka* with Milka Bars and Kinder Surprise, or the dwindling market share of *Bългарaska Rosa* cosmetics compared to the growing presence of products from Nivea and Loreal—characterized Bulgaria’s transition to a market economy throughout the 1990s. As new goods and products flooded Bulgaria’s markets from Western Europe, the United States, and China, the ordinary objects of everyday life under socialism seemingly disappeared, an almost universally shared experience for those living in the country during that time. As Genova and Gospodinov explained:

We started this book because of an obvious deficiency, a missing aspect in the way we reflect upon Bulgarian socialism nowadays. Everyday socialist culture and consumer items—appliances, detergents, cigarettes, food products and the like—are denied a place in the archives, inventories, virtual and real museums of socialism. Political scientists, professional analysts and historians normally do not (or at least until recently did not) lower their gaze towards these artifacts. They remain out of sight, small and unnoticed, slipping through the net of grandiose constructions and expert accounts.... This “book of assets” is an attempt to make an inventory of all that is dropping out of sight and to visualize the disappearing daily life of socialism. (Genova and Gospodinov 2006, 160)

Through the lens of New Materialisms, the “Inventory Book of Socialism” exhibition (and its published catalogue) overtly emphasize that objects are things capable of acting upon visitors. Rather than a curated exhibition of socialist-era design for aesthetic appreciation, this collection of material objects highlighted their status as carriers of meaning and memory that haunted (and perhaps still haunt) Bulgarian society. After visiting the exhibition, the ethnologist Nikolai Vukov reflected on the importance of the project:

For many viewers the objects are easily recognizable as things they once used, saw, or were in contact with; objects that they had heard about; or objects that are still part of today’s households. Despite the variations of age and lived experiences among the visitors to the exhibition (and readers of the book), and despite the differences in taste and attitude toward these objects, the Inventory Book serves to unveil memories about a material life that surrounded people and exercised a lasting impact on their senses and perception. The memories are retrieved and retroactively extracted, but they are also created, constructed, and implanted (Vukov, 2007, 326).

From a marketing perspective, certain brands which invoke memories of the state socialist past can win customers in markets saturated with Western goods. In the German context, for example, the *Amazon.de* marketplace annually offers nostalgic Christmas gift boxes featuring an assortment of old food and drink products from

the German Democratic Republic, including *Rotkäppchen Sekt*, *Spreewald Gurken*, *Pfeffi Likör*, and *Krügerol Halsbonbon*.³ Since 1989, scholars have investigated a wide variety of phenomena associated with what has been called “red nostalgia” (Ghodsee 2004) or “communist nostalgia” (e.g., Boym 2001; Velikonja 2009; Todorova 2010; Todorova and Gille 2010; Luthar and Pušnik 2010), and propose that the persistence of this nostalgia over such a long period of time also signals a profound dissatisfaction with the present.

In the case of the DDR Christmas boxes or the *Inventory Book of Socialism*, the objects may act as agents for both memory and political imagination, as little mementos of a socialist past that lost its battle with the foot soldiers of global capitalism: the advanced guard of the Tampax, the Kotex, and the Pampers which ultimately overpowered those flaccid attempts by central planners to control the “primordial hunger of consumerism.” As Krizstina Fehérváry (2009, 2013) has argued, many other things were once plentiful in the east—heat, water, shelter, basic foodstuffs, kindergartens, public transportation, jobs, etc.—but these things were not as easily collected in an “Inventory Book” of Socialism. These generic public goods could not be packaged or branded to feed the hunger of individual consumers. Rather, they were shared, taken for granted, and largely ignored.

As an ethnographer, I am fascinated by the way that human stories and human desires inhere in material objects. In the way that the fortunes of rival political and economic systems might be determined by their presences or absences. I’m enraptured by the possibility that entire worldviews and philosophies might be captured in, or in any event reduced to, a handful of artifacts collected in a book or specially packaged in a gift basket for Christmas. Can the entire story of capitalism’s 20th century triumph over socialism perhaps be reduced to the tampon, at least as far as women were concerned? Did this diminutive, little wad of cotton connected to a single string prove the undoing of the utopian dreams of millions of people searching for some way to live beyond the claws of capitalist exploitation?

The legacies of the 20th century defeat of the simple Spreewald gherkin by the sleek Tampax are playing out across the fragile and faltering globe today. If the memories of the socialist alternative endure in the material remnants of centrally planned economies, their messages are overpowered by the dazzling capitalist desires fed by the latest model of iPhone, the newest OLED TV, and even the invention of new and improved goods like Diva Cups and Period Pants attempting to usurp the ubiquitous tampon for its primacy in people’s menstrual lives. If the theoretical school of new

³ For examples, launch [Amazon.de](https://www.amazon.de) and type “DDR geschenkbbox” into the search bar.

materialisms gives us a framework from which to understand the agentic qualities of everyday objects, then perhaps there is no better use for this theoretical framework than to turn our attention to the planet we share, where the environment is being irrevocably damaged by the excesses of the “primordial hunger of consumerism.”

Part Three

The qualitative sociologist, Zsuzsa Gille (2007), brilliantly explored how the economies of shortage in the East were also economies of conservation and recycling long before the idea ever caught on in the West. Anthropologist Krizstina Fehérváry (2009, 2013) also argued that it was hard budget constraints (and not just shortages) that prevented families and individuals from buying more than they needed and from wasting goods unnecessarily. She gives the wonderful example of paper table napkins in Hungary which were plentiful in the stores. Despite this, Hungarians often reused them; people did not dispose of things that could be used more than once because they had limited financial resources. But Western capitalism in the 20th century had little concern for recycling, and in fact, pushed the development of disposable products which could guarantee years if not decades of steady revenue.

Since antiquity and across many Western cultures, menstrual blood has been thought of as unclean, but until 1921, most menstrual products were reusable items that needed to be washed out and hung up to dry, an embarrassing practice for those living in cultures which stigmatized menstruation. When women largely stayed at home, menstruation was less of a problem than when they began to enter the public sphere for work and leisure. The first Kotex pad was sold in 1921 using cellucotton which had been developed during World War I for medical bandages. Some nurses working on the front lines began to use the disposable bandages as pads for their periods and Kotex eventually branded the product. It was used with a complicated system of belts and clips that held the pads in place, but they did not need to be washed or dried and could simply be thrown away. For women who were dancers or athletes, tampons provided a better solution, and the first commercial tampon was patented in 1931.

From the beginning, tampons and other disposable menstrual products were marketed as products which made a woman “modern,” and their convenience and disposability were great boons for corporations like Kimberly Clark and Johnson & Johnson because it locked women into decades of purchases. During World War II in the United States, millions of women joined the labor force in factory jobs and the popularity of tampons skyrocketed. By the early 1950s, the use of disposable

menstrual products more than quintupled. So, what Drakulić described as a “basic necessity” was actually a relatively new product in the West.

By the 1960s, industrial chemists in the United States began developing new plastics and synthetic fibers and sought commercial applications. As is often the case, publicly funded research is used to create opportunities for private profits and the development of plastics and synthetics in the United States is no exception. As Elizabeth Arveda Kissling (2006) documents so well in her book, *Capitalizing on the curse: The business of menstruation*, disposable menstrual products were targeted as the perfect commercial goods for these new technologies. Menstrual pad designs soon incorporated thin, flexible, polypropylene or polyethylene sheets at the base of the pad to prevent leaks through the bottom. Advances in adhesive technology soon allowed pads to stick to underwear on their own, doing away with the need for belts or safety pins. By the 1980s, pads added “wings,” basically plastic flaps that wrapped around the underwear’s gusset and prevented leaks on the side of the pad. Once thick pads also got thinner and thinner as more plastics and polyester fibers replaced more expensive cotton in the absorbent part of the pads, wicking away moisture from the body.

These changes reduced the per unit cost of disposable menstrual items but increased their plastic content. When I was growing up, you bought a box of Kotex or pantyliners and there would be 20 or 30 inside the box which you kept under the sink. These days (at least in the United States), every pad or pantyliner comes individually wrapped in plastic. Tampons also used to be primarily made of cotton with simple cardboard applicators. As plastics developed, tampons included more and more plastics in their design. If there is an applicator it is often made of soft, flexible plastic, and the string is often polyester or polypropylene. Some tampons have synthetic fibers in their absorbent part to hold the whole thing together, and of course, individual tampons are often wrapped in plastic, even those without the applicator like the brand OB.

In terms of the amount of waste generated by disposable menstrual products, it is not easy to get a firm number. But there are some figures floating around out there, mostly put together by environmental groups advocating against the continued use of these products and makers of reusable products like menstrual cups, period pants, and reusable pads. According to an article in *National Geographic*:

In 2018 alone, people in the US bought 5.8 billion tampons [that figure does not include pads], and over the course of a lifetime, a single menstruator will use somewhere between 5 and 15 thousand pads and tampons, the vast majority of which will wind up in landfills as plastic waste (Borunda 2019).

In the UK alone, Statista estimated 18 million menstruators in 2016. If a single individual uses an average of 22 menstrual products per cycle, and you assume 13 cycles per year, that is 286 disposable plastic-filled menstrual products per year per menstruator, or about 5.1 billion products per year for the UK. Most modern menstrual pads are about 90% plastic which can take up to *a thousand years* to decompose in landfills or in the ocean. Once again, in just the UK, one environmental group estimates that about 1.5 to 2 billion tampons are flushed down Britain's toilets each year (about half of menstruators flush their tampons away), and these products usually end up in the ocean when the sewer system fails.

I could tell a similar story for the development, use, and plastics content of pampers and perhaps now more than ever, single use, disposable adult diapers like "Serenity Briefs." Capitalism has wonderfully commodified the disposal of the various substances that human bodies excrete at different moments in their lives. I hate it, but I also get it. Sanitary pads with wings were like a revelation to me when I was a teenager, as were the thinner and thinner sanitary pads which came in those convenient individually wrapped packages that kept them clean and portable. I cringe to think about how many disposable menstrual products I have used over the course of my lifetime, not to mention the disposable diapers I used when my daughter was little and, I might add here, the disposable incontinence briefs I will probably use for my own mother (and perhaps on myself when I am old enough to need them). All of these disposable products definitely make women's lives easier and convenient. So, I one hundred percent sympathize with Slavenka Drakulić who felt that her government's inability to provide these wonderfully disposable products constituted the necessary proof she needed to condemn the inefficiencies of the centrally planned or self-managed socialist economy.

And I also understand on some intuitive level why it is that I might have wanted to trade job-protected paid parental leaves and guaranteed spaces in subsidized or free kindergartens and creches for lifetime access to tampons for me and my daughters and granddaughters for whom life without these goods might be a long humiliating trial. What is the use of talking about the environmental impacts of these products, when they are necessary for menstruators to live their lives in some sort of normal modern way? Maybe warning about the plastics in the oceans and landfills that won't biodegrade for the next ten centuries is a little bit like warning, to quote Drakulić, "Bangladeshis about cholesterol?"

Books like Kate Sorper's *Post-growth living: For an alternative hedonism* (2020) or Jonathan Crary's *24/7* (2014) preach a new gospel about the need to control the "primordial hunger of consumerism" not only to save the planet, but also to save our

mental health from the ravages of overwork and exhaustion spurred on by the need to keep up with the proverbial Joneses. According to Sorper at least, we all need to learn to live in a consumer world that sounds remarkably like that of the East European shortage economies that women living in those countries in the 20th century so desperately wished to escape. It seems so obvious now that Americans' and West European's ability to use all of these convenient disposable single use tampons, pampers and incontinence briefs was predicated on the fact that billions of others around the world (particularly those in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and China) were not able to use them. Now that everyone wants them, we're supposed to collectively give them up, or at the very least, corporations must start making more sustainable, green options.

In September of 2021, the Irish writer, Sally Rooney, published her third novel: *Beautiful world, where are you?* Rooney is widely hailed as the first great Millennial novelist, whose book *Normal people*, and the TV serial based on it, were acclaimed as "Marxist" reflections on late capitalist life. As I read this book, I was struck by several poignant epistolary passages written as emails exchanged between two of the main protagonists: Eileen and Alice. They are not about tampons or pampers, but they are about *single use packaging*. Alice writes to Eileen:

I was in the local shop today, getting something to eat for lunch, when I suddenly had the strangest sensation...I thought of all the rest of the human population—most of whom live in what you and I would consider abject poverty—who have never seen or entered such a shop. And this, this is what all of their work sustains! This lifestyle, for people like us! All the various brands of soft drinks in plastic bottles and all the pre-packaged lunch deals and confectionery in sealed bags and store-baked pastries—this is it, the culmination of all the labor in the world...It was as if I suddenly remembered that my life was part of a television show and every day people died making the show, were ground to death in the most horrific ways, children, women, and all so that I could choose from various lunch options, each packaged in multiple layers of single-use plastic (Rooney 2021, 17).

To which her friend, Eileen, replies:

Alice, I think I've also experienced that sensation you had in the convenience shop [...]. And I always end up thinking [...] I don't need all these cheap clothes and imported foods and plastic containers; I don't even think they improve my life. They just create waste and make me unhappy anyway...People think that socialism is sustained by force—the forcible expropriation of property—but I wish they would just admit that capitalism is also sustained by exactly the same force in the opposite direction, the forcible protection of existing property arrangements (Rooney 2021, 38).

Later in the book, Alice and Eileen share their thoughts about the death of beauty. Eileen believes that beauty died in the 1970s with the mass production of plastics and

synthetic fibers, but Alice disagrees. She writes in her email:

I think you're wrong about the instinct for beauty. Human beings lost that when the Berlin Wall came down. I'm not going to get into another argument with you about the Soviet Union, but when it died so did history. I think of the twentieth century as one long question and in the end, we got the answer wrong. Aren't we unfortunate babies to be born when the world ended? After that there was no chance for the planet, and no chance for us. Or maybe it was just the end of one civilization, ours, and at some time in the future another will take its place. In that case we are standing in the last lighted room before the darkness, bearing witness to something (Rooney 2021, 93).

I literally dropped the book when I read that passage, wishing I could take Slavenka Drakulić out for a couple of drinks to discuss what in the hell Sally Rooney thinks she means by all of that pretty prose; prose that hundreds of millions of young people around the world will read in English (and in over 20 translations) without really understanding the historical context of the world to which Rooney refers.

I don't have the answers, but it is a provocative example of how far Millennials have gone in their utter disdain for capitalism and for their concomitant fascination with 20th century state socialism. Or at least *the idea of* 20th century state socialism; I imagine that many of them would find the materiality of it, the materiality that Drakulić so railed against, far less satisfying than their guilt at buying pre-packaged foods in convenience shops (which, by the way, the character of Alice does even after feeling rather sick about it.)

What Rooney perhaps suggests (in her characteristically oblique way) is that communism forcibly deprived people of goods they deemed essential for living "normal" and "modern" lives, and that this kind of forcible deprivation can prevent the widespread ecological catastrophes we are on the brink of today. The primordial hunger of consumerism is savage. It can only be kept at bay by destroying the economic system that produces and exacerbates it. Rooney is a realist and knows quite well that white guilt about all of the suffering people in the Global South giving us our over-privileged lifestyles is not going to prevent ordinary individuals from buying single use disposable tampons, sanitary pads, pampers, or incontinence briefs as long as Kimberly Clark, Unilever, and Johnson and Johnson are selling them and spending millions to advertise them and associate these products with "freedom." (There is a wonderful scene in the 1984 Robin Williams film, *Moscow on the Hudson*, in which a Soviet circus musician defects clutching a pair of jeans in Bloomingdales in New York City. At some point he is in a grocery store for the first time and picks up a box of "New Freedom" sanitary pads and he says something like, America is such a great country that you can even buy freedom in a box.)

The supposed beauty to which Rooney refers is the beauty of a fantasized world freed from the grip of the primordial hunger of consumerism, where relationships and ideas and art and life are liberated from their role as commodities, where not everything is an economic transaction, where not everything is ruled by the profit motive, and where time, love, care, and effort have use values independent of their exchange values. Or maybe not. Maybe she is just vaguely nostalgic for an era when there actually existed a real alternative to capitalism. An era that made Western employers treat their workers better. An era where the real deprivation of millions of people living in communist countries allowed for the hyper consumption of those of us lucky enough to be born to parents living in capitalist countries so “great” that you could buy freedom in a box.

I don’t pretend to have any answers to all of this, but I do think that in order to understand our collective future we need to go back and rethink the materiality of the state socialist past, the lived experience of deprivation in those economies of shortage. When Kate Sorper (2020) calls for us to embrace an “alternative hedonism,” the ability to take pleasure in less, and to value the little things more, she should probably stop and think about what that actually meant for the hundreds of millions of people who somehow survived in a world without pampers, single use menstrual products, and disposable incontinence briefs. In the first place, was it an absolute deprivation or a relative deprivation? For example, was the deprivation of consumer goods made up for by a relative abundance of time? Is it that people living in capitalist societies need all of these convenience foods and disposable products because they are relatively deprived of the time it would take to cook their own lunch or wash the dirty diapers or to take a day off of work on the heaviest day of their periods? More importantly, was the relative lack of consumer goods made up for by other goods and services like kindergarten places or public transportation? What, at the end of the day, do we give up in exchange for disposable menstrual products?

Perhaps now more than ever we need to continue to produce “new materialist” histories of the Cold War, a history told through objects, and how those objects in their real or fantastic forms, in their presence or absence, acted upon the world on both sides of the Iron Curtain. If we read Slavenka Drakulić’s early works closely, she is attributing all sorts of agency to things like tampons, sanitary pads, little Italian dolls, toilet paper, saved glass jars, and the other material embodiments of her socialist life. Similarly, the nostalgia for the socialist past in Bulgaria inheres in the objects cataloged in the *Inventory Book of Socialism* and in various museums of everyday life in the former space of Eastern Germany. These preservations of material culture remind people in the present both of an alternative past and the possibility

of a different future, a future where the things that capitalist economies constantly overproduce (that is the perpetual crisis of overproduction that capitalism avoids through planned obsolescence, disposability, and investments in the advertising and marketing campaigns that fuel the primordial hunger of consumerism for billions of people around the globe) doesn't seduce us into devastating our planet (assuming, of course, that it's not already too late).

In lieu of a **conclusion**, I want to bring us back to that moment in 1990 at the Socialist Scholars conference in New York City when Drakulić held up the tampon and the sanitary pad. These were the objects, by their existence and easy availability in the West and their lack in the East, which purportedly helped to bring down communism. The lack of these objects proved that communism was a system that did not and could not meet women's basic needs. It was humiliating not to have them, just as looking at a *Vogue* magazine was humiliating, because there were many people somewhere else in the world (women who were ostensibly citizens in the countries of the ideological enemy) who enjoyed all of these wonderful conveniences. These items acted as agents in the world, agents of dissatisfaction and political longing for the wonders of the free-market system which would be able to produce the many material things that women in 20th century Central and Eastern Europe wanted and needed.

It is particularly interesting that in Slavenka Drakulić's most recent book, *Café Europa revisited*, published three decades after the end of Yugoslav socialism, she states:

[...] it is difficult to mention the merits of communism, a system that, in a short time, brought modernization and changed an agrarian society into an urbanized, industrial one. It meant general education as well as the emancipation of women; this has to be recognized, even though such changes were accomplished by a totalitarian regime (Drakulić 2021, 114-115).

Here is Drakulić now telling us that sometimes authoritarian regimes can do some good things, that there were merits to the system that she once so roundly decried as incapable of meeting women's basic needs. A fascinating reversal.

This is a conversation for all disciplines: historians, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, writers, philosophers, and others. We need to get over the Cold War baggage that prevents us from looking back at some of the material experiences of 20th century state socialism and learning from them. And I think it's best to start these conversations with the little things, with the detritus of everyday life rather than focusing on the larger social, political, and economic structures. I think that tampons and sanitary pads and pampers can tell us a lot.

When people really abandon these products that are clogging our oceans and landfills with plastics that won't biodegrade for a millennium, then it may be that capitalism will truly face a challenge from the environmental movement that it cannot recommodify to sell green alternatives or otherwise subvert to shore up continued profits. But until then, the tampon and the pad act once again as little foot soldiers, little legions of single use disposable plastic marching us off to some form of environmental catastrophe. To quote Rooney here:

“Maybe this is just the end of one civilization, ours, and at some time in the future another will take its place. In that case we are standing in the last lighted room before the darkness, bearing witness to something.”

A thousand years from now, maybe at a conference like this one, a speaker will start her talk by holding up two almost biodegraded relics from a bygone era –maybe a tampon and a sanitary pad– and explain to her audience that there once was a civilization long ago that was so wasteful that it rendered life on the planet almost impossible. She will note with some incredulity that this civilization actually toyed with various alternatives, and that one alternative in particular had a real chance of changing things. But the people who lived under that system gave it up, at least in part, because about half of their populations really wanted a regular supply of these two little items.

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