



Authority, Authenticity, and the Epistemic Legacies of Cold War Area Studies

Some Reflections on Women's History and State Socialism in Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the history of knowledge production about the former Eastern Bloc in the American and Polish academic contexts. It explores how debates about authority and authenticity are embedded in the deeper histories of area studies and in long-standing conflicts dating from the earliest years of the field of Slavic and East European Studies. The discussion about authority and authenticity within feminist circles mirrors larger conflicts between proponents of the totalitarian thesis and the so-called revisionists. The conflicts between these two schools precipitated a continuing epistemic crisis that also infects the academic cultures of Eastern Europe and is exacerbated by the neoliberalization of academic knowledge production. The epistemic cultures perpetuating Cold War stereotypes may lead to self-censorship or dissuade young researchers from studying the gendered aspects of lived experience in the communist era.

KEYWORDS: anticommunism, authenticity, authority, Cold War, revisionist scholarship, state socialism, totalitarian paradigm, women's history



Who Can Speak about the Communist Past?

In March 2015, Agnieszka Mrozik, a literary scholar at the Polish Academy of Sciences, gave an interview to the leftist portal *Krytyka Polityczna* (Political critique), in which she talked about her research on the feminist activism of communist women in post-World War II Poland. Among the sources she drew on in her work were autobiographical accounts: letters, memoirs, and diaries of her female protagonists.¹ The day after they published the interview with Mrozik, *Krytyka Polityczna* published a response, a polemical article by Kinga Dunin—a feminist collaborator with the Workers' Defense



Committee in the 1970s who had been detained shortly after martial law was imposed in Poland in 1981.² Dunin criticized Mrozik, claiming that the latter's study of communist women's commitment to implementing emancipation policies in the socialist state had overlooked the dark sides of their biographies, primarily their entanglement in a totalitarian system of violence. Dunin accused Mrozik of a "selective reading of sources," because Mrozik had not approached her primary sources with what Dunin considered the appropriate amount of critical distance by "giving them [too much] credence." "[T]he study of sources involves not only reading what is clearly written, but also what is silenced,"³ Dunin instructed.

Other scholars of the emancipatory activities of socialist and communist women who operated within state-sponsored official women's organizations in former Eastern Bloc countries have faced similar criticisms, often less public, but no less devastating. Because the publication of articles in academic journals requires anonymous peer review, questions about the legitimacy of sources can prevent scholarship on communist women from ever seeing the light of day. For example, in 2014, Chiara Bonfiglioli, an Italian scholar, received a telling anonymous review about an article she submitted about the history of the Yugoslav Antifascist Women's Front, an organization founded during World War II and dissolved in 1953. Although analysis of official government reports and formal legislative agendas is a common methodology for the writing of women's history in the West, Bonfiglioli was criticized for applying the same model to the history of women in Yugoslavia. According to the unnamed reviewer, "[Bonfiglioli's] understanding and interpretation of the history of communism in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe should go beyond the official statements and proclamations of the various political activists and decision makers." And, in addition to criticizing her alleged overreliance on sources that merely reproduced the official communist-era narrative, the reviewer warned that "[Bonfiglioli] follows several contemporary revisionist historians who tend to understand [the] history of Communist Yugoslavia as exclusively a history of a 'modernization' process, and take no issue with its ideology and/or politics. I doubt that in this form it could enlighten the international readership of [the journal]."⁴ In other words, like Mrozik, Bonfiglioli was taken to task for not being sufficiently critical of the "ideology and/or politics" of socialism.

Just four years later, Polish sociologist Magdalena Grabowska published the book *Broken Genealogy: Women's Social and Political Activism after 1945 and the Contemporary Polish Women's Movement*. Grabowska also found that in her research on the emancipatory achievements of communist and socialist women in postwar Poland, she repeatedly encountered questioning of her approach and the sources upon which she based her work. Particularly problematic for her critics were the interviews she conducted with activists of state-socialist women's organizations and members of the Communist Party. Grabowska writes: "I was asked questions about the credibility of my female interviewees, suggesting that they were telling untruths. The narratives presented were often compared to possible surveys among NSDAP [Nazi] members and fascist party sympathizers trying to rationalize the concessions they made to the criminal regime."⁵ Basically, communist women should not be credible sources even when one is studying the history of women in the Communist Party and the subjective experiences of women living under communism.

In her book, Grabowska also raised another important issue. She argued that, according to some female researchers, the “revisionist” approach to the history of state socialism (and especially to the history of women in the former Eastern Bloc) can only be explained by the relative youth of those who practice it. For only ignorance of the realities of life under communism, but also disillusionment with the course of transition in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, can possibly justify this somewhat more nuanced assessment of the communist past articulated in the academic debate in recent years.⁶ The label of a “young female researcher” turns out to be an efficient disciplinary tool, because it precisely defines who has the right to speak about communism: only those who lived in communist countries during “communist times,” questioned “communism,” and perhaps fought it in some way. Those interested in presenting a more balanced view of the communist past, perhaps in response to public opinion polls that show relatively persistent levels of “red nostalgia,” too often have their research sidelined if they try to complicate the hegemonic totalitarian narrative or are accused of promoting “distortions” of the past.⁷ As the American philosopher Nanette Funk argued in the *European Journal of Women’s Studies* in 2014:

The explanation for recent revisionist research into state socialist women is complex. After having rediscovered pre-Second World War feminism in Eastern Europe, feminist scholars may have hoped to do the same in official state socialist women’s organizations . . . Such responses by some are also due to a generational change, the coming of age of a generation that hardly experienced state socialism and its problems, but lived in its aftermath and with its stories. Feminist frustrations at the difficulties of being effective under neoliberalism heightens the desire to find women’s agency in an anti-capitalist Marxist past. The wish to do oral histories of women from official women’s organizations before it is too late, but without adequate caution, leads to distortions.⁸

These few examples reflect a deep epistemic quandary with regard to knowledge production about women’s experiences of the state-socialist past in Eastern Europe. Who has the authority to speak about this past, and what is the history of this authority? Why do some voices and perspectives “count” more than others? Within feminist circles, scholars such as Croatian journalist Slavenka Drakulić have bristled at the tendency for social theory to travel from West to East, with Western academics setting the analytical frameworks and East European scholars providing the case studies.⁹ At the same time, Western women studying Eastern European women’s lives (both before and after 1989/1991) are often criticized for their cultural outsider status because they do not “really know” what it was like to live under socialism. “We don’t need Western scholars to explain to us, people from the region, what we went through. We know what we survived,” Mrozik heard during a discussion at an international conference held in Sofia in November 2019 to debate the memory of state socialism thirty years after its end. At the same time, as seen in the quotation above, senior Western scholars sometimes challenge the motives and legitimacy of more junior East European scholars critically working through “what we survived.”

In this article, we want to examine the history of knowledge production about the former Eastern Bloc within the US and East European academic contexts to explore how debates about authority and authenticity in contemporary women's history are embedded in the deeper epistemic histories of area studies and long-standing conflicts dating from the earliest years of the field of Slavic and East European Studies after the Second World War. Although feminist research on women's lives under state socialism has always been marginal to this broader field, the discussion about authority and authenticity within feminist circles mirrors the larger conflicts between proponents of the totalitarian thesis and those who supported a less rigid view of socialist societies, the so-called revisionists who promote a more social historical approach. The interne-cine conflicts between these two schools once precipitated a deep fissure in the field, which although presented as largely resolved within wider historical circles, continues to inform the writing of women's history in Eastern European countries. We argue that there is a persistence of American epistemic cultures perpetuating Cold War tropes about who can and cannot speak knowledgeably about the communist experience. These lingering stereotypes may lead to self-censorship or dissuade young researchers from studying the lived experiences of women in the communist era.¹⁰ To understand these biases, we must first explore their origins in immediate postwar academic cultures.

A Potted History of Area Studies of Eastern Europe

According to the historian Sheila Fitzpatrick, the history of the socialist East only became of real interest in the West after World War II and "in the scholarly realm it was American political science that dominated. The totalitarian model, based on a somewhat demonized conflation of Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia, was the most popular interpretive framework. It emphasized the omnipotence of the totalitarian state and its 'levers of control,' paid considerable attention to ideology and propaganda, and largely neglected the social realm (which was seen as passive, fragmented by the totalitarian state)."¹¹ The academic study of the countries that fell behind the Iron Curtain after 1945 was therefore forged with deep connections to the United States government's need for military intelligence about the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In this context, and throughout the Cold War period, the expertise of East Europeans was either valued or devalued depending on the specific needs of the US government to legitimate its foreign policy responses to the perceived spread of communism. In 2012, Lynda Park, the Executive Director of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), formerly known as the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS), admitted:

There is no denying the fact that the origins of the Association and our field were very much tied to the US government and its involvement in World War II. Many professors and graduate students in the field worked for the Research and Analysis (R&A) division of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) [precursor to the CIA] to provide knowledge about the region for the US war efforts. The USSR division brought together specialists in various disciplines

to produce the kind of interdisciplinary, rigorous, and comprehensive analysis that we consider as “area studies.” These specialists in the R&A were the founders of the field and the Association.¹²

The need to create this new field of study reflected a recognized dearth of knowledge about the Soviet Union. According to historian David C. Engerman, the first two academic centers for the study of the USSR had direct links to the military and intelligence communities. The Russian Institute (now the Harriman Institute) at Columbia University, founded in 1946, was supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and coordinated with both US Army and Navy training programs.¹³ The Russian Research Center at Harvard (now the Davis Center) received its funding through the Carnegie Corporation and maintained links to the US Air Force and Central Intelligence Agency.¹⁴ The explicit purpose of these two research and teaching programs was to produce a new type of American “Sovietologist” who could advise US leaders on crucial foreign policy questions to promote American dominance during the Cold War.

Although there were already plenty of Russian and East European émigrés in the United States who could speak the languages and well understood the cultural contexts of the region, the centers at Harvard and Columbia explicitly set out to create a cadre of American-born experts on the politics of the region. According to historian Geroid Tanquary Robinson, who founded the Russian Institute at Columbia, émigrés could not provide objective analyses of the postwar situation in their home countries.¹⁵ Most of them were former Whites, fervent nationalists, or dissident intellectuals who had lost power, wealth, or social status. These émigrés were often both virulently anti-communist and generally out of touch with the contemporary situation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. American leaders felt uncomfortable making policy decisions based on the opinions of émigrés with axes to grind.

But the émigrés’ strident opposition to communist governments was useful in other capacities. One example occurred in the late 1940s, when the CIA formed and subsidized two “private” organizations of concerned American citizens, the National Committee for a Free Europe, later renamed the Free Europe Committee (FEC), and the American Committee for the Liberation of the Peoples of Russia (AMCOMLIB).¹⁶ The US intelligence establishment hoped to use disaffected East European refugees and émigrés to work against the socialist governments. In 1950, the Free Europe Committee began broadcasting Radio Free Europe to Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria from transmitters based in West Germany. In 1953, Radio Liberation, later renamed Radio Liberty, commenced broadcasts to the Soviet Union in Russian and a wide variety of minority languages.

Since the Soviet propaganda machine worked overtime spreading anti-American rumors and disinformation, the émigré broadcasters could improvise material to combat the communist threat, regardless of factual accuracy, and the US government denied any involvement in the broadcasts.¹⁷ But in 1956, émigrés at the Hungarian desk of Radio Free Europe overstepped the bounds of acceptable disinformation. Apparently on their own initiative, RFE broadcasters encouraged the 1956 Hungarian uprising against Mátyás Rákosi’s Soviet-sponsored government by falsely claiming that Western countries would come to the aid of the Hungarians, to the outrage of

West European governments and members of the US Congress.¹⁸ Although both Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty would not be exposed as CIA fronts until 1972, a new cadre of American journalists and area experts (many of them trained at Columbia and Harvard) kept the émigrés on a tighter rein after the events of 1956.¹⁹

Beginning in 1950, organizations affiliated with the CIA and other US government entities also launched exchange programs to bring scholars from Eastern Europe to the United States through the Congress for Cultural Freedom or the International Affairs Program of the Ford Foundation.²⁰ Socialist governments agreed to cooperate with the Americans but preferred to send technical and natural scientists to the US for training. The Ford Foundation specifically preferred to recruit humanists and social scientists. In the Cold War “battle of ideas” the Ford Foundation wanted to train philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, philologists, and so on. Against this background, for instance, there were sharp clashes between Shepard Stone, the Director of International Affairs at the Ford Foundation (1952–1967), and Eugenia Krassowska, the deputy head of the Ministry of Higher Education in Poland (1951–1965), “who, in a Ford Foundation memo [of 20 March 1957], was called ‘a charming lady who subsequently turned out to be one of the staunchest pro-Stalinists in the present Polish government.’”²¹ Interestingly, many subsequent anticommunist intellectuals like the anti-Marxist Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski went through this program.²²

Although there existed a handful of nonnaturalized Americans with knowledge about the Soviet Union floating around the academy in the 1940s, the US intelligence and military establishments considered them problematic for a different reason. Although some of these men were the founders of the field of Slavic Studies (including Geroid Robinson at Columbia), the Americans who studied Russian affairs in the 1930s and early 1940s often harbored socialist or communist sympathies. With the onset of the Cold War, they were not trusted to advise the US government. Many were purged by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). In his book *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America’s Soviet Experts*, Engerman asserts that while many American leftists were essential to the development of the field of Slavic Studies, their influence waxed and waned over the decades with changes in US foreign policy toward the socialist bloc.²³

In the context of the Cold War, American scholars who questioned or challenged US foreign policy or military interventions (especially in Vietnam) often found themselves pushed to the margins of their professions.²⁴ As generous federal funds flowed into universities to bolster area studies programs, scholars who bucked the status quo lost grant competitions, faced hostile peer reviewers who blocked their chances of publication, and were subsequently denied tenure and promotion. Reflecting on these conditions of academic knowledge production in the United States, R. C. Lewontin wrote:

[T]he Cold War was responsible for an unprecedented and explosive expansion of the [American] academy . . . By making entrepreneurial professors the conduits through which extraordinary sums of public money have flowed into the universities, the Cold War has provided academics as a profession with a potent weapon in their struggle for power within their institutions and thus

has given them an extraordinary degree of control over the conditions of their employment. Although it is a severe blow to their sense of moral righteousness and self-esteem, [American] academics must face the fact that the Via Dolorosa along which many of their colleagues, friends and comrades were dragged to their crucifixions was also the high road to professional prosperity for the great majority.²⁵

In other words, the generosity of federal funding agencies for the study of communist regimes came with the expectation that scholars would not question US foreign policy during the Cold War and that they would ostracize those of their colleagues who appeared too sympathetic to leftist ideas. Although a handful of anti-Stalinist Trotskyists managed to maintain a presence in American intellectual life (particularly around the journal *Dissent*), a whole generation of "New Left" thinkers arose after the social upheavals of 1968 and the shock of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. These New Left scholars critical of the American government and its military interventions were stridently anticommunist, in the sense that they distanced themselves from all intellectual contacts with the countries behind the Iron Curtain. After the Prague Spring, moreover, dissident voices from East European and Soviet émigrés were increasingly embraced and supported by the United States government, as a corrective to the left turn among US-trained academics disgusted by US military entanglements and covert operations in Southeast Asia and Central and South America.²⁶

Thus, East European perspectives have been variously rejected or accepted as legitimate sources about the situation in Eastern Europe or the "truth" about communism depending on the needs of the US government to justify its various foreign policies. After 1980, when Ronald Reagan abandoned détente and sought a more aggressive foreign policy toward communist countries, for instance, the United States Information Agency (USIA) increased the autonomy of the foreign-language desks at Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty. Reagan and his neoconservative allies considered the American RFE and RL journalists too soft on communism and diluted their influence by relying more heavily on hardcore anticommunist defectors, émigrés, and dissidents.²⁷ As the Reagan administration took a hard-right turn in its stance toward the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, scholars in the American academy became increasingly critical of Reagan and what was then called the "Kirkpatrick Doctrine."²⁸ Jeane J. Kirkpatrick was an influential neoconservative who served as the first American woman ambassador to the United Nations and on President Ronald Reagan's National Security Council and Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. She shaped Reagan's rabidly anticommunist foreign policy, which justified its support of what she called "'right-wing' dictators or white oligarchies" in the Global South because they helped check the spread of communism.²⁹

One example of an émigré whose opinion was elevated above those of domestic experts in the 1980s is Richard Pipes, a strident anticommunist born in interwar Poland. Pipes often castigated colleagues he considered too soft on communism and convinced American leaders that ordinary Soviet citizens were essentially different kinds of human beings than their freedom-loving American counterparts. In 1976, the CIA commissioned a comparative study to examine the accuracy of the United

States' annual National Intelligence Estimates (NIE) on Soviet capabilities. The CIA handpicked Pipes to head this commission, which consisted exclusively of strident anticommunists. In Pipes's 2018 *New York Times* obituary, William Grimes explains that "The group's report, commissioned by the Central Intelligence Agency as a counterweight to an analysis that had been generated by the C.I.A.'s own experts—Team A—helped galvanize conservative opposition to arms-control talks and accommodation with the Soviet Union. Additionally, it set the stage for Ronald Reagan's policy of challenging Soviet foreign policy and seeking to undermine its hold over Eastern Europe."³⁰ Grimes also noted that Pipes was the author of "a monumental, sharply polemical series of historical works" and that he embraced the label "Cold Warrior" with great pride. Pipes's notorious "Team B" contributed significantly to Reagan's renewed aggression toward the Soviet Union during the 1980s, which brought the world perilously close to a nuclear war.³¹

Cold War Paradigms of Women's History

American anticommunism with regard to women's issues was most obvious during the HUAC and McCarthy eras, when the US government openly persecuted and accused left feminists of "un-American activities." Beginning in 1948, the political climate was rife with paranoia and fear following the attack on the Congress of American Women (CAW), the simultaneous savaging of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), which led to the suspension of their United Nations consultative status, and the ongoing insinuations against organizations like Women Strike for Peace (WSP) and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).³² Many American women activists, such as those affiliated with the National Organization for Women (NOW), felt compelled to distance themselves as much as possible from socialism either in theory or practice.³³ Right-wing politicians' assertions that women's organizations were "communist fronts" and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's infiltration of domestic women's organizations like NOW silenced many American women who might have otherwise found common cause with women in Eastern Europe.³⁴

It was during and after the 1975 United Nations International Women's Year that American scholars began to take a closer interest in the situation of women in Eastern Europe.³⁵ Since the end of World War II, the Eastern Bloc countries had been trumpeting the gains of women in the state-socialist countries through their support of the WIDF. Through high profile international meetings and slick publications such as the WIDF magazine, *Women of the Whole World*—published in Russian, German, English, Spanish, and French and distributed across the globe—Eastern Bloc countries proclaimed their moral superiority where women's rights were concerned.³⁶ In the 1970s, Western scholars published studies about the status of women in Eastern Europe, with the general scholarly consensus being that while women in socialist states had *de jure* (legal) equality, they lacked *de facto* equality.³⁷ Moreover, scholars like Barbara Wolfe Jancar argued that state women's committees were mere tools of male party elites, and that top-down policies to emancipate women only served the interests of leaders who

needed women's labor force participation and did little to address the crushing double burden that was a reality of so many East European and Soviet women's lives.³⁸

Recent analytical work by Russian historian Anna Krylova shows that gender historians made their contribution to reinforcing Cold War narratives of socialist modernities as "'failed' or 'incomplete' gender revolutions."³⁹ Using the example of Western studies of the USSR's policy toward women, published from the 1970s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, Krylova demonstrates that these narratives were never homogeneous: they operated with different plots, which, however, boiled down to discrediting the Soviet version of emancipation policy. For decades, Western scholars focused on proving that the USSR treated women's rights instrumentally, that Soviet gender policy was conservative and reduced to reinforcing traditional male–female relations, and that Bolshevik feminism as performed by Alexandra Kollontai, Nadezhda Krupskaya, or Inessa Armand was an incidental phenomenon: it occurred during the revolutionary period and was swept away over time by Stalinist traditionalism.⁴⁰

Western research critical of the socialist model of women's emancipation later found great resonance in the former Eastern Bloc countries. As Magdalena Grabowska shows, during the political transformation of the 1990s, Polish feminists—many of whom were academics, fellows at Western universities, and participants in Western conferences on women's rights—rejected the socialist concept of women's empowerment, often reaching back to Cold War arguments. They pointed out that socialism did not liberate women, but burdened them doubly—with professional work and domestic duties. They emphasized that women's emancipation in communist Poland was superficial, because it was done top-down. They claimed, like Western feminists, that the socialist state deprived women of their agency. According to Grabowska, the arguments of Polish feminists of the 1990s and early 2000s were based on Western liberal concepts of agency and empowerment, and largely neglected the local context and the different definition and dynamics of socialist modernization, with its agenda of women's emancipation. Grabowska further argues that the postsocialist feminist desire to "return to the West," with the inherent idea of belonging to a liberal, free-market family (in the American sense more than in the Western European sense), was strongly linked to the rejection of what the Soviet Union embodied: communism and, above all, "the East."⁴¹

In a 2022 article, Agnieszka Mrozik also noted that younger researchers were continuing the discussion of the condition of women in state-socialist Poland, which once so profoundly engaged Polish feminists in the 1990s and early 2000s. After analyzing a number of mainstream studies on the history of women in postwar Poland published thirty years after the political transformation, Mrozik concluded that a new generation of feminist scholars no longer denies Polish women their agency and empowerment under state socialism. Rather, they try to argue that in the People's Republic of Poland women emancipated themselves *independently* of the efforts of the socialist state and state-socialist women's organizations. While emphasizing the importance of women's grassroots emancipation (manifested most fully in their participation in anticommunist protests), today's Polish feminist scholars and activists still choose to overlook the efforts of communist female politicians and intellectuals who once pursued a women's equality agenda within the framework of state socialism.⁴²

These diagnoses do not apply only to Poland. As early as 2010, Dutch historian Francisca de Haan argued that Cold War paradigms continue to influence the historiography of the global women's movement, with left feminists systematically being erased from narratives about the progress of women's rights during the twentieth century.⁴³ She provided an example of how research on global women's movements had marginalized the role of the WIDF, an organization founded in Paris in late 1945 in which left feminists had strong representation for decades. Kristen Ghodsee, in her 2019 book *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War*, has also drawn attention to—forgotten (or intentionally overlooked) by feminist scholars—postwar collaboration between leftist women activists and politicians from socialist bloc countries and the Global South.⁴⁴ Left-feminist internationalism, with its explicit anticolonial message, was until recently a blank spot on the map of transnational women's movements.⁴⁵ However, as Ghodsee and Chiara Bonfiglioli note, criticism of it is still strong. Although left-feminist internationalism has received some attention from feminist scholars, based partially on the claim of *apparent* cooperation between female activists and politicians from the socialist bloc and the Global South, this work almost always emphasizes the unequal relations and colonialist inclinations of the former against the latter.⁴⁶

In her 2014 article criticizing the work of “feminist revisionist scholars” in Eastern Europe, Nanette Funk argued that historians and social scientists working in their own countries need to have “adequate caution” when talking to their compatriots about the socialist past: “If the new gender and women's studies in post-communist Eastern Europe builds on the legacy of an oversimplified past it risks tarnishing the reputation of women's and gender studies in the region. It also risks contributing to the dangers that anti-democratic elements will be forgotten and that women in the region will misunderstand their own histories.”⁴⁷ In her analysis, Funk articulates a worldview in which well-intentioned researchers might produce scholarship that might make people “misunderstand their own histories,” especially if these histories are not attentive enough to the antidemocratic elements of the past. Given that Funk is a senior American researcher (she is emerita from City University of New York) and that many of the scholars she criticized in 2014 were junior East European assistant professors or graduate students publishing articles from their dissertation research, the power dynamics of these exchanges are patently clear. Given the hierarchies in academia and the continuing role that more senior scholars play as anonymous peer reviewers for grants, scholarships, journal articles, and book manuscripts, not to mention tenure and promotion letters, there are good reasons for young scholars to avoid studying aspects of the recent past that might not agree with preconceived and persistent American stereotypes about the totalitarian nature of the communist past.

The Way Forward?

From the perspective of two scholars who have worked in the field of socialist and postsocialist gender studies in both the United States and Poland, we believe that our field is still somewhat hampered by an ongoing epistemic crisis over who has the au-

thority to produce knowledge about the communist past, but also—and perhaps even more importantly—*what* knowledge of this past is considered legitimate. Our scholarship continues to be defined by the Cold War and by its reverberations on contemporary political and economic arrangements in both the United States and in Eastern Europe. In this context, East European scholars who focus on the crimes of communism and research the very real suffering of those who were persecuted by the regime are sometimes accused of constructing a form of “zombie” socialist past to support the unequal distributions of once state-owned wealth after 1989. For example, Liviu Chelcea and Oana Druță argue that Western foundations and postsocialist elites fund research about the terror of the socialist past to prevent popular local resistance to the violence and misery of contemporary capitalism:

The obsessive references to the socialist past have had constitutive powers, creating a particularly strong version of neoliberalism. Zombie socialism arguments have become a convenient and strategic ideological device for furthering social dumping, increasing inequalities, and reducing support for redistributive policies. In this sense, in its post-1989 negation, socialism continues to be extremely relevant: the usage of spectral and mythological representations of socialism has, for the winners of transition, the capacity to preempt social justice claims and to structure political relations in the allocation of wealth.⁴⁸

In other words, some of these East European scholars may have personal pecuniary motives for their scholarship because they (or their families) directly benefited from postsocialist lustrations, rehabilitations, or restitutions. For instance, in Germany, the history professoriate of many former East German universities consists primarily of West German academics who got their posts after the firing of those considered “unfit” to teach after 1989 because of their previous affiliations with the Socialist Unity Party (SED).⁴⁹ In countries like Poland, Hungary, or Romania, the past is often a useful tool in contemporary political struggles in which money, recognition, and prestige are at stake. Governments of these countries allocate huge funds from the budget to finance research on the “crimes of communism.” In Poland alone, in 2020 PLN 423 million (ca. USD 110 million) was allocated to support the activities of the Institute of National Remembrance,⁵⁰ an institution that not only conducts scientific research, but also has the power to “prosecute the perpetrators of German and communist crimes, war crimes and crimes against humanity.”⁵¹ In 2021, another institution, the Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, established in 2016 and reporting to the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, was granted PLN 232 million (ca. USD 57 million)⁵² to implement its mission of, among other things, “researching, popularizing, documenting and expanding knowledge about Nazi and communist crimes.”⁵³ If we add to this various programs established and financed by the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage in Poland that support research on Catholicism, patriotism, national tradition, and culture (from which the communist period is excluded), it is clear for scholars what kind of research the authorities consider worth doing.⁵⁴ Similarly, in the German context, Daniela Dahn has argued that post-1989 debates about whether the German Democratic Republic was

a lawful or unlawful state (*Rechtsstaat oder Unrechtsstaat*) have everything to do with property restitutions to the West German descendants of Nazis in East Berlin after 1990.⁵⁵

While those studying the crimes of communism benefit from generous state support, those who question the hegemony of this narrative are often castigated as dangerous ideologues. In this discussion, in which one of the stakes is the legitimacy of conducting “revisionist” research on state socialism and the history of women and gender in socialist bloc countries, another point deserves attention. It concerns the discrediting of this kind of research under the accusation that it is “ideological,” “politicized,” and therefore “unscientific.” It is no coincidence that Poland’s Minister of Education and Science, Przemysław Czarnek, who has been in office since October 2020, says openly that conducting gender, queer, but also Marxist research is an “ideology” that should be banned. At the same time, the change that has taken place in the public debate over the course of several years in which Poland has been governed by far-right parties is clearly visible. For example, in November 2015, shortly after the parliamentary elections won by the United Right, the then Minister of Science and Higher Education Jarosław Gowin questioned the scientific nature of gender and queer studies journals and expected them to be removed from the list of scored journals. However, he quickly backtracked on this statement under heavy criticism not only from politicians, but above all from the scientific community, who accused him of interfering with the freedom to conduct scientific research. “I did not announce the abolition of gender studies; I am an outspoken liberal on such matters, I believe that the principle of university autonomy and academic freedom is sacrosanct,” Gowin explained in January 2016.⁵⁶

The current Minister of Education and Science has no such reservations. Shortly after taking over the ministry, Przemysław Czarnek gave an interview to the Catholic TV channel *Trwam*, in which he spoke about the great “neo-Marxist conspiracy” against the traditional family and the need to ban “gender ideology” at Polish universities. In December 2020, in the pages of the daily newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, he spoke again: “For me, LGBT ideology, gender, is neo-Marxism in its pure form.”⁵⁷ In May 2022, he responded to a proposal from a Warsaw high school to provide toilets for nonbinary and transgender students by saying that this was “the madness of post-modernism, neo-Marxism.” And he announced: “We are going to check this, we are going to ask the management what purpose this kind of action serves. . . . Poland is a state under the rule of law and we will not allow any illegal actions. According to Polish law, in Poland we have a man and a woman.”⁵⁸

In many ways, the Polish government’s position on the production of knowledge about the state-socialist past mirrors the American government’s epistemic policies during the Cold War. The minister’s increasing emphasis on the “ideological” nature of gender and queer studies and their alleged links to “neo-Marxist ideology” is aimed not only at demonstrating their “unscientificness,” but also their supposed social harmfulness. According to Czarnek, “leftist ideologies” (*lewackie ideologie*) contribute to the “demoralization of children” by promoting “abnormality.” This is why the minister, who is responsible for the entire education system in Poland, pushed to pass laws tightening state control over the education system. One example is govern-

ment control over which NGOs can enter primary and secondary schools to work with youth.⁵⁹ At the level of higher education, as of September 2022, he had not banned gender and queer studies, but he was setting up further institutional bodies or changing the composition of existing ones so that, under the slogan of “upholding high quality research,” they could block the spending of public money on “nonscientific,” “ideological” projects, which the minister considered to be research on gender and sexual identity, but also revisionist research on the history of state socialism.⁶⁰

Top-down, institutional, far-right anticommunism is currently a factor whose importance can hardly be overlooked in the discussion we wish to initiate with our article. But anticommunist bias is no less strong in academic circles, often liberal and declaratively open to a diversity of views. More than once a revisionist researcher has received a review of their article or grant proposal accusing them of “lacking a critical approach to sources,” “succumbing to the propaganda overtones of the sources analyzed,” or simply “lacking objectivity” in their approach to the subject of their research. According to the sociologist Michèle Lamont, who has meticulously analyzed the ways in which decisions are made in peer review processes and by panels reviewing scientific proposals and deciding on the allocation of research funds, an objective attitude to the research of other scientists, free of one’s own worldview—although desirable—is in fact a myth.⁶¹ Lamont quotes a political scientist who sat on the same expert panel with an economist who was convinced that “good scholarship is incompatible with advocacy.” The political scientist told Lamont: “His politics were different from mine and he was very clear about, you know, ‘I don’t have a viewpoint. Either the person is biased or unbiased.’ But he [only] would pull the [neutrality] card when he was reading proposals by lefties.”⁶² Unfortunately, in most cases, the academic system closely guards the behind-the-scenes of its work, for example by requiring absolute confidentiality in peer review processes, which is why it is so difficult to provide examples to support the kind of claims we make in this article.⁶³ When we approached journal editors to ask if we could quote from the anonymous peer reviews that we have received over the years, we were refused. Lamont, whose book *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* is based largely on anonymous interviews conducted by the author with a number of academics from a variety of disciplines, also encountered this problem. The world of academic judgment and its internal biases remains a black box.

Sometimes, however, anticommunist positions are expressed openly and spontaneously in the heat of public debate, in which personal arguments are often also made. For example, after Bulgarian professor of history Krassimira Daskalova (born 1957) presented her biographical research on the Bulgarian politician Tsola Dragoitcheva, a male Bulgarian master’s degree student felt compelled to challenge her authority and the credibility of her methods in a blog post of 10 March 2014.⁶⁴ Daskalova was making the case for using the methods of oral history to access the memories of women who lived under twentieth-century communist regimes. Without careful oral history, the personal experience of communism would be lost, she argued, and it was essential to record these women’s recollections in a systematic manner. In his public post attempting to delegitimize her scholarship, Hristo Alexiev expressed his dismay at Daskalova’s talk, arguing that:

Though we can indeed see oral history as an interesting field of study that enriches our understanding of the historical record, I would argue that the scholarship on oral history in post-1944 Bulgaria should include the accounts of the many victims—male and female—of the communist regime. . . . With the Bulgarian communist regime’s human rights record and economic performance in mind, it seems unclear to me how the building of state socialism in Bulgaria could be considered an uplifting experience in any respect.⁶⁵

Although there have been many books recording the victims of Bulgarian communism (most notably Tzvetan Todorov’s 1999 *Voices from the Gulag: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria*), the basic objection here was that because some people suffered under the regime in question, scholars (no matter what the nature of their research project) should not study any kind of “uplifting experience” under socialism (for women or youth or other groups) without always discussing the experience of the victims and thereby reinforcing the Cold War paradigms. Alexiev, who graduated to become an Intelligence and Security Officer (ISO) for the US government, felt compelled to highlight Daskalova’s supposed softness toward Bulgarian communism.⁶⁶ Her age, her academic credentials, and her decades of historical research counted for little as far as this Bulgarian was concerned. Although this future federal employee of the US security apparatus had no direct power over Daskalova and her work in 2014, one can only imagine the influence of someone with a similar opinion reviewing one of her grant applications, manuscripts, or promotion dossiers behind closed doors.

Over on the American side of things, the epistemic crisis of legitimacy operates on two levels. We do acknowledge that those who do primary research on the region that supports the totalitarian thesis can be lambasted as imperialistic Cold Warriors supporting continued American global hegemony and the ravages of neoliberal capitalism. But far more common is that those doing primary research that continues in the tradition of the earlier “revisionist” social historians in or on the region are viciously attacked as pinkos, commies, fellow-travelers, useful idiots, or apologists for Stalin.⁶⁷ Particularly after the 2016 presidential elections and the rise of new democratic socialist politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, American conservatives may be keen to discredit the growing popularity of socialist ideas among young Americans with horror stories about the twentieth-century state-socialist past.⁶⁸ More than three decades after its demise in Eastern Europe, American conservatives are still opening new museums in Washington, DC to tally the “victims of Marx’s ideology.”⁶⁹ As in Eastern Europe, this history has very real implications for contemporary political arrangements, and scholarship on the lived experiences of women in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe is once again being hijacked by all points on the political spectrum.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

In this article so far, we have been outlining the ongoing debates and tensions around the production of knowledge about the communist past, with the United States and

Poland as our primary examples. We do not necessarily have concrete solutions for a problem that seems rather intractable for those of us who work in the field of women's history. But in conclusion, we would like to draw attention to one more salient issue: the way that contemporary neoliberal academia controls and regulates research on the socialist past, shaping certain behaviors and attitudes of researchers toward the subjects of their own research.

Under an academic system obsessed with the quantitative measurement of impact and dissemination, the production of knowledge about the socialist past faces a number of institutional and financial constraints—both in the country where the research is conducted as well as internationally, where it is published and presented. In Poland, as mentioned above, conducting research on communism that goes beyond the totalitarian paradigm may result in not receiving funding (and rejection of the research project application may be argued briefly as failure to comply with the substantive criteria of the grant program⁷⁰). Revisionist scholarship, no matter how high the quality of archival sources, may also result in negative anonymous peer reviews and, consequently, rejection from publication in certain key journals.

Lack of funding and publications affects the overall assessment of a researcher's work and may influence the decision to renew or terminate the employment contract with them, a situation that is particularly precarious for junior scholars. When presenting the results of her research abroad, for example, Agnieszka Mrozik has been asked many times how she manages to conduct critical (but at the same time open) research on communist women in an anticommunist country. This is a valid question. For many researchers, the anticommunist paradigm (within which institutions allocating funds for research in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc operate) limits academic freedom and stifles original research. This situation forces scholars to go abroad or apply for foreign funds (or both); others make an attempt to "fit" their research interests and topics into the existing system, hoping that the funding party will not realize what research they will actually do. Still others abandon the "controversial" topic of studies of the communist period altogether. This is how explicit and implicit (auto-)censorship affects the choice of research subject and shapes the way it is conducted: asking research questions, selecting sources, constructing narratives, and so on. The great irony, of course, is that this auto-censorship is not so different from the type of self-policing once necessary for scholars in communist countries before 1989.

This does not mean, however, that conducting research abroad or in an international environment is easier. As thoroughly explored by the aforementioned Michèle Lamont, even in the most prestigious and recognized scientific circles, the research excellence of a project or publication may be discredited when confronted by the personal or political opinions of the anonymous peer evaluators, or with the policies of institutions that uphold the Cold War totalitarian paradigm.⁷¹ Within the academy, these are not public disputes, nor polemics in the scientific press, but evaluations conducted in the privacy of offices, prepared reviews and ratings, decisions on research funding, and so on, that often turn out to be the most effective tool for disciplining scholars who go beyond the anticommunist framework of researching socialist modernities.

Both in Eastern Europe and in Western academies where much of this research is evaluated, we must be critical of the neoliberalization of the academy and the way

that the anticommunist paradigm perpetuates itself by forcing scholars of all ages and nationalities to grapple with the lingering effects of Cold War censorship. The very structures and policies that facilitate the dissemination of research may condition the possibility of studying the socialist past, and we must address this problematic history openly and with an eye to increasing rather than limiting academic freedom. This means that editors and fellowship selection committee members must be extra diligent when finding appropriate reviewers for works on the history of the communist era, and that senior scholars should be more thoughtful about the contributions of their junior colleagues, especially when their research challenges accepted paradigms in the field.

Scholars of Eurasia and Eastern Europe must have an honest discussion about who is authorized to speak about the socialist past. We must discuss how to avoid, or at least limit, the “testimonial injustice” of questioning the credibility of those sources, perspectives, and approaches to the history of (state) socialism and the history of women and gender in the socialist bloc countries that do not conform to contemporary dominant anticommunist narratives.⁷² And it is necessary to have this conversation within the context of the continuing rationalization and privatization of knowledge production.

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◆ Notes

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4. Email correspondence between Chiara Bonfiglioli and the authors of the article, Kristen Ghodsee and Agnieszka Mrozik, 13 July 2022.

5. Magdalena Grabowska, *Zerwana genealogia: Działalność społeczna i polityczna kobiet po 1945 roku a współczesny polski ruch kobiecy* [Broken genealogy: Women's social and political activism after 1945 and the contemporary Polish women's movement] (Warsaw: Scholar, 2018), 113.

6. Ibid., 116–123.

7. A 1999 poll by the leading public opinion polling organization in Poland, CBOS, found that twice as many people reported that their family had *lost* from transition as gained (29 percent versus 14 percent). Ten years after the revolutions of 1989, there were twice as many people who considered themselves losers as compared to winners—in Poland. A consistent majority reported little change in their economic situation. It was not until the poll was rerun in 2009, the twentieth anniversary of the transition, that there were twice as many self-reported winners as compared to losers (30 percent reported gains versus 14 percent reporting losses) and it was not until 2019, the thirtieth anniversary of the transition, that a plurality of Poles reported that their families had gained, rather than simply treading water. Similarly, a plurality of Poles identified their households' financial situation as poor until 2004 and it was not until 2015 that more Poles said their household financial situation was "good" or "very good" rather than "poor" or "modest." See "Polish Public Opinion: Assessment of Systemic Transformation," Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS), 5 June 2019, https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public_opinion/2019/05_06_2019.pdf (accessed 3 February 2022). See also Kristen Ghodsee, "Red Nostalgia? Communism, Women's Emancipation, and Economic Transformation in Bulgaria,"

L'Homme: Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft [L'Homme: Journal for feminist historical studies] 15, no. 1 (2004), 23–36.

8. Nanette Funk, "A Very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women's Organizations, Women's Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 24, no. 1 (2014), 344–360, here 355 and 356.

9. Slavenka Drakulić, "A Letter from the United States: The Critical Theory Approach," in *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed* (New York: Norton, 1992), 123–132.

10. With this article, we join a broader discussion in which an argument relevant to our perspective has been articulated by English philosopher Miranda Fricker. In her 2007 book, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, she pointed out that in public debate, including academic debate, certain types of testimony expressed by certain social groups are considered more credible than others. She called this inequality in recognizing which testimonies are credible and which are not "testimonial injustice." As an example, she cited the testimony of Black victims, to which white police officers give less credence than the testimony of white victims. In a culture where white people are still more privileged than Black people, the former's testimony is considered more credible than that of the latter. See Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–8. Referring to this argument, we note that the totalitarian paradigm, which frames the discussion of the history of the former Eastern Bloc, primarily legitimizes the testimonies of victims of communism. At the same time, it depreciates the testimonies of other groups—such as the beneficiaries of state socialism—labeling them as expressions of nostalgia for the past system.

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20. See, for example, Volker R. Berghahn, *America and the Intellectual Cold Wars in Europe: Shepard Stone between Philanthropy, Academy and Diplomacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

21. Ingeborg Stensrud, "Europe Not Taken for Granted: The Ford Foundation's Exchange Programs in Eastern Europe in the 1950s and '60s" (PhD diss., Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2018), 70.

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23. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*, 13–93.
24. Noam Chomsky et al., *The Cold War & The University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New York: New Press, 1997); David Price, *Cold War Anthropology: The CIA, the Pentagon, and the Growth of Dual Use Anthropology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
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58. "Toaleta dla uczniów LGBTQ+ w LO: Czarnek: Postmodernizm i neomarksizm" [Toilet for LGBTQ+ students in high school: Czarnek: Postmodernism and neo-Marxism], *rp.pl*, 23 May 2022, <https://www.rp.pl/edukacja-i-wychowanie/art36351101-toaleta-dla-uczniow-lgbtq-w-lo-czarnek-postmodernizm-i-neomarksizm> (accessed 31 July 2022).

59. "Czarnek: Wara od naszych dzieci, jeśli chodzi o lewackie ideologie" [Czarnek: Get away from our children when it comes to leftist ideologies], *dziennik.pl*, 22 July 2021, <https://edukacja.dziennik.pl/aktualnosci/artykuly/8213956,przemyslaw-czarnek-szkola-ideologie-lewackie-uczniowie-mein.html> (accessed 31 July 2022). See more on anti-gender campaigns around the world in Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

60. For example, in the new Council of the National Program for the Development of the Humanities—an institution established in 2011 to award research grants in the humanities—appointed by Czarnek in May 2022, as many as five of its fourteen members come from universities in Lublin, close to the minister because of his ties to the region; four come from Catholic universities, and two historians are associated with the Institute of National Remembrance. See "Minister Przemysław Czarnek powołał nową Radę Narodowego Programu Rozwoju Humanistyki" [Minister Przemysław Czarnek appointed the new Council of the National Program for the Development of the Humanities], Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki [Ministry of education and science], 25 May 2022, <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja-i-nauka/minister-przemyslaw-czarnek-powolal-nowa-rade-narodowego-programu-rozwoju-humanistyki> (accessed 3 February 2022).

61. Michèle Lamont, *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 242–243.

62. *Ibid.*, 181.

63. Out of several enquiries sent to researchers working on the issues of interest, whose texts were deemed by reviewers to be insufficiently critical of the research topic or sources used, e.g., interviews with female officials of communist parties or activists of state-socialist women's organizations, we received only one permission to quote excerpts from an otherwise anonymous review. In most cases, the confidentiality of the review process was cited as an obstacle to sharing such experiences.

64. This lecture was delivered at the Russian East European and Eurasian Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on 20 February 2014.

65. Hristo Alexiev, "A Woman Politician in the Cold War Balkans from Biography as History: The Case of the Bulgarian Communist Functionary Tsola Dragoitcheva (1898–1993)," 10 March 2014, <https://reecillinois.wordpress.com/2014/03/10/a-woman-politician-in-the-cold-war-balkans-from-biography-as-history-the-case-of-the-bulgarian-communist-functionary-tsola-dragoitcheva-1898-1993/> (accessed 3 February 2022).

66. Mr. Alexiev graduated in 2014 and since 2018, he has been serving as a "Foreign Language and Area Specialist" and ISO for the US government. This information comes from Mr. Alexiev's LinkedIn profile as of 6 October 2020: <https://www.linkedin.com/authwall?trk=rip>

f&trkInfo=AQF9aN3mhwgJeAAAAXT_TFJQq5cJBvNxH2PJzcSnCAp-7eJDHb_3R_p0WWM MjyyFkkF7I7v4_uezFl8srI3SP4MV_r6CGEqXs-qW_HwHZPyVB840bYcoZ6n1q3TLas1ecVJrf ws=&originalReferer=https://www.google.com&sessionRedirect=https percent3A percent2F percent2Fwww.linkedin.com percent2Ffin percent2Fhristo-alexiev-b83b3199 (accessed 6 October 2020).

67. See, for example, Jacob Heilbrunn, “Stalin’s New American Apologists,” *Washington Examiner*, 13 March 2000, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/stalins-new-american-apologists> (accessed 3 February 2022); or John Gray, “Fellow-Travelers and Useful Idiots,” *New Statesman*, 8 May 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/05/fellow-travellers-and-useful-idiots> (accessed 3 February 2022).

68. See, for instance, the research of the American Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, <https://victimsofcommunism.org> (accessed 3 February 2022); also Lydia Saad, “Socialism as Popular as Capitalism among Young Adults in U.S.,” *Gallup*, 25 November 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/268766/socialism-popular-capitalism-among-young-adults.aspx> (accessed 3 February 2022).

69. Justin Moyer, “A New Anti-Communism Museum in D.C. Tallies 100 Million Victims of Marx’s Ideology,” *Washington Post*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/magazine/2022/09/20/victims-of-communism-museum-opens/> (accessed 21 September 2022).

70. For example, the Science for Society program established on 1 July 2021 by the Polish Minister of Education and Science in the “Humanities—Society—Identity” module supports projects aimed at “exploring and promoting the idea of Polishness in history, culture, and political thought,” as well as “conducting research in the field of national (cultural) identity for the sustainability of the Polish national tradition.” See “Nauka dla Społeczeństwa” [The Science for Society program], Ministerstwo Edukacji i Nauki, <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja-i-nauka/nauka-dla-spoleczenstwa> (accessed 4 February 2022).

71. Lamont, *How Professors Think*, 242–243. Lamont notes in her book that reviewers’ judgments are influenced by many factors, including differences between the disciplines they represent—for example, historians’ requirements for working with sources do not necessarily coincide with the practices of anthropologists or literary scholars in this regard. However, personal opinions, sympathies, or biases of reviewers play an equally important role in the processes of evaluating the quality of publications or applications for grants or fellowships, and for this reason the author decided to analyze them in her work, although she makes no secret that this was not an easy task.

72. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.