ABSTRACT

DO NEW TIMES REQUIRE NEW MEN?

Sara Rastbäck Baltic and East European Graduate School (BEEGS) Södertörn University

College

Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference

August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

Estonia is undergoing rapid economic and social changes. I aim to study the macro level changes through the lens of discussions of “close” values on a micro level. My main approach is discourse theoretical and social constructivist, so this designates both a theoretical and methodological approach.

I interpret the findings from my participant observations, in-depth interviews and field work from a semiotic angle. Informants statements on masculinity and couple-relations are seen as signs or representations, in the system of representations and statements that is the discursive formation in process.

The starting point for my conversation interviews with new-generation Estonians, from a “cultural elite” is masculinity. The conversations drift between gender stereotyping and representation in movies and pop-culture, discussing how we were brought up by our parents, what masculinity means in couple-relations and gender equality. Informants also discuss official reports and statistics on wage differences according to sex, questions of parental leave and domestic violence. I have found that informants relate to at least three different discourses for gender relations: They discuss along lines of “Soviet” respective “Western” stereotypes and they talk also of a “Nordic Ideal” for gender equality.

Informants use these discourses for different levels of analysis and explanation, e.g. the “western” representation of Barbie and Rambo is used to describe gender stereotypes as commercialized and globalized, while the “Nordic Ideal” is related to as used by Estonian politicians as a means of EU-adaptation and legitimization of Estonia as Nordic or Scandinavian country rather than an Eastern state. Whilst informants are reflecting upon certain features of gender as constructions, there are at the same time features of gender and gender relations that are seemingly perceived as natural or inherent.

My aim is to show how informants in conversations use, produce and reproduce discursive features representing gender equality to make sense of their personal relations as well as of national and international politics.