‘EAST’ MEETS ‘WEST’: CO-OPERATION BETWEEN RUSSIAN AND ‘WESTERN’ RESEARCHERS DEALING WITH FEMINIST, WOMEN’S, AND GENDER STUDIES

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Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference
August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

Introduction - Sketch of the dissertation project

Outline
Co-operation between Russian and ‘Western’ researchers in the sphere of Feminist, Women’s and Gender Studies (FWGS) has become intensified and important since the late 1980ies. A considerable number of joint conferences, research projects and publications have been realised since. However, in such co-operation certain problems are likely to occur, due to its unequal, often hierarchically structured nature. These problems caught my interest and became the focus of my Ph.D. dissertation. In this paper I will sketch its basic research questions and tell about the work-in-progress so far.

My dissertation project is initially based on findings of my diploma thesis on FWGS in Moscow and takes up questions and problems that arose in connection with my research on the topic so far. Since the late 1980ies, gendernye issledovaniia have evolved in Russia, representing an intersection of academic research, grassroots women’s organisations and governmental gender policies; partly explicitly breaking with, partly continuing traditional ways of conducting research on gender relations in society; partly drawing upon, partly rejecting ‘Western’ influences. The political changes in Russia connected with Perestroika and Glasnost and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union have facilitated and enhanced contact between Russian and ‘Western’ researchers and growing interest in collaboration has occurred.

Scientific practice usually implies communication and mutual reception between researchers in different parts of the world. Needless to say that this holds true for FWGS in Russia and elsewhere as well. However, the exchange does not appear to be one between equal partners. Hierarchical relations can be observed, which seem to correspond with the difference between Russia, representing the ‘East’ on the one hand and the so-called ‘West’ on the other, with the ‘East’ often being the inferior part in such relationships. These inequalities aroused my interest in the topic, all the more since FWGS claim to represent an alternative to science-as-usual with its specific hierarchies and structures of power.

The notions of ‘East’ and ‘West’ can frequently be found in publications and discussions of Gender researchers involved in such co-operations. However, the uses and meanings of these terms often appear to be rather unclear and vague. They imply - or sometimes conceal - different kinds of unequal relationships that concern academic, financial, political and other aspects. The terms ‘East’ and ‘West’ tempt to view the respective other in a generalising, simplified way. It seems characteristic that the term ‘West’ most often appears in Russian articles, while the respective ‘Westerners’ write about ‘East’, with Russia being a considerable part of it. The unequal, hierarchical relationship can make effective communication and co-operation between researchers from either sides difficult or impossible despite initial mutual interest. Misunderstandings, distrust, arrogance, and unwillingness to understand each other or even to communicate are likely to occur. Such phenomena have been voiced by researchers, publicly as well as off the records.
Summing up, in my study I shall attempt to open up the black-box terms ‘East’ and ‘West’ in the context of research co-operation in the field of FWGS. The manifold unequal and hierarchically structured relations that constitute - or are sometimes hidden behind - ‘East’ and ‘West’ shall be analysed, with regard to their discursive production as well as to the institutional and organisational conditions of this production.

Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

A basic question in my research endeavour is about how science works, how it is put into practice. Science, in this case, means social sciences and humanities, where FWGS are represented most strongly. Several methodological concepts from the area of social studies of science may be useful tools to face or rather construct the object of research. I understand them as a help to think about the co-operation between Russian and ‘Western’ scholars, but not as systems where my observations shall be fitted in. With Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the scientific field, one can look at science as a game or fight for shares of relevant capital (Bourdieu 1975, 1992, 2001). What is relevant capital in a field is itself a result of the struggles within it. One could ask for the different value of the work of researchers from different countries, or for the value of theoretical, conceptual research compared to empirical research. It can, however, be questioned in how far the concept of relative autonomy of fields can be applicable in a context like FWGS, where other kinds of logic than the ‘pure academic’ (e.g. political) are likely to interfere and take effect. The concept of boundary-work, developed by Thomas Gieryn tackles the questions concerning boundaries between science and non-science, good science and bad science and also feminist and non-feminist science - how are they set, discussed, contested, blurred etc. (Gieryn 1995). It might be enlightening to use it with regard to other kinds of boundaries, like e.g. within science (conceptual - applied, theoretical - empirical), between science and politics, or between uses and practices of science in different cultures. In this context, criticism of hegemonic ‘Western’ feminist concepts, voiced by authors like bell hooks, Uma Narayan and others who write on the behalf of marginalised groups of women can be useful for a comparative approach (See hooks 1981, Narayan and Harding 2000). The manifold boundaries and differences sketched here shall be considered with regard to the role they play in the context of co-operation between Russian and ‘Western’ researchers.

Tentative Findings

Some Discussions about the concepts ‘East’ and ‘West’

I would like to present some of the discussions about the usefulness and meaning of ‘East’ and ‘West’ by ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ authors that seemed most interesting to my research questions. It is not intended to give a thorough overview here, but to highlight some points of view. In an issue of the journal Гендерные исследования, three prominent Russian Gender scholars and one US-American scholar are asked about their assessment of the existence and importance of the conceptual dichotomy ‘East-West’. Both the historian Natal’ia Pushkareva and the sociologist Anna Temkina consider the existence of such a dichotomy as uncontested. Both mention the different circumstances under which FWGS have developed: In the ‘West’ the development of FWGS was connected with a comparatively strong Women’s movement and voiced critique of established social theories. In Russia, FWGS had their origin chiefly in academic circles. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, ‘Western’ social theories from different schools were received by Russian social scientists alongside and simultaneously with the critique of the very schools, FWGS being one branch of such critical approaches. Temkina refers to this situation as discursive chaos (дискурсивный хаос) or, in another
paper as discursive omnivorism (*diskursivnaia vseiadnost'*, see Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2000, 18). The prevailing forms of gender relations in a society represent another crucial difference: the housewife, a woman who is not working for payment and who is economically dependent of her husband is rather alien to the soviet and post-soviet society. Furthermore, Temkina stresses that the meaning of the conceptual dichotomy depends very strongly upon the context where it is used: in what parts of ‘East’ or ‘West’ and by whom. The discipline and preferred school of thought of the very person will also play an important role.

Pushkareva names several dichotomies that are used corresponding to the ‘East’-‘West’ dichotomy, like e. g. passive-active, female-male. She takes a rather optimistic point of view, implying that the seemingly foreign ‘Western’ theories can be and have already been made useful for Russian FWGS.

The perspective of the philosopher Igor’ Kon is somewhat different. He states that many of the questions discussed in the ‘West’ are rather irrelevant to the post-soviet society, although some of them may indeed have global importance. He warns about a reception of ‘Western’ gender studies in Russia that merely consists of an uncritical adoption of a number of exotic new terms.

The fourth expert asked in the article from *Gendernye issledovaniia* is the American scholar Henry Krips, who states that there is no objective knowledge, but only such that is situated in a certain social and cultural context. As one of the aspects that influence FWGS in an ‘Eastern’ context he names a historical legacy of scientific Marxism which brings about a tendency to give preference to approaches in the humanities that are oriented towards a positivist-sociological and/or social-political side.

The Russian historian Galina Zvereva distinguishes different ways in which post-soviet scholars deal with the reception of ‘Western’ theories and concepts in FWGS. Firstly, there is the approach of seeing ‘Western’ influences as inadequate and of no use for investigating Russian contexts. Secondly, there is a rather quick and uncritical reception or appropriation of ‘Western’ ideas, sometimes just by using some new terms. Thirdly, there is a more critical way of respecting the otherness of theories and concepts that were developed under social and cultural circumstances different from those in Russia. In Zvereva’s opinion, post-soviet scholars interpret as ‘Western’ what could also be referred to as international or worldwide (*mirovoi*) (See Zvereva 2001).

Peggy Watson discusses the research about Eastern European’s transition to democracy from a gender perspective. She criticises the view of the ‘West’ as what is normal, what is laid down as the measure for what is going on in Eastern Europe.

‘Although transnational feminism transcends the borders of any individual state, it is far from being situated in a ‘power-free zone’. Rather, it is produced by, and produces, a transnational ‘curved space’. This curvature is a function of asymmetrical global relations of power. This being the case, an idea of the West - even if implicit and unspoken - is inevitably part of the cognitive frame within which the discourse of transition is constructed, just as this discourse itself produces ‘the West’. Insofar, then, as this ‘West’ is an unspoken point of reference for the representation of Eastern Europe, a western-centredness, analogous to whiteness, structures interpretations of change.’ (Watson 2001, 38).

With such assumptions, so-called ‘transitologists’ have often been utterly unsuccessful in predicting developments in Eastern Europe, because they had as it were expected it to repeat a process of (belated) modernization as it had taken place in the ‘West’ before. In her paper, Watson names several dichotomies that correspond with or are used synonymously to the relation between ‘East’ and ‘West’: Pupil-Teacher, Lack-Abundance, Totalitarian Regime-Democracy, Oppression-Freedom, Invisibility-Transparency, Backwardness-Progressiveness.

The discussions reported here are mostly centred around the question of reception of ‘Western’ concepts and theories in a Russian or other ‘Eastern’ context respectively the application of ‘Western’ concepts and theories to Russian or other ‘Eastern’ realities. The opposite direction - reception of ‘Eastern’ ideas in the ‘West’ seems unthinkable so far, at least in the area of FWGS. It seems that ‘East’ and ‘West’ prove useful and challenging categories in the field of Women’s and Gender
Studies. It may, however, be questioned, whether they should be treated as dichotomies. The following impressions from my interview material suggest a more sophisticated, multidimensional construction.

**Categories derived from the Interviews**

Since May 2002 I have conducted and partly transcribed 14 semi-structured interviews with Russian (6), American (1), Austrian (1), British (5) and German (1) scholars who are or were in some way involved in the kind of research co-operation I am interested in. My questions concerned the interviewees’ experiences and impressions of studying and working in the country of the respective other, of different kinds of co-operation (research projects, publications, conferences) as well as the interviewees’ assessment of the role of language and funding in co-operation between Russian and ‘Western’ scholars dealing with FWGS. The interviews lasted between 20 minutes and one and a half hours. My analysis is informed by techniques borrowed from Grounded Theory which enable me to break up the interview material into categories and sub-categories, to be understood as concepts indicated by the data (See Glaser and Strauss 1967; Corbin and Strauss, 1998; Dey 1999). Grounded theory also implies an open-minded approach to data (as far as this is possible at all!), where the data must not be forcibly fitted into pre-existing grand theories.

So far, I have tentatively identified some topics that came up more or less recurrently in several interviews. Some of these topics correspond with the interview questions. They may be refined, reformulated, regrouped in the further course of analysis. I will enumerate some of these areas and show of which sub-topics they consist and how they may be interrelated. I will also quote some characteristic extracts of the interviews. Translations from German and Russian are mine, the original text can be found in the endnotes.

- **Academic criteria and hierarchies**
  
  What my interviewees told about their experiences with ‘East’-‘West’ co-operation can not be seen apart from their academic context. They locate themselves within their university, the academic situation in their country and in relation to their colleagues from other countries. I quote one British scholar who tells about the division of labour within one joint research project, where there is also a connection to the topic of funding:

  ‘it it so clearly had a power relationship built into it which was you know there are three Western partners and then there are lots of Russian partners they are m that ones that are paid to do this kind of data gathering and I still say I would like to think you know we did it differently - em and and certainly you know that the Russian researchers they were very you know were very well - senior to me e in terms of their own professional development so they certainly had a strong impact on the on the project but em - it was very unsatisfactory in the way that it worked’ (Interview 10)

- **Feminist, Women’s and Gender Studies**
  
  The specificity of FWGS was referred to in different ways. On the one hand, it was described as something new and exciting: A Russian respondent told about a scholarship she had got in a Californian Women’s Studies Department in the early 1990ies which differed very much from her experience of philosophical discussions so far:

  ‘When the teacher met the students in the lecture hall and they went from tremendously theoretical questions to very personal questions very smoothly and naturally and then back again ... this very tight connection.’ (Interview 2)

On the other hand, one respondent spoke about her reluctance to call herself a scholar who is doing FWGS. She said she was using Feminist and Gender studies approaches, but she did not conduct research focussed on women and gender, giving the following explanation where one can also find a connection to the topic of personal aspects of research activities:

‘and I think it’s because it is so challenging personally - you have to - you have to totally deconstruct yourself before you can do it and you have to accept all your political motives for doing things and I
found actually in some respects it was just - it was too demanding I wanted to have a a work - persona that I could manage easily’ (Interview 10)

- Information/Literature/Data
A library with literature from the field of FWGS is an important motive which has been mentioned by Russian scholars who tell about their stays in the ‘West’ (mostly: the UK and the US). The experience of having virtually ‘nothing’, (i. e. there is virtually no feminist literature available in late Soviet or early post-Soviet Russia) is contrasted with the abundance of the libraries they find at ‘Western’ universities. On the other hand, ‘Western’ researchers as a rule do not go to Russia because of the literature they expect to find there but rather to do empirical research or to work in archives. We find the ‘West’ as provider of literature that is potentially important for either side (feminist and gender theory), while the ‘East’ provides data. A distribution of labour or roles is suggested that is clearly hierarchically structured.

- Funding
Some of my respondents have pointed out that it is rather complicated to get funding for joint research projects. Usually there is either funding for projects conducted by Russian researchers - from Russian or ‘Western’ institutions or for projects conducted by ‘Western’ researchers funded by their national institutions. EU projects are a possibility to organise joint projects, but here, the principal applicants will always be ‘Westerners’5. A British respondent remarked:

‘you have to be a principal applicant who’s got a full time job in this country in the UK so you can’t for example build in you know a co-applicant from - Russia so that the resources are split (...) in an equal way so they have they you feel you know that structurally as well as y’know within the research team that there are equally represented in the project and e I don’t know any if any funding agencies allow that in in resource terms to take place and you can fudge it em but you always know the principal applicant on the grant and therefore the kudos that goes with the the research is you know still vested in the Western researcher’ (Interview 10)

This topic requires further research apart from interviews with researchers, e. g. inquiries to national and international funding agencies about their procedures.

- Means of Communication
If people who live quite far apart from each other want to cooperate, they need effective means of communication. The widespread use of the internet has made communication a lot easier. As one of my respondents who co-ordinated a joint Russian-German project put it:

‘I was a little more strict last year I still said I don’t do anything any more with people who haven’t got an e-mail account (...) really I mean that is a bit mean of course because in fact not everyone has access but my line of thought was we actually want to collaborate with modern open-minded people and that includes openness towards this new means of communication. That was my little justification and it is simply impossible with people from the Russian provinces without e-mail it is difficult anyway because of course the all write at someone - via friends - you never have one address but at least some kind of communication is important and of course it has become a lot better, the telephone connections are stable, the faxes arrive.’ (Interview 7)6

- Soviet Society
A recurrent topic in interviews were particularities of Soviet society and mentality. People who have done empirical research in Russia tell about the FSB (former KGB) getting interested in their proceedings. Soviet mentality in scientists is mentioned as an obstacle to co-operation. People who spoke about this Soviet mentality often could not tell what was specific of it, even when I insisted.

I got one concrete hint of what a soviet habit in academia could be by one Russian respondent who told about a joint project where texts by German and Russian Gender scholars were translated - which represents a connection to the topic language.
‘I was astounded then that a big part of my Russian colleagues said: this is not important - this word, well I don’t know, well some basic word, well what difference does it make how it is translated, it is this word after all - you see when this came up it turned out that many words are understood in just one way, that these that these polysemantic meanings are not taken into account for every word (...) this brought about big difficulties but this is a - such a as it were - well - habit - traditional academic well soviet habit - to understand a word in only one way this is connected to such a well objectivist practice of essentialism - now this was a starting point - when doing the translation we understood that it was difficult for us...’ (Interview 8)

- Gender relations and gender ratio in research cooperation (and beyond)
A British respondent told me about her conflict with a Russian colleague she collaborated with.

‘at one point she was very concerned about this and said that she really did need to she had to employ a man - and so we had this - very heated argument whether or not that was a right position and e because I felt that you should - there should not be any way in which we need to have a man within the collective but within the Russian environment of course it was very important because there were certain types of negotiations that culturally [breath] em - it is much easier for the collective if there was a man to do it’ (Interview 10)

However, the assessment of the importance of men does not seem to be a specific Russian quality, but rather something characteristic of the academic - and other - contexts, as two further statements, one of the same person and one of an Austrian respondent might suggest:

‘I mean it’s always the same until men - take something seriously it’s not serious I mean we only get kind of family - concessions now that men are taking a more -greater role in the family we now we have much more awareness of parental leave...’ (Interview 10)

‘well that has to do with the fact that in principle there are so many more men than women in science so the gender scene has quite a different position (...) and that obviously the authority and acceptance increases from one minute to the other as soon as some men also deal with that and that thus, it is not such a marginal phenomenon or a phenomenon where everybody would say: oh it is just those hysterical aunties...’ (Interview 9)

- Personal Aspects of Co-operation.
It was repeatedly mentioned by respondents from either side that the qualities of their partners are crucial for the co-operation to get on well. Often, there were statements of the type: I don’t think it would have worked with someone else, but XY is a very special person. Qualities of such special persons are e. g. unconventionality, or a very strong knowledge of and subtle feeling for the language of the respective other. One of my Russian respondents called her ‘Western’ mentor affectionately ‘my English granny’ (moia angliiskaia babuška, Interview 3).

- Language
Knowledge of a foreign language, i. e. the language of the respective other, appears to be a crucial issue. It is mentioned as a precondition for co-operation as well as an obstacle to it when there is no knowledge or very little. There is the sub-topic of translations of texts in either direction (Russian to English/German/French or other... English/German/French or other to Russian) which provides a link to the topic of academic hierarchies: What is the status of the translated texts? What texts get translated anyway? Fundamental theoretical and methodological texts come from the ‘West’ to Russia as a rule and not the other way round. Foreign terms and concepts like discourse and gender are discussed in how far they can be translated into Russian or just taken as loanwords (See also Zdravomyslova and Temkina 2000;Nosova and Heyder 2000). The English language seems to be the most important lingua franca in a presumed international scientific community. Thus, texts published in Russian have a disadvantage in the first place - but then, this could hold true for texts in German or French as well. This prompts the idea of different Wests - as a hierarchy or a continuum with different degrees of ‘Westernness’ - which might turn out to be another category.
Conclusion

Generally, it has become clearer in which way the relations within research co-operations are manifold and multifaceted. At a first glance, there seem to be unidimensional, dichotomic hierarchies between ‘East’ and ‘West’. But these can not be considered apart from the context in which they are embedded - the academic field, the social and political environment and also personal aspects of the relationship. It would be misleading to understand the power hierarchies as fixed and merely one-way, i.e. the ‘West’ being in the more favourable, the ‘East’ being in the relatively disadvantaged position. The respondents themselves question or even subvert the idea of such a simplified view of their relations.

The interviews I conducted with researchers from various countries are far from being thoroughly and systematically analysed. Still, I could find some tentative categories that seem to matter in the area of ‘East’-‘West’-co-operation. Further research work will consist of refining the categories mentioned and looking for them - and maybe others - in different sources and contexts. Then, it will be important to see the categories in relation to the context from which they originated - who said or wrote what, where, in what language, for what purpose, for which audience? Many more questions are still ahead, not the least important of them being whether the categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’ be made more useful by my research endeavour?

References

Bourdieu, Pierre (1975) The specificity of the scientific field and the social condition of the progress of reason, Social science information 14 (6): 19 – 47
Bourdieu, Pierre (1992) Homo academicus, Frankfurt am Main
Endnotes

1 See Garstenauer 2000. In this thesis, I tried to figure out the most important criteria and distinctions that structure resp. are negotiated within the field of Moscow Women's and Gender Studies. Furthermore, some of the ideas of the present outline have been developed in conceptualising a joint research project that, unfortunately, could not be realised. (See Veronika Wöhrer, Therese Garstenauer: Hierarchies and Phantasms in ‘East’-‘West’ research co-operation with special focus on Feminist, Women's and Gender Studies. Unpublished manuscript, January 2002.)

2 Literally, gendernye issledovaniia can be translated with ‘Gender Studies’. However, the term covers a broad range of meanings. It would be more comprehensive and adequate (albeit inelegant) to translate it with ‘Feminist and/or Women's and/or Gender Studies’. In this outline I will use the term Feminist, Women's and Gender Studies (FWGS).

This focus distinguishes my study from others that treat ’East’-‘West’-contacts from a more theoretical sociology-of-knowledge perspective.

4 Kogda v auditorii e prepodavatel’ vstrechalsia so studentkami i oni ot sugubo teoreticheskikh voprosov ochen’ plavno i estestvenno perehodili k ochen’ lichnym zhiznennym voprosom (...) potom obratno vot eto s povia’ voobshche ochen’ tesnia.

7 ‘Menia porazila togda chto bol’shaia chast’ moikh russkikh kolleg skazali eto ne vazhno - eto slova nu ia ne znaiu tam nu kakoe-to bazovoe slovo nu kakai raznica kak ego perevesti eto slovo ono i est slovo ponimaete vot - kogda vozniklo vot eto vot - okazalas’ eto slova - ponimait’sia to’ ko v odnom znacheni chto vot eti vot takoi polisemantichnosti ne ugaadyetsia na kazhdym slovom (...) v etom byla bol’shaia slozhnost’ no eto - eto takaia nu kak by skazat’ - nu - privychka - tradicionnaia akademicheskaia nu sovetskaia privychka - ponimat’ slova e vse-taki v edinstvennom znacheni eto sviazano s a m m takoi praktikoi nu ob’iektivistskoi takoi praktikoi essentializma - vot i vot - vot eto byla nachal’naja tochka - vo vremia perevodov poniali eto nam trudno...’

8 ‘ja das hat damit zu tun dass ja prinzipiell eben weil in der Wissenschaft so viel mehr Männer sind als Frauen die Genderszene schon einen ziemlich schwierigen Stand hat (...) und dass sich offensichtlich deren Autorität oder Akzeptanz schlagartig erhöht wenn da irgendwelche (...) Männer sich auch damit beschäftigen und das dadurch nicht dann so ein Randphänonmen is oder so ein Phänomen is wo alle sagen na das sind eh nur die hysterischen Tanten...’

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