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A ZEUGMATIC SPACE: EAST/CENTRAL EUROPEAN FEMINISMS

Mihaela Mudure

Abstract

This paper analyzes the peculiar cultural position of East/Central European feminism with particular focus on Romanian feminism. The author uses a rhetorical figure, zeugma, in order to underpin the specificity and the commonalities of the post-Communist area feminisms as compared to the hegemonic feminisms of the world, or to Third World feminisms. Zeugma (from an ancient Greek word meaning ‘bridge’) is a figure of speech that relies on balance and acceptance of grammatical difference. An almost perfect cultural space shifter, East/Central Europe produces feminist discourses that constitute zeugmatic spaces in the worldwide concerto of world feminisms.

Motto:

“Which is why the critique of all discourses concerning gender, including those produced or promoted as feminist, continues to be as vital a part of feminism as is the ongoing effort to create new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms of another perspective – a view from ‘elsewhere’.”

(Teresa de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender)

It is from this “elsewhere” that I want to claim a space for Central/East European feminisms, particularly, for Romanian feminism, which I can … pretend that I know better because I belong to Romanian culture. The space I want to claim and argue for in this essay is among the other feminisms of the world and it is also inspired from the more and more complex evolution of East/Central European feminisms. It is an evolution towards an oxymoronic 1 space, very much similar to the oxymoronic space that Third World feminisms have claimed since 1981 when Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa vehemently articulated their position(s) in their collection of writings by radical women of color This Bridge Called My Back. And it is a path that was eloquently continued by Audre Lorde in her collection of essays Sister Outsider. All these perspectives on women’s issue show the tension that exists in Third World feminisms between belonging to a world wide movement and being at odds with some hegemonic spaces that exist within this movement due to different forms and degrees of visibility, public and/or political experience, the richer resources that some feminisms benefit from. Therefore, writing about East/Central European feminisms as a bridge called “our back,” I am fully aware of the dangers, even of the almost inescapable trap of essentialism as I talk about a large area of the European continent. The danger exists even if I limit myself to my own culture, therefore, to Romanian feminism. However, exactly as there is a “we”, which actually means “I” and there is an “I” which actually means “we” because of strategies of representation, or modesty,

1 The oxymoron is a rhetorical figure which has the paradoxical power to show unity and similarity while also maintaining the separateness, and the opposition, even, of the notions involved. The most known example of oxymoron is: eloquent silence.
I shall claim “a bridge of our back”, the singular noun suggesting my own responsibility in the theoretical claims I am making. I shall claim, therefore, this space “the bridge of our back” as a specific East/Central European space. The necessity of this space has already been pointed out by Gail Kligman and Susan Gal, or by Rosi Braidotti, scholars who have been more preoccupied than others with variety and diversity among feminisms, with trafficking feminisms.

In their book *The Politics of Gender after Socialism. A Comparative Historical Essay*, Susan Gal and Gail Kligman underpin the problem. “And even though academic feminism in the United States had come to recognize the justice of minority and Third World women’s demands to be heard within feminist scholarship and hence the importance of diversity when it came to East, most white middle-class American feminists: nevertheless expect replicas of their own concerns. … On the assumption that the past is ‘another country’ they unconsciously expected the women they encountered to be versions of their own grandmothers, and therefore more like themselves as women and feminists” 3. Rosi Braidotti tackles the problem in the making of European women’s studies: “no perspective in women’s studies can be considered truly ‘European’ unless it addresses the need to produce non-exclusionary and non-ethnocentric models of knowledge and education. … Moreover for this work towards a common and diversified definition to succeed, discussions are needed in a comparative framework with women from Eastern and Central Europe, from the United States and the developing countries.” 4

And finally, an East/Central European voice, Dasa Duhacek in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy* makes the following statement at the end of her entry on Eastern European feminist philosophy: “If this overview is more inclined to open up problems, it is because it portrays the picture, or an incomplete mosaic, of Eastern feminist philosophy. Every aspect of the very existence of this philosophy and its existence is a process, an unfolding which is central not only to itself, but to feminist philosophy as a whole. Given that philosophy is at its best where it provokes and disturbs rather than settles, I consider the question to be more important than the answers.” 5 In other words, Eastern feminist philosophy rather asks questions than gives answers.

I consider that it is high time to limit this imprecision and this circumstantial optimism and claim a more precise space for East/Central European feminisms. In my opinion, this space is a zeugmatic position within the world’s feminisms. Zeugma is a rhetorical figure, which relies on bridging, and yoking. In rhetoric it expresses the relationship between a verb that can have two predicates or a noun able to have two

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2 I found I fully share Gloria Anzaldúa’s very interesting comments on the dynamics of “I” and “we” in an interview taken by Ann E. Reuman and published by *Melus*. “In ’88 I wrote an essay on the plural ‘I’ and the singular ‘we,’ and it was about representation and how the author, the writer a lot of times in using the ‘I’ is using the ‘we’ because there are other women who identify so strongly with her experiences” (Ann R. Reuman, “Coming into Play. An interview with Gloria Anzaldúa,” *Melus*, vol. 25, no. 2, *Latinx Identities* (Summer 2000): 22.


attributes. Usually one is very common, the other is a more controversial, symbolic, figurative position.\textsuperscript{6}

Whereas the theoretical notions coined by Third World or minority feminisms such as Gayatry Chakravorty Spivak’s subaltern, Gloria Anzaldua’s mestiza consciousness, Alice Walker’s womanism, Audre Lorde’s Afriquette, or Chela Sandoval’s oppositional consciousness rely on an antagonism between the hegemonic feminisms and the Third World feminisms powerfully aware of different women’s class, race or sexual orientation positionings. Or the problem of East/Central European feminisms is their ambivalence, they are in a bridging, yoking position between hegemonic feminisms and the feminisms of the poor women of the world. East/Central European feminisms belong and long to belong to Europe, which is a space with a hegemonic history and presence. On the other hand, the social, political, and particularly economic realities of these countries are more or less close to the realities of Third World countries – with adequate variations for each country of the region. I consider that this interplay, this ambiguity of East/Central European feminisms is best represented by a zeugmatic position. An almost perfect cultural space shifter, East/Central European feminisms seem both Western and non-Western, marginal and striving to be accepted into the hegemonic club. These movements, these hesitations have a long history. East/Central Europe has always been attracted, with various intensities, by different centers of power and it has also experienced marginality, the privileges and the discomforts of the periphery in various degrees. Notwithstanding is also the incomplete degrees of Western-type modernization in these countries which entails a more difficult task for feminisms in their efforts to dismantle their apparent unity in the eyes of an outsider. Last, but not least East/Central Europe has a tradition of seeing itself as a bridge, a threshold between Europe and the Orient, between East and West, while also carving its own East and West within the region. Nowadays these hesitations, ambiguities echo the result of forces outside feminist debates, outside the debates inside women’s movements. They come from the arena of international politics, and from the new re-ordering of the world after the fall of the communist system, the construction of new enemies and the refashioning of new confrontations where religion and secularity hold a more and more important role.

Therefore, from this bridge, also named our back, which signifies both a belonging to the world’s feminisms, and the necessity to carve a space of our own which should be able to encompass our position, tensioned, ambiguous, frustrated, rich, and eager to voice its own individuality, I shall focus now on some peculiarities of Romanian feminism, as a zeugmatic space for debate and considerations.

There is certainly nowadays in Romania an increasing interest, in the academic circles, particularly in humanities and social sciences, in feminism, gender studies, gendered approaches. This has, partly, to do with the growing awareness of the more and more numerous women working in the Romanian academia or in Romanian NGOs. Universities tend to lose their status as privileged, and therefore mostly male dominated work places, which they had under the communist regime

\textsuperscript{6} Examples of zeugma: Dickens’ Mr. Pickwick took his hat and his leave. Or, in \textit{The Rape of the Lock} by Alexander Pope, Belinda was afraid she might: “Or stain her Honour, or her new Brocade, … Or lose her Heart, or Necklace, at a Ball…”. In ancient Syria there was town Zeugma built on the shores of the Euphrates. Its name, Pliny says, comes from a bridge uniting the two banks of the Euphrates, which suggested the name, the Greek word meaning “a yoke,” Pliny (Hist. Nat., XXXIV, 150) also says that Alexander the Great was the first to build a bridge at this point, no doubt a pontoon bridge.
interested in the surveillance of these possible loopholes from the official discourse. There are also numerous women’s NGOs of all political or religious orientations struggling to get the resources necessary for their activities, predominantly from international sources because communities either do not have resources or the mayors and city counselors (predominantly men) are not very enthusiastic about spending money for such activities.

On the other hand, militant feminism is not a big, widespread movement in Romania, but this is not a rare situation. Large women’s movements are rare and they tend to appear in extreme historical circumstances when a particular issue comes to dominate the societal agenda. Such was the suffragettes’ movement or in the 20th century, important women’s movements were the international “Women in Black” movement7 and the “Mothers of Plaza de Mayo” in Argentina.8

As for academic feminism, which is Athena’s head of the spear, special mention should be made of the new emerging centers where feminist research is being done. Usually, at this point in any presentation on Romanian gender studies, there is mention of some important Romanian universities (Bucharest, Cluj, and occasionally Timisoara). But not even lip service is usually done to other institutions, such as the University of Iasi, of Brasov or of Oradea, where there are such preoccupations as well. I would also add that there are already in Romanian feminism zones of shadows, and zones of maximum visibility, which tend to be shaped according to the zone of influence of central authorities, according to subjective factors, and according to a hierarchy of access to resources.

Does Romanian feminism have a history? Or is it a post-1990 creation getting out immaculate and powerful like Athena from the head of Zeus, in the post 22 December 1989 world, characterized by unrestrained - except for economic reasons - freedom of movement, documentation and information? Romanian feminism certainly does have a history, although it is only today that this history is being uncovered. The historicity of the feminist discourse is very important for the prestige of the feminist discourse.

Romanian feminism does not have an eighteenth-century tradition of theorizing and political activism as Mary Wollstonecraft or Olympe de Gouges9

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7 “Women in Black” is a loose network of women worldwide committed to peace, justice and actively opposing to war and other forms of violence. It is not an organization, but a means of mobilization and a formula for action. The group is women only, and usually take the form of women wearing black, standing in a public place in silent, non-violent vigils at regular times and intervals.

These vigils were started in Israel in 1988 by women protesting against Israel's Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and demanding peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Italian women supporters of the Israeli women took the idea back to Italy. Contact between Italian women and the Yugoslav women resulted in Women in Black vigils in Republic Square, Belgrade, opposing the Serbian regime's involvement in aggression.

8 A group of women who became a symbol of human rights activism and courage. Dressed in black, they have been demonstrating for years every Thursday at 3:30 in the afternoon, in the famous Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, demanding to know the fates of their loved ones. Marching around the statue of liberty, in front of the presidential palace, they used to tie white handkerchiefs imprinted with names of disappeared sons and daughters, around their heads, and carry signs emblazoned with photographs of those about whose destinies they sought information. The Mothers’ use of the imagery of Christian motherhood made them particularly effective against the professedly Catholic military regime. The mothers were a symbol of courage; leading the struggle for justice, they started their demonstrations while the junta was still in power. Several of them, including their founder, Azucena Villaflor de Vicenti, disappeared themselves as a result.

9 Mary Wollstonecraft with the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Olympe de Gouges, the author of *Les Droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* challenge the universalist claims of the Enlightenment and propose a feminist perspective on the Enlightenment ideology.
offered in the West. Corresponding to the zeugmatic status of Romanian culture and due to its belatedness in modernization for historical causes, it is at the beginning of the 19th century that some female aristocrats (a Miss Soutzu, or Hermione Asaki-Quinet, for instance) assume authorship veiling their creative effort as translations. Ana Ipatescu or Maria Rossetti, women of the 1848 generation, enter the political arena more actively. Even later in the 19th century, the first half of the 20th century, Romanian feminists do not surpass a certain pragmatic level in their writings. They participate in the debates of the time, talk back sometime, they advocate women’s rights to education and political, or economic participation, but they do not theorize beyond the immediacy of the calls of the impending present. The only exception is Calypso Botez who tries to frame a tradition of Romanian feminism in her book entitled *Romanian Feminism*. She sketches a synthesis of feminist orientations, agendas and struggles.

A major problem for East/Central European feminisms is their relationship with the nationalisms of the area. For the feminists of the 19th century or the first half of the 20th century sorority is a matter of particular concern that will be addressed after the fulfillment of the national ideals by the foundation of strong national states. And the nation is represented, of course, by the protective female angel, draped in the national flag, kept flying in battles which are waged by men and won by men. An initiative such as Alexandrina Cantacuzino’s in the 1920’s to bring together minority women and Romanian women, although salutary, remains isolated and is not able to overcome chauvinistic, xenophobic, even anti-Semitic discourses, as history will tragically show.

In the zeugmatic space of East/Central European feminisms meet, in certain points, the Third World feminisms after World War II, when the independent nations were carved out of the colonial empires of the time. In both cases, women participated fully in the effort for national emancipation but afterwards were not given the public space which they were entitled to.

The zeugmatic space of East/Central European feminisms also must acknowledge the fact that feminism was affected by the repeated projects of modernization, all of them incomplete or flawed from ideological premises, the bourgeois liberal project and the communist project. This gives another commonality with the Third World feminisms. In East/Central Europe there is still a large space occupied by rural, traditional communities, many of them living on a sustenance economy. Or these rural societies, although they give both man and woman a specific, and separate place in economy are deficient with regard to the modern contemporary living standards. Domestic violence, an aggressive patriarchal parental authority, female victimization are grafted on poverty and a low standard of living.

A peculiarity of the zeugmatic space of East/Central European feminisms is the necessity to address its origins. In the post-1990 effort to uncover a history of women’s movements and feminism, there is a tendency, in my opinion, to over-emphasize the liberal roots of feminism and neglect its leftist component. Or feminism is interconnected with the beginning of the social-democratic movement. Feminist scholars must offer new theoretical discourses that are able to catch the essence of the post-communist environment. I think that one cannot talk about the zeugmatic position of East/Central European feminisms without an analysis of how feminism was usurped by the communist ideology. The cases of such female communist militants as Elena Filipescu-Filipovici, Ecaterina Arbore, Constanta Craciun, and the mechanisms of their promotion within the party, the cases of Ana Pauker and Elena Ceausescu should be looked into. What is the relationship between
the promotion of women under the communist regime and authentic female emancipation? It is symptomatic that the women got the right to vote in 1946 that right became void of any genuine political agency because of the imposition of communist dictatorship.

There was also in communist Romania an “intellectual feminism”, exquisitely represented by the singular figure of Ecaterina Oproiu, a writer, film critic, and translator about whom very few Romanian feminists seem to remember. Ecaterina Oproiu translated from French a sociological feminist analysis of women’s plight, she published a collection of dialogues with women from all social milieus of Romanian society, a true panorama of Romanian women’s condition in the 1970’s, and she also contributed to a collection on “girlhood”, one of the very few explorations of this topic in Romanian. After 1990 Ecaterina Oproiu tried to benefit from the newly-acquired freedom of the press and she became the editor-in-chief of several women’s magazines, such as *Ea si el (She and He)* (1991-1998) and *Timpul femeilor in tara barbatilor (Women’s time in Men’s Country)* (1992-1998) where she strove to contrive a feminist discourse attractive, pleasant, easy-going, but not superficial, in order to limit gender illiteracy in Romania.

To a large extent, I think that East/Central European feminism works hard and succeeds in recuperating a deficit in knowledge about women’s condition. To a much smaller extent does it succeed in offering notions that might encompass the peculiarity of this cultural/political space. Sometimes, even if they exist, such theoretical attempts are not known well enough all over the region because of the language blockage. The “region” tends to translate a lot from English or French, and very little from the languages of the “region” into the language of the “region”.

Overwhelmingly, we are “Under Western Eyes” and like Third World women we bear the consequences of a certain voyeurism and narcissism of the Western perspective on our cultural/political region. On the other hand, we share, with the Western World, the Greek/Latin heritage, an extremely important and long Christian tradition, a hegemonic racial position through the way in which we are perceived by the Others, as Caucasians. Experiencing the ambiguous pleasures of belonging and not belonging, inside out, interstitial, overlapping, hegemonic sites when viewed from the poorest countries of the world, and marginal when viewed from inside fortress Europe, our identity has a fluidity which makes it difficult to grasp. The zeugmatic position is flexible enough, balanced enough, and rich enough to encompass it. In any case, I think that the position of East/Central European feminisms cannot be fully grasped without a positioning in relation to minority women’s feminisms and Third World women’s feminisms. The poet Rutivca Andrijasevic has been able to catch this ambiguity, in inspired verse, in her poem “Migration and Fortress Europe”:

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10 We should mention, in this respect, Mihaela Miroiu’s theorizing on “convenio” as the ethical space which pushes women towards an ethic of care, instead of justice, Marina Blagoeva’s efforts to read the matriarchal aspects of family life in former Yougoslavia as deceiving empowering efforts, belated gratification gestures through the ethics of sacrifice, or Branka Arsic’s attempt at reading the library as a female body in her novel “The Library” published in 1995. “Library is the scene of history. Library is, like the female body, a stage on which wars, victories and losses, loves, betrayals and deaths simultaneously take place. Library is like a female body, a stage on which all the languages are spoken and all the writing are written at the same time. Library is like the female body, a stage of eternally unsatisfied desires and irretrievably lost chances” (Jaggar and Young, *A Companion*, 135).

11 In this respect, special mention should be made of the efforts of Irina Zherebkina from Kharkhiv, Ukraine to publish studies on gender issues that circulate all over the post-Soviet space.

12 I am trying to find distinctions between the East/Central position and the Third World women as they are pinned down by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her most cited article.
I feel hated each time I go to the foreign police office
With all my papers
Keeping my head and my voice low
Hoping to get the permit of stay I desperately need
A piece of paper making me legal
[...]
They make me invisible
So I fight them
For visibility
And I resist.”

These belonging or not belonging tensions are even more difficult to bear as they are dependent upon bureaucratic decisions from a scopic Brussels (the headquarters of the European Union) which sometimes relies on assessments of certain aspects of social or political realities, and sometimes redesigns European spaces according to criteria not sufficiently clear from the theoretical point of view, but which show certain economic or political interests, or concerns. This dependence on a center, the tensions between integrative attractions in order to reach European simultaneity and nationalist protectionist rejections, the margin as a source of energy and inferiority complexes, the obsession of having to catch up because of a historically acquired deficit in Western type modernity, the imitation of the center, mimicry and its hybrid results, ambivalence and partial Orientalization, the neglect of the cultures, literatures, or languages of the region in favor of everything that comes from the prestigious centers of Western Europe or North America, all these peculiarities – which shape these cultures in complex and variable proportions – cannot be eschewed by the feminist discourse if it aims at being more than an imported discourse.

Also the public respect that gender issues need and deserve cannot be acquired without an internalization of this agenda by most of the population, the umbrella of the European Union can certainly help bringing these issues to public attention, but convincing legitimization can only come through political, cultural and social exercise of most of the general public. Otherwise, we shall “pass” for Europeans (members of the EU club), but our integration will only be an entrance into a panoptic time, a time imposed from the outside and derived from other durations.

Romanian feminism, to take it as a case study, must address the relationship between feminism and Western style modernity, which has always been a target, a focus for desires in Romanian culture concurrent with ethnocentric fears about losing our national specificities. One of the difficulties of implementing a feminist discourse in Romanian culture and society is the historical reality that modernity projects either were not allowed to grow “ripe” (the liberal project before World War II), or they minorized the whole society through dictatorial policies (the communist project). In the West, feminism was favored by the crisis of modernity. As Rosi Braidotti says: “In this sense, the crisis of modernity can be seen [...] as a disruption of the masculinist foundations of classical subjectivity. From a feminist perspective, such a
crisis is not only a positive event but also one that is rich in potential forms of empowerment for women.”\textsuperscript{16} In Romanian culture the modernist crisis did not encourage feminism to the same extent because modernity still does not affect all the layers of what we call “profound Romania”. The numerous rural communities which only have the means to practice sustenance agriculture make Romania look like a patch society where some people use the internet and the opportunities offered by globalization while others do not have access to minimal good infrastructure, electricity, adequate medical care, modern housing conditions. Romania’s citizens live alternative times and histories and the feminist discourse must take this into account in order to nuance its discourse.

Romanian feminism should also establish a dialogue with religion. Firstly, because after the collapse of the communist system, religion dominates the ethical discourse and many individuals consider that this is the only reliable guidance they can get in order to withstand and endure the avatars of transition. Secondly, religion, alongside public television, is the only cultural offer in the Romanian countryside. The priest is a moral authority and the emancipation of rural women from the traditional patterns which equate womanhood with sacrifice, delayed gratification and pollution must also take into consideration the important place of religion in these women’s lives.

The feminist discourse also has to take into account that certain slogans which functioned very well in the Western countries (equality, access to the labor force) do not have the same echo in post-Communist countries where the egalitarian ideology brutally wiped out the ideology of difference and where women were forced to work outside their home because everybody had to be a useful citizen. The private and the public space were constructed differently from the famous Habermasian algorithm. Women were not very eager to enter the public space, which was a space of oppression because of the imposed ideology. Hence their suspicion towards the hasty promotion of women in public positions in the 1970’s and 1980’s. The private space became a space of freedom where individuals could express themselves freely, men and women were solidarity families in this vs. the big Patriarch, the communist state. At the same time, within the private space traditional hierarchies were maintained. Woman was supposed to nurture and care for the family (children and husband), whereas man represented it publicly and was the most important provider.

East/Central European feminism must also consider the problems of minority women. This question is extremely important in the post-Soviet countries where, because of the dynamics of borders, the minority and majority groups have changed, the political ethnic actors acquired or lost hegemony in society. Romanian feminists must delineate the center and the margin in their own society, focus on the specific needs of the minority women. In this respect, I think that besides the problems of the women belonging to the so-called historical minorities, the women of the so-called new minorities should be included on the feminist agendas. I am referring to the increasing number of refugees, immigrants from Asia, or Africa. There is an increasing number of Muslims in Romania and the situation of these women, as well as the situation of local women who marry Muslim men, start veiling themselves and adopt at least exterior forms of Islam, if not more than that, the way in which they negotiate their identities should be an occasion for new feminist knowledge.

There is a growing interest for Roma people in Romanian scholarship, but Roma women’s problems seem somehow to disappear between concerns. Romanian policies for Roma emancipation and integration are not very keen on gender differences in Roma communities. Or one cannot talk about the integration of the Roma without the emancipation of the Roma women. The way Roma people socialize by marriage at a very young age prevents them from studying for a longer period of time. For many of these women the risk of acculturation seems much greater and more important than educational opportunities. Of course, it is up to the Roma people themselves to see the ways in which their own traditions negotiate with the ways of mainstream society and Roma women themselves, through their most visible representatives, such as Delia Grigore or Luminita Cioaba-Mihai, must express their own point of view. On the other hand, other feminists, outsiders to Roma community, must also be aware that feminists must tackle these women’s issues as well. There is some obstruction in dealing with this problem which has to do with a form of insidious racism, never openly admitted under the pretext that marginality and exclusion is inevitable with the Roma as some form of “natural” condition. Feminist scholarship must investigate the way in which class, gender and race overlap in marginalizing Roma men and women. This is even more difficult to do as there is a kind of consensus, not necessarily explicitly articulated, that race is not a problem in Romania. A comparison with the American feminist scholarship will be helpful in this respect, I think. In this line of thinking Rosi Braidotti noticed that: “although in North America feminism the race issue was present from the start, it took a long time for ethnicity and race to be recognized as a central variable in the definition of feminist subjectivity.” It seems that the same long time is necessary for Romanian feminism to surpass very deeply embedded prejudice.

Last but certainly not least, the misogynist spaces and discourses in Romanian culture must be approached. Feminist scholarship can offer a new and fresh perspective on Romanian culture.

As feminism implies social transformation and social transformation is always a collective issue, I cannot fail to mention that because of poverty, marginalization, lack of economic opportunities, trafficking in women and children is another serious problem of Romania. Feminist scholarship must approach it from the sociological, ethical, philosophical ground, and in connection with modern mobility and migrations.

In conclusion, taking all the advantages of its zeugmatic position, Romanian feminism, East/Central European feminisms must participate in the general traffic of ideas in their own voice, belonging, but also maintaining a space of their own for negotiations and theorizing.

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IMPERFECT VISION: FAILING TO SEE THE “DIFFERENCE” OF CENTRAL AND EAST EUROPEAN WOMEN

Elaine Weiner

Abstract

In this paper, I suggest that an “interpretive disjuncture” regarding the trajectory of “gender-in-(economic) transition” prevails between West and East whose most obvious division is spatial. Underlying such spatial referents are even wider incongruities in terms of theoretical dispositions and their consequent methodological proclivities. I outline the contentions and contestations about “gender-in-(economic) transition” and the respective underlying assumptions which mark the current terrain. More specifically, I explicate how “gender-in-(economic) transition’s” implicated engagement in a globalizing economic order of neoliberal conformity translates, for many Western scholars, into a post-socialist “development” course inimical to those of Third World women (and men) during the 1970s and 80s. I then describe how Central and East European social scientists discursively establish an interpretive distance from the Western rendition of “gender-in-(economic) transition” by invoking the historical, cultural and social “differences” of and among Central and East European women. I contend that their vocalization of “difference’s” salience analytically renders them proximate to scholars of the Third World and also Western women of color, but, in terms of their historical relationship to the West, experientially distant. I subsequently identify how standpoint theory and recent approaches to narrative and narrativity can transcend this rift. Finally, I highlight how such theoretical and methodological alternatives can contribute to a better understanding of women’s (and men’s) action[s] (and inaction[s]) and consequent empowerment and/or disempowerment.

Introduction

From transition’s outset, individuals, whether situated on the inside (e.g. citizens and scholars) or outside (e.g. observers and analysts) of post-socialist transitions, concurred that a bifurcation of post-socialist societies into “winners” and “losers” was an inevitability of transformation. However, the composition of these social groupings was a source of some dissent. Perhaps the most contentious site of debate has centered on the post-socialist socioeconomic status of women. This dispute fractures most apparently along geographic lines – i.e. West versus East. Western scholars, observing and analyzing the post-socialist circumstances of Central and East European women through a theoretical (and methodological) lens colored by several decades of Women in Development/Gender and Development (WID/GAD) research, tended towards pessimistic portentions and later confirmations.

1 Importantly, my intent here is not to essentialize “Western” and “Eastern.” I construe them as merely heuristic devices (i.e. ideal types) useful in illuminating differences. They are in no way absolute distinctions; both variabilities within and commonalities between them do prevail.
2 I am using this qualifier very loosely with “Western” as a referent for those located outside of (as well as largely to the West of) Central and Eastern Europe (inimical to the binary with which I set out at the start of this chapter) whose “knowledge” is observational rather than experiential (i.e. lived).
3 These constitute critical approaches to development from a feminist perspective. The use of these descriptors fluctuates somewhat (and with some inconsistency) due to the efforts of a number of academic researchers to redirect the attention from women “in isolation” to gender as a “social relationship” (Anne Marie Goetz, “Introduction: Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development,” in Anne Marie Goetz, ed., Getting Institutions Right for Women in Development (London: Zed Books, 1997), 1-30; Caroline Moser, “Adjustment from Below: Low-Income Women, Time and the Triple Role in Guayaquil, Equador,” in Haleh Afshar and Carolyne Dennis, eds., Women and Adjustment Policies in the Third World (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 3). There is further variability both between and within these two categories in terms of the feminism(s) of their
of Central and East European women’s losses most acutely on economic and social fronts. Meanwhile, many Central and East European social scientists countered with defiant optimism, highlighting the “self-determining” woman embracing new prospects in the transition from planned to market economy. This seemingly easy division, however, masks more complicated epistemic tensions.

With few exceptions, for these Western scholars (as well as many international organizations such as the International Labour Organization, UNICEF, and the United Nations), it was the nature of economic reform processes, designed largely in accordance with neoliberal dictates, which were (to be) the fundamental determinants of Central and East European women’s status, largely irrespective of historical, cultural and/or social context(s). In their estimations, a neoliberal development paradigm which had already attained wide currency in the Third World with a prevailing orthodoxy modified little since its institution in the 1980s rendered the post-socialist predicament of Central and East European women a familiar teleology. Neoliberalism, with its globalizing propensity, had trespassed the borders of yet another world, the Second World, mostly to the detriment of its female populace — its by-now predictable victim. In one of the most unequivocal articulations of this view, Maxine Molyneux wrote, “None of this is unexpected […] The pattern found elsewhere in the world has predictably enough appeared in the post-socialist states.” And, a reliance upon gender-disaggregated statistics (e.g. unemployment rates) and social policy reforms (e.g. reduction or elimination of subsidized public daycare) offered empirical confirmation of the parallels.

practitioners. WID scholars’ predominant feminist penchant is liberal; whereas, GAD researchers’ feminist tendencies are largely socialist.


6 I consider the gender agenda(s) of such organizations to be heavily informed by WID/GAD scholarship.


8 See, for example, A. Geske Dijkstra, “Women in Central and Eastern Europe: A Labour Market in Transition,” in A. Geske Dijkstra and Janneke Plantenga, eds., *Gender and Economics: A European Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 118-135; Einhorn, *Cinderella Goes to Market*; Barbara Einhorn and Swasti Mitter, “A Comparative Analysis of Women’s Industrial Participation During the Transition from Centrally Planned to Market Economies in East Central Europe” (Paper prepared for UN Division for the Advancement of Women: Eastern Europe Expert Group Meeting, Vienna, April 8-
Many Central and East European social scientists, however, rejected this structurally-determinist scenario, arguing instead that the status of Central and East European women was (and continues to be) contingent upon the contextual specificities (i.e. historical, cultural and social) in which reforms transpire(d). In their minds, Western scholars’ story of “loss” is anchored in erroneous assumptions. In an unadorned affirmation of this Central and East European sentiment, Czech sociologist Jaroslava Štastná declared: “Since 1989, Western social scientists have largely driven debate and have transferred – often uncritically – their concerns about and concepts of the role of gender in Western society into the context of Eastern and Central Europe.”

And therefore, upon these false foundations rests the categorical construction of a homogenized and victimized “Central and East European woman,” not unlike Chandra Mohanty’s “Third World woman.” Like Mohanty, Central and East European social scientists are, in effect, resisting a “mode of appropriation and codification of ‘scholarship’ and ‘knowledge’[…s]” of Western origin about Central and East European women. While Central and East European social scientists have offered limited empirical evidence to-date to buttress their claims, their criticism of this body of Western scholarship raises the question as to whether “gender in (economic) transition” is more complex and multi-dimensional than such Western interpretations currently suggest. Redressing these Western interpretive faults lies not only in a revision of their theoretical suppositions, but also, albeit implicitly intimated by Central and East European social scientists, of their methodologies. In both respects, what Central and East European social scientists have imagined to be the


12 Substantiation has frequently taken the form of anecdotes or personal impressions.
alternatives – theoretically and methodologically – are not wholly novel. Although the parallels are largely unacknowledged and perhaps even unrecognized, their invocation finds strong resonance with a burgeoning approach among researchers, many non-Western (frequently labeled “post-colonial”), in which they draw upon women’s subjectivities in order to reveal forms of both gendered exploitation and empowerment, mediated by historical, cultural and social specificities, incurred in the process of economic change.

Essentially, an interpretive disjuncture regarding the trajectory of “gender in (economic) transition” prevails between Western and Central and East European social scientists whose most obvious division is spatial. Underlying such spatial referents are even wider incongruities in terms of theoretical dispositions and their consequent methodological proclivities. This, I believe, is an invocation, if not an inspiration, to (re)consider, or more accurately to (re)contextualize “gender in (economic) transition” – historically, culturally and socially – in order to ascertain whether alternatives to this singular story of loss, with a plot of WID/GAD predisposition, exist. Such an undertaking impels a refocusing of both theoretical and methodological starting points of inquiry, shifting, in effect, from structures (i.e. economic) to human agency (configured by historical and cultural legacies and social localities) and consequently, from a reliance upon objective (i.e. positivist) to subjective (i.e. interpretivist) epistemological frameworks.

Only very recently has there been any concerted effort towards this end, most especially evinced by Susan Gal and Gail Kligman’s edited collection titled, *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism*, published in 2000. Although guided by a common set of conceptual assumptions, this book is a bridge of many sorts. With contributors from both West and East and the practice of comparative (i.e. historically, culturally, and socially), interdisciplinary and methodologically-diverse approaches, the overarching task of the volume is a “sketch [of] how East Central Europe’s interactions with other polities and economies, along with continuities and paradoxes from the past, produced patterned, if historically particular results” with gender at their analytic center and with a particular focus upon the interactive dynamisms of “discourses, institutional practices, and subjectivities.”

In my own intervention into the discord between West and East surrounding “gender in (economic) transition,” I follow Gal and Kligman’s lead in theoretically and methodologically re-positioning inquiry about “gender in transition.” I draw particularly upon recent approaches to narrative and narrativity as a means of theoretical and methodological reconciliation between West and East, allowing not only for an account of human action, but also its “temporal, relational, and cultural, as well as institutional, material, and macro-structural” interconnectedness. Unlike the majority of analyses in *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism*, however, whose starting points lay in overtly-gendered discourses (e.g. reproductive rights, media representations of femininity) and institutional practices, only later (and sometimes not at all) arriving at their “reproduction” in the

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13 “…all reflect the view that looking at post-socialism from the perspective of gender relations is important because it promises to clarify the means by which changes are occurring in politics and economics as broadly understood” (Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *Reproducing Gender: Politics, Publics, and Everyday Life after Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5).


form of men’s and women’s subjectivities, I began with (women’s) subjectivities and from there extrapolated their “reproductive” contingencies (e.g. institutional) – *some of which are not so obviously gendered*.

Appreciating their capacities to impart new understandings about “gender in (economic) transition” is, however, best founded not only upon a clear mapping of the contentions and contestations about “gender in (economic) transition,” but perhaps even more importantly, the respective underlying assumptions which mark the current terrain. Towards this end, in this paper, I explicate how “gender in (economic) transition”’s implicated engagement in a globalizing economic order of neoliberal conformity translates, for Western scholars, into a post-socialist “development” course inimical to those of Third World women (and men) during the 1970s and 80s. I then describe how Central and East European social scientists discursively establish an interpretive distance from the Western rendition of “gender in (economic) transition” by invoking the historical, cultural and social “differences” of and among Central and East European women. Paradoxically, however, I suggest that their vocalization of “difference’s” salience analytically renders them proximate to scholars of the Third World and also Western women of color, but, in terms of their historical relationship to the West, experientially distant. Utilizing standpoint theory and recent approaches to narratives and narrativity in an inquiry centered on the case of Czech women, I briefly describe how Western scholars’ single story can be (and is) theoretically transcended, by making visible the contingencies, complexities and contradictions inherent in the post-socialist experiences and identities of two groups of Czech women situated at socioeconomic extremes – managers and factory workers.

(Gender in) Economic Transition’s Global Referents

*Motto:*

> The construction of a global market economy according to the currently dominant neo-liberal paradigm is characterized by a dual process of marketization and the withdrawal or contraction of the state sector. The market is posited as the sole and sufficient regulator of economic and social development. (Barbara Einhorn in *Women and Market Societies: Crisis and Opportunity* [my emphasis])

Although Central and East European transitions are without precedent, many have embraced a postulated linear teleology of transition – e.g. from socialism to democracy and capitalism – in which “a fundamental political and economic distinction between what was and what is to come” is assumed. In this way, seemingly-knowable outcomes are presupposed with the particularities of their geneses seen as largely superfluous. This evolutionary thinking has undergirded much of transitology and indeed, much of the Western scholarship on “gender in (economic) transition” manifests the same propensity. Like many transitologists, they sought to locate the global referents of Central and East European post-socialist


“developments.” They found their global analogy in a mode of economic transformation variously referred to as “structural adjustment,” “economic restructuring,” and more recently, “marketization” or “market liberalization” compelled by the displacement, in the mid-1970s, of state dirigism (also known as Keynesianism) and the institution of its long-standing opponent, a non-interventionist paradigm of economic development favoring market self-regulation and a minimalist welfare state, known as neoliberalism. Plainly articulating this sensibility, Moghadam writes, “and now, restructuring has encompassed the former state socialist countries as well” [my emphasis].

Parallel Practices: Gender in (Economic) Transition and Women in Development (WID)/Gender and Development (GAD)

Motto:

…the creation of a global market economy affects women in their different locations in similar ways,

(Einhorn [my emphasis])

Western scholars interested particularly in the gendered implications of economic liberalization in the post-socialist context further narrowed their sights, drawing their anticipations and inferences regarding the gendered effects of Central and East European transitions from the by-now (i.e. early 1990s) substantial body of WID/GAD research now spanning over three decades, highlighting the consequences of development (or “modernization”) for women in developing countries, most especially in Latin America and Africa. The predominant emphasis of this body of literature generated largely by WID/GAD researchers is on the harmful social impacts of the reigning neoliberal model of economic reform, particularly on women. Where proponents of a neoliberal reform model envisioned macro-economic enablement, WID/GAD researchers claimed witness to its gendered disablements.

For WID/GAD researchers, the encounter of Third World women with a neoliberal prescription for economic practice designed to shift economic and social responsibilities from states to individuals rendered Third World women casualties of an internationally-sanctioned, standardized approach to remaking the economy/state dynamic. Interestingly, however, while criticizing the hegemony of a neoliberal

20 WID scholarship emerged in the early 1970s.
21 Although the social consequences of economic restructuring may be felt by men as well as women, many WID/GAD researchers deem women to “confront change and crisis from a position of structural disadvantage” and therefore, neoliberal policies have “the effect of further undermining their already tenuous hold on resources” (Molyneux, “Women’s Rights”, 293).
paradigm, WID/GAD researchers generated their own hegemony in the shape of repeated claims of its outcome – i.e. Third World women’s victimization.

In a departure from traditional WID/GAD approaches and a response to calls by Third World women for greater sensitivity to their “interests and identities,” some scholars have challenged this story as reductionist, putting forth instead, a more cautious, contextually-sensitive version of opportunity/agency embedded within or existing alongside crisis/constraint/victimization with a recognition of the subjectivity intrinsic to the determination of an outcome’s value – i.e. as obstacle or opportunity. 23 Although this interactionist alternative to the conventional WID/GAD additive scenario avails, it far from prevails. Consequently, when Western scholars sought to determine the direction of “gender in transition,” they typically looked to WID/GAD scholarship’s familiar and well-worn course:

Figure 1.1: Traditional WID/GAD Model of Relationship between Neoliberal-type Economic Reform and Gender (in the Third World)

the practice of economic restructuring in accordance with a neoliberal paradigm

(Third World) women

= victimization/loss.

Their only qualifier to the equation was the specificity of women:

Figure 1.2: Traditional WID/GAD Model of Relationship between Neoliberal-type Economic Reform and Gender (in Central and Eastern Europe)

the practice of economic restructuring in accordance with a neoliberal paradigm

(Central and East European) women

= victimization/loss.

However, their objectification, i.e. as women, rendered this modification of little (to no) significance. Meanwhile, cause(s) and effect(s) extended across, while at the same time largely irrespective of, space and time.

Hegemonic Homogenization: The “Central and East European Woman”

Motto:
…literature and public discussion…suggest that a thorough and systemic analysis of the effect of the transitional process on gender relations has not yet occurred in public or academic circles. (Czech sociologist Jaroslava Štast’ ná in the journal Transitions: Events and Issues in the former Soviet Union and East-Central and Southeastern Europe [my emphasis])24

While for Western scholars a scenario of victimization and loss for Central and East European women in the economic transition was expected and easily apparent, this was not a depiction with which Central and East European social scientists readily concurred. For instance, at a 1991 United Nations Regional Seminar on “The Impact of Economic and Political Reform on the Status of Women in Eastern Europe,” Hungarian researcher Maria Lado declared:

The pessimistic views on women’s prospects were based on historical and economic projections of situations completely unlike the current transition from a centrally planned economy to a market one…it is an over simplification to assume that the changes would have only a negative impact on the lives and economic activities of women” [my emphasis].25

In the 1993 edited collection, Gender and Post-Communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Czech philosopher, Hana Havelková described a “diagnosis” of East European women’s post-socialist situation relying upon Western women’s “theoretical and practical experience” as “lead[ing] to an underestimating of the specific historical experience of women in Eastern Europe.”26 In the same compilation, Hungarian sociologist Olga Tóth rebuked Western scholars for their “pity” and “trembling compassion” stemming from their “distortions” or misunderstandings about Central and East European women’s contemporary realities.27 In a 1994 conference paper titled, “The Gender Consequences of Political and Economic Reform,” Czech sociologist Jirina Šiklová asserted:

From the point of view of Western social scientists, the post communist block appears as an undifferentiated whole. But it is not homogenous. There always were and there still are big differences between the countries which are now collected under the term post communist. The economic and political situations in these states differ

In essential ways, depending on the traditions and on the conditions of the country before World War II (1939) on how closely and for how long the country was economically and politically tied to the former Soviet Union, and on the ethnic and religious make-up of the country, both past and present.\textsuperscript{28}

In 1995, Štast’ná, inverting Western assumptions, proposed that “In the Czech Republic, women may have gained more than they lost through the emergence of a market economy.”\textsuperscript{29} In a later work, Hana Havelková reiterated her earlier emphasis on the salience of history, contending that “A new place for women will bear much of the legacy of the past, thus making the situation of Czech women and gender relations in Czech society retain some very specific and unique features….this is true of all the post-communist countries.”\textsuperscript{30} In a 1998 issue of Transitions: Changes in Post-Communist Societies devoted to “talking about men and women,” Šiklová, also restating earlier claims, espoused that “Many Western feminists tend to misinterpret the realities and opportunities [of women] in Eastern Europe,” later adding “post-communist countries were homogenized by socialism for some time but they still differ profoundly from one another.”\textsuperscript{31}

A Single Story or Several?

In a sense, for Central and East European social scientists, the critical transgression of Western scholars lay in their endeavors to transport and transplant a non-native plant species to Central and East Europe and to further anticipate its sustainability, never recognizing its probable perishability due to Central and Eastern Europe’s unfamiliar soil. Familiar with the cultivation of gender inequality in the Third World, such Western scholars assumed a similar terrain in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the perceptions of Central and East European social scientists, Western scholars, layered (and continue to layer) false universalizations about “women’s experience” one atop the other: globally, by aligning the experiences of Third World and Central and East European women; regionally, by failing to differentiate (e.g. historically, culturally) between the women of Central and East European nations; and locally, by disregarding the socially-disparate locations (e.g. class, ethnicity) of Central and East European women. Although the “difference(s)” of Central and East European women intimate a uniqueness, the calls for their notice are not, however, original. This effort to draw attention to the multiplicity of Central and East European women’s “difference(s)” on global, regional, and local fronts resonates with two bodies of feminist scholarship from: one, Western women of color, particularly African-American\textsuperscript{32}; and two, non-Western, Third World scholars, often referred to as

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Jirina Šiklová, “The Gender Consequences of Political and Economic Reform” (Paper prepared for Social Science Research Council Conference The Social Bases of Liberalization, Warsaw, Poland, September 23-25, 1994), 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Štast’ná, “New Opportunities,” 26.
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Hana Havelková, “Abstract Citizenship? Women and Power in the Czech Republic,” Social Politics (Summer/Fall 1996): 258.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} See, for example, Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (New York: Routledge, 1990); bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to
“post-colonial.”

Both charge Western scholars, especially those of feminist persuasion, with failing to give voice to the complexities of women’s experiences as configured by historical, cultural and social specificities resulting in the hegemonic monoliths, “Women of color” and “Third World women.”

Significantly, however, while the “West” is implicated as colonizer in/of the past of “Women of color” and “Third World women,” Western scholars in the Central and East European context cannot so easily lay such imperialist claims through which they might (and in the case of “Women of color” and “Third World women” do) co-opt their past – themselves mired in it. For “Women of color” and “Third World women,” their past, albeit misunderstood by many First World scholars, manifests an entanglement with an imperialist West that is not mirrored in the forty year history of Central and East European women under state socialism. In this way, the “difference” of Central and East European women achieves perhaps, an even greater distance as Western scholars stood outside, with little or no access to, Central and East European women’s stream of history.

Nonetheless, for “Women of color,” “Third World women” scholars and Central and East European social scientists, contextualizing women’s experiences would serve ultimately to destabilize Western scholar imposed constructs such as omnipresent oppression and its passive object, the victimized woman, revealing instead, localized meanings of oppression and the active woman negotiating economic change. As I discussed earlier, there have been some attempts on the part of WID/GAD researchers to respond to the appeals of “Third World women” scholars to resist the “discursive colonization” by Western scholars of the lives of Third World women and to capture the “constitutive complexities” of their lifeworlds. However, this approach has remained marginal to a great extent because it obliges its practitioners to surrender their teleologic assumptions and to develop contextual proficiency. Albeit unnamed by Central and East European social scientists, it is this reframe that, I believe, provides a guide to substantiating their supposition of several stories rather than a singular story.

Visibility

Following, in part, the approach of this latter group of WID/GAD scholars, I consider “gender in (economic) transition” by starting from the micro-level, i.e. women and moving to the macro-level, i.e. economy rather than vice-versa, in effect, redefining women as economic transition’s subject in lieu of its object. Warranted by this theoretical shift is also a methodological divergence from heavily quantifiable benchmarks with predetermined meanings established by Western scholars of

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34 Women of color have been (and continue to be) more inclined to accentuate the social, while post-colonial feminist scholars have tended to place greater emphasis on the historical and cultural.

WID/GAD proclivity to a reliance upon qualitative assessments which rest upon localized understandings of women’s experience. In this way, I contemplate whether and how this Western equation of loss holds constant across global, regional, and local boundaries when the terms of its calculation are reformulated.

Towards the contextual embedding of “gender in (economic) transition” and in consideration of the prominence of Czech feminist scholars in the region’s discourse of difference, I take up the case of Czech women between 35 and 55 years of age – a generation faced with adapting to new economic conditions over the course of their working lives. In an attempt to further consider the social variability of experience, I focus upon women – managers and factory workers – who share an industrial reality as employees of the Czech Republic’s largest industry, i.e. manufacturing, both past and present, but whose socioeconomic circumstances in the post-socialist era are widely divergent. Against this interactive backdrop of class and gender, I imagine the Czech Republic’s greatest dramas of “gender in (economic) transition” playing out as triumph and tragedy, respectively. Managers, viewed as the major players in the post-socialist pursuit of enterprise profitability, stand to reap both the symbolic and material gains – transition’s winnings. As female managers, their accomplishment signifies an obstacle overcome. In sharp contrast, workers, socialism’s “official ‘working class’ of ostensibly ‘workers’ states’” have much to lose in terms of prestige and privilege (e.g. guaranteed employment); and, to be a female factory worker means to have the losses only intensified.

Starting Points, Standpoints, Epistemologies, and Ontologies

My own recent work is theoretically and methodologically grounded in both feminist standpoint theory which advocates utilizing women’s experience as the starting point of inquiry as well as in recent interpretations of narrative and narrativity as “concepts of social epistemology and social ontology.” Importantly,

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36 Notably, despite a considerable body of scholarship attesting to the interplay of social differences, considerations of gender and class in the context of post-socialist transitions have remained separate topics of inquiry – each anomalous to the other.


while in the employing of a standpoint approach is consistent with some WID/GAD research, the incorporation of contemporary approaches to narrative and narrativity constitute a directional departure. Most obviously, they complicate the causal dynamic which underlies virtually all WID/GAD scholarship, regardless of theoretical or methodological inclination, in which the practice of economic restructuring in accordance with neoliberal dictates, although for some WID/GAD researchers contextually-mediated, shapes women’s (and men’s) experiences and concomitantly, identities. While some WID/GAD researchers implicate the historical, cultural and/or social context of women’s experiences with economic change, contemporary approaches to narrative and narrativity assume that “social life is itself *storied,*” suggesting that the contingencies are even more complex and indirect as history and culture are constructed and reconstructed in narrative interstices of a public nature. Effectively, history and culture are narratively rendered and in this form *inform* women’s experiences and identities, thus transforming (augmenting) the causal connections assumed by WID/GAD researchers. This combination of approaches is, I suggest, especially useful in terms of its capacity to broaden understandings about the relationship between gender and economic transformation by making visible both the matrix of social relations in which individuals are embedded and how they come to make sense of their social world in narrative form – conjoining “later outcomes to earlier events…through chains of causality” – appropriating public logic(s) in the formulation of personal ones. The consequence, I believe, is a more comprehensive portrayal of women’s experiences.

*Towards a More Holistic View*

In my own work, I began by listening to Czech female managers and factory workers, individually, and at times in groups, narrate their experiences and understandings of economic transformation (and the lack thereof) in their work and family lives in the decade since socialism’s collapse. Immediately evident are the dramatic disparities in Czech female managers’ and factory workers’ constellations of post-socialist experience and identity. In their broadest deviation, Czech female managers recount their rise to the top, driven by individual instrumental rationality, becoming part of the “new elite.” Czech female factory workers, inversely, describe their fall to the bottom, doomed by their socialist dysfunctionality, becoming part of the “new poor.” Perhaps, the most intriguing facet of these two stories is, however, the site of their convergence – i.e. a mutual conviction that the socialist past is/was the source of disempowerment/oppression and a belief in the capitalist present and future as the means of empowerment/liberation. It is this interpretive conjuncture which narrows the gap between the interests and identities of Czech female managers and factory workers, but concomitantly works to distance them from their Third World relations. For women of the Third World, the market – of a neoliberal prescription – is an confluence of oppression and liberation. And therefore, identification as “victims” and/or “losers” is an incongruity, they cannot *but* be “winners” and “survivors,” respectively.

41 Somers and Gibson, “Reclaiming,” 38.
To some extent, my engagement with “gender in (economic) transition” shares the preoccupations of Western scholars, whether interested in WID/GAD or “gender in (economic) transition,” with understanding the consequences of economic liberalization for women and locating their experiences on axis of empowerment/disempowerment. And indeed, the views from below – localized and subjective – complicate the singular and now seemingly simplistic story told by Western scholars about “gender in (economic) transition.” It is, however, in the construction of their life’s logic – the narrativity of their narratives – that the post-socialist particularity of their difference becomes apparent and in a broader sense, reveals the salience not only of the real workings of economic transition, but the power of it rhetorical referents in determining experiences and identities.

I argue that the narratives of Czech female managers and factory workers are largely appropriations of a hegemonic narrative, prevailing in the public discourse, of particular temporal and spatial constitution. Born of possibilities distinctly post-socialist, it is a narrative about the market in which socialism and capitalism are locked in a rigid set of logical and normative oppositions (e.g. oppression versus liberation). Of Czech construction, it is of careful craft in its cultural connotations. Drawing upon this larger narrative frame, Czech female managers’ and factory workers’ narratives assume the same overall causal emplottment – i.e. capitalism renders liberation.

I contend that the individual assimilation of this reigning narrative is, however, an integrative accomplishment involving the reconciliation of said narrative with the constitutive social forces of one’s social world. And thus, two very different articulations of liberation are the outcome of Czech female managers’ and factory workers’ anchoring of their lived realities in a market narrative.

Significantly, however, these narratively-rendered portraits of post-socialist experience (and identity) suggest that the mobilization of power, and its demobilization, are tied not only to the workings of the realities of economic reform, but also, and arguably even more critically, to its historically- and culturally-refracted rhetorical envisioning. Effectively, individuals’ consciousness and its lived consequences (e.g. human agency) are inextricable from the broader historical, cultural and social context (realized in practical and rhetorical terms) in which they are embedded. It is this conditionality which complicates the verifiability of their social realities. It is this difficulty which, I surmise, is ultimately the true challenge, theoretically and practically, to women of the West and the East (and certainly more globally) in their abilities to fully engage one another and to realize a more equitable world. The status of Central and East European women, as measured by various indicators, have changed since socialism’s demise in ways more often inauspicious than not, but where Western scholars appear to have missed the mark is in understanding their variable meanings (i.e. interpretive frames) in the post-socialist world. The “truth” of social reality is not mirrored exclusively in experience, rather it

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43 As Somers describes, “A metanarrative is a cultural form that has been epistemologically naturalized by conjoining narrative with social naturalism” (Somers, “The Privatization,” 130).
44 Somers, “The Narrative Constitution.”
45 Here I am referring to the abilities of individuals to think in (social) categorical terms (e.g. as “women”) and therefore, to conceptualize themselves as having common interests based upon shared social location(s); and thus, counter to the interests of those of disparate social localities.
lies somewhere in the interstices of experiences and discourse(s)\(^{46}\) whose full apprehension necessitates a migration in which one shifts from being a part of (inside) to apart from (outside) – able to see the reflection (and beyond it) in the glass.

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\(^{46}\) My thinking here is guided, in part, by post-structural feminist scholars such as Joan Scott who contend that experience should not become the “authoritative (because seen or felt) evidence that grounds what is known, but rather what we seek to explain…” (Joan Scott, “Experience;” in Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (London: Routledge, 1991), 22-40).


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LIMITED RELEVANCE.
WHAT FEMINISTS CAN LEARN FROM THE EASTERN EXPERIENCE

Anca Gheaus

Abstract

The ethics of care, and especially the way in which it relates to theories of justice, has been one of the major streams in feminist ethics and political theory over the last decades. While the initial focus was on the conflicts between care and justice, recent theories argue in favor of understanding justice and care as complementary, and not opposing values.

The present paper reconstructs the reasoning behind (Western) feminist arguments that present justice and care as harmonious values. While I believe this reasoning is valid, and indeed very relevant for the ‘Western’ – political realities, I also explore the question why its conclusions can not be easily embraced by ‘us’ in the ‘East’. I argue that, due to the frail and ever-changing nature of Romania’s public institutions, people often find themselves in situations that force them to choose between reasons of care and reasons of justice.

Introduction

This paper looks at the question of how political theory recently produced by Western feminists is relevant for an Eastern European society like the Romanian one. More specifically, I shall focus on the issue of care and its relationship with justice, an issue which has been at the core of much ethical and political debate for a long time.

In the past years several feminist authors have brought persuasive arguments in favor of an understanding of justice that includes care as one of the primary goods that any community has the duty to distribute fairly among its members. Our institutions – the argument goes – should be shaped so that the burden of care-taking is not left exclusively on the shoulders of women, as it traditionally was, either as unpaid domestic work or as low-paid work on the market.

Some of the institutions advocated by Western feminists – such as day-care for children, free public education and state-organized and subsidized health services - did exist in communist Romania and some of them survived the changes of the past fifteen years. At a first glance, it would seem that we are in a better position to harmonize justice and care at the institutional level. However, I shall argue that, due to the institutional failure and the pervasiveness of informal unjust practices, people in contemporary Romania often face genuine dilemmas between care and justice. The case study I propose as an example of such a conflict is the practice of private tuition (in Romanian: ‘meditatii’) which runs parallel to the official educational process.

Integrating care and justice: ‘Western’ theory

When the ethics of care started to take shape a few decades ago, care was generally seen as a value – or a set of values - opposed to justice. Care, presented by some as a feminist value and by others as a merely feminine one, is associated with compassion, emotional involvement, interest in one’s particular circumstances and responsiveness

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1 I am thinking mainly of feminists from Great Britain and the United States.
to concrete needs. The values traditionally associated with justice - like impartiality, equality of resources and opportunity, fairness and focus on institutional structure - seemed to contradict the partiality of care and its emphasis on private relationships. Justice requires us to treat everybody according to the same standards, to treat friends in the same way as strangers, while an ethics of care praises mostly those acts done out of love and commitment for those who are near and dear. The main danger associated with care was the exclusion of those who do not belong to the circle of one’s close family or friends, and so entailing parochialism and corruption – both being deeply unjust practices. How could the two values be reconciled, then? At best, the ethics of care was seen by mainstream political philosophers as fit for the realm of the private sphere while justice was supposed to shape the public domain of institutional and political life².

One of the important achievements of the long-lasting debate around the relationship between care and justice was the emerging agreement that both values are important in the public as well as in the private sphere, and that what we may want is a theory capable of integrating them, by placing the emphasis on the way in which they complement each other rather than on the sources of their conflict. Firstly, care need not be seen as opposing justice, because one of the requirements of an ethics of care properly understood is care for strangers³. This type of care can supply the same goods that an ethics of justice does: the recognition of the strangers’ needs and interests and, consequently, moral and political commitment to their welfare.

Secondly, and maybe more important, feminists started to pay close attention to care as a necessary condition for a just society. They argued that one cannot hope to have the good-enough citizens needed to support a just society unless such citizens have first been nurtured – which is raised, educated and socialized – in caring families⁴. Moreover, since all of us go, at times, through periods of partial or total dependency (during illness, pregnancy, frail old age) and some lead their entire lives as dependents (like people with severe disabilities) the care of some individuals is needed in order to support any social structure⁵. The more attention is paid to care as a precondition for social life, the more it becomes obvious that care is a primary social good, whose distribution is a matter of justice.

In the remaining of the present section I shall present the argument – in a nutshell – made by two feminist philosophers concerning the need to include care among the things we have to distribute justly. Both philosophers come from the ‘West’ and their writings reflect the political experience of their respective countries: one of them, Diemut Bubeck, is of German origins (but has spent a considerable amount of time in England) while the second, Eva Feder Kittay, is a US citizen.

The structure of the argument, which is common to Bubeck and Kittay, is the following:

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1. Justice requires a fair distribution of the burdens and benefits of social life.  
2. Care is a necessary ingredient for the survival of any political community – we cannot do without it (i.e. someone has to do it).  
3. Care is, to some extent, a burden – i.e. it represents one of the costs of social life.  
4. Therefore we need to achieve a just distribution of care-giving in society.  
5. Care has traditionally been the responsibility of women - both in the household and on the market (the caring occupations are feminized).  
6. As both Bubeck and Joan Tronto convincingly argued, care work has traditionally been given very little social recognition. As a form of domestic work it is unpaid and looked down on as not ‘proper work’. As a form of work on the market, care is under-paid.  
7. Therefore, the present structures of care-giving are over-burdening women, who receive neither economic recognition, nor social respect for their care.  
8. Therefore, we have to change the present structures of care-giving to make sure everyone is doing her/his fair share of caring.

The common conclusion reached independently by Bubeck and Kittay leads them to suggest ways of redistributing care in a just way. Here the two depart; Bubeck presents care as a citizen’s duty and her proposal is to create a state-run civil service of care-giving, which would be similar to, or even replace, the military service. This would mean that each citizen of a given community works for a couple of years – typically in one’s youth – as a care-taker in one of the institutions which provide care (hospitals, day-care centers, homes for the elderly and so on).

In turn, Kittay proposes to include care on the list of Rawlsian primary goods, which would provide a solid justificatory basis for a state-run welfare system. By supporting individual care-takers, paid or unpaid, through economic incentives, a political community would give due recognition both to care and to those people who most often provide it.

In Bubeck’s, as well as in Kittay’s theory care is a matter of justice and therefore its management is a question of public interest. Far from being at odds, the values of justice and care need each other and therefore the ethics of care and the ethics of justice are construed as complementary.

The conflict between care and justice: ‘Eastern’ experience

With this theoretical framework in mind, let us now briefly consider the situation in Romania. At a first glance, there are at least two reasons to think that justice and care have a chance to work successfully together in Romania.

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Firstly, we inherited from the communist regime a massive welfare state whose institutions were supposed to do the job of redistributing care in society, providing free education, health services, support for the elderly and for parents of small children on a large scale.

Secondly, in a society whose political order has undergone deep transformations and whose institutions are re-shaped and re-defined, ideally there should be ample opportunity for advocating an understanding of justice compatible with care. If care and justice are indeed politically complementary values, this may be the moment for us – feminists in the East - to make a public statement about the need they have for each other.

Unlike the United States, for example, we did not inherit a libertarian public understanding of justice that reserves a minimal role for the state. And, unlike most countries in Western Europe, we - in the East - do not have to build from scratch the infrastructure needed to support a welfare system. Or so it seems.

All this would probably be good news for Romanian feminists, who may think they do not need to fight the same battles as their colleagues in the West in order to dislocate a market-oriented, feminist-unfriendly understanding of justice. However, the situation is not as simple as it may look at the above-mentioned first glance and it is far more sobering. In nowadays Romania, both feminists and non-feminists have good reasons to mistrust the state and its institutions. I shall not discuss here why the welfare state, as we inherited it from the communist regime, is rather contrary to the interests of most women. This is a big and complex subject that has started to receive due attention in scholarly literature.  

The point I want to make is a much more modest one – namely that in Romania the malfunctioning of inherited institutions, paired with our justifiably low trust in them, gives rise, in the very process of establishing just institutions, to many dilemmas between care and justice.

So why does the model advanced by Western feminists – of justice and care working in harmony - raise serious problems under the conditions of imperfect institutions? I shall argue by means of analyzing concrete situations, and I shall discuss only one example here, taken from the field of education: the private tuition system. By ‘the private tuition system’ I mean what in Romanian is called ‘meditatii’. It represents an informal practice, which took mass proportions from the eighties onwards, of sending one’s children to get extra educational training in addition to what they usually get at school. This training is offered by school teachers, and often by university professors, and it is mainly meant to help the pupil to pass the many exams one has to pass in the Romanian educational system in order to gain entry to high-school or to university.

There may, of course, be many justifications for the private tuition system: It offers access to some supplementary education, which nobody should, be in principle, prevented from getting. It provides an extra source of income to teachers who, under the current economic conditions, face serious economic hardship. It may even provide an opportunity to teachers to train their pedagogical skills, because it puts them in one-to-one teaching situations (or in small-groups arrangements) which are so different from – and pedagogically so much better than - the mass education one finds in most schools. However, the arguments against it seem to be even stronger: it perpetuates a vitiated system of evaluation in education (based on the candidate’s

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ability to memorize unnecessary information), it distorts the relationship between the pupil and the private teacher, it decreases the quality of teaching in schools, it introduces a generalized attitude of duplicity (both pupils and teachers know that the ‘real stuff’ is what goes on in the private tuition context, rather than in school)\(^\text{10}\). But, most important, it is deeply unjust, both procedurally (because it imposes a double standard of examination, where one has to know the subjects studied in school as well as what is provided in terms of ‘clues’ via the private tuition) and substantially (because those who do not have the means to pay for it are excluded). To draw the line, the main argument against this informal practice comes from justice: it represents a serious attack on the ideal of equal chances which officially informs the educational policies in Romania.

But what should a parent whose child is about to face important exams do? No matter how evil the system is judged to be, one can argue that there is always a reason of care – maybe even a duty of care – which justifies any given parent, who has the means, to provide his or her child with the extra-training. On the other hand, by sending one’s children through the private tuition system one encourages, and to some extent legitimizes it, thus contributing to the exclusion of those who cannot or do not want to be part of it.

How would a person whose ethics is informed by care deal with this situation? She would probably be strongly inclined to put up with the constraints of the given system and send her child to private tuition. How would someone respond who has at heart both the value of care and the value of distributive justice (as Bubeck and Kittay are)? To start with, such a person may be in a better position to recognize the situation as a genuine dilemma. Then, depending on whether the balance tips rather towards a commitment to justice or rather towards a caring commitment to the welfare of the child, she would either chose to boycott the system of private tuition or not. But, no matter what she chooses in the end, she would feel a deep uneasiness about her choice, to the extent to which she identifies each possible course of action as a violation of one of the two values.

This case of a moral dilemma we face between promoting justice or action on care is unfortunately not singular. There are many other situations, both public and private, and often on the borderline between the public and the private, when we have to decide whether we want to reinforce the vicious cycle of unjust practices. Each time we decide to bribe our way within the health system, for the sake of a friend’s life, or each time one accepts the unwritten and unjust rules of, say, an educational institution for the sake of one’s students – and the stream of examples may go on flowing – people have to decide between limiting the chances to bring about justice and compromising the needs of those they care for.

Life under the conditions of extremely frail institutions and/or pervasive unjust practices is more likely to prompt dilemmatic situations than life under the conditions of working institutions or under institutions which are highly responsive to the citizens’ political will and therefore open to criticism and change. Recent, as well as not so recent, literature on moral dilemmas sometimes advances the idea that one way to measure moral and political progress is by assessing how good institutions are at precluding the necessity of dramatic individual choices of this kind. Authors as

\(^{10}\) For the last three points, see Vlad Alexandrescu, Adrian-Paul Iliescu and Alexandra Niculescu, “Reforma ca ruptura radicala,” in *Educatia si Invatamântul – orizont 2015* (Bucuresti: Corint 2000), 22-49.
different from each other as Ruth Marcus\textsuperscript{11} and Martha Nussbaum\textsuperscript{12} argue, following Hegel, that, when faced with dilemmas, the rational response is to think how one can change the rules and institutions of one’s society so that such dilemmas will be made impossible in the future.

The present paper certainly does not want to discard this suggestion; on the contrary, I believe that a sustained attempt to reform the educational system – for the discussed example – is the only way of avoiding the dilemma sketched above. A society whose institutions do not allow for the appearance of informal and unjust practices will always function as a regulative ideal. However, I want to draw attention to the limits of this approach and to raise the subsequent issue of the implications for the justice versus care debate. As Seyla Benhabib\textsuperscript{13} once noted, all ethical and political thinking is utopian – and this includes feminist thinking as well – because it aims to come up with ideal models of human interaction. This observation pertains to the political models proposed by Bubeck and Kittay in order to integrate care and justice politically. However, the further the reality is from the ideal model (and in many respects Eastern European societies are further from it than Western ones) the bigger the potential conflict between care and justice becomes.

What one decides to do in the end when facing a moral dilemma will, of course, also depend on reasons other than the moral ones and it may finally be the case that, faced with genuine dilemmas, the chosen course of action is a matter of personal decision, beyond the scope of moral criticism.

Conclusions

The main conclusion is that, for us in Romania, the price individuals have to pay in order to follow the requirements of justice is sometimes too high. Moreover, when people living under the constraints of highly imperfect institutions have to choose between boycotting deeply unjust practices – like in the case of the private tuition – and promoting the wellbeing of those who depend on them - in this case, their own children, the ethics of care occasionally collides with the requirements of justice.

Therefore, the old issue of care versus justice re-emerges, in the current political context in the East, as an issue of conflict rather than harmony between the two values. As long as a society’s institutions, although far from perfect, are nevertheless fairly reliable and responsive to people’s perceived needs, care and justice may indeed work together well, because institutional failure will be relatively quickly penalized and corrected. By contrast, in a society which does not allow for relatively quick institutional change we may have to live much longer with the conflict between the two. Under these conditions, much of the relevance of the Western theories about how care and justice can work together as political values may be limited to the political context within which they have been designed. Before we in the East reach the stage where political mechanisms are efficient instruments for shaping institutions which deal directly with care - such as the education or health systems – we may have to live with painful conflicts between the two.


\textsuperscript{12} Martha Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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Abstract

In this paper I give an overview of my ongoing dissertation project, in which I investigate discourses and co-operations of gender researchers from the USA, Austria, Czech Republic and Slovakia in the early 1990s. Gender studies are an international field of research that claims to be reflexive of differences and hierarchies. Debates and critiques about dominant discourses and privileged researchers have a long history: Black feminists or feminists from the South were amongst those who have criticized the hegemony of white western middleclass concepts. I want to analyze how differences and hierarchies are dealt with, when they come up in concrete co-operations between persons, who have been socialized in former opposing systems of the Cold war.

Debates and conflicts about “Western missionaries” and “conservative Eastern women” shaped some of these encounters, whereas others seemed to be harmonic and protagonists stressed their pleasure “to be of help” or “to be given useful knowledge.” But similar images of “Western experts,” considered to have more experience, resources and dominance, and “learning Easterners” said to lack all these, were inherent in all discourses. Generalized and dichotomic usage of the categories “Easterners” and “Westerners” could be seen in many publications of the early 90s. Sometimes they were addressed as most important difference, dominating over e.g. class, race, etc. But even though the terms “East” and “West” shaped the whole debate, they were hardly ever explicitly defined. Implicitly they carry a variety of meanings: belongings to different regimes, religions, “cultures” or historic empires are only some of the connotations. Besides, they refer to concepts of development (from “barbarism” to “civilization”) that were invented and connected with “Eastern” and “Western Europe” in the period of Enlightenment, but are powerful up to the present. Therefore I argue for a careful usage or even avoidance of these terms.

Issues of money, resources and power were important in these first meetings. The access to resources influenced the formation of new organizations, the exchange of information and the academic production of knowledge. Who is in the position to initiate conferences or publications, to suggest topics, to get funds, to give lectures, etc.? Which theories represent a “feminist canon”? Who can afford not knowing which concepts and publications? Who is considered as competent for theoretical analyses, who “illustrates” by talking about experiences? These were some of the questions many scholars asked.

But despite many problems and struggles that came along with these encounters, feminist border-crossers were important to challenge seemingly “natural facts” or clear positions about gender relations and gender politics on all sides. Without these confusing and sometimes even threatening confrontations, many new discourses and important initiatives would not have started.

Introduction

In this text I want to present parts of my dissertation, which I am currently working on. I start with the idea, aims, theoretical framework and main questions of my dissertation, continue with an outline of my empirical research and resume with the

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1 I use the terms “East” and “West” in quotation marks, because, on the one hand, they are used a lot in the literature in question, so I cannot neglect them, but, on the other hand, I am very skeptical of them and their usage: Even though they come out of geography, they do not refer to geographic locations, but rather to the belongings of former political blocks. This can, for example, be seen when Prague is considered as “East”, but Vienna as “West,” Romania and Bulgaria as “East,” but Greece as “West.” Moreover, they carry connotations that are far from neutral and therefore question unreflective usage. See Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).
first thesis, which I drew out of already analyzed publications, interviews, and observations.

1. Global Sisterhood in Question

During the research for my Master thesis, which I concentrated on Gender Studies and the perceptions of feminism in Slovakia, I came across the topic of “East” – “West” relations within Gender Studies. After the fall of the “Iron curtain” contacts, discussions and co-operation between activists and researchers from countries that belonged to the “capitalist” sphere of Europe (or the USA, Canada, etc.) and the former “socialist” or “communist” countries became possible without state control and restrictions. This chance was taken by a lot of scholars, and relatively many meetings took place, which were accompanied by discussions and publications that reflected and commented on these relations. This discourse seemed very interesting: on the one hand this meant that a scientific field reflected its own ways of functioning, on the other, these issues also affected my own work. By virtue of the fact that I am an Austrian who undertakes research in Slovakia, the “East” – “West” divide was inherent in my own research as well.

During my time in Slovakia, I was confronted with differences and presumptions of what it means to be an “Easterner” or a “Westerner,” that carried inequalities and implicated hierarchies of several kinds. Different models were in all our heads: my interview partners, my supervisors, my colleagues and I all had our images and expectations. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that instead of researching “the other” it would be more interesting to do research on “othering.”

As I was dealing with Slovakia and Czechoslovakia, I primarily came across articles and other publications by women from the Czech and Slovak Republics as well as those from the USA, Great Britain, Germany and Austria. My impression was that there were different kinds of approaches and ways of dealing with differences: The poles of these seem to have been debates between some researchers from the USA and the Czech Republic, on the one hand, and some Slovaks and Austrians, on the other. Between the former there were ongoing arguments and conflicts concerning “Western” self-styled “lecturers” “missionaring,” while “missing the Czech context,” versus Czech “conservatism” and “ignorance” about women’s suppression. Such conflicts were carried out in publications or at conferences. Some titles of articles give an impression of the discussions: “McDonalds, Terminators, Coca Cola Ads – and Feminism? Import from the West,” “Why we are not feminists,” “Eine Westfeministin geht in den Osten” [A Western Feminist goes to the East] or “Why We Resist Western-Style Feminism.” Discussions between some researchers from Austria and Slovakia seemed to be rather harmonious, stressing the pleasure “to be of

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help” or “to be given useful knowledge.” But both debates were shaped by similar images of “Western experts,” considered to have more experience, resources and dominance, and “learning Easterners,” who were said to lack all these.

Laura Busheikin and Claire Wallace describe these stereotypes of the “Easterners” and “Westerners,” shaping not only public discourses, but also discussions among feminists and gender researchers themselves. Busheikin calls them “the international feminist brigade” and “our backward Eastern sisters,” Wallace speaks about the “Western feminists” versus the “Eastern women.”

In my dissertation I want to investigate the first contacts and co-operations between gender researchers in these four countries and analyze how images of “East” and “West,” of “us” and “the others,” are constructed and reconstructed, how differences – according to origins, nationalities or regimes as well as hierarchies between researchers – are dealt with and how they influence concrete discussions and co-operations. Furthermore, I want to investigate whether there are any attempts to question and/ or subvert stereotypes and hierarchies.

I understand the observed images and stereotypes as constructed ones, being at the same time politically, economically and socially relevant. This is why I first want to analyze images and stereotypes in discourses and then to compare them with facts and figures, showing who has resources and how many they have (money, as well as literature, working facilities, etc.), who quotes whom, who organizes what etc.

This means that, even though I am using the terms “East” and “West” a lot myself, my aim is to reconstruct (and deconstruct) their uses and meanings, and not to perpetuate their problematic connotations or even to essentialize them.

In my opinion, it is especially interesting to deal with the notions of “East” and “West” within Gender Studies, as this is an international field of research that claims to be reflexive of differences and hierarchies. Therefore, I want to analyze how gender researchers deal with them, when they come up in concrete co-operations. Within feminist theory and gender studies this issue is far from being a new one. Debates and critiques about hierarchical structures have a long history within this field. Women of color, feminists from the South, working class women or Lesbian feminists are only some of those who had criticized the hegemony of white Western middleclass concepts (and continue to do so). bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins or Alice Walker are only some of the most famous authors. Especially relevant for this project are critiques by authors from post-socialist European countries such as Slavenka Drakulic or Jirina Šiklová.

Besides these critiques, other concepts that deal with hierarchies or hegemonies within academic discourses are very useful. Many of them have been developed within cultural or postcolonial studies. The best known ones are, for example, Edward Said’s “Orientalism” or Stuart Hall’s texts. In my analysis, works that focus on Central and Eastern Europe seem to be very useful and interesting, like Larry Wolff’s Inventing Eastern Europe or Maria Todorova’s The Invention of the Balkans.

2. Methodology

5 Quotations from interviews carried out in spring and summer 2000.
Empirical research for this project includes various types of data and will be carried out in all four countries of interest. The main sources are qualitative data, which means analyses of written materials, interviews and participant observations of the very first co-operations between 1989-95.

Written materials consist of articles, conference papers, minutes of meetings, letters, e-mails, etc., where researchers from the USA or Austria met those from the Czech or Slovak Republics and/or worked together. Furthermore, I carry out expert and guided interviews with the participants in the first discussions and co-operations. These interviews include researchers from all four countries involved. To get concrete impressions, I do participant observations of currently on-going international co-operations, such as conferences or meetings in the mentioned countries. I will not analyze them as “primary” material, because they do not take place in the time of interest, but I regard them as useful for establishing categories for the analysis of other material.

Quantitative data include citation indices, percentages of “Western” and “Eastern” authors in journals or representatives at conferences, project calculations etc. These figures shall be used as illustrations and to contrast the outcomes of qualitative research. This means I use a mixture of different methods to get a complex picture of my field of research and work out theoretical findings.

I am working with the concept of “Grounded theory,” because it provides tools for extracting theoretical abstractions out of empirical data. For the analysis of the texts, interviews and protocols, I use hermeneutic methods adapted for social research as “Feinanalyse” or “Sequenzanalyse” [Sequential analyses], which were elaborated to analyze implicit structures of social settings or systems. Therefore, they seem to be adequate to work out connotations of terms, images and stereotypes. Some of the patterns and structures I have already found shall be described in the following chapters.

3. Dichotomic and Generalized Use of “East” and “West”

As I mentioned in the first chapter, in the early 90’s many authors spoke about “Western feminists” and “Eastern women” and described differences between them – or sometimes stressed the things they have in common. But in these publications the main category of comparison is the belonging to an either “Eastern” or “Western” country. Even researchers who called for a more differentiated approach (as Claire Wallace or Jirina Šiklová) often ended up using “Easterners” and “Westerners” as their main categories of differentiating themselves. An example for this is:

“Osteuropäische Frauen [...] sind nun ebenso der Ansicht, dass die Geltung vieler, im westlichen Feminismus enthalten universalisierender

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9 I want to stress again, that these are observations, not final results, since my investigation is not finished yet. Moreover, I want to point out that my research is about the early 90s, so it does not take into account that relations and co-operations might have changed substantially since then.
Annahmen über Geschlecht sich auf den Kontext beschränkt, dem sie entsprungen sind.”

[Eastern European women […] also came to the conclusion now, that the validity of many universalizing assumptions, which are included in Western Feminism, is limited to the context in which they emerged.]10

Jirina Šiklová, for example, stresses the differences between post-socialist countries, but uses expressions like “post-communist women” or – especially in her German or Czech texts - “unsere Frauen” [our women] herself.

“Post-communist women are skeptical of the endeavors of Western women to have women’s needs redressed legally.”11

“Unserer Frauen haben natürlich jahrzehntelang in einem System gelebt, das ein sogenanntes Quotensystem durchgesetzt hatte.” [Of course, our women lived in a system where a so-called quota-system has been functioning for decades.]12

“unsere den Feminismus verbal ablehnenden Frauen” [our women, who verbally refuse feminism]13

This is not only very vague, because it is totally unclear who “our women” are, but it also constructs homogenous groups and produces generalizations, which are highly questionable. Does this mean all Czech women? Or even all women in post-communist countries? Or Czech academics? Or Czech middle class women? Or does Šiklová mainly refer to mainstream discussions? If she meant all Czech women, who refused feminist ideas, how could there be initiatives like the Gender Studies Centre? But why doesn’t she also refer to these women who are “different” then, who are interested in gender (and sometimes feminist) topics?

The importance of these categories can also be seen in some of the titles of articles, like “Eine Westfeministin geht in den Osten [A Western Feminist goes to the East],” “Gibt es einen grenzüberschreitenden Feminismus zwischen Ost und West? [Is there a Border-crossing Feminism between East and West]” or “Verstehen die Frauen im Westen die Frauen im Osten? [Do Women in the West understand Women in the East?]”14

Another dichotomy and generalization is made by Šiklová when she says: “In comparison with Western women Czech women are very emancipated, but they don’t want to recognize it.”15

Even though she does not use the term “Eastern” here, but narrows it down to the national belonging, she again uses a polarizing categorization: “the West” and “the

10 Wallace, “Eine Westfeministin,” 131 (translation by the author of this paper).
14 For details see the chapter “References.”
Czech Republic.” And it is again a very general saying, which remains unclear. It seems very hard to imagine that all Czech women are very (or even more?) emancipated in comparison to all Western women. But this vagueness is not only characteristic of Šiklová’s work. Especially when it comes to the terms of “East” and “West,” much seems to go without saying. I could hardly find any explicit definition of what “East” or “West” are supposed to mean, or what makes a scholar an “Easterner” or a “Westerner.”

Another interesting point is the usage of “us” or “our women” and “them.” Šiklová is not the only one, who uses these expressions. Hana Havelková writes:

“Ich habe selbst Dutzende von Gesprächen erlebt [...] bei denen es immer um ein und dasselbe ging: von ihrer Seite die Feststellung, daß unsere Gesellschaft sexistisch und patriarchalisch sei, die Frauen zweitrangige Bürger, außerdem konservativ, unfrei und diskriminiert usw.; von unserer Seite die Ablehnung dieser Diagnose in allen Punkten. [I have experienced dozens of conversations myself, which were all about the same issue. They stated that our society is sexist and patriarchal and women would be second class citizens, besides being also conservative, dependant and discriminated against, etc. and we rejected this diagnoses in all aspects.]”16

Havelková does not define the categories “us” and “them.” The point of differentiation might be either the fact of “belonging” to different countries and societies, or the origin and socialization in different political, economic and social systems. The above given quotations show that, according to some very vaguely defined “belonging” to “East” and “West,” entities of “us” and “our women” are constructed and marked off against “them” and “the others,” who have a different context and history, and have to be explained.

4. Overestimation of East-West Differences

In many of these texts, the differentiation between “East” and “West” is not only used as a dichotomy, but also as the most obvious and important difference between women. In comparison to this division, the other differences, as class, race, age, sexual orientation, etc., seem to have been neglected.

In this respect, an example is the report of a workshop on “Family and Childhood,” held by American and Czech women at the Gender Studies Centre Prague in 1991. The report says, that there was a “gulf of understanding between us and our American friends.”18 All differences and misunderstandings between the participants described in the report are explained by to their identities as “Westerners” or “Czechs.” No other differences such as the financial situation of the woman, ideological background, sexual orientation, being a mother or having no children, etc. have been taken into account, at least none of them are mentioned.

16 Havelková, “Real Existierender Feminismus,” 147.
17 I put this word in quotation marks, because I think it is actually very unclear, what “belonging to a country” or “a society” really means. In my opinion there are very different concepts for this issue who carry different political visions.
18 „Workshop reports” and “Letter from Abroad” in: Prague Gender Studies Centre: Bulletin Summer 1992, 7
Hana Havelková similarly mentions in her article:

“Uns quält weder rassische noch soziale Unterdrückung, wir betrachten aber auch die sexuelle Unterdrückung nicht als prioritär. Das Problem liegt anderswo. Unser Land befindet sich als ganzes gegenüber den westlichen Ländern in einer sozial wie kulturell anderen Position.” [We are not struggling with racist or social suppression, but we do not consider sexual suppression a priority either. The problem is somewhere else. Our country as a whole is in a socially and culturally different position compared to Western countries.]\(^{19}\)

So Havelková, too, constructs a unity qua nation that she describes as having more influence on the status of women than other social categories.

5. Finances and Resources

One of the most mentioned and “urgent” topics is that of money and resources. Almost all of my interview partners (from all areas involved) told me that they lack them. Many scholars from the Czech and Slovak Republics also said that they feel dependent on their Western colleagues in this regard. As there have not been any state money and local funds for Gender or women’s projects neither in Slovakia, nor in the Czech Republic, researchers as well as activists in the field had to ask for international funds. In the early 90s money mostly came from the USA or countries of the “old” EU or Switzerland. This amounts to the fact that Czech and Slovak scholars had to adapt to their criteria and conditions with regard to organization, working structures and contents. Some of my Czech and Slovak interview partners also mentioned that they are unhappy about being even dependent on “Western” money, when they want to meet their colleagues from other post-socialist European countries. And that there cannot be any real balance between them and their “Western” colleagues as long as they do not have enough money and resources to initiate projects by themselves or to invite them back. But I want to stress that this is not a general saying for all post-socialist countries or all kinds of gender projects.\(^{20}\)

Other lacking resources are computers, access to internet, printing facilities, scientific staff, etc. and also availability of books, magazines, education material etc. “The problems related to bibliographic material are prices – especially those of foreign publications – transport and language. Who speaks what foreign languages? What can be translated? Shall an international audience be addressed? Where can books be published? etc.

Another important factor is experience in women’s movement, feminist theories and feminist organizing. Many participants in this discourse state that so

\(^{19}\) Havelková, “Real Existierender Feminismus.”

\(^{20}\) This conference and publication on “Gender and the (Post) East-West-Divide,” organized by scholars from Romania, or other conferences organized by the Women’s Studies Centers in Zagreb and Belgrade are just some examples of projects that are initiated and run by scholars from post-socialist countries. (Even though, probably most grants are given by “Western” foundations, too.) Besides, the situation has changed a lot since the early 90s. Especially with the newly elected conservative governments in the two “Western” countries I am interested in, the USA and Austria, money and resources for feminist projects had been cut down dramatically.
called “Western women” have this experience, whereas women in post-socialist countries lack it.

The description of the Slovak philosopher Zuzana Kiczková of her first encounter with gender studies in 1990 might serve as an example:

“Dojem bol pre nás ohromujúci, ved’ prvý raz sme poculi tematizovat’ filosofické problémy z feministického uhlu pohl’adu, s kritickým akcentom a analyzujúcimi prístupmi.” [We experienced an overwhelming impression: for the first time we heard philosophical problems addressed from a feminist point of view, with a critical impetus and an analytic approach.]

She continues with her surprise about a three-day conference and whole libraries and bookstores dedicated to a field of research she had never heard about before and none of her colleagues at the institute had ever dealt with. After this conference she and her colleague Etela Farkasová decided to deepen their knowledge about this issue:

“Pochopili sme, že tento na západných univerzitách už dávnejšie rozbehnutý ‘feministický vlak’ len vel’mi t’ažko budeme môct dohonit’. […] A predsa sme sa ešte v to majove popoludnie rozhodli, ze sa pokúsime nastupit’ aspon do posledného vagoná.” [We understood that we would reach this ‘feminist train,’ which started to run on Western universities already a long time ago, only with difficulties. […] Nevertheless, on this May afternoon we decided to try to get at least into the last carriage.] “

Kiczková wrote these lines in a publication addressed to a Czech and Slovak audience. She does not add any explicit criticism of developments in the international field of Gender Studies, but rather describes her subjective impression of her position in this field. Her metaphor could be read as follows: she faces an already highly developed field of research and debates and seems to have two options: either to let go of the train (and just watch it from the outside), or to try to jump on it. But her place would then only be in the last carriage. She imagines herself not in a position to decide upon the direction, the speed or route of the train, nor to sit in the first class or the restaurant, watching the landscape passing by. She would probably not even see who the drivers or decision-makers in the first carriages are.

From my point of view, this is a very interesting description of the international field of gender studies, which in some aspects corresponds with my own experiences. Whereas most gender researchers in countries like the USA, Canada or the “old” EU countries do not have much knowledge about the ongoing gender debates and developments in post-socialist countries (of course with the exception of those who are specialized in this field and serve somehow as “go-betweens”), scholars in “Central” and “Eastern” Europe cannot do without knowing about developments in – at least some – “Western” gender discourses, as they form the “mainstream,” the “canon” of feminist knowledge. But I want to stress that speaking of “CEE” and “the West” is an incorrect homogenization in this case as well, as there are huge differences between different countries. Coming from Austria, my experience is that

21 Zuzana Kiczková, “Úvod do feministických štúdií,” ASPEKT (Myslenie žien, 1/ 1998), 298
22 Kiczková, “Úvod do feministických štúdií.”
scholars are supposed to know at least the discourses going on in the biggest German speaking country, i.e. Germany, and in the USA and Great Britain, as they are considered the places where the most "advanced" discussions take place. On the other hand, the situation for scholars from bigger post-socialist countries, as Poland or Russia, might be different too, because they have bigger academic communities and therefore a broader field and variety of debates within their countries. This makes it maybe less important to look at developments abroad.

A certain imbalance is also reflected by many conferences and publications that took place or were edited in the early 90s. Most international projects on gender, women’s or feminist topics with Czech or Slovak participants were initiated, edited, organized, etc. by researchers from the USA or one of the older EU countries, whereas Czech and Slovak scholars were mostly participants or contributors, often giving speeches or contributions about their own national contexts. In the library of Gender Studies Centrum Prague, I found 32 international publications on Gender and “Central and Eastern Europe,” of which 24 were edited and published by scholars from the USA and (rarer) “Western” Europe, only six were edited by Czechs. The latter were exclusively documentation of conferences or workshops that took place in the Czech Republic. The former had sometimes contributors from the Czech and Slovak Republics to describe the situation in their countries, sometimes the authors of the “country sections” were US scholars, too. The latter always included at least one or two papers from researchers from Austria, Germany, France or the USA, who wrote about their achievements or about a “general” topic which means that the authors did not specify any national or regional contexts. One anthology did not mention any editor, but was bilingual, German and Czech, and seems to have been a collaborative work between a German and a Czech NGO. One other publication was a Czech and German co-edited book.

The above mentioned description of Zuzana Kiczková and some remarks other scholars made in interviews, remarks like “they still lack knowledge about...” or “our women are not so advanced yet,” point to such notions as “forward” and “backward,” to implicit or explicit concepts of progress, that conjecture “Western” developments as more advanced and Czech or Slovak scholars as those who have to keep up with them. Hana Havelková criticizes attributions of forwardness and backwardness, when she says:

“Vielleicht wären die westlichen Feministinnen besser in der Lage, unseren Gesichtspunkt zu verstehen, wenn sie unsere Situation eher als postfeministisch, denn als präfeministisch betrachteten.” [Maybe Western feminists would understand our positions better, if they thought about our situation as post-feminist instead of pre-feminist.]24

It seems that within gender studies – similarly to other, more mainstream, fields of scientific discourse – there are some contexts that are considered more “important,” more “general,” “context-neutral” or relevant for every scholar, and others that are regarded as less important or more “special” and therefore not so relevant for those who do not live there or do not deal especially with this area. In June 2003, in a panel discussion in Vienna, Hana Havelková described this situation considering that “Westerners” are in charge of “theory,” and “Easterners” serve with

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23 Not all of them had titles like this. I counted all books dealing with different variations of this topic.
24 Havelková, “Real existierender Feminismus,” 156.
“practical” aspects. According to my observations, this “division of labor” is not only due to one party, but to images and stereotypes that probably all researchers – in different levels – have, and it seems fair to assume this, up to a certain level, considering the above mentioned division of resources. However, I believe that we have to reflect on these images and question them, if we do not want Gender Studies and feminist theory be like any other kind of mainstream academia, but a field of research that reflects and deals productively with differences and hierarchies amongst the scholars.

Jirina Šiklová, in her speech at the meeting “Frauen im vereinten Europa [Women in a United Europe], calls for the inclusion of the history of women under socialism into the canon of feminist knowledge:

“So wie Rosa Luxemburg in die Geschichte des Feminismus und der Frauenbewegung gehört oder die im Sozialismus verbotene Alexandra Kollontai, so gehören dorthin auch die Entwicklungsphasen des Sozialismus und die Lösung der Frauenproblematik.” [Just like Rosa Luxemburg belongs to the history of feminism and women’s movement or Alexandra Kollontai, who was forbidden under socialism, so do the stages of development of socialism and the handling of the women’s question.]25

I understand this as a suggestion to balance the relationship between the “knowing” and “learning” parties of international gender discourses and to rethink the perceptions of “relevant” or “important” knowledge in this field.

6. What is “East” and what is “West”?s

As I mentioned before, in most publications, “East” and “West” seem to refer to the former Cold War blocks, and could therefore be replaced by “post-socialist” and “capitalist.”26 But with a closer look at the interviews, it turns out that these terms have other, more implicit meanings. Many Czech, Slovak and Austrian researchers distanced themselves from being “East” or “West”, when asked about their own understandings of these terms, but called themselves “Central European.”27 This term is also used in a lot of articles by US American scholars who distinguish between “Eastern” and “Central Eastern Europe (CEE)”.28 Many of my interview partners29 considered that “East” and “West” did not have so much to do with geography and definitely not only with the capitalist or post-socialist part of Europe, but more with connotations like “where things are better” or “where people are richer” and “where things are worse” or “where people are poorer” and also “where there was/is war.” As “West,” they mentioned the “older” EU countries and the USA and Canada, “the East” was assumed as “behind the Ukrainian border” or “the former Soviet Union,”

26 I use the term “socialist” here, as the “Czechoslovak Socialist Republic” called itself “socialist,” not “communist.” Communism was said to have been achieved only by the Soviet Union.
27 Or “mitteleuropäisch.” This German term has another history, which is associated with Friedrich Naumann’s concept of German expansion in the area.
28 See, for example, the homepage of the Network of East West Women.
29 I have analyzed this so far primarily in interviews with Slovak scholars.
sometimes also Albania or Serbia. So “East” and “West” were not refused as valid categories in general, but only as the right ones to describe their own situation in between the “East” and “West.” Other countries and inhabitants were still thought of as “Easterners” or “Westerners.” The distinction between “Central” and “Eastern” was primarily used to distance oneself from the “real East.”

This corresponds very well with the findings of Larry Wolff in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe*, who analyzed this issue and considered that the term “Eastern Europe” was invented by intellectuals of the Enlightenment period. They constructed “Eastern Europe” as something “different” from the “civilized Western world,” as something in between the Orient and the Occident, not totally “barbarian”, but definitely not civilized either. This means peoples, cultures, nationalities, etc., which were geographically located in areas between the Balkan peninsula and the Baltic region and between the Prussian borders and Russia, were observed, described and unified under the general rubric “Eastern Europe,” ascribing them certain characteristics:

“It was Eastern Europe’s ambiguous location, within Europe, but not fully European, that called for such notions as backwardness and development to mediate between the poles of civilization and barbarism. In fact, Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century provided Western Europe with its first model of underdevelopment, a concept that we now apply all over the globe.”

It seems that this construction of “East” and “West,” including connotations of “civilized” versus “in between civilization and barbarism” – or “where things are going better” and “where things are going worse,” to use the words of my interview partners – still shape our perceptions of “us” and “the other,” and I do not mean to exclude myself from this! Therefore, I would like to argue for a careful usage of these terms, as they carry old and powerful concepts, which are far from value-neutral. I would suggest using different terms or clarifications, if possible. Even though I am also skeptical with respect to national concepts, I think in this context it might be more appropriate to use concrete national references than giving labels as “Eastern” or “Western.” Given my findings, the term “Central Europe” is no way out either, but only perpetuates the polarity between a more “civilized” and a more “barbarian” part of Europe. The only things it does is shifting the borders and players a little bit. The image of the “real other,” the “uncivilized,” is projected onto the former Soviet Union. The developing region, which is not really “Western” (yet), but not really “Eastern” either, is called “Central Europe.”

30 In case of Austrian researchers the situation is slightly different. When they call themselves “Central European” they mostly refer to “our neighbors” and “the common history.” This perception of “being all Central Europe” sometimes gets the touch of Austrians “being the first in Central Europe,” being the supporters, advocates, etc. of “our colleagues,” having a historical duty to work together and “help them.” In my opinion, this approach does not implicate an egalitarian perception of differences either!


32 In the 1980s, when concepts of “Central Europe” or “Mitteleuropa” were rediscovered and discussed by dissidents and émigrés like Milan Kundera or György Konrad, as well as conservative intellectuals in Germany and Austria, they were used to question the division of “East” and “West” within Europe and establish a new discourse “beyond” these polarizations. But at the same time, these articles carried anti-Soviet, anticommunist and also anti-Russian stereotypes. So, in my point of view, the concept of “Central Europe” implies similar problems in all contexts.
7. Border Crossers

Almost all scholars I interviewed and observed have in common the fact that they do not only deal with gender studies and their “own” contexts, but cross borders that seek to see, work with, investigate or analyze other contexts as well. In this aspect, they become trespassers and go-betweens or even translators or diplomats. They are experts in two worlds and spend a lot of time explaining “the other world,” explaining what is going on in other parts of the world and therefore opening windows to achievements and developments to those who stayed at home and also explaining what is going on in their own context to those they meet abroad or come from abroad and want to know about their region.

The feeling of being in between contexts is also described by some of my interview partners from Slovakia:

“ich weiß, dass die Zeitschrift hier nicht in diesem Kontext zu Hause ist, also weil die Zeitschrift sich anderswo befindet, als der Kontext, na?” [I know that the journal is not located in this context, I mean the journal is somewhere else as the context here.]

“Ich habe vor allem so ein Gefühl von so einer Disproportion, dass wir eben über Sachen sprechen, die sich anderswo befinden.” [Most of all I have the feeling of a kind of disproportion: that we talk about things that happen somewhere else.]”

I think that beyond the described problems according to differences and inequalities within international and cross-cultural feminist debates, it is very important to have such discourses and transgressions. Because even though many of the border-crossing feminists, activists, and gender studies scholars faced a lot of difficulties, many perceptions about what it means to be “a woman,” about gender roles and relations, about forms of political activism, etc. were challenged in these discussions. Seemingly “natural facts” or well-elaborated positions were confronted with new, revolting ideas on all sides. Out of these confusing confrontations new discourses arose and new initiatives and developments started. In my opinion, a lot of achievements would not have been possible in all involved regions without the work of these border-crossers.

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THE ROLE OF MIGRANTS IN NATIONAL FEMINIST MOVEMENTS:
THE CASE STUDY OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC IN THE 1990s

Alena Heitlinger

Abstract

The main goal of this paper is to explore the roles played by exiles and expatriates in feminist movements and in resistance to feminism. The main focus is placed on the uniqueness of experience and perspective of migrant feminists and their opponents. Using data gathered from interviews, personal testimonials, newspaper interviews and essays, and my own personal and intellectual biography, the paper explores as a case study the involvement of Czech émigrés and Western expatriates in feminism and anti-feminism in post-communist Czech Republic. It highlights the ways in which specific historical circumstances and the politics of location offer migrants both unique opportunities and special problems for framing and conveying feminist and anti-feminist ideas and practices across cultures and national borders. It concludes with an assessment of the range of political and organizational skills Czech activists have acquired since 1989, and how this has undermined the monopoly émigrés once had on feminist theory and democratic practices.

Introduction

Five years ago, when I published my book Émigré Feminism, I argued that emigrants “frequently move with equal facility among several perspectives, seeing each one simultaneously from within and from without, seeking to make visible to each culture and political tradition both its own preconceptions and those of others. This enables émigrés to adopt multiple perspectives, defying a single world-view. Caught between different systems of values, beliefs, languages, discourses and identities, émigrés who are feminists can develop a distinct capacity to translate feminist ideas across cultures. This general proposition reflected the transnational and comparative orientation of the edited volume. I have since changed my mind about using émigré feminism as an essentialist concept. My personal experiences and subsequent research on the roles played by Czech (post)exiles and Western expatriates in mediating feminist discourses and practices has convinced me that émigré feminism is best treated as a historically contingent category.

After spending most of my professional career in efforts to explain a variety of women’s issues in East Central Europe to Western feminist scholars, I was hoping that with the fall of communism in November 1989, “I would finally be able to transmit something back from Canada and the United Kingdom to my country of origin.” However, I soon discovered that my personal émigré feminist experience “turned out to be a poor guide to the understanding of Czech women’s reaction to Western feminism. I soon found out that, like many other long-time émigrés, I am

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1 Research for this paper was carried out with the financial assistance of a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would also like to thank my research assistant Mirek Vodrážka for his invaluable contribution to the research project.
3 For the record, I am a Czech-born, British-trained, Canadian feminist sociologist, who left her native Czechoslovakia at the age of 18 after the Soviet invasion in August 1968, and who encountered (and quickly identified with) a specific brand of Western feminism during her undergraduate and postgraduate studies in the U.K. in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
now more Canadian than Czech. My knowledge of local culture has aged.”

Using data gathered from interviews with women activists, personal testimonials, and newspaper interviews and essays, this paper examines as a case study the involvement of Czech émigrés and Western expatriates in feminism and in resistance to feminism during the period of post-communist transition in the 1990s. The main focus is placed on (1) the roles Western expatriates and Czech returnees have played in initiating and directing change; (2) the tension between the growth of feminist ideas and politics, on the one hand, and the backlash to feminism, on the other; and (3) the range of political and organizational skills Czech activists have acquired since the collapse of communism, and how this has undermined the monopoly émigrés once had on feminist theory and democratic practices.

Constructing feminist and anti-feminist discourses

As Holy has argued, “in contrast to the ecological movement, which began to have its impact long before the final overthrow of the communist regime, the feminist movement came to affect Czech discourse only gradually after the November events.” The renowned Czech writer Josef Skvorecký has made an important contribution to that discourse. However, this contribution was made by attacking feminism.

Walby has suggested that “gender politics [...] are not only the activities of women asking for greater equality, but involve antifeminist responses. ‘Backlash’ appears to be a recurring feature in the history of feminism.” The historical record reveals that anti-feminism can be as diverse as feminism, ranging from “turn-the-clock-back” type of opposition (typically associated with conservative, “pro-family” and “pro-life” moral projects attempting to push women back to the home as full time

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5 Most of the data on Czech women's groups presented in this article are derived from interviews conducted during 1998-2001 by Mirek Vodrážka and myself with spokespersons of 28 women’s groups. Vodrážka initially contacted officials of all of the 32 women’s groups listed in Hauserová’s guide to Czech women’s initiatives (Eva Hauserová, ed., Altý a soprány (kapesní atlas ženských iniciativ (Praha: Gender Studies Centre, 1994). However, he soon found out (by trying to make a telephone or written contact) that the guide contained several defunct or non-functioning groups, such as the women's committee of PEN or L-klub Lambda. On the other hand, he also learned through informal networking about some groups which were not included in the guide, such as Eunika, Baaba, and Inkodnito. He also contacted the Union of Roma Women, but he soon learned that it is not clear who actually represents the group. Its first leader, Alžbeta Miková, was part of the first migration/refugee wave to the U.K. in 1996. Her successor, Ms. Ferková, agreed to an interview for our project, but when Mirek Vodrážka made another attempt to contact her in the summer of 1999, he was told that Ms. Ferková was currently in the U.K., and that she may, or may not, return to Prague, depending on her assessment of the situation Czech (and Slovak) Romas face in the U.K. Additional interview data cited in this article are derived from Poole (2000) and Saxonberg (2001).
7 After the Soviet invasion in 1968 Skvorecký moved to Canada and co-founded with his wife, the novelist Zlena Salivarová, the highly successful dissident publishing house “Sixty-Eight Publishers Toronto”. The author is regarded as a national hero for saving Czech literature during the post-1968 period of ‘normalization’.
8 Sylvia Walby, Gender Transformations (London: Routledge, 1997), 156.
dependent housewives and mothers) to various media distortions.\(^9\) “One of the features of contemporary backlash,” argues Walby “is that it works by reversal, by presenting the opposite as true. One of the ways that it works is as a journalistic examination of difficulties faced by women today which are then falsely represented as being a result of feminism.”\(^10\)

The two main forms of modern anti-feminism – social conservatism and media distortions - also exist in post-communist East Central Europe. As Bren has argued (prior to the split of Czechoslovakia), “Czechoslovak men and women alike associate ‘women’s rights’ with communism; the term has therefore acquired a negative connotation as being the product of an imposed system. The result is a backlash of social conservatism: a wish to turn the clock back toward family values and traditional roles and to create an economy able to sustain single-income households.”\(^11\)

Czech media paid relatively little attention to women’s issues in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution, but this all changed with the publication in 1992 of Skvorecký’s two feminist-bashing articles. As is evident from their titillating titles, “Can There Be Sex Without Rape?: Adventures in American Feminism (I)”, and “Is It Possible to Talk to Women Without Sexual Harassment?: Adventures in American Feminism (II)”, both articles ridicule what the then 69-years-old Mr. Skvorecký regarded as extremist American (or Western) feminism. The two articles first appeared in the Czech weekly Respekt, but “Can There Be Sex Without Rape” was also subsequently published in translation in The Prague Post, the city’s main English-language newspaper.

The publication of Mr. Skvorecký’s anti-feminist views elicited lively debate in both the Czech and the English-language media. The titles of some of the antifeminist contributions speak for themselves: “What Do I Have Against the Feminists”, “Feminism According to the Eskimos”, “Is Feminism Getting Tamer?”, “The World Without Men”, or “American Feminists Put the Fear into Me”. The feminist response of the 31-years-old Canadian-born Laura Busheikin, the then part-time co-ordinator of Prague’s Gender Studies Centre, is of particular interest, because it touches on the role of migrants in national feminist movements and transnational dissemination of ideas. Published as a rebuttal on the same page as Skvorecký’s piece, Busheikin’s Prague Post article criticized Skvorecký for abusing his status as an émigré and as a Czech dissident hero:

> Skvorecky is abusing his position: After living more than 20 years in Canada, he must know that the issues he dismisses with an ironic wave of his pen are far more complex and weighty than he depicts. He also knows the Czech situation. The Czech public is, on the whole, ignorant of the history and concerns of the women’s movement. Skvorecky takes advantage of his status as hero in Czechoslovakia; perhaps he feels he’s lost in the North American war between the sexes, but back in his homeland he can strike a pre-emptive blow, crack a few cheap jokes about ‘lesboid feminists’, and get away with it. And perhaps he

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\(^10\) Walby, Gender Transformations, 157.

can keep Czechoslovakia a ‘pure’ place where he can behave the way he wants to towards women, without worrying about their responses. Perhaps he can squelch feminism before it gets going.  

In an interview with the Canadian newspaper The Globe and Mail, Busheikin makes a careful distinction between what she can say publicly about her home and host countries, Canada and the Czech Republic:

I don’t think it’s my place to analyze Czech society for Czechs, but certainly I can speak up when I think my society has been misrepresented, and that’s what I was responding to.

Thus the role which exiles and expatriates can play in national feminist and anti-feminist discourses and practices is a highly contested one. As Poole has argued, after 1989, the voices of those who were most silenced under the communist regime dominated. Former dissidents and exiles became prominent. In these [two] groups, the gender rhetoric tends to be conservative. Among dissidents, conservative gender attitudes were a part of their radical anti-socialist speech, of their emphasis on the superiority of political and civic rights over social and economic rights. But the conservative rhetoric is not stable, rigid, or constant. Time is an important factor.

Thus it is instructive to examine a more recent perspective of another well-known Czech male exile and dissident, Václav Belohradský, who since 1970 has lived in Italy, where he teaches sociology. His views are much more sympathetic to feminism:

What has shocked me the most is the vocal effort of Czech women not to admit the evident discrimination of which they are daily victims. I was shocked by their firmly closed eyes. Whenever I mentioned to a woman in the Czech Republic that she is discriminated against, she got very annoyed, arguing that this a Western stupidity along the same lines as the struggle against wearing furs [...] They would claim that Czech women have an implicit agreement with men about the real social position of women, which might look as discrimination only on the surface, only to an uncomprehending foreign eye. They would also say that ‘it looks as if we are in a subordinate position, but in reality (for the understanding eyes of the locals) we are equal to men and they deep down don’t doubt this.’

In Professor Belohradský’s view, Czech women have internalized their own views.
subordination by refusing “to see what is immediately obvious to anyone who only briefly visits the Czech Republic; women here serve men.” The contrasting views of Skvorecký, Busheikin, and Belohradský reveal the complexities and tensions which can arise when émigrés speak about feminist issues in their ‘home’ and ‘adopted’ countries, and how easy it is to suspect and easily discredit their voices when they do. It is worth noting that in September 1998, after spending almost a decade in the Czech Republic working for two Czech women’s groups, Gender Studies Centre and ProFem, Ms. Busheikin returned (with her Czech husband and Czech-born child) to her native country Canada.

The Role of Migrants in Czech Women’s Groups

Although feminism has a strong negative connotation in the Czech Republic, there is a nascent, grassroots women’s movement which has emerged in wake of the November 1989 Velvet Revolution. The movement functions as a loose and fluctuating network of thirty or so women’s groups, which have self-organized around a wide spectrum of “single issues” such as education, consulting, human rights, art, religion, violence against women, environmental pollution, prostitution, lesbianism, single motherhood, and women’s entrepreneurship. Some additional groups have formed as women’s sections of political parties or local branches of international women’s organizations. Functioning as clubs, professional associations, social service and educational organizations, foundations, and public advocacy groups, the women’s groups cooperate on all kinds of issues, and increasingly form a vibrant but highly vulnerable women’s movement.16

The groups are quite diverse, small, and mainly Prague-based. For the most part, they fall under the rubric of what Jenkins calls “professional movement

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16 As Molyneux points out, “there are contrasting views as to what a women’s movement is. On the one hand, there are clearly identifiable women’s movements that, like those which mobilised to demand female suffrage, have a leadership, a membership, a broader following and a political programme. On the other hand, there are more diffuse forms of political activity which can also qualify as a movement, as distinct from other forms of women’s solidarity such as those based on networks, clubs or groups. The definitional boundaries are complicated by the fact that networks or clubs sometimes develop into or form part of social movements.” (Maxine Molyneux, “Analysing Women's Movements”, in Cecile Jackson and Ruth Pearson, eds., Feminist Visions of Development. Gender Analysis and Policy (London: Routledge, 1998), 68.). Moghadam suggests that the “network form of a feminist organisation may be the most suited to transnational organising, mobilising, policy-oriented research and advocacy that also includes non-hierarchical and democratic objectives. It may also be the most effective form of feminist organising and mobilising in an era of globalisation.” (Valentine Moghadam, “Feminist Networks North and South. DAWN, WIDE and WLUM”, The Journal of International Communication 3 (1/1996): 124-125). See also Laura Busheikin, “Is Sisterhood Really Global? Western Feminism in Eastern Europe,” in S. Trnka, with L. Busheikin, eds., Bodies of Bread and Butter: Reconfiguring Women's Lives in the Post-Communist Czech Republic (Prague: Gender Studies Centre, 1993), 69-76. Reprinted in Tanya Renne, ed., Ana’s Land. Sisterhood in Eastern Europe (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1997), 12-25; Eva Hauserová, ed., Alty a soprány (kapesní atlas ženských iniciativ (Praha: Gender Studies Centre, 1994); Alena Heitlinger, “Framing Feminism in Postcommunist Czech Republic,” Communist and Post-Communist Studies 29 (March 1996): 77-93; Jacqueline True, ‘Victimisation or Democratisation? Czech Women’s Organising Potential in a Globalising Political Economy,’ Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift 100 (1/ 1997): 47-62; Jacqui True, “Antipodean Feminisms,” in Alena Heitlinger, ed., Émigré Feminism: Transnational Perspectives (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 267-293; Poole, “The Emergence”; Steven Saxonberg, “In the Shadow of Amicable Gender Relations, in Helena Flam, ed., Pink, Purple, Green: Women’s, Religious, Environmental, and Gay/Lesbian Movements in Central Europe Today (Boulder: East European Monographs, 2001).
organizations, which are staff-driven, derive their resources from institutions and isolated constituencies, and ‘speak for’ rather than organize their official beneficiaries.” The only group with a mass membership base and a national profile is the successor to the communist Czech Union of Women (CUW). Its main focus is on rural areas and small towns, and its leader, Zdenka Hajná, has been quite effective politically. However, Prague, as the country’s capital and largest city, is where lobbying and attempts to influence state policy take place, so the location of the majority of the women’s groups there is hardly surprising.

The two leading Czech women’s organizations – Gender Studies Centre and ProFem – have strong transnational and émigré feminist connections. Gender Studies Centre was started in 1991 in her apartment by the well known Charter 77 dissident Jířina Siklová, with the financial assistance from the U.S.-based Network of East-West Women, and subsequently from the German feminist foundation Frauen-Anstiftung. The previously mentioned Canadian-born Laura Busheikin became one of the first two employees of the Gender Studies Centre, and she subsequently also worked for ProFem.

ProFem, with its revealing sub-title – Central European Consultation Centre for Women’s projects – was founded in January 1994 by the returnee Saša Lienau. Saša spent the post-1968 ‘normalization’ period in exile in Germany, where she became politically active in the Green Party and the feminist movement. That involvement taught her valuable political skills in agenda setting, building coalitions, lobbying, writing grant applications and generally accessing financial resources, and courting support.

Saša has been able to put those skills to good use both in ProFem, and in the broader Czech feminist milieu. As a consultancy organization, ProFem’s goal is to advise women “how to manage an organization, how to form its structure, what form the organization should choose (association, foundation, etc.) and also to offer psychological counselling.” To this end, ProFem has organized “open houses”, seminars and courses focusing on various forms of self-help including self-employment, self-defense, fundraising for women’s projects, and women’s entry to politics.

In the early post-communist period, the German Green Party was quite eager to support grassroots women’s organizations in post-communist East Central Europe. Taking advantage of this window of opportunity, Lienau was quite instrumental in securing stable operational funding for both the Gender Studies Centre and ProFem. However, such funds are now harder to secure, since the Green Party has become less interested in funding feminist NGOs, and more interested in “supporting political parties. The Green Party wants women’s organisations to co-operate with environmental groups in founding a political party.”

Jana Outratová, the founder of the International Women’s Network (IWN) is another returnee feminist, who was able to put to good use valuable political skills, which she learned during her post-1968 exile in Canada. Jana founded IWN with the help and encouragement of an American friend whom she met in the Association of

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19 Lienau, personal communication.
20 Quoted in Poole, “The Emergence,” 126.
Business and Professional Women. Jana found that,

all the women's NGOs already in existence were either too academic or too narrowly focused. What we wanted was an association of women professionals from various sectors and specialties, who would form a supportive network, and who would have contacts abroad. Thus the first criterion was the mix of various professions, and the second one was orientation abroad. The majority of NGO activists here do not speak enough foreign languages, and this is one reason why their communication with sister organizations abroad is minimal.\(^\text{21}\)

Taking advantage of Outratová’s wide-ranging contacts, lobbying skills, and business acumen, IWN is involved in extensive networking:

We comment on new legislation, we have contacts with women senators and MPs, we advice both local and businessmen, we are members of the Czech-Canadian Chamber of Commerce, we also participate in Belgian-Czech-Canadian Trade Chamber. I attend any embassy function I can, and whenever we need to, we exchange information with other women NGOs. It is all quite dispersed, but it is good that there isn’t just one trend, so whenever there is an opportunity, we take advantage of it.

The German-born Barbel Butterwech, the leader of La Strada, is another migrant with impressive political skills, who has used available political opportunities to advance women’s issues. Funded by the EU and the Dutch government, the organization is part of an international program “La Strada,” which also operates in the Netherlands, Poland, Bulgaria and the Ukraine. Its main goals are prevention of trafficking in women, influencing legislation, and disseminating information on the global issue of trafficking in women.\(^\text{22}\)

Although individual Czech émigrés and Western expatriates have made an important contribution to the diffusion of ideas and practices regarding feminism, it would be inaccurate to suggest that their ideas and activities have constituted the core feminist field in the Czech Republic. Maríková claims that the number of active members, fans and advocates involved in women’s NGOs “does not usually exceed 100.”\(^\text{23}\) Thus the four Czech émigrés and Western expatriates discussed above form a tiny minority among these activists.

The post-1989 generation of migrants and women’s activists

Fifteen years have passed since communism collapsed in Czechoslovakia. During that time, the climate of political pluralism has taken root (evidenced, among other things, in the peaceful break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993), and Czech activists have

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\(^\text{21}\) Interview with M. Vodrážka , July 22, 1999.
\(^\text{22}\) Poole, “The Emergence,” 61.
\(^\text{23}\) Hana Maríková, “Gender Equality in the Czech Republic – the Position of Highly Qualified Women in the Transforming Society”, in Michel E. Domsch, Desire H. Ladwig and Eliane Tenten, eds., Gender Equality in Central and Eastern European Countries (Frankfurt am Mein: Peter Lang, 2003), 108.
acquired an impressive range of political and organizational skills. They have learned how to self-organize, lobby the government, work with very limited funds, write grant applications to foreign and domestic agencies, manage an NGO, and take advantage of windows of political opportunity, such as the Czech accession to the EU. They have also learned the kinds of issues on which they can agree and co-operate. Thus the monopoly which émigrés once had on democratic organizational and political skills has been substantially undermined.

Maríková found that the impact of feminism on Czech women has thus far been marginal, but that women’s NGOs have played an important role in compensating “for the shortcomings of the state administration and educational institutions.” As examples, Maríková cites the above mentioned Gender Studies Centre, which has organized “lectures and seminars called ‘Social problems through a gender lens’ for students of certain humanities universities.” The Association of Businesswomen and Managers has acted as a substitute “for certain ministries and state bodies with respect to the support for women in enterprise activities.”

Moreover, a new generation of feminist activists has come of age. They have increasingly encountered living conditions similar to those prevailing in Western democracies, including the global spread of proficiency in English. Unlike earlier generations growing up under communism, young Czech women today are able to access Western literature on gender equality directly, and establish personal links with Western feminist activists, without the need for mediation by émigrés. According to one such young woman,

the stereotypical, negative, partly obsolete understanding of feminism [in the Czech Republic] is now mixed with the experiences of my contemporaries, who are returning from lengthy stays in (Western) countries, often for study purposes. While abroad they could not avoid encountering feminism. They accept the form and type of feminism they experienced as something fashionable or permanent, but in each case it addresses some of their concerns. Somewhat surprisingly, among this group I have only rarely come across the opinion that feminism is reprobate, unnecessary, and dangerous. Among the few negative reactions the prevailing one is a mixture of curiosity and interest on the one hand, and fear and danger on the other.

Thus when discussing the specific subject positions, identities and perspectives of feminists and anti-feminists who are émigrés, the notion of a ‘cohort’ or a ‘generation’ is another variable to consider. As Manicom has argued, “the designation as a cohort refers not just to a generation or its historical conjuncture, but
also the distinctive political and theoretical discourses that frame analysis.”

Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw from the Czech case about the capacity of migrants to translate feminist and anti-feminist ideas and practices, along with political and organizational skills, across cultures and national borders? It is important to avoid an essentialist use of the category, and to refrain from assuming that the émigré feminist identity “may provide one with a unique epistemic advantage, a positionality that provides one with pure knowledge, a superior perspective in understanding the ‘home country,’ as well as the country of immigration, which the ‘insiders’ in either cannot have.” Nevertheless, Arat-Koc further argues, “there may be certain sensibilities and sensitivities that cross-cultural challenges may provide to émigré feminists.”

Émigrés and expatriates who speak the local language have an important asset with which they can access local debates, give media interviews, network with local activists, and offer strategic advice. However, the effectiveness with which they can act as “ambassadors” of Western and local (anti)feminisms depends on their status as migrants. For example, the background knowledge of exiles of their ‘home’ country can age. Over time, exiles can lose their familiarity with the nuances of the local situation, and instead become more knowledgeable about the cultural and political environment of their country of immigration. Local hostility to émigrés and foreign residents can also limit the effectiveness with which these migrants are able to intervene in local debates. Thus, depending on the specific historical circumstances, the politics of location offers migrants both unique opportunities and special problems for framing and conveying feminist (and anti-feminist) ideas and practices across cultures and national border.

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Abstract

Feminism as a political ideology is not largely accepted in the Romanian society. Rather, it has entered and remains concentrated at the academic (university) level and at a very thin level of the civil society (some NGOs). Since 1989, Romanian “deep” society has maintained a patriarchal vision of the relations between men and women. I wanted to argue that, among all versions or families of feminism, liberal feminism was probably the most likely way of introducing and consolidating feminist ideas. Unfortunately, representatives of the Romanian liberal party (men and women alike) still have an ambiguous discourse concerning women, somewhere between a solid paternalist attitude and a somehow shy, exotic feminist one.

Patriarchal Romanian “deep” society: a view from inside

Feminism as elitism: an exception that confirms the rule?¹

Since 1989, feminism – as an ideology, as an academic group of disciplines, or as a way of defining one’s identity – has re-entered the Romanian marketplace of ideas at an elite level, but without ever reaching “the masses.” Of course, this process has not been a smooth one, and it has had to fight against new and old prejudices. Today, feminism has found a “niche” in several academic centers (such as Bucharest, Cluj, Iasi, and Timisoara), where courses and programs on gender studies are being developed. So far, there are four MA Program in Gender Studies, in Bucharest, Cluj, Timisoara and Iasi. One can also find several publishing houses that have special collections on Gender Studies.² Additionally, there are several significant NGOs that are active in the field of women’s issues – such as AnA, Filia Center, SEF Iasi (Equal Chances for Women), Artemis Cluj, and CPE Bucharest (Center Partnership for Equality). Of course, both the academic education and the civic activity of NGOs aim at changing the society and its mentality in the long run. Still, the impact and influence of these initiatives remains somehow restricted to the specific area wherein they function³.

¹ There is a saying in Romanian: “this is an exception that confirms the rule.” It means that the rule is so powerful, that any counter-example remains an exception.
² The first one was at Universe Publishing House, where translations of well-known books by Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, or Judith Butler were published. Then a special collection on Gender Studies was initiated by Mihaela Miroiu at Polirom Publishing House, Iasi. This collection brings together translations (Andrea Dworkin, Moira Gatens, Gloria Steinem and manz others), as well as Romanian original books (by Mihaela Miroiu, Otilia Dragomir, Laura Grünberg, Stefania Mihaiescu, Doina-Olga Stefanescu Vladimir Pasti etc.). Other special collections are found at Desire Publishing House, Cluj and Politeia Publishing House, Bucharest. There are also other publishing houses that occasionally print books in the field of Gender Studies, without having a special series in this field (Alternative and Trei from Bucharest, Editura Fundatiei pentru Studii Europene and Limes from Cluj).
³ In addition, according to the figures from a public survey made by IMAS (13-21 March 2003), the general trust in NGOs is at the lowest level among similar institutions (only 25.5%). For details, see www.psd.ro.
The “deep” Romanian society

I must explain from the outset that I will not talk here about the small minority of men and women active in the academic sphere or involved with women’s NGOs. Rather, I am referring to the large portion of the Romanian society, which is called by some authors the “deep” Romania.

This “deep” Romania is the population that lives in proximity to or below the poverty line, including the rural population that practices a subsistence economy rather than a market economy. Another way of describing this fact is to say that it represents more than 50 percent of the population that declares in recent surveys that the country is going in a wrong direction and that their own situation is worse than a year before.

The basic features of Romanian transitional society, concerning women, as described by Mihaela Miroiu, are its patriarchalism and its “leftist conservatism.” In order to offer a better understanding of what exactly the term patriarchalism means, concerning more specifically the participation of women in the public sphere, I will refer to several figures extracted from an important public opinion survey, The Gender Barometer, that was conducted by GALLUP, for the Open Society Foundation. When asked whether there is in Romania a real equality of rights between men and women, 50% of the respondents answered “no.” This does not indicate a highly critical awareness of the situation of women as second-class citizens, because the image of women includes the following features: not as good as men for politics (54%), too busy with their domestic chores for political involvement (68%), taught that their job is not being a leader (46%). As a consequence, when asked what gender they prefer for a certain public position, the more responsibilities the position entails, the smaller are the chances that a woman will be chosen. Therefore, while a woman may be preferred as a member in the School Committee of Parents, her chances in running for presidency are close to zero.

Is (liberal feminist) politics a solution?

This question is always a difficult one and the presence of the phrase “liberal feminist” does not ease it. It is a truism that in Romania, as elsewhere, the major sphere of decision-making is the political one. The Romanian case is in a way more special, because in other countries the economic sphere, the juridical one, or the civic one can make a difference and incline the balance. Unfortunately, as the periodical scandals of top-level corruption cases prove, these spheres are at least influenced, if not actually biased, by political institutions and affiliations. Therefore, if one wants to make a change in Romania, one must definitely involve the political sphere.

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7 Barometru de gen (Gallup, August 2000).
8 Barometru de gen, 120, 143-144.
As for the syntagm “liberal feminism,” I refer to the phase during the years ’60 – ’80, and more precisely to the works of Betty Friedan and Susan Moller Okin, where I try to integrate the critiques of Zillah Eisenstein. The majority of authors situate at the center of the liberal feminist doctrine the preoccupation with individual liberty and autonomy, the equal opportunity issue, and what is called the political “androgyne” of society. This is true especially for the first period of contemporary feminist liberalism. Additionally, as women’s situation did not improve, other problems entered the liberal feminist agenda, such as the issue of domestic violence, domestic work, sexual harassment, affirmative action, maternal/parental leave, and so on. Eisenstein characterized this as the inherent radical potential of liberal feminist politics.

Is liberal feminism an alternative in/for Romania?

You may still wonder why I chose liberal feminism as the most appealing feminist paradigm for Romanian public opinion. I will attempt to list the reasons for this, as follows:

1) The European Union impulse

Many, not to say all, of the recent legislative projects that focus on women are due to the external demands for harmonization of Romanian legislation to the European one, as a consequence of our country’s expressed wish to join the European Union. I include here not only laws – such as the one on sexual harassment, the law that abolishes the penalties for homosexual behavior, the law on the equality of opportunities between men and women – but also governmental bodies and institutions such as the National Agency for the Equality of Opportunities. They both base themselves on a liberal framework and had been adopted as a preliminary step towards the projected invitation of joining the EU in 2007. Despite opposition or neglect vis-à-vis them, they will consolidate (of course, if they will not remain forms without contents) an attitude that may be called a liberal feminist one.

2) The “gender does not matter” attitude

When I use this phrase, I basically refer to the large percentage of the population which, when asked directly “who should run a business, a firm, a school,” answers that the gender of the person does not matter.10 This percentage is larger at the level of youth. This mirrors Susan Moller Okin’s well-known assertion that “[a] just society will be one without gender,”11 therefore being consistent with a liberal feminist paradigm. Although the general trend in Romanian feminist literature (Miroiu, et al.) was to discredit this attitude, claiming it was a legacy of the communist regime, from a pragmatic point of view, I think it is an advantage. One way of introducing it into the political discourse is by transforming it into the question: “if gender really does not matter, why not elect a woman?”

3) The final reason is that, of all the versions of feminism, the liberal one is basically the least rejected. When talking about the other versions, I take into consideration the

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10 Referring to the same public survey, the percentage of the population saying “gender does not matter” fluctuates between 20% (member of the Parish Council) and 56% (member of the Local/District Council), Barometrul de Gen, 142.

11 Okin, Justice.
classic division of feminisms into liberal, Marxist, radical and socialist, but the situation remains the same if another, more nuanced typology, is discussed (such as Rosemarie Tong’s one).

Marxist and socialist feminisms. Even though at the theoretical level there is an important distinction between these, I do not expect “deep” Romanian society to notice the difference. This is mainly due to the communist legacy. Firstly, Marxism and socialism as such have lost the political battle in Romania, if not the ideological one. Since 1989, the parties that have dared to call themselves “Communist” and/or “Socialist” have never succeeded in raising more than 5 percent of the votes. Secondly, even before 1989, the distinctive feature of Romanian communism was not an original way of interpreting socialism, but rather its more or less hidden nationalism. Thus, today, the legacy of the communist discourse is shared between a nostalgic, socialist discourse (the Socialist Party of Work) and a hard, sometimes proto-chronist, populist nationalism (the Greater Romania Party). Although the last one has a significant percent of women in its structures, I do not see a feminist alliance with these two parties, because they promote a rather conservative image of women.

Radical feminism. Here, the issue is further complicated due to the already negative image created by the media. As a press survey may prove, before a radical feminist Romanian group ever existed, there was a large and shared consensus that such a thing is “improper” for Romanian women. Contributing to this opinion are, firstly, the strong anti-feminist opinions promoted by (otherwise) respected and influential intellectuals and public figures. Usually, anti-feminism combines a curious mixture of anti-radicalism and political correctness. Secondly, an exaggerated, highly stereotypical image of the radical feminist (that is presumably men-hating, unattractive, frustrated, and, worst of all, lesbian) entered the back door of magazines, tabloids, and TV shows, seeming at times to haunt the imagination of the media-makers. And thirdly, even the people most open towards gender issues – such as university faculty members or active NGO members – refuse to be associated with radical feminism (the “I am feminist, but…” syndrome). Therefore, in this moment, I think radical feminism may be an option for some courageous, outstanding individuals, but in the short term, it is not a solution for “mass” feminism.

I must equally mention the existence of counter-arguments vis-à-vis a liberal feminist paradigm of “equal opportunity” or “equal treatment.”

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13 See the articles and books published by Horia Roman Patapievici, Monica Spiridon. For the mixture of radicalism and political correctness equated with feminism, one explanation may be the translation of Edward Behr’s bestseller, O America înfricosatoare (A frightening America), by the prestigious Humanitas Publishing House.
14 For example, Norica Nicolai, a woman representative of the Liberal Party, former Secretary of State during the previous legislature, is described in a 5-lines article as „the most macho of all women politicians”, allegedly because she „never wears make-up”. www.cotidianul.ro/2000/cancan
16 Among other versions of feminism, many of them have a very restricted cultural definition that does not extend over politics. These are the cultural, the existentialist, and the ecofeminist trends.
17 See for instance Grünberg, Laura, “Între Buteni si Bucuresti sau lungul drum al politicilor sociale catre femei” [Between Buteni and Bucharest or The Long Way of Social Policies to Women], Liliana
proposes the alternative of a more extensive involvement of women in planning and applying reforms in various fields – this would imply non-discriminatory promotion of women, access to education, dealing with women’s health problems. Honestly, I do not see how one can hope to solve the problems of women’s discrimination without a proper law that prevents sexual discrimination. Furthermore, laws that are adopted in parliament without a significant percentage of women MP’s are hardly meeting feminist (and even other women’s) expectations.

What about Romanian liberals?

*Inter-war tradition of feminist liberalism*

In many places of the world, liberalism as a political doctrine has a tradition of advancing women’s issues on the political agenda. Romania is no exception: as elsewhere, liberalism was one of the first “doctrinaire ally” of feminism. And yet, the pioneers of liberal discourse in Romania maintained a dual vision of women, one that replicates itself in the contemporary political program. On the one hand, some of the inter-war liberals (Cezar Bolliac, Ion Ghica) manifested a genuine interest, sometimes convergent with the European one, towards women’s issues – the right to vote, the right to active citizenship, the right to education, the denouncement of women’s economic dependence upon men. On the other hand, the ethic dimension of their discourse (as Raluca Popa puts it) makes the same politicians see women as morally superior to men – a kind of goddesses that consequently do not need to corrupt themselves by doing “dirty” things such as politics.

Quite surprisingly to somebody living in the present, women’s positions during the inter-war period seem much more solid and articulated than today. For instance, two periodicals from that time were entitled *Actiunea feminista* (The Feminist Action) and *Drepturile Femeii* (Woman’s Rights). Women’s movements and actions also seem to have been more organized, focused, and efficient. For instance, they managed to obtain a majority support for women’s right to vote inside the (so far) male-only Parliament. Their achievements look quite remarkable: out of the 13 feminist

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20 Raluca Maria Popa, “Dimensiuni ale patriarhatului in gandirea liberala romanéasca între 1848 si al Doilea Razboi Mondial” [Patriarchal Dimensions in the Romanian Liberal Thought between 1848 and World War II] in Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu, eds., *Patriarhat si emancipare in istoria gandirii politice romanesti* [Patriarchy and Emancipation in the History of Thought of Romanian Politics] (Iasi: Polirom, 2003), 25-71. The same attitude may be found in contemporary surveys, where some 45% of the respondents declare that politics is too corrupt for women to take an interest in. (Source: The Gender Barometer, 144). Not surprisingly, politics is never too corrupt for men…

proposals formulated by Eugenia de Reuss-Ianculescu, 11 were obtained, while the remaining 2 are still to be vindicated today.\textsuperscript{22} Other suggestions remain somehow utopian, such as the proposal of the same Eugenia de Reuss-Ianculescu, that women in Parliament, regardless of their official political affiliation, proclaim themselves a “Feminist.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{Liberal Party today: an ambiguous discourse concerning women}

The contemporary liberal discourses have inherited their ancestors’ dilemma on women’s issues. On the one hand, they have supported and sometimes initiated in recent legislatures many initiatives that aim at improving women’s situation. A few examples are: the law preventing and fighting domestic violence, which has recently been passed; or the sustained opposition to the attempt by the Minister of Work to limit the amount of the parent allocation during parental leave. All these initiatives indicate openness vis-à-vis women’s issues, and the political ability to fight for them.

Still, there are several ambiguities and inconsistencies that may be grouped according to the following:

1. \textit{Actual representation of women}

For a party promoting the liberal doctrine of equal opportunities, it is a terrible irony to have the smallest proportion of women elected in the Parliament (only 2 out of 43 seats). Of course, there is the explanation that the left-wing parties are more open to including women on their election lists. But this does not change the situation. One may argue that a compensation would be the fact that, despite the gender imbalance, the two female representatives are very powerful women – Norica Nicolai was Secretary of State during the previous legislature; Mona Musca is very charismatic, being often invited to appear on TV talk-shows. What is also interesting, is that both of them have somehow become associated with the label “feminist” in the media. Their own relation with feminism remains ambiguous, because in the media, feminism still sounds like a bad word, and a politician’s image is crucial for her evolution in politics. To give you an example, a feminist speech of Mona Musca about domestic violence is perceived as just another liberal speech, while an interview about her proposal on some affirmative action measures (that were never implemented) is ironically commented and ridiculed by a male journalist because of its implicit feminism.\textsuperscript{24}

2. \textit{Image of women in the doctrine of the party.}

At the content level of the National Liberal Party’s (PNL) official programs, the main focus is on the classical individual, regardless of one’s gender. Thus, if one searches the web site of PNL\textsuperscript{25} (which contains the nucleus of the basic political programs, principles, organization, representatives, and thousands of texts and public speeches

\textsuperscript{22}The two still unachieved propositions are applying the principle of equal pay for equal work, and rewarding a wife’s [domestic] work with money (Mihaiescu, \textit{Din istoria}, 142-143).

\textsuperscript{23}This is probably the Romanian version of the slogan “sisterhood is powerful.”

\textsuperscript{24}For the first example, see Mona Musca, “Stoparea violentei în familie,” Online. Available HTTP: <www.pnl.ro/?id=dp881> (last accessed May 4, 2004); for the second one, see Lucian Gheorghiu, “Peste patru ani femeia ne va stapîni” [In Four-Year Time the Woman Will Dominate Us], \textit{Cotidianul} (December 25-31, 2000), Online. Available HTTP: <www.cotidianul.ro/antierioare/2000/cancan/cancan2531dec.htm#In%20anul%202000%20femeia%20n e%20va%20stapani> (last accessed May 4, 2004). The comments of the author are rather malicious, aiming at diminishing her proposal, making them look ridiculous and counting on the readers’ consensus that all this “feminist” stuff is unsound and radical.

\textsuperscript{25}Source: www.pnl.ro.
produced by its members) one will find no text that contains the word “feminism” or “gender,” and only 17 cases where the word “women” is mentioned. Out of these 17, almost half mention the word “women” only once, and in non-significant occurrences. The rest of them either refer to the National Delegation of the party, which has a commission dealing with women, or finally belong to a text that tries to say something meaningful on women. Still, this alleged neutrality (that has been so powerfully criticized by feminist authors) unfortunately covers a rather conservative image of the role of women. Most often in the public speeches, women are primarily associated with their family roles. Ironically or not, even the pro-feminist attitudes are “tamed” by connecting them with the institution of the family.

I will only give an example that I find paradigmatic. Back in 2000, Deputy Mona Musca lunched a project called “Woman, a social capital of Romania” and in its framework a program called “The offensive of the success model.” This program aimed to raise a campaign of changing mentalities, by promoting the models of several successful women (businesswomen, politicians, intellectuals). Well, to counterbalance this, the program was endorsed on the International Day of the Family, and the title under which it was publicized by the party was “Homage to the family.” I think no other comments are necessary.

3. The quota issue
Following again some EU recommendations, the quota issue (regarding a more balanced participation of women in the legislative and executive politics) was rediscovered during the last two legislatures. Of course, it had to pass almost a decade after the collapse of the communist regime that the much-blamed “30 percent” rule (now raising toward 50 percent) could be seriously discussed. The PNL position significantly oscillated on this matter.

I will briefly mention here three moments: the first one is 1997, when deputy Mona Musca opposed deputy Paula Ivanescu’s proposal that parties should be given financial incentives to promote a balanced proportion of women and men on their lists. The second one is 2000, when the same Mona Musca declared for the press that she would endorse a proposal that parties should have a fixed number of eligible seats for women, while for the rest of the places an open competition may apply. Third, in 2002, the recent proposition of MP Nicolae Vlad Popa that, starting with future elections, all party candidate lists should exhibit parity between men and women. As you can see, a libertarian point of view was followed by an affirmative action type of measure, to end up to promoting parity. If a similar change of discourse were to be adopted regarding a “hot” issue, such as corruption, any party would be definitely sanctioned by its own electorate. Of course, these measures were so far promoted only at the level of discourse (but isn’t it the case for corruption as well?). Still, the issue is not perceived as an important one, and this is why PNL could make such spectacular changes in its position.

26 We have a Romanian joke saying that if one does not want to solve a problem, then he or she must make a commission for dealing with it...
27 The proposition was initiated by senator Nicolae Vlad Popa, who at the same time mentioned that most parties have less than one third part women candidates on their electoral lists (Source: Violeta Cherciu, “Intilnire cu presa” [Meeting the Media], Online. Available HTTP: <www.pnl.ro>, October 15, 2002). Of course, the proposition does not say where these women are going to be placed: at the top of the list, i.e. on the eligible positions, or at the bottom...
Therefore, overall, the message of the liberal party is not very satisfactory for a feminist agenda.

4. Liberal female representatives: the long journey towards a (recognized) feminist agenda

An important aspect of the Liberal Party is the fact that among its representatives there are two women that, despite the gender imbalance inside the party, are special. One of them is the chief of the liberal group in the Senate, Norica Nicolai. The other is the deputy Mona Musca.

In closing, I will focus on the example of Mona Musca. During the last legislature, she had 65 public interventions in the Deputies Chamber and 13 political interventions. She took part in 7 legislative initiatives, one of them concerning women’s issues (the law project for protecting the victims of domestic violence, which was later integrated in the law for fighting and preventing domestic violence). And yet, her activity is not perceived as a committed feminist one, and many Romanian feminists comment rather negatively on her political performance. Without trying to diminish this aspect, I think there are some reasons for her ambiguous attitude.

The ambiguity concerning her public image I was talking about is evident when one searches the Internet. For example, if one types “Mona Musca and parliament,” one will find serious and informative reports and official texts mentioning her genderless activity as a liberal deputy. When searching “Mona Musca and women,” one finds a series of articles that were published in different tabloids and the scandal press. Here, the reporters adopt a familiar attitude when speaking about her, and eventually gossip on her supposedly feminism.

This is probably why Mona Musca’s own attitude concerning her feminism is still an ambiguous one that falls between polite (liberal-type) rejection (“We need competence, not feminism”) and more or less hidden acceptance of it.

Conclusion

Feminism as a political ideology is not largely accepted in Romanian society. Rather, it has entered and remains concentrated at the academic (university) level and at a very thin level of the civic society (some NGOs). Since 1989, Romanian “deep” society has maintained a patriarchal vision of the relations between men and women. I wanted to argue that, among all versions or families of feminism, liberal feminism was probably the most likely way of introducing and consolidating feminist ideas. Unfortunately, representatives of the Romanian liberal party (men and women alike) still have an ambiguous discourse concerning women, somewhere between a solid paternalist attitude and a somehow shy, exotic feminist one.

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28 Mona Musca was born on 04.05.1949 in Turda, Cluj. She graduated from the Faculty of Letters at Timisoara. Assistant professor at the University of Timisoara, she collaborated with the Romanian Television for the show “Cuvinte potrivite” [Appropriate Words] and was researcher at the Linguistic Institute “Iorgu Iordan” from the Romanian Academy. She has been a deputy since 1996, member of the Commission for Culture, Art and Media, co-author of the new law for organizing and functioning of radio and television. She is also the chief of the Department for image and media of the National Liberal Party.


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WHOSE INTERESTS DO THEY DEFEND?
PROBLEMS OF THE POLISH FEMINIST MOVEMENT

Magdalena Dabrowska

Abstract

Several attempts to explain the lack of women’s support for the Polish feminist movement appeared in the feminist literature. They mostly concentrate on the external reasons, such as the communist heritage and the negative linkages created between communism and feminism, the specificity of the Polish culture, the influence of the Catholic Church. The authors usually do not examine the feminist movement, its aims and ideas. In this article, I maintain that the lack of the support for feminists’ activities is caused not only by external reasons, but also by the values, politics and discourses of feminist movement itself. Several characteristics are the most significant for the Polish feminist movement: concentration on the public sphere, depreciation of the family and motherhood, atheistic character of the movement and women’s victimization in the feminist discourse. I demonstrate that the set of values and aims promoted by Polish feminism radically differs from the values respected by the majority of Polish women. This disharmony causes the lack of women’s support for the movement.

Introduction

The problem of difference between “Eastern” and Western” feminism raises numerous questions. Is it possible to speak about “East” and “West” after the collapse of the iron curtain, after several years of political transformation, and, finally, after the accession of several Eastern European countries into the structures of European Union? Is it possible to speak about “Western” feminism, if feminist doctrine consists of numerous versions of feminism? What kind of feminism is the most “Western” and suitable to compare with “Eastern” feminism? And finally, is the experience of communism sufficient reason to speak about all post-communist countries as about one, homogeneous, simply “Eastern” entity? The dichotomy between “Eastern” and “Western” feminism is today more of a historical problem. It lost its actuality and ability to inspire really stimulating discussions. Besides, the comparison between Eastern feminism and Western feminism suggests a relation between “original” and “copy”. The original is usually better, more creative, while the copy is a more or less successful repetition. The whole relation is based on domination and subordination. It is better to break with the tradition of “copy” and “original” in order to speak about feminism in Central-Eastern Europe without comparing it to its Western counterpart. Each Eastern-European country has its own version of feminism, its own problems and strategies.

I would like to concentrate on another dichotomy that seems to emerge, at least from within the Polish feminist movement: the dichotomy between “feminism” and “women”. The feminist movement has a very limited impact on the shaping of public and private spheres in Poland. Even more interesting than this is the fact that it also has a very limited influence on women. Simply, a lot of women does not support feminist ideas or even express very critical remarks about feminism. Thus, surprisingly, the movement created to express and defend women’s interests is not supported by women. If this is so, in whose name do feminists speak? Whose interests do they defend? In this article I will try to explain why the feminist movement has
such an insignificant influence on women’s lives and consciousness and why it is lacking their support.

External reasons

The feminist movement has a marginal impact on the public opinion and on the public life. Research shows that the majority of Poles simply do not know anything about feminism. Malgorzata Fuszara, a sociologist from Warsaw University, investigated the way the society understands the notion of feminism. In 2000 the researchers asked a group of people the following question: “If a member of your family or a friend asked you what feminism is, what would you answer?” 53% of the respondents could not give any answer! Various authors attempted to explain the reason why the feminist movement did not gain popularity and women’s support in Eastern Europe. They usually concentrate on external reasons, such as the communist experience, the specificity of the Polish culture or the strong influence of the Catholic Church on public and private life.

Especially in the early articles published after 1989, the lack of support for the feminist movement in Eastern Europe is explained by the category of the communist experience. It is claimed that the negative opinion about feminists and women’s organizations expressed by the society derives from the experiences of the previous political system. Some authors base their explanation on the comparison between women’s lifestyles in the communist states and in the Western states. According to this explanation, feminism is perceived as a luxury available only for rich, Western women. In Poland, the country where the most basic products were constantly lacking, feminism is not necessary because it is not a basic product, one that you could not survive without. As an illustration to this hypothesis, Barbara Limanowska relates to an answer given to an article published in one of the women’s magazines in 1986 where there were presented several feminists ideas introduced in the United States. One of the readers wrote a letter in which she said: “I consider the publication of this article to be a misunderstanding. The comparison between women’s lifestyle in Poland and United States is ridiculous and arrogant. What is the number of rolls of toilet paper per capita in Poland and in the United States?” The claim that Western feminism is evaluated as a luxury by Eastern Europe is also supported by Ann Snitow. She maintains: “In post-communist countries, Western feminism was often rejected for its bourgeois character. Its mistakes, racism and classism are commonly known. […] Western feminism, with its central imageries concentrated around pleasure and free choice, easily can be interpreted as hedonistic and not serious.” Both authors concentrate rather on the lack of support for the feminist movement during communism. The economic and political situation made it impossible for feminist ideas to develop in Poland. The comparison of feminism to Western luxury used by

feminists in the 80’s and early 90’s is not working today. Feminism, as well as toilet paper, lost its bourgeois character.

Another explanation also relates to the communist past. It suggests that the feminist movement is associated with the communist ideology and for this reason does not gain popularity in a democratic state. During the communist regime, there was only one feminist organization in Poland, Women’s League, created by the government in 1945 with the purpose of propagating the socialist ideology among women and to represent the interests of the totalitarian state. Slawomira Walczewska, a feminist from Cracow, claims that Women’s League, “as an organization created by communists, realized the emancipatory concept that derived from the communist ideology and was not interested in the discussion of alternative conceptions.”4 The League promoted the ideal of professionally active women, often performing traditionally male occupations, like bricklayer or tractor driver. Although the League promoted the model of professional women, it was not concerned with the conditions of women’s work or with the discriminatory practices such as unequal payment or difficult access to high positions. The organization did not attempt to change the gender stereotypes deeply rooted in the society, such as women’s responsibility for children and household. Problems of women’s sexuality or sexual violence were not in the area of Women’s League interest. According to Walczewska, the activity of Women’s League had negative consequences for the feminist movement that started to develop after the collapse of communism.5 The feminist activists were identified with the communist ideology. The ideas of gender equality and equal access to labor market were connected with the communist slogans calling women to work on tractors.

Women’s League activity resulted also in women’s passivity, especially visible in a democratic state. Walczewska claims that during communism women did not have the possibility to fight for their rights and to defend their real needs and interests through the structures of the League.6 Other forms of political activity were not allowed by the totalitarian state. As a consequence, a lot of women disappointed by politics decided to abandon the political activity and to retreat to the private. After the collapse of communism they did not engage in the defense of their interests in the democratic state. They were passive and preferred to stay in the private sphere during economic and political transformations. They also lost trust in women’s organizations and in their ability to represent women’s needs.

Anna Titkow, a scholar from Warsaw University, tries to justify the lack of support for feminism using a historical explanation.7 She relates to the Polish history and the nobleman ethos. According to Titkow, Polish noble women had a high position in the society. They often managed their property and land, were engaged in trade and in other economic activities. Nobleman ethos obliged man to respect his wife. Women were in fact a subordinated group, but their sphere of influence was quite widespread. When Poland lost its independence, woman’s role of wife and mother became politicized. The family was a place where national identity was sustained, defended and prolonged. Women were most usually responsible for protecting national tradition, by teaching children the mother tongue, Christian

religion and Polish history. Such a situation reinforced women’s position in society. Women’s role gained additional political, national and cultural meaning. Furthermore, a model of the strong woman who can survive in any situation started to develop. Titkow presents two possible explanations on how this special historical situation influenced the lack of emancipation ideas in Poland. According to the first explanation, emancipation was not necessary because women gained high social status and respect and they were also included in the public sphere during the fight for independence. In addition, national interest united women and there was no place for ideas of emancipation. Thus, the national fight simply consumed all women’s activities.

The influence of the Catholic Church on the public and private spheres is also often mentioned when explaining the lack of women’s support for the feminist movement. In Polish history, Christian religion was one of the fundaments of national identity. During communist times, religion was one of the main spheres of resistance. It is impossible to deny the important role of the Catholic Church for Polish national identity. On the other hand, the strong position of Catholic Church has negative consequences for women’s emancipation. The role of women as mothers and housewives promoted by the Church is very distant from the feminist ideas of gender equality. Moreover, the Christian ideal of suffering and submissiveness does not encourage women to actively fight for changing their situation. This aspect is developed by Barbara Limanowska, who believes that Polish women do not have the common group consciousness that would enable them to be aware of discrimination. They accept and are often proud of their traditional role in the society. They do not want to bring upon any changes.

The lack of support for feminism is sometimes explained by the society’s stereotypes about feminism, stereotypes that are also reproduced by the media. Often – however, not always – the picture of feminism presented in the media is based on stereotypes. Newspaper articles claim that feminists suffer from brain changes, they do not respect any moral principles, they are ugly lesbians or they want to destroy all men. Feminists accept and even strengthen these stereotypes. Not long ago, one of the most recognized feminists decided to be a hostess in a television contest. Her task and the way she behaves reiterate all stereotypical images of feminists. She performs the role of an “intellectual and emotional castrator in a sadomasochistic contest.” She is malicious and cruel, she seems to hate people, women as well as men. Such a stereotypical image, accepted and even followed by feminists, does not help to achieve women’s support.

Katarzyna Rosner, a scholar from Warsaw University, explains the weakness of the Polish feminist movement by concentrating on the feminist movement in a democratic state. In her opinion, the feminist movement is weak because it does not use democratic structures to increase the efficiency of the movement. The lack of any attempt to develop is the main reason of its weakness. The Polish feminist movement consists in small organizations or foundations that only occasionally cooperate. They do not attempt to gain wide support, they do not recruit new members, they do not try to expand their organizations. On the contrary, feminists seem to feel comfortable when being isolated and marginalized. They do not believe that it is possible to

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8 Limanowska, “Dlaczego.”
become a popular and strong social movement. According to Rosner, only a strong feminist movement, supported by many women, will be politically effective.

Internal reasons

Feminists use mostly external conditions such as history, tradition, culture, religion, or women’s passivity to explain the lack of support for the Polish feminist movement. In my opinion, it is worth analyzing the feminist movement in itself, its aims, political program and discourse, in order to find reasons for the lack of support for it. It seems that the feminist program does not correspond to women’s needs. In addition, the pessimistic image of woman as a victim of patriarchy does not encourage women to support the movement.

Polish feminism may be characterized as liberal feminism. Liberal feminism is most visible in the media and seems to be supported by the most influential feminists. Equality of all human beings is a postulate of feminism and of liberalism. Feminists concentrate mainly on women’s rights, because women as a group are more disadvantaged and their interests are often neglected by universally oriented liberalism. Feminists seem to believe that the introduction of legal mechanisms will effectively improve women’s situation in the society. Legal changes are treated as the best evidence that something is being done for women. Legal changes may be used by feminists as a ‘material’ proof of their successes when applying for a grant to Western organizations, and by the government as a proof for European Union that a lot has been done for gender equality in Poland. However, it is questionable if legal changes are really beneficial to women and if they really are and can be used by women. Especially if we remember that Poland is a country where laws are not respected and, if possible, are avoided, courts are overloaded, legal awareness is low and lawyer help is expensive.

Feminists concentrate mainly on the public sphere. The feminist discourse creates certain models of women: women with professional career, independent and rejecting the traditional role. Their emphasis on work and career is interesting mainly for educated, middle class women, without social responsibilities such as family or children. Feminist actions are aimed at creating women in a similar pattern with men: first of all, they should work. The movement limits its ‘target group’ or group of supporters to young, well-educated women, interested first of all in career. They will be the group that will gain most benefits from this orientation of feminist politics. They will gain access to public positions, to politics, to high levels of professional career. The Polish feminist movement is simply defending the interests of its members – middle class women.Only this group of women will benefit from parity in politics. Working class and poor women will not gain anything.

The feminist discourse attacks the traditional, heterosexual family, but it does not propose any alternative solution. One may even have the feeling that, when speaking about family, feminists have in mind mainly single parents, homosexual relations or abusive families. They do not speak about average families that make up the majority of the population and they do not tackle upon the issue of how to re-create power relations within the family so that the institution should be more respectful and concerned with women’s needs. Their discourse, concentrated mainly on the public sphere, is not attractive for women, who would like to balance career and motherhood. Such a political program automatically excludes a lot of potential supporters of the feminist movement. According to bell hooks, the devaluation of
family reflects the class nature of the feminist movement and excludes a lot of women of color from joining it. It seems that the experiences and values of the women of color are similar to the values and the experiences of Polish women. Polish feminists follow the patterns of white, “bourgeois women’s liberationists” and base the movement on middle-class values. Such strategy does not work and the movement does not benefit from women’s support.

The appreciation of motherhood, an experience that is extremely valuable for a lot of women, is not visible in the feminist discourse. Issues such as motherhood, intimate relations with a (heterosexual) partner, or family relations based on equality, are missing. They do not propose the role of the mother that could be an alternative to the traditional model of mother created by the conservative discourse. Another problem that feminists have to face is the language in which they speak about women’s issues. They try to build their discourse in opposition to the conservative one, promoting mainly women’s maternal role. If conservatives emphasize the value of motherhood, feminists emphasize the importance of the professional career for women’s happiness. These discourses present two contradictory poles of reality. An existence based only on motherhood or only on career is not complete and will not assure happiness for the majority of women. There is a gap that has to be filled with a new discourse, adapted to the expression of new values, new feminist contents. The task of the feminist movement is the creation of such a discourse. In my opinion, the creation of the new discourse, based on a new understanding of women’s place in culture, is the most important and the most challenging assignment of the Polish feminist movement. Without a proper language and the promotion of the values important for women, the feminist movement will always be marginal.

The feminist movement has a specific relationship with religion. It is secular, even atheistic, and rather conflicting with the Catholic Church. Feminist ideas of emancipation are different from the Catholic visions of woman’s traditional place in culture and family. Unfortunately, the feminist movement goes not only against the Church teaching, but also against the women who believe and respect Christian values. The research done by Joanna Tomaszewska on the relationship between feminism and religion reveals that especially Catholic women feel excluded by feminists.11 The women interviewed confess that they were often accused by feminists of hypocrisy, of attempting to connect two antithetical systems of values: feminism and religion. One of the women states ironically: “I thought I was a feminist, but feminists sisters helped me to realize that I was wrong.”

Abortion seems to be the central issue of the Polish feminist movement. Such a situation has an understandable explanation: in Poland, abortion is allowed only in exceptional cases. Feminists often present abortion as woman’s most important right. Often, in public debates, other aims of the movement are neglected, while abortion is presented as the most important concern. For this reason the movement may be perceived exclusively as a pro-abortion movement. Concentration on abortion as one of the fundamental values of the Polish feminist movement excludes Christian women from joining it. Their religion and also the values they believe in are in contradiction with the issue presented by feminists as a fundament.

The feminist movement is not able to attract women. First of all, it uses a specific discourse on women. Women, in the feminist discourse, are usually presented as victims: victims of patriarchal society, victims of discriminatory practices, victims

of male aggression, victims of power relations. Various feminist articles and brochures present women as victims. The best example of such an attitude is the picture on the cover of the feminist magazine Zadra.\textsuperscript{12} It presents a woman standing in the street, with pampers and her hand plastered. She is begging for money. In her hands she keeps a piece of paper explaining the reasons of her occupation. “I am a woman. God bless you” is written on the paper. The photo suggests that being a woman is sufficient explanation for being a beggar. Being a woman is synonymous to being a victim. The next issue of Zadra publishes a comment on the photograph. The author explains that the photo was taken during a performance of the artist Angelika Fojtuch. The author interprets the performance as follows: “She was standing for three hours, as a radically weak individual, passive and vulnerable to every gesture, to being wounded; even provoking being attacked or mocked at. Simply, as a woman in our society, in our culture.”\textsuperscript{13}

Feminist ideas are directed towards two groups of women: patriarchy defeaters and victims of patriarchy. The first group consists of women who want professional or political career and who see in feminism a method to increase their chances of achieving this aim. These women are usually well-educated members of the middle class who are often leaders of the movement. The other group consists of victims of violence in family, single mothers in difficult economic situations, victims of sexual violence and women in unwanted pregnancy. These women are necessary to justify and legitimize the existence of the feminist movement. Women’s victimization by the feminist discourse is described and criticized by bell hooks. She asserts that “[the] sexist ideology teaches women that being a woman is being a victim. Rather than repudiate this equation (which mystifies female experience, for, in their everyday lives, most women are not continually passive, helpless, powerless ‘victims’), women’s liberationists embraced it, making shared victimization the basis for woman bonding. This meant that women had to conceive themselves as ‘victims’ in order to feel that the feminist movement was relevant to their lives.”\textsuperscript{14} The Polish feminist movement uses the practices described by hooks. Feminists’ discourse deliberately constructs women as victims. After doing this, feminists may construct themselves as liberators, as the group that will defend the interests of those poor, victimized women. Through this strategy they legitimize their right to represent the interests of all women.

For a lot of Polish women it is not easy to think about themselves as victims, because they rather see themselves as strong, independent women. Especially those less privileged have to be strong in order to deal with everyday problems. bell hooks comments on this type of situation as follows: “Women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives. They cannot afford to see themselves solely as ‘victims’ because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal power they posses. It would be psychologically demoralizing for these women to bond with other women on the basis of shared victimization.”\textsuperscript{15} For similar reasons, the feminist discourse is not attractive for Polish women. Moreover, if they had to choose between the conservative discourse that emphasizes the “essential role of women” and “revives the dignity of motherhood” and the feminist discourse that presents women as victims, they would probably prefer the former.

\textsuperscript{12} Zadra 1 (18/ 2004).
\textsuperscript{14} bell hooks, Feminist Theory from Margin to Center (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 45.
\textsuperscript{15} hooks, Feminist Theory, 45.
Many bell hooks’ critiques of “bourgeois women’s liberationists” may be directly applied to the Polish context. Polish women respect values such as religion and family, which are important for women of color as well. For similar reasons Polish women are reluctant to join the feminist movement. The remarks of the women of color towards the feminist movement may be valuable for Polish feminists. They could be useful for re-shaping the politics of the movement, its aims, and, first of all, the values on which it is based.

Conclusion

Polish women, now living in a democratic country, did not choose feminist premises. They do not support the feminist endeavor, they do not join the feminist organizations. It is very likely that they also do not support the feminist program and the vision of femininity promoted by feminists. The feminist organizations do not recognize, nor express the needs and the interests of the majority of Polish women. They have a certain vision of women and they try to actualize it. Women do not necessarily support such a vision. Monique Witting’s famous sentence may be paraphrased into “a feminist is not a woman”, which means that she may have false ideas about women’s needs and expectations.

It is important to ask if feminism, as characterized above, is able to represent the interests of all women, or at least of the majority of women. Are feminists legitimated to speak in the name of women? And if not, in whose name do they speak? Whose interests do they defend? Is it worth liberating somebody who does not want to be liberated? Do we witness the division between the wise, enlightened feminists and the dark masses of stupid women who have to be enlightened by the use of force? If so, women ‘liberated’ by the use of force will probably not use their newly achieved freedom. Should we assume, that feminists are right, that their vision of the world is the best possible one, so they should continue its attainment, without taking into consideration women’s needs and opinions? Feminists are just one more interest group, created to defend certain visions of the world and society, that it will repeat the schemes of all organizations, who fight to gain power, and, after completing this aim, they will forget about the group whose interests they promised to defend. In this pessimistic interpretation, the feminist movement will be just another movement struggling first of all for power. After getting it, they will forget about women, like all rulers do.

The lack of wide support is not particularly problematic for Polish feminists. Sławomira Walczewska says that: “It is a fact that ‘mass’ feminist movement does not exist in Poland. There are no women’s organizations assembling thousands of members, no demonstrations with banners. But, do we really need this kind of feminism? Don’t we remember marches with red banners that took place in the past? Don’t we remember the mass organization of Polish women and its mass support?” She seems to accept the lack of support for feminist activities. Instead of a mass movement, she proposes a movement for the élites, for educated, middle-class women. Walczewska concludes: “Feminism can be found in universities, in research institutions, in editorial rooms and publishing houses. It has great proponents. Should we worry that there are only a few of us? We should rather be happy that there are a

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Walczewska contrasts mass feminist movements in communist times with elite movements in a democratic state. Compulsory mass support for women’s organizations during communism did not mean that the ideas promoted by the organization were really supported, while the lack of support for women’s organizations in a democratic state, where citizens benefit from free choice and possibility to organize themselves according to their believes may suggest that feminists’ ideas are not accepted by the majority of women.

Several years ago Ann Snitow wrote about feminism in Central-Eastern Europe as follows: “I think that no one in the East nor in the West can predict what feminism will mean in this part of the world. […] Now, it is clear that the debates prompted by feminism are very important for these new societies.” Snitow is right, the discussion about feminism has already started. The feminist movement became a part of the political scene in Central-Eastern Europe. Unfortunately, feminists did not prompt far-reaching changes in customs, stereotypes or culture. They concentrated on legal issues and women’s access to the public sphere. Feminists were not able to achieve the most important aim, namely to convince women that feminism is really important, that it is useful for them. Feminists were not able to encourage women to join the movement and to struggle for their rights. I do not claim that the feminist movement is not necessary just because great numbers of women do not support it. On contrary, I think that there is still a lot of space for the development of various kinds of feminisms, for various emancipatory strategies and for various definitions of “women”. Without a new politics that is based on values important for the majority of women, feminism will not receive their support. I see prospects for Polish feminism only in development and diversity.

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18 Snitow, “Przyszłość,” 12.


WOMEN AND POLITICS IN DEMOCRATIC HUNGARY

Dorottya Rédai

Abstract

After the collapse of the state-socialist regime in Hungary, similarly to other countries in the region, women’s political participation radically declined and fifteen years later the situation does not show much promising signs of improvement. The goal of this paper is to offer an analysis of this phenomenon, focusing on the attitudes of parliamentary parties towards women’s roles and public participation; party policies on women’s issues; the current debate on women’s quotas; the media representation of women politicians; and women politicians’ views on women’s issues, on their roles and responsibilities as female public figures and the gendered messages they send to their constituency, shaping and constructing the meanings of gender in this specific post-socialist political scene.

Introduction

After the collapse of the state-socialist regime in Hungary, the patterns of women’s political participation changed. This change is mostly described as a decline, which is true as far as numbers are concerned, but the phenomenon is difficult to understand through such a one-dimensional approach. The goal of this paper is to inquire into women’s situation in national politics through describing parliamentary parties’ attitudes and policies concerning women’s public participation and quotas; women politicians’ views on women’s issues and on their roles and responsibilities as female public figures. I intend to examine the present situation in the context of state socialist legacy and the “East-West” debate on feminism during the transition with the aim to present a specific Hungarian picture of the issue of women’s parliamentary participation.

Although Hungary is still in the process of democratic transition, joining the European Union is a historical turning point for the country and the threshold of a new phase of democratic development. At present we are at a sufficient distance to be able to look back and evaluate what heritage state-socialism has given us in terms of gender identity and relations, political discourse and the shape of feminism. At the same time we can look ahead to see how joining the EU might bring different and novel issues and streams of gender discourse and relations, with a potential to modify the face of “Eastern” feminism. At such a moment I consider discussing the issue of women’s political participation particularly relevant.

Women’s presence in parliament during and after state socialism

It has been widely discussed how and why the relatively high percentage of women representatives during state socialism dropped significantly after the collapse of the regime.1 During the Kádár regime women were officially and centrally

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“emancipated,” “liberated through work.” This meant on the one hand, that women had to work full time, and, although social services from the 1960s (such as day-care services, paid sick leave, maternity leave etc.) were supposed to help women, they still ended up bearing a very heavy double burden. On the other hand, women were lifted out of the isolation of the private sphere and were given the opportunity – and were indeed expected – to participate in public life, including politics. In the single-party system this was a mere token representation; the selection being based on loyalty to the party and skills and relations necessary for negotiating between official party ideology and citizens, and there was no opportunity to voice dissident individual or community concerns. Nomination of women representatives was due to a semi-official quota system for women, peasants and workers. This quota system and the social services benefiting women were admired by those Western feminists who, until the 1980s, tended to idealize socialism and look to it for a model of improving social institutions and gender relations in capitalist countries. What such adherents of state socialism failed to realize was that in these ostensibly “woman-friendly” societies, women were in fact not at all or scarcely present in the highest level of decision-making bodies.

In the 1980s, women held about 30% of parliamentary seats and one or two women were members of the cabinet, responsible for “feminine” sectors, such as health and light industry. Compared to this proportion, it is true that the democratic transition has brought a severe decline in women’s political participation. However, considering that in the state socialist era women’s presence in parliament did not entail any real power, it can be claimed that the average of 9% in the four democratic elections is an actual rise in terms of opportunity for women’s interest representation. Also, if we consider women’s participation from an international perspective, it appears that it is not exceptionally low. In any case, this percentage, whether it is seen as a rise or fall, is nowhere near 30%, the critical mass of representation.

Before 1998 women were not significant in the political discourse; women’s issues emerged mainly in the context of abortion legislation. Between 1994 and

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4 Fodor, “The Political Woman?,” 147.


6 Whether women politicians consider their parliamentary presence as such an opportunity will be discussed later.

7 Gal and Kligman, Reproducing Gender, 94.


9 Funk and Mueller, Gender Politics, 9-12.
1998, when the socialist-liberal (MSZP-SZDSZ) coalition\textsuperscript{10} was first in power, they did not have a clearly articulated commitment to increasing women’s presence in politics, and this lack of positive attitude did not encourage women to enter the political arena for the 1998 elections. Neither did the conservative government in 1998-2002, which \textit{did} have an articulate view on women’s place in society: women’s traditional role based on the patriarchal family-model was insistently promoted both on the level of rhetoric and actual policies.\textsuperscript{11} A forcefully projected image of woman, pushed back to the private sphere of the family, presented as submissive and subordinate, her greatest possible desire and achievement in life being marriage and motherhood. Motherhood, seen as a moral obligation to resolve the crisis of an aging population, has greatly influenced public attitude and, together with the aggressive, vehement, mud-throwing tone of the 2002 election campaign, may well have contributed to discouraging women from running for parliamentary seats. In fact, the 1.5% rise in women’s participation in 2002 is probably due only to the 20% quota system introduced by MSZP in 1999.\textsuperscript{12}

The electoral system and the issue of quotas

In Hungary a mixed member proportional representation (PR) electoral system with two rounds of elections, 5% electoral threshold and a mixture of single-member constituencies, county lists and national or compensatory party lists is used. While PR systems are theoretically more favorable for women, the Hungarian system is not advantageous for them, because the highest number of parliamentary seats are filled from single-member constituencies, where women are much less likely to be nominated in “winnable” positions.\textsuperscript{13}

In the 1998-2002 conservative parliamentary term 8.3\% of representatives were women (32 women out of 385 MPs) and in the present left-wing term proportions are not much higher: 9.8\%, i.e. 38 women. Only in MSZP has there been a real increase in the proportion of women; in the case the other three parties the number of women representatives has remained the same, while the total number of MPs has increased in the case of Fidesz and MDF, and decreased in the case of SZDSZ. 8 out of the present 10 women MPs of Fidesz were also elected in 1998, the one woman in MDF is in both cases the head of the party and 2 out of the 3 SZDSZ women were representatives between 1998 and 2002 as well.

\textsuperscript{11} E.g. financially supporting families with 3 children to the extent that might attract women to give birth to 3 children (or more).
\textsuperscript{12} The total number of MPs / women MPs and the percentage of women among the number of MPs in the different parliamentary parties in 1998 and 2002:
1998: Fidesz: 144/10 (6.9\%), FKGP: 49/4 (8.2\%), MDF: 16/1 (6.25\%), MIÉP: 12/1 (8.3\%), MSZP: 136/14 (10.3\%), SZDSZ: 24/3 (12.5\%).
\textsuperscript{13} Antic and Jalušić, \textit{Women}, 36-38.
The debate on quotas divides political attitudes: MSZP applies a quota system while the other three parties oppose it. This is partly due to their political stance on the issue of equal opportunities, and can partly be explained by the hang-up about state-socialist heritage, which continues to strongly influence party rhetoric, attitudes and policies.

As far as Fidesz and MDF are concerned, women’s presence in politics is not an issue, which logically follows from their general attitude towards women’s place in society, well summarized by a young female Fidesz MP claiming that “the introduction of women’s quota is dangerous because – among other reasons – it might ruin the life of Hungarian families if suddenly too many women are going to enter politics.” On a theoretical level, as it was expressed by a member of MDF, “passive and active suffrage, i.e. that somebody can elect and be elected, is a basic citizen right. Differentiation between citizens in this respect (e.g. on the basis of gender, race, religion, nationality or ethnicity) is against the constitution. Therefore no one can influence directly the number of women holding public positions.” Another female Fidesz MP said she found the quota system hypocritical, as the problem of improving the situation of disadvantaged social layers could not be resolved by quotas. She voiced one of the popular arguments against quotas: “Just because someone is a woman, she is not necessarily competent.” (Neither is a man, I may add…) This argument cannot be defined as right-wing, however; it is pronounced with equal conviction on both sides of the political arena.

Socialists and liberals agree in theory that legislative measures and institutions are necessary to improve women’s and other disadvantaged social groups’ situation. Their disagreement on quotas stems from their different theoretical approaches towards how to achieve equality and their different interpretation of the Article on Equal Opportunities of the Constitution – the role and constitutionality of positive discrimination. According to the liberal interpretation, which corresponds to the above-quoted conservative approach, positive discrimination violates men’s passive voting right. Everybody has equal rights to elect and be elected, and as the right to vote is a fundamental civil right while positive discrimination is not, the former

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15 I received this answer from a male MDF politician on behalf of Dávid Ibolya (woman), head of the party, to my inquiry about parties’ stance on women’s nomination for the 2004 EU parliamentary elections. I asked leading women politicians of the four parliamentary parties in September 2003 whether parties have an official standpoint/policy on nominating women as candidates in the elections, whether there are quotas, whether there is some sort of EU pressure or expectations towards the parties regarding the number of women candidates, how many women will run as candidates of their party, and what potential hindrances/difficulties there are with regard to the issue. Although the question specifically inquires about EU elections, the standpoint obviously holds for national elections, as well.

16 When I refer to or quote women MPs’ words, I use interviews conducted with 11 women representatives by Réka Sáfrány and myself in January-February 2004, co-authoring the policy report “Beijing Plus 10” for the UNRISD by Éva Fodor, presently in draft version. I use the interviews for reference here with the kind permission of Fodor and Sáfrány.

17 Constitution 70/A. §. “If any measure to attain a social objective or to enforce a constitutional right can be implemented only in a way that does not ensure equality - but at the same time does not violate the Constitution - such positive discrimination cannot be deemed unconstitutional. The limit of positive discrimination is the prohibition concerning equal human dignity in a broad sense, and the fundamental human rights set down in the Constitution. Although social equality as an objective, as a social interest, can precede individual interests, it cannot precede the constitutional rights of the individual.” Quoted in English in Csaba Tordai, “Parliamentary or quota system?” (Conference paper, Roles, Rules and Ratios: Men and Women in Politics, November 3-4, 2000).
cannot be restricted by the latter. Another classic liberal argument is that a person should be judged on the basis of her/his personal merits, therefore if somebody is elected just because she is a woman, which could be the consequence of quotas, it is just as sexist and discriminatory as excluding women from the political arena. Liberals see the quota-system as treating the symptom and they profess to be in favor of the elimination of the cause: “It is no use changing the proportions of parliamentary representation by means of quotas, if the convictions and beliefs in people’s minds remain untouched. (...) Prejudices, the conditioned sexist behavior can be combated only by education, raising awareness and propaganda – in the positive sense of the word.”

Interestingly, the concept of positive discrimination is apparently not opposed by SZDSZ when it comes to other disadvantaged social groups. In winter 2003 Bálint Magyar, SZDSZ Minister of Education proposed applying positive discrimination towards Roma and other disadvantaged young people at higher education entrance exams, i.e. accepting members of disadvantaged social groups from a 20% lower test score.

Behind the official party line, SZDSZ is not uniform on the issue of quotas and positive discrimination. A woman MP of SZDSZ stated that the liberals are continually struggling to find a way to bring more women into the party. The issue is brought up again and again, but proposals about quotas by female members are as a rule rejected by the most prominent male members citing liberal theory. She argues that the “everyone according to their merits” argument does not hold in the present situation because women start out from such a backward position that support would be justified until men and women could stand on an equal footing. She points out another factor of opposing quotas: as SZDSZ is a small party, replacing male MPs with females would mean that a number of men would lose their jobs, which they will obviously not support.

According to the socialist interpretation of Article 70/A, “formal equality before the law does not guarantee the elimination of social discrimination and equality. That is why the implementation of basic constitutional principles needs several additional regulations. These are the measures of the so-called positive discrimination.” As there is a great inequality between women and men in politics, “any effort to reduce this inequality is reasonable.” From this standpoint, the quota system is of common interest, for it enhances democracy and therefore it is to the advantage not only of one certain social group, but also of society as a whole. In the socialist argument the liberal one is turned around: women have first to play an important role in politics, which will in turn contribute to changing sexist public attitude towards women, and thus promote gender equality.

MSZP introduced a quota system in 1999, according to which at least 20% of the candidates running for parliamentary and local elections and party members have to be below the age of 35 and at least 20% have to be women. Although this does not guarantee that 20% of the parliamentary seats are actually occupied by women,

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18 Tordai, “Parliamentary or quota system?”
22 Wiener, “Ensuring Equality.”
because it is not stated that women candidates are to be put in winning positions, the number of socialist women MPs significantly increased from 1998 to 2002. 11 of the 14 women elected in 1998 were elected in 2002 as well, and the other 13 were new representatives.

Whereas MSZP emphasizes the significance of the quota system in supporting women and young people, interestingly, women MPs are not so unified on the issue. The elder women, who started their career back in the state socialist era or at the beginning of the transition, claim that they do not need the quota because they have already proved their worth in the course of their work. They also claim that earlier they had to work much more than their male colleagues to achieve equal success and recognition, implying that it is easier now for young women. Younger women MPs on the other hand say that although the quota has helped them into position, personal merits are much more important and that somebody should not run as a candidate just because she is a woman – the same argument as liberals and conservatives use against quotas.

Party attitudes towards women as candidates and women’s issues

In the 2002 election program of MDF the only context in which women are mentioned is that of motherhood and the family. The program claims that “the family and the development of the Hungarian population are issues central to the politics of MDF.” Various family-supporting financial measures are to be introduced, part-time employment is to be encouraged as it “enables the parent – primarily mothers, in accordance with our traditions – to better reconcile childbearing and employment [...]” and “full-time mothering” is going to be proposed again, as considered “necessary in order to encourage childbearing and to provide more favorable conditions for quality child-raising.” And the ultimate incentive to have children: at their old age (both?) parents will receive a certain percentage of their working children’s salary as a pension-supplement. When “huge anomalies” in Hungarian salaries are discussed, no mention is made of unequal pay for equal work.

The party program of Fidesz, written in December 2002 is completely gender-blind. It is claimed that during their governing the European Social Charter was endorsed and in the process of EU legal harmonization the Labor Code was amended, namely “regulations concerning the prohibition of discrimination are applied, the principle of ‘equal pay for equal work’ appears [...]”. In the social policy section the “successful” family policy of the Fidesz-government is mentioned, as opposed to the “fearsome” policy of the socialist-liberal government, which

25 All quotations from the various party documents are my translation. The passages quoted here are from X. 113-120.
27 The section titled “Legal harmonization in the world of work - the facts speak for themselves.” In fact, in the Fidesz-era nothing practical was done to apply these principles in the world of work and I venture to claim that if the government had not been pressured by the approaching EU accession, even this lip-service to equal opportunities would not have been paid. Also, a bill on equal opportunities for women and men, tabled by SZDSZ in February 2001, was rejected by the conservative coalition without discussion and so was an equal opportunity program draft tabled by MSZP in April 2001.
produces a “great disruption in the lives of Hungarian families.” The words ‘women’, ‘men’ (except for ‘statesmen’) and ‘gender’ do not appear in the text, and ‘equal opportunities’ is mentioned only in the context of Hungarian employees having equal opportunities with Western European ones when working in EU countries.

In the 2002 SZDSZ party program a separate chapter is devoted to the equality between women and men, discussing the concept of equal opportunities and anti-discrimination and the various areas (work, education, health, media etc.) where women are discriminated against. The paper proposes enacting equal opportunities legislation and establishing the institution of a deputy ombudsman for gender equality.

In the election program of MSZP women are not specifically addressed, although a few social issues particularly affecting women, such as childcare benefits or the improvement of teachers’ situation, are. In the more detailed government program the expression “equal opportunities” is not present, but women are mentioned in several contexts, most emphatically in the section on employment policies. These two are very general documents without detailed discussion of any social or economical issues. In the Act on Equal Opportunities ratified in January 2004, an effort to harmonize the act with the relevant EU legislation is prevalent, and discrimination against women is highly emphatic and constantly referred to in the elaboration of the various sub-chapters.

In spring 2003, an Equal Opportunities Directorate was set up within the Prime Minister’s Office and within it an Equal Opportunities for Women and Men Secretariat, which, although its operation has produced ambiguous results so far, is definitely a breakthrough. In establishing the Directorate, and in our politicians’ apparently growing sensitivity about gender issues, it is no doubt that the EU accession process, with gender mainstreaming directives looming over their heads, has been the most important factor, and I am not convinced that without pressure from the European Union such achievements would have been realized in the present state of public attitudes and political awareness concerning gender issues.

When the socialist-liberal government was set up in 2002, they prided in the unprecedently high percentage of women in the cabinet: 3 Ministers out of 16 (Interior, Health Affairs and Environment) and the Speaker of the House of Parliament were women. Since then the percentage has dropped: the Ministers of Health Affairs and Environment have been replaced by men, despite the lobbying of the MSZP Women’s Platform to appoint another woman to head the Ministry of Health Affairs. On the other hand, a new seat has been created and filled by a woman: the Minister of Equal Opportunities.

Women MPs’ gender awareness, attitudes towards feminism and women’s issues

The Women’s Platform (WP) of MSZP, comprising of local, regional and national bodies, was established in 1992. Their activities comprise mostly of organizing the distribution of social aid (e.g. clothes collection for the poor) and various events (e.g. the meeting of women mayors, meeting other European parties’ women’s platforms). Some members claim that in the early 1990s the WP helped transform the old communist party into a new European-type social-democratic one. Many women MPs

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29 The Minister of Environment was a member of SZDSZ, so there was no lobbying for her replacement by a woman.
admit that the WP helped advancing their career, thus it appears to be effective in this respect on the national level. However, one of the elder MPs complained that in the country the local WPs cannot operate very successfully because it is difficult to find adequately educated women who are willing to commit themselves to politics in the context of very traditional gender role expectations.

The Women’s Platform of Fidesz was established in the summer of 2003, with the initiation and support of Viktor Orbán, head of the party. It has often been quoted how, at the founding meeting of the WP, he invited the women to form a supporting network around their husbands in order to help them advance their career. One Fidesz woman MP was not sure whether she was a member of the WP, and another expressed her doubts about its interest representing capability. She finds it problematic that only women can be members, as she considers male aspects to be equally important in resolving women’s problems. At present, hardly any information is available about the WP; their website only includes news about events the members of the WP have participated in (e.g. a charitable auction, meetings with European conservative politicians, issuing statements about current issues).30

As for the two small parties, MDF does not have a women’s organization of any sort, which is not surprising, considering the fact that they have only one woman MP: the head of the party. The women in SZDSZ do not have an official platform either, but they formed an informal circle two years ago and organize regular events where they have discussions with the female party members and women guests about current social and political issues.

With respect to women representatives’ connections with women’s NGOs, regular relationships are scarce and incidental. Some MPs do not identify with or are not interested in the issues that women’s NGOs represent, arguing that being a woman politician does not necessarily mean that they are supposed to deal with women’s issues. Others claim that NGOs’ messages do not reach the level of national politics – with the exception of domestic violence, the only issue politicians have taken on their agenda, mainly due to NGO activism. Yet others claim that there are not many NGOs, their political role is insignificant and that it is not NGOs’ task to exert direct influence on party politics.

Women MPs claim that they do not feel being discriminated against as women, neither in the parliament, nor within the party. The elder women remember that in the state socialism era of “emancipation” it did not matter in terms of work whether one was a woman or a man. However, at the beginning of the transition, with the strengthening of conservative social and political thought, they experienced a backlash of scorn and underestimation, and had to work much harder than their male colleagues. Several women mention that communication in the parliament is less “macho” than in other scenes of their work – especially in the country where traditional attitudes to women’s roles are very strong – but if pressed, they can all come up with counterexamples. One MP says that at the beginning of the transition being a woman used to be a definite drawback at the appointment of candidates for the elections and often they were appointed because of the lack of a suitable male candidate. Regardless of age and political side, all women MPs are rather conservative in the sense that they expect and appreciate male chivalry (opening the door for them, helping with their coats, praising their looks etc.) and resent when they

are not treated with politeness and respect by their male colleagues and media representatives.

Although increasing the proportion of women in politics is very important, electing a woman for a representative does not necessarily mean she will stand up for women’s issues and interests. The youngest MPs interviewed do not consider it their task to deal with women’s issues because they define themselves as experts in other areas. Equal opportunities, social solidarity, women’s employment problems (part-time employment, unequal wages for the same work, equal treatment in the world of work) and domestic violence are mentioned as issues women MPs could work on. However, they do not presently have a developed network of solidarity and cooperation among women MPs to strengthen representation (neither within, nor among the parties), and they do not see the chance of forming such coalitions. As a socialist MP said, “party interests always overwrite women’s interests.”

A young socialist MP explained that the difference between right and left was that on the conservative side women were considered primarily in the context of motherhood and family, whereas in the more progressive left it was believed that women should have the choice between being a mother and pursuing a career. At the same time, women MPs do not see a conflict between managing their family and their career, and several of them claimed that they did not understand why having a double burden was seen as a potential problem for them, when “all women in other professions do the same.” The heavy double burden is a legacy of the state socialist emancipation of women, which female MPs apparently continue to bear without reflection.

The approaching EU parliamentary elections

The latest political event affecting women’s political position is the EU parliamentary elections in June, where parties will compete for 24 seats. Two months before the elections, candidates lists are not available on any of the four parties’ web sites; the information is to be found in daily newspapers, a fact that reflects the manifest lack of a clear conception for the nomination of candidates. The MSZP list is the most ‘Euro-conform’: in the winning positions (12-13 seats are expected to be won) there is parity, while in the 12th - 24th slots there are only men. The SZDSZ list was set up in a rather hypocritical manner: in the first two places there are men, in the third and fourth there are women, the latter being the commissioner of the Ministry of Education for the rights of the Roma. From the 7th slot on there is parity on the list. This would sound like a relatively woman-friendly arrangement, except that SZDSZ can expect to win two seats at the most, i.e. the first two men will be elected. As for the Fidesz list, it has not been decided who will fill the 19th-24th slots, but out of the 18 candidates 6 are women, 3 of whom are in non-winning positions (14th, 15th and 17th slots – Fidesz expects about 11-12 seats). I can (ironically) say that it is to their merit that the token Roma politician was put in the 8th slot, while MSZP gave the 18th slot to the Roma. In the case of MDF, also expecting 2 seats, the list is headed by the female party leader who has no intention to take her seat in the EU parliament. No information is available about the rest of the candidates except for the two men who are in the second and fourth slots.
Feminism – East and West

Much has been written about western feminists’ attitude towards their eastern sisters in the early 1990s. These writings describe how western feminists tended to idealize state-socialist achievements of women’s benefits, how they expected, as a natural course of events, a wave of feminism to rise after the collapse of the regime, and how they grew frustrated by women’s withdrawal into the private sphere and by the lack of gender awareness and a common feminist language. At the same time, as these texts thoroughly discuss, western feminism was treated with suspicion or outright rejected in Central Eastern Europe, where women felt that their western sisters acted in an imperialistic way, trying to impose foreign ideas on them, and that western feminism was yet another form of state socialist emancipation, which they had no wish to revive.

Anti-feminism is a vivid tradition in Hungary, strengthened by the demonization of everything under state socialism – including women’s emancipation – which nationalist political discourse both feeds on and lashes out against. During state socialism, traditional gender roles were never really questioned, especially in the domestic sphere, and this traditional sexism lives on in right-wing attitudes to women’s roles. One classical element of anti-feminist rhetoric, characteristic in the first part of the 1990s and used on both political sides, was that first burning economic and social problems (as if women did not have social problems) have to be solved and the grounds of democracy have to be laid down, and only then women’s issues, which are of secondary importance, can be dealt with. After all, in Hungary women and men are equal (due to state socialist emancipation?), and there is no real need for special policies. The other virulent element of conservative ideology is concerned with women’s ‘natural’ role as mothers (both of their children and of the nation), wives and caretakers – a role that compulsorily emancipated women were supposed to be happy to return to. While many identify with the idea of pushing women back into the private sphere, socialization, economic necessity and identity issues seem to secure that women will not withdraw from the public sphere.

Anti-feminism is not only present on the right side, though. As the examples of the interviewed women politicians show, both socialists and liberals refuse to identify as feminists. Moreover, disappointing a tendency as it may be for those who have been hoping for the emergence of a new, more gender-sensitive generation, the young MPs are the most expressly anti-feminist, while the elder ones who started their career back in state socialism, either define themselves as feminists or, even if they deny being that, they hold feminist views and stand for certain feminist issues.

How are EU accession, gender mainstreaming policies, directives and practices going to alter public, professional and political attitudes and practices related

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to gender issues? As I have argued earlier, Hungarian public attitude to women’s issues and feminism is very conservative and political discourse obviously both influences and is influenced by this fact. I am convinced that EU expectations and institutional pressures have recently had and will increasingly have a favorable effect on women’s situation. At the same time, a certain ambivalence can be sensed about the prospective impacts of the accession on gender relations. There is a fear of importing ‘alien’ concepts and practices, of the imposition of foreign ideas again. The obligation to comply with gender mainstreaming directives might evoke memories of the state socialist ideology of “emancipation.” At present, activists and academics dealing with women’s issues tend to be either middle-aged or elder women specialized in certain issues pertaining to women but without much gender knowledge and awareness, refusing to identify with feminism and often politically uninvolved (in the broader sense of politics), or belong to an increasing number of gender experts who are either politically active feminists or pursue an academic career and dissociate themselves from daily feminist involvement.35 For the past few years, the civil sector has been growing stronger and more visible and women’s NGOs are having their voices heard more than before. This process will probably be strengthened by the EU accession.

Conclusion

Fifteen years after the change of the state socialism regime, and on the doorstep of becoming a member state of the European Union, women’s political participation in Hungary shows a complex pattern of old and new ideology, attitudes and practices. With regard to the political discourse on women’s issues, conservative, liberal and socialist ideologies cannot always be clearly distinguished and are often subordinated to general political interests. Paradoxically, there has been no feminist movement in the country and still a backlash against feminism prevails. Women politicians’ attitude to women’s issues is characterized by a lack of knowledge about gender issues and feminism; the lack of concepts and techniques necessary for dealing with gender roles; conformity and fear of being labeled as feminists/man-haters and, consequently, of loss of political credibility; a genderless/gender-blind professional identification and a lack of significant difference in attitudes and views according to age and political stance. It is clear, as Gal claims, that the political category of “woman” has to be discursively constructed in order to be able to constructively define and debate women’s issues and interests.36 Creating a valid, specific Hungarian gender discourse, which can communicate and cooperate meaningfully with the rest of the European discourse, is the task of today’s feminists.

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35 The majority of them educated at CEU or American universities and thus trained in western feminist discourse, the attitudes to which I have described earlier.
36 Gal, “Feminism,” 43.


Internet sources

AN AMERICAN’S “FEMINIST” EXPERIENCE IN LITHUANIA

Jennifer Bovair-Danulevicius

Abstract

Lithuania has undergone tremendous changes since the fall of communism and its regaining of independence in 1991. These changes affect all spheres of the country: political, economical and social. While the country struggled to establish a democratic government and a free-market economy, Lithuania has faced setbacks both internally and from abroad. Although the fledgling democracy has managed to make great advancements in the past ten years, there have also been many adverse affects due to the transition. One of these problems is the growing gender inequality in society. While it would seem that the changes Lithuania is undergoing would open up new opportunities for women, this has not been the case. Women have suffered more than their male compatriots have during the transition period, and their rights as citizens are not on equal footing as for men. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Lithuanian society has rejected the gender-egalitarian Marxist model and is instead promoting a return to the traditional family model. The majority of Lithuanian society believes this is the true Lithuanian way of life, and it must be returned to in order to sustain the well being of the nation. This traditional model is more myth than reality. The result has not been liberation of women from Soviet-era burdens, but rather increasing rates of female unemployment and a lack of workforce gender equality laws. The loss of female representatives in government threatens women’s rights, especially concerning reproduction and personal security. The government of Lithuania, although ahead of those in other former Soviet republics, has been slow to address the problems and inequalities that exist for women in society. These inequalities, however, cannot be ignored. The situation of women has deep effects on the entire nation. If Lithuania wishes to become a true democracy, the rights of all its citizens must be equal and free from gender discrimination. This paper examines the inequalities, that exist in Lithuania, and explores the possibility of a Western-style feminist revolution.

Introduction

A young American woman arriving in Lithuania will immediately notice a marked distinction between herself and the women around her. There are expected cultural and social differences; typical Lithuanian fashions are much more feminine than American styles, and women in Lithuania marry and have children at younger ages. Beyond the surface level, however, a disparity can be recognized when one compares the way American women are regarded by the majority of Lithuanians. Drawing from a wide variety of influences, from Western feminist scholars to television shows like Sex and the City, Lithuanians have come to see American women as unfeminine, unmotherly, and feminist.

The word feminist has a variety of meanings to the American women. The basic tenant is that feminism works to achieve and to ensure equality between men and women. This definition does not apply to all who consider themselves feminists, nor do many who believe in gender equality embrace the term. In Lithuania, however, American feminism is synonymous with radical anti-male, anti-family, anti-religious sentiments.

This assumption makes the American woman self-conscious of her behaviors, dress, attitudes and relations with Lithuanians. Additionally, it interferes with her abilities to objectively observe the current situation of women living in Lithuania. Lithuanian society is presented as a set of contrasts against American life, rather than as a unique, unified whole. When examined from this perspective, it is easy for the American woman to notice vast inequalities between Lithuanian men and women.
Having experienced generations of feminist/ women’s rights movements, she begins to question why there has not been such a similar set of events or objections to the status quo in Lithuania.

It is impossible, however, to measure Lithuanian gender equality and women’s rights in terms of those legally enforced and socially accepted in the United States. Many Western scholars have examined the East/ West divide in order to ascertain what needs to happen for Western feminism to flourish in Eastern Europe. Looking to find a Western style solution to the women’s situation in Lithuania, however, only creates further divisions and is counterproductive to improving it. Western feminist movements fought for women to gain rights, not to protect rights they already had. The modern Lithuanian woman is vastly different from that of an American living in the 1890s or 1960s. Various factors explain why a strong, Western-style feminist movement has not evolved, and most likely will not, in Lithuania.

For hundreds of years, the struggle for Lithuanian independence consumed the thoughts and time of anyone with reactionary or revolutionary leanings. Early women’s movements were closely linked with preservation of the Lithuanian language and culture during denationalization under the first period of Russian rule from 1795. Women organized underground schools after the Lithuanian language was banned in 1863, and girls were treated on an equal basis as boys, in order that they one day might fill their teachers’ positions. The General Census of the Russian Empire in 1897 revealed that while Lithuanian girls had the lowest attendance of state schools in the Empire, the majority of women were literate in a non-state language. During this time of repression, all Lithuanians were considered equal in a society committed to defending its freedom. The women’s liberation and equality movements that developed at this time were secondary to the greater cause of Lithuanian liberation. Women’s groups never fully developed a consciousness of women’s rights for women; many of the rights they were fighting for before 1918 were denied to their fellow countrymen as well.

Furthermore, Marxist gender equality was imposed on all citizens when Lithuania became a Soviet republic. Women did not have to organize and protest to receive the vote, the right to work or for access to abortions. They did not struggle through the “Feminine Mystique” or “the Problem that has no Name” which oppressed American women. Lithuanian women were told they had reached full equality with men. According to Western feminist standards, in theory, they had. Women in Lithuania had access to education in traditionally male dominated fields. They were able to work outside of the home and received social assistance with childcare, food preparation, laundry and other household duties. If there were complaints about the actual fairness of the system, inequalities were attributed to the fact that total Soviet revolution had not taken place. After a generation of enduring such a lifestyle, many Lithuanians concluded that they were living in true egalitarianism. With constant propaganda of Soviet ideology, most believed that real equality had been achieved. They could not imagine that “equality of a different nature – one based on partnership” – could even exist. The warped version of egalitarianism that Lithuanians lived under poisoned their concept of feminism and gender equality.

Women suffered under the double and triple burdens of working both outside and inside the home. Yet, the Lithuanian female psyche did not allow her to realize her second-class status in society. The Lithuanian women’s femininity, her fundamental nature, exists in her stability, attachment, tolerance, lenience, devotion, self-denial, compassion, and protectiveness. In supporting and maintaining the Lithuanian society, she must act as a willing member who strongly bears her burdens. This “salvation through suffering” mindset comes from the teaching of the Catholic Church, to which most Lithuanians subscribe. The resistance of the Church against radical feminism contributes to the lack of even a modest feminist movement in Lithuania. Expressions of patriarchal attitudes regarding family life are almost a prerequisite to enter into a political career. Public opposition to all things Soviet and support of Catholic dogma are routine aspects of most public political speeches.

Increasing nationalistic sentiments since the fall of communism calls for a return to traditional, Lithuanian family values. The importance placed on the family was reflected in the new constitution:

Article 38
The family shall be the basis of society and the State. Family, motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood shall be under the care and protection of the State. […] The right and duty of parents is to bring up their children to be honest individuals and loyal citizens.

The importance of family was not new to Lithuanians. Many women were initially thankful for an opportunity to return home, hoping to be relieved from double and triple-burden. However, while women did not consider this return to be a political statement, many men saw it as an opportunity to establish a patriarchal society.

Many felt that such a social structure was the true Lithuanian way of life. There is no historical period, however, in which the majority of Lithuanian families were based on the husband-breadwinner/wife-homemaker model. Pre-Indo-European Lithuanian peoples lived in an egalitarian society. They celebrated an earth-based spirituality, and in their art celebrated various forms of the woman-goddess. Archeological evidence points to a matrilineal structure, where rights and privileges were handed from mother to daughter. The invasion of Indo-European tribes in the fifth century B.C. introduced a patriarchal system to Lithuania. Yet, this concept was not strongly embraced, and Lithuanian women still had many rights and freedoms. The Lithuanian nation was plagued with wars, and while the men fought, women managed the economy and society. The first written laws of the Lithuanian state in 1529 gave women the rights to joint family ownership and to attend meetings.

While a few historians believe that these laws were created to liberate women, most conclude that they reflected the widely accepted customs of the time. These laws,

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5 Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania.
7 Dominiene, “The Lithuanian,” 5.
8 Purvaneckiene, “Women in the Domestic Domain,” 49.
which gave women rights to property, divorce and child custody, were freedoms not afforded to women in neighboring countries.

The era that is the supposed ideal of today’s traditional family was the inter-war period from 1918-1939. Lithuania had regained independence, and the new Constitution recognized equal civic and economic rights to women and men. During this time, women voted in the elections to Parliament, and ten women were elected as delegates in 1920. These women representatives succeeded in help pass an amendment in 1922 that restored women’s property rights, although the law also stated that a woman “be obedient to her husband as the head of family, to love him, to try to please him, and to be a devoted housewife.” During this most nationalistic time, the model of husband breadwinner, wife homemaker was not common. One popular feminist at the time wrote:

A Lithuanian woman has never been or felt herself a husband’s slave; she has too big a family; she has been too independent on the farm. The few town women were so much needed for broader, nationalist political work. Their long decades in Tsarist Russia have not extinguished in her a person with a free spirit who is eager to express herself in all spheres of life.9

Over forty-four percent of women with young children (under fourteen) worked outside the home. This figure does not include women who worked on the family farm. A 1934 survey10 reported that seventy-seven percent of Lithuanians lived in rural areas. As they had for hundreds of years, Lithuanian women worked along with their husbands to support the family. Women were also allowed equal access to education, elections, and other bases of society.

Nevertheless, nationalist sentiments, however imagined or romantic, greatly influenced the restructuring of Lithuania after independence from the Soviet Union. This independence was celebrated as a restoration of freedom to the individual. Men and women no longer had to live their lives as the state decreed. However, immediate utopia did not ensue, merely, new problems replaced the old. Many Lithuanians were disappointed and unsure in a world where the possibilities were endless, but somehow untouchable. Many Western scholars argue that there could have been more activism in the early years of independence to ensure women’s rights. There were brave women who spoke out against establishment of a patriarchal society. They were told, however, that women’s rights were not a priority. The Lithuanian saying “only when there is good bread can you sit and scratch your butt” was a commonly heard response to women’s concerns. This nonchalant attitude towards women can explain why their social situation has deteriorated compared to men’s in the past ten years. Additionally, many women did not anticipate the degree to which their rights were about to be diminished. Now that a strong, male-dominated control is in place, it is increasingly difficult to gain back lost rights.

Women were no longer compelled to work, but soon realized that a single salary could not support their families. Without enforced equal-opportunity laws, women faced an unfamiliar set of problems in the workforce. In 1998, women made up 47.5% of the labor market in Lithuania and on average earned 77.2% of what men

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received. There is no economic sector in which women earn more than men.\textsuperscript{11} Although women in many cases represent an equal or greater proportion of workers in a particular sector, they do not hold the same jobs as men. For instance, in the financial intermediation sector, women make up 63.5\% of the total employees. Even though jobs in this field have some of the highest salaries, women only average 65.4\% of what men earn, almost 12\% lower than the general average. This is not because women are being paid less for the same jobs, but rather that women are employed in lower-paying positions. Throughout all sectors, women comprise 83.4\% of common employees and only 35.7\% of high-ranking managers and administrators. In education, where women make up 77\% of all educators (from kindergarten through university) the majority of school headmasters are men. In addition, significant amounts of women are employed in public sector fields such as education and health, which have lower-paying wages than jobs in the private sector. The public sector also has the added problems of budget cuts and layoffs due to internal restructuring. Women, who remain in the lowest positions, are the ones first affected by these problems.

Employers’ attitudes towards women in the workforce have been influenced by the concept of the traditional family model. The result has been an increase in gender discrimination – a negative influence on working women. Seventeen percent of female graduates reported experiencing discrimination from their employers because of their gender.\textsuperscript{12} Many employers do not want to hire young professional women because they believe that they will soon get married, if there are not already, and want to start a family. A quick scan through the classifieds of any major newspaper shows job vacancies advertised with gender preferences, although this was formally outlawed in 1999. It is difficult to enforce equal-opportunity laws in a country where preferential treatment of men is accepted as the norm.

In addition to employers’ attitudes, women’s own expectations greatly influence their careers. In the same study of recent graduates, women expressed a higher satisfaction with the position they occupied and the salary they received for the work they performed. In an economy that is becoming increasingly capitalist-oriented, the desire to attain higher levels of pay and status in one’s career is necessary for success. If a woman’s goal is to raise a family and be a good mother, career advancement may have little or no importance. What remains unclear is whether women’s expectations and prioritizing comes from societal pressures and expectations or from their own desires.

While affluent women may elect to stay home with their children, this is not a widespread option. Most women in Lithuania are driven to find employment to adequately support their families. However, the past ten years have seen a large increase in unemployment. Surprisingly, the numbers continue to increase, although Lithuania’s economy has stabilized and continues to grow.

\textsuperscript{12} Purvaneckiene, “Women in Lithuanian Society,” 119.
Table 1: Unemployed women and men in 1993-1997 (average annual data)\(^{13}\)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Among Women</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Among Men</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
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The number of unemployed women is only slightly higher than of men (Table 1), but it is harder for unemployed women to find new jobs. One can predict that the number of unemployed women will grow at a faster rate.

Lithuania lacks the social services that would aid mothers who want to return to the workforce. While they are home raising children, women lose job experience and do not receive education in modern methods and techniques. Women are missing extremely crucial elements in a country that is undergoing massive civic and economic restructuring. Retention and re-employment programs, where they do exist, are not designed to meet the needs of middle-age mothers,\(^{14}\) but focus primarily on men. The challenges of balancing family and a career greatly influences women’s position in the workforce. Lithuanian men do not take an active part in the responsibility of taking care of the children. In a 1996 study of university graduates two and a half years after graduation, 25\% of the female respondents were on maternity leave, whereas not one man had taken advantage of this right.\(^{15}\) Even if a woman is working, society believes that she is still solely responsible for her children and home. All of these factors combine to create a difficult situation for working mothers.

One of the major reasons gender equality laws, in the workforce and elsewhere, are not enforced is the male domination in local and national governance. As with mandated workforce quotas, governing bodies in the Soviet system had to have a 30 percent female representation. That percentage fell sharply after the restoration of Lithuanian independence, and continues to decrease (Table 2).

Table 2: Members of Parliament by Sex (%)\(^ {16}\)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>92.9</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>89.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10.6</td>
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This lack of a female voice in politics is having a dire affect on women’s already frail rights.

One of the major rights that women could lose in the near future is control of their reproduction. Before Soviet times abortion was a crime and considered a grave


The only form of birth control accepted by the Lithuanian Catholic Church, the state religion, was natural family planning. Abortions were legalized during Soviet times and are currently permitted until the twelfth week of pregnancy. Although there was a decrease of 87 to 49 per 100 live births from 1980 to 1990, they remain the most common form of birth control in Lithuania. Yet, abortion, as well as preventative birth control options, could soon be criminalized.

The publicly supported traditional family model does merely require women to return to the home, but to also to raise large families. Decreasing birthrates have fostered the fear of “the death of the nation.” In 1960, the national average was three children per family in 1960; this dropped to 1.67 by 1994. The main reason for the decrease is women’s uncertainty about bringing more children into their world. With the fifteen years being as unsure as they have, many women do not know if their future will be secure enough to support more children. Lithuanian women are not encouraged to use or educated about preventative birth control methods; many use abortion to keep their families small. A 1993 study found that a woman’s main reason in justifying an abortion was consideration of the fate of unwanted and unloved children.

The pro-life movement, however, does not view abortion as a means for keeping family sizes small to improve children’s life-quality. Instead, nationalistic propaganda, fueled by the Catholic Church, condemns abortion and birth control as a sin, and as a major contributor to the social ills plaguing the country. At a 1994 conference titled “Lithuanian Family: Traditions and the Future,” the Lithuanian Bishop, speaking from a panel that included the Prime Minister and a United Nations representative, proposed a ban on abortion and all forms of birth control.

Abortion is one of the main issues where Lithuanian women actively disagree with the values of the traditional family model. Most women, although predominantly practicing Catholics, support legalized abortion, and most are not afraid of losing this reproductive right. However, one only need look to Lithuania’s neighbor, Poland, to recognize how easily it can be taken away. Lithuanian women did not have to fight for access to birth control and rights to abortion – it was given to them by the communist state. As one woman wrote:

[Young Lithuanian women] have no time or energy, and no social or historical framework with which to enter the political arena and fight for their rights. In our country, they are silent. It is men and older women – neither of which can bear children- who speak the loudest.

Increasing social pressure for a return of traditional values could easily leave Lithuanian women with very few reproductive rights.

The largest and most disturbing problem for women in Lithuania is not workforce inequality or lack of a female voice in the government. During the past ten

18 Gineitiene, “The Church,” 84.
20 Ibid., 75.
22 Ibid., 82.
23 Ibid., 88
years, there has been an alarming increase in violence against women. The overwhelming patriarchal mentality places women in a subordinate position. This easily erodes respect for them. Regrettably, an atmosphere exists in Lithuania whereby men feel that it is acceptable, if not expected, to use violence to assert themselves.

In a national survey conducted in 1997, 63.3% of adult women reported to have experienced some form of male violence (Table 3). Lithuanian women are very aware of this lack of personal security. In the national survey, 61% of women ranked personal security as ‘very important’, and 32% ranked it as ‘important.’

The place where the majority of women felt unsafe was out in public in the evening or after dark. Yet, many women, especially working women, have to face being out alone at night quite frequently. In order to overcome their feeling of insecurity, women will change their patterns in order to avoid what they feel are dangerous situations. There is only a small amount of women who will walk past a group of drunken men (8.1%), or behind a group of young men or teenagers (14%). Few women employ any means of self-defense other than avoidance. Only 27.3% of women always carry some form of self-defense, and fewer are the numbers of women who have attended a self-defense course (2.4%). Of those who do take active measures to protect themselves, the majority has previously experienced some form of violence from male strangers.

Table 3: Results from Victim Surveys Carried out in Lithuania, 1997 (%)\(^\text{24}\)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Adult women (16 years and older) who have experienced violence</th>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>63.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victims who contacted the police</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women who experienced violence outside the immediate family:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From strangers</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From friends</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From other relatives</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women who were victimized by their husband/partner:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By physical violence</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By sexual abuse</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By threats</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced or separated women who were victimized by their ex-</td>
<td>53.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>husband/partner</td>
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</table>

The government does not inform women of the dangers they face from violence in society. It is only after a negative experience that the individual takes aggressive measures to protect herself.

Seventy-nine percent of women think that the safest place for them and their children is in their home, but only 46% feel secure in their home at any time of day or night. That is to say, that many women feel insecure alone in their homes, especially at night. Yet, from looking at the data one can conclude that women should not fear strangers the most. Only 11% of attacks on women were by strangers. A disturbing 42.2% of married women or women living with a partner reported being victimized by their husband/partner. Even more alarming is the data that shows almost ten percent of married women had been forced to engage in sexual intercourse through

physical violence or threats from their husbands. The home, the place of refuge and rest, is the place where women are the least secure.

Domestic violence and sexual abuse are incredibly challenging to overcome. In a country with a patriarchal mentality such as Lithuania’s, women have a very difficult time even speaking out as victims of violence. In the national survey, only 10.6% of victims contacted the police. One can speculate that for women who experience domestic and sexual abuse, that number is even lower. Women who experience these types of violence are often too ashamed to report it. Victims of domestic violence are frequently led to believe that they are responsible or deserving of their treatment and do not think to look outside the home for assistance. The majority of Lithuanians feel that the single entity responsible for stopping violence in the home was the family itself.25 The prejudices of society convince the victim that the violence is her problem, not the abuser’s. If a woman stays home and is a good wife and mother, she would never receive any kind of abuse. Additionally, abusive husbands and partners often threaten additional violence if the woman was to report the situation.

There are further problems that face women who do report instances of abuse. The Lithuanian police force does not have adequate training to respond to reports of domestic violence. Young police officers feel uncomfortable speaking to an older man about how he should conduct himself in his own household. Many calls are subsequently not even reported. Precincts do not have trauma or abuse counselors on staff who are skilled at dealing with such cases. There are no legal mechanisms to stop a perpetrator of domestic violence by police and prevent future violent behavior, unless an incident resulted in murder or heavy injuries. Women who report abuses are stigmatized and often no better off than before.

The realities of life are forcing Lithuanians to change their idealization of the traditional family model.26 International pressure from the United Nations and European Union has influenced the actions of the Lithuanian government in regards to gender equality. In 1995 Lithuania took part in the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The Beijing Declaration called for a renewal of governments’ commitment to increasing gender equality. In its mission statement, the Declaration called for a strong commitment from the participating governments to mobilize resources and the strengthening of internal mechanisms to ensure the rights and equality of women were supported and protected. This prompted the Lithuanian government to create a national Action Plan for the Advancement of Women, approved in November 1996. In this major step, the government publicly acknowledged, “society does not perceive women’s rights as human rights” and “pursues the opinion that a woman who raises a child, is not a full-fledged member of social and political life and is not a competent worker.” The plan sets guidelines for the protection of women’s rights and for equality in their economic-social status. It also calls for research and statistical data to be prepared in a way that is gender sensitive, which is especially important in trying to monitor the changes in the situation of women in the country.

Lack of funding has unfortunately prevented the plan’s full implementation. The government of 1996 that approved this plan did not foresee the coming economic crises that the country would undergo only two years later. However, adoption of the plan has been a start in the right direction. Lithuania has made progress in establishing

25 Ibid., 122.
26 Ibid., 123.
some of the national machinery necessary to carry out such a plan, such as the position of State Counsellor on Women’s issues. Still, the status of this office is marginal, as the State Counselor on Foreign Relations and Relations with NGOs is responsible for gender issues.

NGOs play the largest part in advancing women’s equality in Lithuania. Drawing on international support, NGOs have the funding need to make changes in the current situation of women. For example, the Vilnius Women’s House Crisis Center, founded in 1996, was able to help 490 women in its first three years in operation. By 1999, there were 63 women’s NGOs in existence in Lithuania, although not all of these organizations strive to achieve equal rights or equal opportunities for men and women.27 Interestingly, most of the women working for these NGOs resist calling their work feminist. They work hard to advance the status and rights of women, but believe feminist implies radical action. Many are wives and mothers, and think this makes it impossible to claim being a feminist. Nevertheless, the involvement of these NGOs in civil society is increasing public awareness and support of women’s issues.

The most significant achievement for women was the passing of an Equal Opportunities Law. Women’s organizations began to raise awareness of the need for such a law as far back as 1992. As been mentioned, gender equality was not a high priority for the new government in the early years. The United Nations Development Program in Lithuania was able to give support to the first project of an equal opportunities law in 1995. The catalyst to the formation of this law, however, was the increased number of women elected to the Seimas in 1996, the highest ever in Lithuania. These women united to form a Group of Women Parliamentarians, which works to protect the rights of women in Lithuania. The result of their influence was seen when the Seimas adopted the Law on Equal Opportunities in December 1998 that came into effect on March 1, 1999. This law is significant as it makes sexual discrimination illegal in the fields of education and employment. It also sets forth the duty of the government to implement equal rights for women and men. Along with the passing of this law, the office of an Equal Opportunities Ombudsman was created. The future of the effectiveness of this law remains hopeful.

The situation of women in Lithuania on a whole is progressing. Although the patriarchal ideals of society remain strong, important changes are taking place. As Lithuanians become more integrated into the international community, awareness of women’s issues will only increase. The formation and growth of women’s NGOs within the country, and the hard work of women parliamentarians continues to advance the status and rights of women in Lithuania. Although many inequalities exist between women and men, the future remains bright for great change to take place in Lithuania. Unlike the loud, feminist American version, however, the Lithuanian movement will be more likely a “velvet women’s revolution.”

Education is one sphere in Lithuanian society where women have equal opportunities as men. The number of students enrolled in educational institutions that were female was 50.7% during the 1998/99 school year. Among students enrolled in higher educational institutions, the percentage of females is 39.2% in vocational schools, 65.2% in colleges and 57.8% in universities.28 In the same year, the 51.8% of

27 Ibid., 125.
28 Due to this trend of higher enrollment of female students, the Kaunas Institute of Technology established quotas during entrance examinations for male students. Women’s organizations protested and in 1998 this practice was successfully abolished.
all doctoral students were women. These figures offer a positive outlook for young women. Education is the basis for entry into the workforce, and higher level of education allows a graduate to compete for better-paying and more secure jobs. The data shows that more women than men are working to attain higher levels of education.

Having achieved levels of education comparable to, if not greater than, those for young men, young women will be increasingly better off upon completion of their education and entrance into the workforce. Young women are highly aware of the injustices that face Lithuanian women. Additionally, they have not lived under the warped Soviet era inequalities of their mothers and grandmothers. While these young women are not embracing the term “feminist,” they are successfully challenging patriarchal attitudes. One male university student said, “I am intimidated by my female peers. They are stronger, they are smarter than men. They control the home and family life. Once we graduate, they will control public life too.”

These young women are perhaps more like their American counterparts than they realize. While feminist activists worry that young women are not concerned with preserving hard won rights, apathy is hardly prevalent. Young, educated, and highly mobile women, growing up in a globalized society, take “women’s” rights as an inherent part of what it means to be a citizen in a free society. Young American and Lithuanian women do not waste time worrying about the vote, access to abortion or sexual discrimination. They consider these to be basic rights in a democracy.

The young American woman is no more or less a feminist than her Lithuanian peers. Both are attaining higher levels of education and pursuing careers in traditionally male fields of economics, statistics, business and political science. While debates among scholars during the mid-90s revolved on an East versus West basis, the young generations are far more similar. These women were not separated by the Cold War, and have grown up with more freedoms and advantages than any generation. Whether or not they choose to embrace the term feminist is irrelevant to the debate over liberation. These women’s lives, actions and future ambitions speak louder than any words.

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REFLECTIONS ON ‘ARTEMIS’ – A ROMANIAN FEMINIST PROJECT

Maria Diaconescu

Abstract

In this paper I share with you some of my thoughts on my experience working on a feminist project, in Cluj, from 1998 to 2000. This project is Artemis, a counseling center for women and girls against sexual abuse and violence. I have also included some remarks on my experience with a Western feminist project (WiWva – Wildwasser West Berlin), and finally, I present some considerations on feminist ideas in the Romanian East European social practice.

Motto 1:

“In ancient times, for at least four thousand years, the Great Goddess was the deity that humanity worshipped. The serpent around her feet, she appeared on walls, on statues and winding through the friezes and vases of ancient cities and was the symbol of knowledge…In those times, men and women lived in harmony, there were no weapons of war, no fortresses, women were the administrators, the queens and the law makers and men worked in concert with women, the serpent was the symbol of knowledge and healing for all. This was a time of peace; a time before new religion declared woman to be less than man. A domineering society from the north-east moved over Europe around 4300 B.C. and again around 3000 B.C. The male-dominator society came to Britain later, about the first century A.D. with Romans. This warring, patriarchal society subjugated the Goddess societies and militantly suppressed women’s freedom, including knowledge and their access to knowledge…”

(S. Crock and J. Bastow)

Motto 2:

“When all mankind shall receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed.”

(Abdu’l-Baha)

The Artemis Program, started in Cluj – Napoca, in June 1997, was a project that involved counseling girls and women against sexual abuse. The project was funded by the Open Society Foundation. In 1998, a macro project was selected for two-year financial support from the European Commission, the Phare Lien Program. Since October 1998, activities have been organized in collaboration with two German partners: WiWa (West Berlin: Wildwasser Counseling Centre for Girls against Sexual Abuse), and euroCom. The first partner was responsible for training and supervision,

2 Abdu’l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace (NSA of the Baha’is of USA, 1982), 175. In Persian there is a non-gender specific word for “all people;” no equivalent in English.
and the second partner was responsible for budget management and accounting assistance. At the beginning of the year 1999, a second smaller project, Women against violence (WAV), dealing mainly with domestic violence, started for the following 2 years. This project was also funded by the Open Society Foundation. In 1999, in Cluj, a shelter for sexually abused girls (up to the age of 18) was opened. Another Artemis – also a counseling center for girls and women against sexual and physical abuse – was founded in Baia Mare. In the first two years, a team of fourteen professionals worked in Cluj (psychologists, social workers, experts in law), and a team of five specialists worked in Baia Mare (a psychiatrist, a psychologist, an educational expert, a social worker, and a sociologist). The team from Baia-Mare was assisted by a group of ten volunteers, Social Work students; a lawyer ensured the legal assistance as a volunteer, as well. The main objective of all Artemis projects and teams has been to offer psychological, social and legal support and counseling for girls and women, victims of sexual abuse and/or of domestic violence.1

I worked in the second project, as psychosocial counselor and coordinator of the “Women against violence” project. Before this, I was employed in a family planning center and worked as volunteer during the “pregnancy” period of Artemis. In the autumn of 1998, when I applied to work for the Artemis program, I was asked about my view on feminist ideas. I was surprised by this question. Having read Elsa Jones’s book and some theoretical hints about feminist thinking about six months before, my answer was: “feminism, as I understand it, promotes equal chances and opportunities between women and men.” The body language of the German woman who asked me this question suggested me that she thought I was wrong.

Indeed, some time later, in Berlin, where I left for an internship, and during my training in Cluj with the Artemis team assisted by WiWa, I started to understand that feminist practice does not necessarily mean “equal opportunities between men and women,” even if it has contributed to their present development. This kind of things, such as “gender” and “equal opportunities…” in some Western feminist points of view, has to do with another masked form of a male dominant vision, with women’s lack of courage to assume their perception and understanding of the world and its meanings as women, with women’s lack of will to fight for women’s interests. I was asked a similar question and received a similar feedback from some Greek feminist women some years later: “there is no such feminism without the direct engagement of women in the political arena.”

So, in Berlin, I was directly confronted with the WiWa feminist practice: 1) women working for women, 2) not working with the abusers, and 3) assuming “parteilichkeit” (German language), “bias, biased or partial” (English), “partinitate” (Romanian). Its meaning is “party spirit” or “to keep justice”: to support the processes of justice doing or fighting for women’s interests without fighting against others’ interests, without abusing the rights of others. The “party spirit” of WiWa & Artemis work meant several things:

1) awareness of the fact that sexual violence is not a general problem, nor an inner conflict, but it is something happening in society;

2) awareness of the fact that sexual violence is a painful, traumatic experience for every person who goes through it (women, children, persons with different kinds of disabilities, etc.);

3) awareness of the fact that the so-called “impartiality” is a myth, and awareness of the fact that there is a need for space in order to reflect, there is a need for distance and reflection on one’s own attachment, involvement and engagement;
4) awareness of the fact that neutrality and independence from our own home, ethnicity, ethics, gender, age, etc., are impossible and they, consequently, influence the counseling and we need to take time to reflect on our own work;

5) offering an honest and empathic work to the clients, and knowing that in this work the counselor has a careful self reflection work also, supported by a team;

6) accompanying the clients, without believing we know what is better for them (the trap of this principle is to believe we know what is best for the other). A similar concept of “partinitate” could be “an alliance for women’s rights.”

Some gender and feminist studies and projects have developed in Romania. Artemis is one project of this kind. The main problem of these projects is the lack of money in order to survive. This means politics: to fight for money. I suppose it is the same in USA or Western Europe. I was really astonished to find about one of the political promises of the mayor of Cluj, this year. He promised he would build churches. He promised around ten times more money for building churches than for social assistance. In the meantime, the counseling and shelter services of Artemis, the Women against violence Association, almost die because of the lack of money, even if there is a law on domestic violence which focuses on the kind of services for children and women that Artemis can offer. What interest could “men” (the local authorities, churches etc.) have to support a feminist project, which obviously does not support at all the patriarchal values which give men the privilege to abuse women, children, and different others. I was astonished when a priest told me: “Poor man! He abused his wife and is to be punished. I succeeded in making him promise he would never do it again, and so I succeeded to save him from punishment,” or when the wife of a priest told me: “Poor men; there are men who have to take care of their children alone! I would like to do something for them, maybe to find some women willing to support them and their children.” No comment.

I do not know if we can talk about a feminist movement in Romania. Maybe there is a silent or underground so-called “feminist” TV-thinking, a kind of colonization of the minds via television, movies, and internet. I suppose some (or, rather, a lot of) boys are searching the internet for games of war and sex-shops, and some (or a lot of) girls are exploring ways to become top-models and sexy, most wanted (and later, be hunted by smugglers). It is a way of getting power and self-esteem. In Romania, the “sexual revolution,” a western product via family planning and contraception, is definitely modest, without any connotations of feminism.

In Western countries, the sexual revolution of ‘70s developed some paradoxical effects; it demolished both destructive and constructive taboos. I suppose the development of the counseling centers for girls and women against sexual abuse and violence in the West has been a necessity in order to rebuild some necessary limits which became extremely fluid – almost dissolved after the sexual revolution. I suppose this is a paradoxical effect of Western feminism: much more violence and sexual abuse was experienced (or just disclosed?) after the sexual revolution than before. Men use violence in order to reassert their power and control (in politics, social practice, families) desperately wanting to keep their dominance and control over women’s sexuality, and feeling threatened in their manhood because of the feminist movements. The more women fight for their rights, the more the men fight back using violence in order to keep their dominance. I suppose this is the reason why feminism has become more silent and moderate lately. It has got masked as more tolerable politics, such as gender, equal opportunities, etc.

In Eastern countries there is the necessity to rebuild the private space and to learn to say honestly and openly “I feel,” “I believe,” “I think” in all areas of life,
including sexuality and faith. Maybe this is the reason why it seems that everybody is talking and nobody is listening; everybody feels the strong need to express herself/himself. Why say something if nobody listens, or somebody abuses your trust, or everybody talks at once? So, there is the need for detachment, as well, in order to understand what the other asserts. There is the need for accepting the other and respecting her/his feelings. There is the need for time and management of the listening/talking processes.

Different social identity theories and practices (which ground human rights), religious and psychotherapy concepts and practices, were kept in silence, in Romania, before 1989. All of them were somehow taboo, suppressed or not talked about. All of them require time for development, to be worked out, they need careful consideration mainly on how they relate to each other.

Even so, with these East-West differences, violence and sexual abuse against children and women is a reality in Eastern European countries, as it is in the Western countries. The East and the West share the same patriarchal ground that makes possible the cultural and structural violence that we live in. Violence of any kind means taking advantage of the power difference. The societal/cultural or structural violence refers to all actions, attitudes and values of a society which block or delay the development of the other who has no “voice” in society, or who is not heard (children, women, people from a different ethnic or religious background, etc.). This kind of values and attitudes are responsible for inequalities of chances, and violence against women, children, Roma people, etc.

What do I want to highlight in this paper? There is a high support of patriarchal culture via the educational environment, the political environment, and the church. In the name of the so-called national and traditional values, strongly supported by the church, there is a high support of patriarchal culture. In my opinion, patriarchal values have to do a lot with the skin of religion – the temporal and social norms, known in Romania as “the national and traditional Christian values.” The patriarchal values have nothing to do with the core of spiritual and religious meanings. The spiritual, transcendent, essential part of any religion of the world has to do with the essence of the human being which transcends any skin: gender, culture and religion differences; this is the core part of any religion. According to Peseschkian, the religious externals that are influenced by time, the rituals and dogmas – the skin – are put in the foreground, while the actual religious contents – the core – are put aside. This produces a shift in form and content, misunderstanding and confusion because of the lack of differentiation between faith – religion – church.

My hypothesis is that the religious skin ideology – put in the foreground – patterns in a paradoxical way any other subsequent ideology/politics or philosophy of life, even if (and especially when) people reject or ignore the core religion. This is what happens after any revolution. Subsequently, the revolution patterns the relationships in the same way: another form of patriarchal, changed roles. I suppose this is the reason why so many men and women ask the same question: “Does feminism want to change the patriarchal with the matriarchal?” I think this question implicitly recognizes the male dominant thinking and the gender power imbalance in society. The result of rejecting the core religion because ignoring the time dimension of religious skin and the lack of differentiation between faith – religion – church, is the lack of meaning, the need to search for a meaning of life in other areas, such as:

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philosophy, ideology, politics, science and psychotherapy, etc. and the risk to confuse religion, politics, and science (transferring God images in these fields). Religion has the function of “giving meaning,” whereas science (including social and psychotherapy theories) has “the finding new meanings” function, according to Peseschkian. He warns that religion does not replace psychotherapy/ science and psychotherapy/ science is not a substitute for religion.

I want to highlight that psychotherapy and religion (and any other social/ political theory and practice, including feminism) as they develop in the future, have to take into consideration the need to rebuild limits, acceptance, respect, honesty and trust in the I – you relationships, the I – we (private – public), if they are fond of the idea of finding new meanings, without assuming the “giving meanings” function. Even if the traditional religious meanings or religious externals or skin do not fit into the newly discovered meanings, nothing is a substitute for religion.

I approach feminism, religion, and psychotherapy, first of all because psychotherapy is just a “baby,” not recognized as a newly born, as a distinct profession. Second, in Romania, politics replaced religion. Third, religious meanings have always had a therapeutic value for some people. Looking back, the relationship between religion and politics looks like the abusive relationship between men, inside patriarchy. Religion – in a sense – has had the same experience of violence as women and children (and many others) experience currently in the relationship with the “head of the family, one-sided served men.” The official materialist and scientific philosophy, history, literature, arts have had the task “to give meanings” before 1989. Nowadays, the old churches regain their religious original function. In the meantime, they seem to have lost the meaning they have had to give to the people. They focus on the skin of the religion. Researches show that people trust in these oppressing institutions, which become “poor men!” God knows if people receive answers to their existential question, if they have faith, if they really have hope and trust the future, if their trust in churches helps them to keep and respect limits (the necessary “taboos”). One thing is certain: they gain a sense of order and stability, even if these old churches cannot answer the problems and trials of the contemporary world (discrimination, sexual abuse and violence against children and women, globalization, biotechnology, etc.).

Sexuality, violence and sexual abuse issues, were overlooked in Romania, before 1989. All of them were somehow taboo, suppressed or not talked about. Nowadays a lot of concepts and practices address them: family planning/ contraception, feminism and psychotherapy, Church theories and practices, politics, gay-lesbian theories and practices, child protection politics, etc. What do they all have in common? They look like islands in a sea, and there are very few boats in order to communicate with each other. At best, when they meet they either do not communicate, or they simply fight each other. Anyway, because they do not talk to each other, there are no bridges between them. Who has anything to gain or to lose from this situation? I really doubt somebody gains anything important. The people who lose are the patients, the children in schools, the families, etc. The tension (conflict, competition) between different social actors is reflected in the inner conflict, in the soul of the persons and families who need to be listened to, to be accepted and assisted in a respectful way.

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Mihaela Miroiu\(^5\) highlights that men’s fear of feminism is actually justified by their fear of losing the status of a person who has the right to be one sidedly served, or their status as the “head of the family.” The most impressive study in Romania on the interconnection between religion and gender, the discourse and practices on women in church, is the study of Christian anthropology by Anca Manolache.\(^6\) I was really astonished to find out what miserable condition women had in the old church only because the so-called spiritual laws have been kept unchanged for centuries. Another really impressive study on women in religious practice and thinking is Emil Moise’s article on gender discrimination in religious practice (marriage and christening) published in *The Journal for Interdisciplinary Study of Religions and Ideologies*.\(^7\) This study advocates the renewal of the ecclesiastical practice so as to eliminate all discrimination that women and girl-babies are subjected to in the church.

I think that the gendered perspective or feminist thinking on the relationships between women and men in this part of the world could be really useful if as many studies and projects as possible would focus mainly on how the traditional religious conceptions and practice fit into the feminist projects/ gendered thinking. Some feminist and gender ideas, psychotherapy training integrated step by step mainly into the universities and schools for priests, social theory and the practice of the church, could be a solution to prevent the occurrence of sexual abuse and any kind of violence in the future. Otherwise, the patriarchal values (stronger in the theological schools than in other schools) will further support the cultural and structural violence, including the violence against women (and against any different other) through the subordination of the women (and of any other different voice) and by means of blaming the victim myth. Minimizing or absolving the abuser of responsibility is very common; “the man is the head of the woman” according to some ecclesiastical laws.\(^8\)

In their turn, feminism and psychotherapy research and practices, as any other interfaith and intercultural understanding and learning, could benefit if new tools are gained in their effort to find new meanings in their theory and practice (by searching and selecting): healing core messages of all the great religious traditions. In an interfaith dialogue context, women and men may discover someday that feminist and gender ideas are prefigured (foreshadowed) in the Sacred Books – Revelations of the all great religions of the world.

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\(^8\) Manolache, *Problematica*, 13, 22, 75-77.


GLOBALIZATION OF LGBT IDENTITIES: CONTAINMENT MASQUERADING AS SALVATION OR WHY LESBIANS HAVE LESS FUN

Shannon Woodcock

Abstract

In the last decade, globalization of the same-sex politics and the gay rights movement, has led to the well-funded introduction of western discourses of Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights in eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America. In this paper I analyze what happens when western discourses help ‘the East’ uncover their ‘repressed’ sexualities, and more specifically, how lesbian communities are constructed in post-socialist eastern Europe through discourses of the sexual act as political identity. There have always existed communities that identify through same-sex practices in eastern Europe, and these communities have performed their identity in a variety of ways, in a variety of social spaces. I argue that Romanian and Albanian women who desire women have had a detailed, dynamic and beautiful system of strategies for identifying themselves and others, and that the western project of developing LGBT communities attempts to contain this strategic dynamism.

Introduction

This paper was inspired by a particular moment in Tirana, Albania, when, as an Australian who refuses to identify by sexual practice, I found myself being addressed by a Dutch ‘human rights worker’ as an Albanian lesbian. Working (on commission) to form a Dutch embassy sponsored Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) non governmental organization (NGO) in Tirana, the woman had come the closest to finding a lesbian subject in a foreigner whom she ‘had heard’ knew women who ‘knew.’ I pointed out first of all that I was not the Albanian lesbian she was looking for, that I could introduce her to Albanian women who had sexual relationships with women, but that these women, from my own discussions with them, found the term lesbian actively destructive to their lifestyles. I told her that I couldn’t see the benefit of getting together a group of people to discuss what they had already developed (extensive strategies for living in difference), and that an LGBT NGO should offer something more for women. Increasingly hysterically, the human rights representative ranted against my willingness to ‘spend my life in shame and hiding’ and my failure to ‘recognize that this is the time for lesbians to have the courage to be free.’ Though shocked at the insistent loudness of her discourse, it was easy for me to remind myself that I was not the one she was addressing. My identity as an ethnic Australian in Albania freed me from having to answer to her misrecognition of my identity as repressed lesbian.1

I went home and fumed at the refusal of this woman to recognize my chosen subject position or any of my comments about her project ideas, but then I started to think. The Dutch embassy would give the money for the project anyway, so if I

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1 It struck me at the time that the situation of choosing to diagnose and reject the subject position my enunciator ascribed to me was a case which reverberates with Judith Butler’s text Excitable speech: a politics of the performative (New York: Routledge, 1993). The power of refusing to answer to this subject position is an example of the kinds of agency Butler is often accused of foreclosing. I would also like to note at the beginning of this paper that I am writing from within a western educational system and society where I have personally benefited from legislative protection for individual rights regardless of sexuality, gender or race. These are the same rights that I critique as potentially oppressive systems in other contexts in this paper.
involved myself in her project at least I could get paid to do some research and have a chance to bring some local influence to the project. To call her back and suggest we discuss some kind of collaboration would require answering to the name by which she constituted me (Albanian lesbian), but I was contemplating this as a compromise for personal benefit and a chance to try and protect those I feared would be hurt in the project. From my experience in the NGO world, a lot of donor priorities are enacted through local participants who think along these same lines, supposing that international actors will do whatever they want regardless of what the locals say, so that at least if locals are involved there is a chance to try and reorientate the project for local benefit.

This paper begins to examine how lesbian communities are constructed in post-socialist eastern Europe through specifically western discourses of the sexual act as political identity, introduced primarily through LGBT NGOs. I take as my foundational ruse Foucault’s argument that ‘the homosexual’ became a ‘species’ circa 1870 in an epoch of western society which relies upon an urge to confess sexual practice as a means to uncover a ‘truth’ in ‘human nature.’ Not only is the contemporary centrality of sex in finding truth a product of this time, but also the discursive rubric of taboo and repression as preventing access to personal ‘truth.’ Foucault notes that ‘civilization has required and organized an immense verbosity,’ ‘the incitement to discourse,’ in the form of confession, in order to produce and validate knowledge. While hegemonic western social discourse would have us believe, therefore, that we are hostages to our social taboos about sex, in fact the Enlightenment era has ‘initiated sexual heterogeneities.’ The multiplication of sexualities in the west, privileged as primary and political forms of identification, remains primarily in the form of the heterosexual/homosexual binary.

In the last decade, globalization of what Tellis refers to as same-sex politics, or what Hoad calls the gay rights movement, has introduced western discourses of LGBT rights in eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America. In this paper I analyze what happens when western discourses help ‘the East’ uncover their ‘repressed’ sexualities. I lightly trace the specific interests of ‘the West’ in defining itself against the East, and the influence of donor interests on the development of entire NGO fields, especially the field of gay rights. It is vital to examine how the western discourse of ‘freeing’ LGBT individuals from repressed social positions through political action primarily requires local subjects who answer to those very specific names of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Of course there have always existed communities that identify through same-sex practices in eastern Europe, and these communities have performed their identity in a variety of ways, in a variety of social spaces. I argue that Romanian and Albanian women who desire women have had a detailed, dynamic and beautiful system of strategies for identifying themselves and others, and that the western project of developing LGBT communities attempts to contain this strategic dynamism. Neville Hoad, the leading theorist in the small academic field critiquing the globalization of sexuality, expresses the situation concisely when he states that “

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3 Foucault, *The History*, 33.
4 Foucault, *The History*, 37.
assert the universality of a specific historical agent can, and arguably is, closing down spaces for these participants without replicating the set of historical circumstances which allowed gayness to have historical agency in the west. The universalism that promises liberation ends up as oppression."⁶

Of course I am speaking from a space where my rights to live free from discrimination on grounds of sexuality are protected under Australian and European Convention statements, and as an actor privileged by education and nationality not to answer to any enunciated subject positions I choose to refuse. But I do believe that it is from within our circles, as theoreticians of identity, as NGO workers negotiating subjects enunciated by donors and popular local press, that we can begin to think through the complex interplay of east and west community formations.

How donor interests civilize societies

NGOs in the Romanian and Albanian civil society sectors need to perform for donor interests in order to access funding. There is now a significant body of academic analysis of the hoops through which EUrope proper (the West) demands those in ‘almost Europe’ (the East) jump.⁷ While remaining marginal to those who make policy, there are many minds that make the link between a western European crisis of identity and the strict demands for an Other identity issued to the East. Anti-corruption, political ‘stability,’ and ‘border integrity’ projects can all be read as mechanisms to other crises in the western political system. Likewise, there is a significant body of literature that interrogates the anxiety behind the most recent donor fetish of ‘trafficking,’ a topic usually assigned to ‘women’s’ NGO’s. The globalization of sexuality through the NGO boom of the last decade has been a significant event on an international social and legislative scale.

The role of LGBT NGOs depends upon the conflation of the sexual act of represented subjects and their personal-as-political-identity – individuals in a community must primarily identify through the sexual acts they prefer and claim an exclusivity of these acts. Members of an LGBT NGO should or must be singularly homosexual. In the LGBT NGO world, bisexual and transgender categories serve to recapture individual identities that fail/refuse to fit the heterosexual/homosexual normative binary.⁸ Hoad points out that gay rights organizations often claim protection under the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which does not mention sexual orientation.⁹ The anti-discrimination legislation required by EUropean accession stipulates that persons not be discriminated against on grounds of

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⁶ Hoad, “Arrested Development,” 53.
⁷ I use the term EUrope to refer to the imagined community of ‘united EUrope’ which wears the mask of naturalized antiquity ever since its christening in 1993 with the Maastricht treaty. The European Union is the structural foundation of this mask, which requires constant construction and anxious maintenance. Accession countries may be geographically European, but what they are protesting is their right to claim a EUropean identity.
sexuality, but does not name identities based on sexual practices. The catchphrase categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender used by human rights NGOs throughout the world, have no basis in any international human rights documentation. These categories for sexuality are used as unquestioned and predetermined boxes for human identification in countries as diverse as Romania, India, Thailand and Papua New Guinea.

Thirty-five years ago in England, America, Australia and Canada, actors who identified with the gay movement chose to fight for political rights based on their sexual preference. The contemporary globalization of legislative political agitation for gay rights in every country of the world is a point on the Western trajectory of gay rights. But the politicization of sexual identity is and was a particular moment in western history that did not occur in eastern Europe. The conflation of sexual acts with identity and the concept of politicizing non-normative sexual practices are new and uncomfortable to Romanian and Albanian societies at large. In almost EUropean Romanian and Albanian civil society, individuals who ‘deviate’ from the heterosexual norm are expected to choose one of these four categories which fits to their most preferred sexual practice, identify primarily through this category, and accept this as a political assignation.

The nature of discomfort in Romanian society can be explored on one level through headlines in the Romanian press relating to homosexuality. Two Romanian gay rights activists studied press depictions of homosexuality and found that gay men were most often referred to through jokes associated with the sexual act of sodomy. This cannot simply be taken as an example of homophobia, for it is a fact that the primary identification of the Romanian LGBT community was as activists for the legislative decriminalization of sodomy in the penal code. The LGBT community formalized and grew around a public identification with a specific sexual act as political. The authors point out that newspapers often linked sodomy with criminality (such as rape). This highlights the level of confusion that is brought into play when you define a community through a sexual act which has a history of criminalization, and is actively used as a weapon of demasculinization. Acknowledging these contradictions provides insight into how gay men can be stereotyped as feminine and passive, failing to inhabit masculinity, even while the act is depicted as violent and masculine.

A final example of supposed misrepresentation was a headline that related to the event of a press conference of the largest Romanian LGBT NGO “ACCEPT” to

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10 I am familiar only with the huge LGBT media in Australia, which dedicates an increasing amount of space to ‘developing’ gay scenes, such as those in Romania and Russia. Members of LGBT communities are even encouraged to go in person to a developing gay community and help them overcome what is depicted as a lack of courage to ‘come out’ in ways that would look like Australian LGBT communities. In one issue of a Sydney lesbian magazine, the before and after photos of ‘a Russian Lesbian’ showed her transformation from unsmiling, serious, office worker to a laughing outdoors snap showing her in a brightly colored Australian t-shirt.

11 I mean that conflation of same sex sexual practices only are new as forms of self-identification for Romanian and Albanian society. Of course, the sexual act of sodomy was intensely linked to criminality and criminalization of practitioners through the enforcement of penal code Article 200. Representations of hegemonic masculinity in heterosexual pornographic images are visible in the streets in Romania are also political, but the norm against which other sexualities are policed. I do not disagree that social recognition of a multiplicity of sexualities is valuable for society, and I think vital for increasing critique of representation of women as objects of sexualized masculine gaze.

address reform of the penal code. With the headline ‘homosexuals – unaffected by the rising price of petrol,’\textsuperscript{13} the journalists comment through sarcasm on the pervasiveness of the LGBT identity and their voice in civil society. The activists identify the headline as negating the rights of homosexuals to make an ‘intimate issue’ into a legal or social matter. I suggest that this is exactly the issue the newspaper raises through inference, and I think that it is valid and valuable for all segments of Romanian society to ask how and why a group defined by a sexual practice have come to be considered an important symptom of Romania’s ‘European-ness’? Indeed, it is interesting to note that the vision statement of ACCEPT taken from their web site, is ‘a society in which sexual orientation is simply a human characteristic.’\textsuperscript{14}

The local vision statement, therefore, is not to build a politically active community primarily identified through sexual practice, but a society where political identification is not primarily based on sexual practice. I suggest that what the press plays upon is exactly this gap between the way sexual practice in general was previously understood as an intimateapolitical practice (even against the state institutions!), and the new EUropean politics of sexual practice determining political identity.

Donors create and perpetuate largely unconsidered, or at worst arbitrary, trends in issues deemed suitable for funding. Tellis, writing on the effect of same-sex politics NGOs in India in the last decade, highlights the international trend to fund primarily anti-AIDs based projects in relation to same-sex community development, despite the statistical occurrence of HIV infection being a heterosexual phenomenon everywhere outside the West.\textsuperscript{15} LGBT NGOs in Romania and Albania have also received the most significant bulk of their funding for preventative sexual health and anti-HIV projects.\textsuperscript{16} The association of AIDS with homosexuality has had two (at least!) major ramifications for the formation of homosexual communities in the East. Firstly, it relies on a specifically American experience of gay male communities as HIV transmitters and defines a new communal identity through linking sexual practice with disease. This is not helpful in post-Ceausescu or post-Hoxha societies, where misinformation about sexual practice and sexual health remains rife.\textsuperscript{17} Secondly, AIDs based funding not only ignores the statistically identifiable victims of HIV in the East (heterosexual women and men), but constructs a homosexual community that privileges men. This has resulted, in both Romania and Albania, in donors and local administrators, including women who identify as lesbians in the same frameworks as men, as recipients of health project funding.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{13}“Homosexualii – neafectati de scumpirea benzinei,” Adevarul (8.03.1998) as cited in Creteanu and Coman, “Homosexualitatea.”


\textsuperscript{15}Tellis, “Ways.”

\textsuperscript{16}For a vast and informative overview of projects undertaken by ACCEPT, see http://www.accept-Romania.ro/proiecte.html

\textsuperscript{17}Homosexuality was considered (and still is to a large extent) a psychological and/or physical illness under the socialist regimes in both Romania and Albania. For a study of the role of the health profession and medical disinformation as a means of control in socialist Romania see Gail Kligman, The Politics of Duplicity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

Constructing Lesbians in an LGBT world

The formation of lesbian communities in Romania and Albania has encountered many of the same problems as in the west, in so far as women who identify as lesbians have struggled for a space from which to speak in the gay movement, especially with the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. Organized lesbian communities east and west both experience smaller numbers than gay male groups, and even critical debates as to whether a ‘lesbian’ or ‘woman orientated’ culture exists. The issues faced by a nascent lesbian community in Romania are showcased in an interview/discussion amongst ACCEPT activists that was published in an ACCEPT bulletin. One participant reckons that the lower participation rate of lesbians compared to gay men in ACCEPT is because they are considered a political organization rather than a medium for socializing. Adrian Coman, the director of ACCEPT, specifies that it is men and not women who are the subjects of the heavily funded ‘Gay Men For Safer Sex,’ and that the ‘special activity’ for lesbians is a meeting group called ‘LesBi’ which includes bisexuals. The discussion continues that in fact lesbians have a much smaller rate of HIV infection, but nonetheless they ‘hope that in the future we can distribute special condoms for women.’ This is a lesbian activist speaking, yet there is a clear gap between what she knows as reality (that women who sleep with women in Romania do not transmit HIV at any notable rate) and the way that lesbian community needs must be articulated within the framework of the donor’s priorities. Not only does this speaker contradict her own knowledge that ‘special condoms for women’ are largely unnecessary, but she names these products not through the marketing or political term used in western lesbian communities, ‘Femdom,’ but as another kind of condom for women, ‘a male condom but different.’

In Albania one can witness the same issues at a less developed stage in the example of the freelance ‘human rights project co-ordinator’ desperately seeking even one lesbian in order to get an entire gay movement underway. In fact, after months of speaking with a small group of Albanian women who desire women, who all work in the civil society sector, this project designer still cannot find anyone to answer to the name of lesbian. The entire project relies upon the participation of a significant number of lesbians as they are required to demonstrate EUropean ‘gender mainstreaming’ policy.

Considering the funding prioritization of sexual health issues for gay men in the LGBT movement, lesbian communities in Romania (in practiced reality) and Albania (in the NGO envisaged future) both offer primarily ‘discussion group/counseling’ services. In Romania, lesbians are also politically involved in imagining a future where the rights of same sex couples to legislative protection (marriage, anti-discrimination laws, adoption, inheritance) are established. In Albania, there is not yet even a basic law on gender equality. In the absence of a strong legislative campaign (such as the anti-article 200 campaigns in Romania), lesbian communities focus their attention on the practice familiar to all of us from its popularity in the west, ‘coming out.’

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19 Mona Petre in ibid.
20 Running projects for bisexuals and lesbians together could be criticized as conflating women and bisexuals as the Others of a phallocentric hetero/homosexual binary.
21 It is interesting to note that the phrase ‘to come out’ was incorporated into Romanian language as ‘to make the coming out’ (a face coming out-ul) rather than ‘to come out,’(sa vin (afara)). Linguistically, the action stands far from the everyday incitement to come out from a dark place, the everydayness of the term in English was part of its signifying agency.
‘Coming out’ as community formation

‘Coming out,’ according to the large information project run by the American Human Rights Campaign Foundation, ‘shows pride in yourself and your community’ primarily, and, secondly, ‘helps educate others about the discrimination that LGBT people face.’ These stated effects of coming out illustrate well how LGBT identity is constructed through the process itself. The first point obviously requires the subject to identify communally with their sexual practice preference, and presupposes that this is a permanent and unchangeable identifying factor. The comment that coming out helps educate others about discrimination assumes that the subject will face enough discrimination or identify with the discriminated against subject position, to fully inhabit the politically active role of educator. The process of coming out ‘is different for everyone’ and ‘is never finished,’ it perpetuates itself through the advised steps of coming out to one’s local gay community first, then one’s family, friends, and heterosexual work colleagues. In the standard model of literature, the family of an individual who comes out are also encouraged to embark upon their own journey of ‘coming out’ to straight family friends and colleagues and supportive family of a gay relative. The process of coming out exemplifies Foucault’s understanding of western society as claiming sex to be a privileged form of knowledge of ourselves that is prevented by social taboo and repression. It is only through confession, breaking the taboos with a third party listening, that the ‘truth’ can be released.

The western culture of ‘coming out’ has been adopted by the Romanian and Albanian LGBT communities. Numerous Romanian web sites include translations of and links to coming out advice sites, and the special ACCEPT advice for coming out site states that people use a lot of different words to describe their coming out experiences; ‘hate, safety, fear, boldness, liberation, tears, but, somewhere, sooner or later, light.’ In the ACCEPT discussion article, one Romanian lesbian participant says that

‘growth in lesbian visibility (in Romanian society) can be encouraged through promotion of models in the community, of people who demonstrate through personal example that if you come out nothing will happen to you! Some lesbians are terrified of coming out and consider that this is something terrible. We need to have discussion about what will happen if you come out – in truth society is homophobic, but not the whole world reacts violently!’

This quote makes it clear that Romanian society is at best not reacting violently, and the general anti-homosexual sentiment of the society is well documented. Does the act of coming out in Romania hold any promise of reward for the subjects who announce

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22 All the information in this paragraph is taken from the web site for the national project for Coming Out of the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.hrc.org/Template.cfm?Section=Coming_Out> (last accessed 5/9/2004).
and name themselves in the same way that those practicing within the western model and western society gain?

There is no doubt that coming out forms a community, its necessary for people to openly choose a particular form of identification in order to have a community of people identifying in the same way. It is important to note that ‘confession’ functions very differently in Romanian and American (or western) societies. While living in a same sex relationship in Romania or Albania requires constant information management (that could be read as selective ‘coming out’), the enjoyment of confession endlessly perpetuated by ‘coming out’ in the American social context, cannot (and should not be expected to) be replicated in Romanian society. The urge of the above author for a greater number of women to ‘come out,’ to create a critical mass of a culture of confession is understandable. Community formation is even more desirable considering the hostility of Romanian society to individuals who are ‘out’ as sexualities that deviate from the heterosexual norm. Indeed, the internationally oft-stated desire for lesbians to become more visible is itself an incitement to discourse which functions in tandem with the ‘myth of lesbian invisibility,’ according to numerous academics of queer culture.

The failure of activists to recognize the significance of the gap between reality in Albania and the rhetoric of ‘coming out’ recently resulted in one tragic case in Tirana. Encouraged by a foreign gay rights activist, a 19 year old Albanian ‘came out’ to his friends, family and the rest of the country on a television talk show because ‘coming out is necessary for accepting oneself.’ The next day he was thrown out of home, ostracized by friends, and begging the talk show producers to help him deal with violent threats. The culture of confession does not function similarly in the east and west.

The benefits for women who desire women to identify as lesbians in Romania and Albania are for those who want to identify with a politically privileged subject position from which to develop and take advantage of legislative structures enabling same-sex relationships to be recognized by the state. I propose that requiring a strong lesbian community identity creates many factors that are actually detrimental to the real lives of women who desire women in Romania and Albania.

In my personal experience, prior to 1999 in Romania (and currently in Albania) it was relatively easy to walk the streets holding hands with another woman, even to kiss a little more passionately than usual in public. The reason for this ease was the lack of popular words or discourses to identify, name and judge female same-sex practice. In the matrix of what can be called homosocial practices between women, the lack of the word lesbian in popular culture meant that, unlike in Australia or America, bystanders did not have this signpost to an established homophobic discourse at their disposal. Once social discourse signifies ‘lesbian,’ subjects can be thus constituted and discriminated against regardless of whether they identify themselves as lesbians. As Butler explicates, “one need not know about or register a

25 The popularity of talk show confession culture in the USA is an example of the culture of confession I am describing. While the talk show format has been adopted in Romania and Albania, the nature of the subjects and the ways they are discussed do not, in my opinion, reflect anywhere near the same reliance on scandalous confession.

26 See especially Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia E. Weiringa, “Sapphic Shadows: Challenging the Silence in the Study of Sexuality,” in Blackwood and Weiringa, eds., Female Desires: Same-sex relations and transgender practices across cultures (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). This chapter argues that Lesbian invisibility in ethnography and general representation is a powerful myth.

way of being constituted for that constitution to work in an efficacious way [...] a chain of signification that exceeds the circuit of self-knowledge.”

It was only after the right wing “Homosexuality No No No” campaign in 2000-2001, where the words gay and lesbian were popularized in media discussion and protest, that I heard the word lesbian being used by young men as an insult against a group of young women in the street. This campaign strongly protested attempts to remove sodomy from the Romanian penal code and received the vocal public support of the right wing Romania Mare political party, and various organizations affiliated with the Romanian Orthodox Church. Orthodox student groups protested in the street, and the Patriarch himself and other religious figures held regular public speeches. The most effective transmission of information was the posting of unsigned A3 size bulletins along the major boulevards of Bucharest which listed many damaging effects lesbians and gay men would have on ‘real’ Romanian society. These posters articulated at length a vast range of signifiers of homosexuality, most showing continuity with discourses of degeneration which had been utilized in the socialist period. It was only after this poster campaign (and the largely uncritical media attention it received) that I personally experienced violent physical harassment in a Bucharest street when identified as ‘lesbian.’ On this occasion I was surprised and horrified primarily because I did not consider myself to be signifying ‘lesbian’ in any overt way – I was with a female friend, but wearing a skirt with my short hair. The incident is indicative of the new currency of ‘lesbian’ as an identifiable and besieged category of identity, rather than a new subtlety in understanding difference in Romanian society. I therefore argue that LGBT identities provided by the West are now recognized by a larger portion of Romanian society as the new names for subjects who violate heterosexual norms. In Romania especially, the introduction of foreign names is very quickly and violently incorporated into the groundswell of anti-EUropean ‘new right’ movements, such as ‘Romania Mare’ (Greater Romania), so that there is a strong and well funded political interest that will ensure the Romanian public understand new terminology in unique and often violent exclusionary ways.

Another argument against the rigid categorization of LGBT identities is that it creates community identities policed at the expense of diversity of individual sexual practices. In western LGBT communities, identity boundaries are as heavily policed as those of the heterosexual communities. There may be a multiplicity of sexualities, but each comes with a carefully articulated and heavily invested exclusive community


29 Copies of these posters and information concerning the campaign in the streets, media and on the internet can be gained from the author, or from the library of ACCEPT in Bucharest.

30 My response to this recognition was the usual ‘how do they know?’ and Judith Butler’s work on hate speech is useful for addressing the violence that can be inherent in such a public interpellation. It is likely that ‘lesbians’ in Romania in this period were identified with signifiers picked up from international popular culture – such as from American sitcom characters – in addition to locally produced discourses. It is interesting to note that the contemporary burgeoning western-style amateur stand up comedy scene in Bucharest heavily relies upon stereotypes of gay male behavior which have long become standard in western humor. In these routines the humor is often the performance of a masculinity which is sensitive to fashion, feminine, and gay.

31 We have seen this happen with the concepts of anti-discrimination against gender (construed as no more jokes about dumb blondes) and positive discrimination for ethnic minorities (Romania becomes ‘Rromania’!). The coalition of groups who funded the fight to retain the penal code article 200 was an example of how much political and financial support backs the anti-gay rights movement.
identity and allegiance. When an individual ‘comes out’ as a particular identity, there is a formal or informal moral and political responsibility to the group to retain this single identification position.32 When I began living in Hungary and Romania in 1997, I felt free in a society where people didn’t ask if I was gay, straight or bisexual as a way of placing me in a social category. Certainly the question is not asked because heterosexuality is the normative model, but this does not mean that women are not having sexual relationships with each other. I have met many women who have previously had both female and male lovers, and women who have had exclusively female partners, but these women overall considered the term ‘lesbian’ as foreign and problematic.

It is interesting to note that amongst the Romanian and Albanian diaspora in London and New York, I have interviewed women who only have relationships with women, and they share my discomfort with the western pressure to identify as lesbian and the political responsibility it entails. Some of these women gained refugee asylum abroad as ‘lesbians,’ and are conscious of the way that they mobilize discourses of persecution alongside, or intertwined with, the narrative of the pre-LGBT past as more free for women who wanted to have sexual relationships with other women. While the regimes of the socialist and immediate post-socialist periods did persecute alternative sexualities, it is also a little explored reality that when societies construct women as excluded and separate from men, women can also quite easily claim a space for having female sexual as well as social partners. In Albania especially the ‘good woman’ is the one who stays at home, goes out only with her female friends, and doesn’t socialize with men who are not of her family. Many women who desire women live with close female friends or are married, and those with whom I have discussed the possible formation of a lesbian community feel that a rigid new identity designation would be a detrimental change to their lifestyles. Not only does ‘coming out’ as a lesbian place one outside the established and policed structures of patriarchal protection, it disturbs the delicate dynamics of women-women sexual relationships that develop from intense friendships without being recognized by participants as choices in lifestyle, let alone a basis for an exclusive political identity. Potential lovers, family and friends are much more open to individual preferences when they are not associated with a political identity based primarily on sexual practice, especially when it is one that rejects a social structure that is subverted daily by the dynamic strategies of local women. The blunt categorical definition of sexuality as lesbian or straight, in a complicated context like Albania, destroys difference and a plurality of sexualities even as it claims to recover identities from repression.

How many Albanian sexualities can we have?

A final example of the way that the LGBT rights project can be a tool for repressing difference is found in the limitations placed by the Dutch human rights worker I mentioned earlier on the new project for Albanian Gays and Lesbians. In our first meeting I asked if she had found any bisexual or transgender individuals to form the rest of the LGBT project, to which she replied that the project would only include gay men and lesbians because ‘the others would be too confusing.’ The question, of course, is too confusing for who?

32 A wonderful documentary about ‘coming out’ as having a boyfriend in a lesbian community was the 1994 American film Go Fish.
All the terms are new and ‘confusing’ for the local society, and she had already been informed by those she wanted to call lesbian that this was not a name they wished to identify with. The refusal of bisexual and transgender identities in Albania is a fascinating move because such a large portion of western anthropology concerning this small country has focused on precisely these identities! Culminating with anthropologist Antonia Young’s 2000 publication Women Who Become Men: Albanian Sworn Virgins there has been over a century of faux-scholarly inquiry into the ‘cross-dressing’ culture (and sexual practices) of women in Albania’s north. The forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation by Aleksandra Djajic Horvath provides academic insight into the anxieties and fascinations that have driven this specific relationship of the West with Albania as the East. In addition, Albanian society is one in which affections are openly displayed between men in ways that do cause anxiety for western visitors. It is in this context that the Dutch activist’s refutation of bisexual and transgender identity in Albania as ‘too confusing’ strikes me as primarily her confusion with a society that performs its own multiplicity of sexual signs and languages for reading them. Masquerading as anti-repression, the work of this individual in Albania is active containment of sexualities.

The LGBT movement claims to be globalizing a new multiplicity through freeing supposedly pre-existing categories of sexual identity from social repression, but this can be more easily read as a movement of containment. Through defining sexual practices as politicized LGBT identities, the existing multiplicities of sexual practice and ways of performing them in society are formalized in new western categories with their specific place in an international political trajectory. In order to form these new communal identities, individuals are urged to participate in the self-perpetuating western culture of ‘confessing’ their break with social taboos, which in turn creates a new set of organizing sexual identities which damage existing, more subtle, networks of communication of sexualities and identities.

In the meantime, when I am named lesbian by men in a Romanian street I feel angry that they steal a name that could be my strength in other contexts. When I arrive in a new city almost anywhere in the world I can go to one of multiple LGBT NGOs and be sure to meet other women who identify with women, but I can no longer hold hands with a woman in Bucharest, sexual partner or not, without being violently interpellated by a discourse of identity defined through sexual practice. If the major gain of the LGBT movements in Romania and Albania will be the introduction of legislation to protect all individuals from discrimination on the grounds of sexuality or gender, will such legislation function in Romanian and Albanian societies the same way that it functions in western societies? Can we think outside the LGBT boxes, think queer perhaps, long enough to examine how legislative changes affect any society?

It is clear that I speak from within the language I rail against, that I benefit from the contemporary universalisms that say I cannot be discriminated against because of my sexual practices. But these universalisms are creating problematic new limits for ways of being, knowing, and desiring in Romanian and Albanian society where women had created their own spaces before the arrival of western discourses of lesbian identity.

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LESBIANS IN MODERN RUSSIA:
SUBJECTIVITY OR SOVIET PRACTICES OF ‘HYPOCRISY’?

Nadezda Nartova

Abstract

Western researchers of homosexuality in Russia, basing their views on the experience of their own countries, as well as on the modern queer-theory discussion of subjectivity, transfer their notions and concepts on the post-Soviet space and make a conclusion that Russian gays and lesbians don’t have a stable, culturally defined identity, that could let distinguish a community and demand its recognition on different levels. In my opinion, the situation in modern Russia is a bit different. And its analysis “from the inside” let me talk not about subjectivities, freedoms and pluralities, but about Soviet practices that are used to represent and achieve lesbian lifestyle in the post-soviet space. The representation of heterosexuality and homosexuality by lesbian women in post-Soviet Russia shows not the floating subjectivity, but a specific form of social space reorganization, which does not prevent them from defining themselves as purely lesbians and conduct a lesbian lifestyle.

Modern Western feminist researchers of identity, sexuality, politics and representation, basing their ideas on the experience and the development trajectory of their own countries, realize the problematic character and insufficiency of rigid and preset categories like homosexual, heterosexual, lesbian. These categories, included in the practically realized politics of identity, introduce rigid segregation of groups’ inclusion. In everyday life, a person’s experience and practices are much more differentiated and identities are less stable and multiple. Thus, theory and practice make us look for new analytical categories and approaches. One such approach is queer theory, which shifts the accent from identity to subjectivity, and consequently on the plurality of experience, representations and practices.

Western researches of homosexuality in Russia transfer their views in the search for subjectivity on the post-Soviet area and, looking at the appearing image, conclude that Russian gays and lesbians do not have a stable, culturally-defined identity that could allow to distinguish the community and demand recognition on different levels. In their opinion, it is more appropriate to talk about gay/lesbian subjectivity, producing an amorphous structure of people not limited by an explicit category: people follow homosexual and heterosexual practices at the same time, represent in different situations different forms of masculinity and femininity. But what if these researchers find what they are looking for on purpose? Isn’t it a kind of “orientalism” when new and tempting forms of sexuality are attributed to a different country that used to be a closed one and that is exotic in some way? In my opinion, the situation in modern Russia is a bit different. And its analysis allows me speak not necessarily about the subjectivities, freedoms and pluralities, but about Soviet practices of representation and realization of lesbian lifestyle in the post-Soviet area.

Researchers of Soviet society write that there were two public spheres in the life of a Soviet person: (1) an official one (family, work, official events) that was under

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the strict control of the state and was regulated by the official written code; and (2) the unofficial one (networks of friends and acquaintances, subcultures, shadow economics) that ensured everyday life and that was regulated by an informal unwritten code. The main norm of Soviet life was the legitimate double standard or the legitimate hypocrisy, when during the official events a person followed one set of rules and in private life another one, never mixing these spheres and having the ability of snappy switching between the two spheres. The lives of many people became a constantly repeating duality – as if broken into two parts. Thus, on the one hand there was the official life, consisting of acceptable public and private life, from the point of view of the doctrine, and on the other hand there was the secret private (or intimate) life. This practice of hiding one’s behavior, or “extracting” it from the sight of the neighbors and colleagues and sometimes even family members could be evaluated as a single act independent from outside direction or invasion. Hypocrisy required the learning of the technique and individual elaboration of the switching mechanism between the official and the private world, which finally became almost automatic as a body skill.

Changes that started in Russia at the end of the ‘80s and the beginning of the ‘90s entailed the destruction and disappearance of two spheres of life – the unofficial public and the official public ones, thus reshaping the structure of the public and private in the Russian society in the traditional direction for the Western practice: separation of the private sphere, appearance of the market sphere and the sphere of free public discussion, the civil initiative and others. But for the homosexual and lesbian communities, the practice of division of spheres and of hypocrisy is still topical. In spite of the legal (repeal of anti-homosexual law) and normative (discontinuation of forced psychiatric treatment of lesbians) changes, as well as the gay/lesbian movement rush at the beginning of the ‘90s, homosexuality has still not become equal in rights with the heterosexual way of life. In the process of “normalization” of society, heterosexuality remained the cultural norm, supported by the tradition and social institutions, while lesbianism was propelled into the unofficial public sphere – into a special tolerated, but not evidently represented area.

Using the terminology of G. Garfinkel, one can say that heterosexuality is the basic sense-making category of knowledge and the experience of people and society – “something that everyone knows” – and that includes publicly approved behavior models known to any decent person. Heterosexuality is not only a value and a norm but also a type of behavior that is shared and supported by all society members. In order to keep the general world-image intact, the only social roles (and their conduct) that get legitimacy are the ones based on the heterosexual identity. Since identities that are “not normal” (or outside the norm) are stigmatized, according to Irvin

\[4\] O. Kharkhordin, Unmask and Dissemble: Genealogy of a Russian Person, (St. Petersburg European University in St. Petersburg, Letniy Sad, 2002), 352.
\[5\] Kharkhordin, Unmask, 362.
Gofman, it makes one display behavior not corresponding to one’s identity, but culturally acceptable.

In this study, eight semi-structured theme-lined interviews were conducted with lesbian women between 18 to 35 years of age living in St. Petersburg. Materials of eighteen other interviews from the author’s works were used as well.

For the analysis of the interviews, the method employed by A. Rotkirch was used. This method is based on the notion of “triple experience” described by Ch. Pierce. “According to Pierce the triple experience includes the dynamic relationship between the body feelings, institutional practices and cultural interpretations affecting the self-image formation or self-awareness of a person.”

Having analyzed the interviews, I learned that lesbian women in the process of social interaction restructure the social area into spheres of representation – realization/ non-representation – non-realization of lesbianism. There are three such spheres: the lesbian sphere, the borderline sphere and the heterosexual sphere.

1. Lesbian Area – the sphere where lesbianism is freely represented and realized. Partners (and life with them) are included in this sphere as well as friends and acquaintances networks, lesbian clubs, internet sites. Information exchange and search for partners take place in this sphere and one can get here support and spend one’s leisure time. Close non-homosexual friends are included in the lesbian sphere and the basis for self-representation as a lesbian is the high level of trust “only close ones, friends” (26, interview #4), while the previous communication takes away the risk of stigmatization “And how can we quarrel because of that?” (30, interview #3)

2. The Borderline Area – is the sphere where lesbianism is represented but not discussed. The following people and situations belong here:
   i) When no attention is paid to the others, and others’ private life and behavior are not discussed (street, café) “and what’s the difference with whom and how I hold hands, people just walk on the streets and what, do they watch how the others walk?” (30, interview #3)
   ii) When a lesbian woman has equal status with others (passers-by, fellow-students);
   iii) When the opinion of others cannot have bad or obvious negative after-effects for the lesbian woman “And what can they do to me?” (24, interview #7). In crisis situations lesbian women can guarantee defense and neutralize the situation. Lesbianism representation in this sphere is expressed in the partner presence and in the expression of tender

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7 Abels, Interaction, 209.
9 The choice of this age group was determined by the assumption that structural conditions of the Soviet and post-Soviet periods have significant differences. Thus we were interested in women whose worldview was formed in the post-Soviet period.
feeling towards her. Others are given the right to decide what kind of relations are these and this is the counterbuffer that guarantees noninterference into the private life “who doesn’t like doesn’t have to look” (26, interview #4), “if they have seen something and understood, that’s their problem” (30, interview #3).

3. The Heterosexual Area – is the sphere where a lesbian woman represents herself as a heterosexual one. This sphere includes significant others: parents and work, where the supposed danger of stigmatization and negative after-effects is very high. In this sphere heterosexuality as the basic practice is not violated. Here the mechanisms of heterosexuality are respected by such behavior as the appearance of a lesbian woman with a boyfriend and the ability to neutralize the problematic situation by referring to a heterosexual experience or the absence of a decent partner: “Mama, just look at modern men, she looks and I say, do you have further questions?” (26, interview #4). The culturally defined norm of heterosexual contract guarantees the concealment of lesbianism if it is not directly named or represented.

The lower a woman’s status in an interaction situation and the higher her dependence level, the more she represents (“performs”) heterosexuality. For example a lesbian can reveal her sexuality to a colleague with whom she has developed trustworthy or friendly relations but almost never to her boss.

For the parents whose socialization took place in the Soviet times, the lesbian way of life is not associated with a safe life strategy for their children. Therefore, learning about the homosexuality of their daughter is considered by the lesbian women as threatening to their parents’ health and wellbeing that the daughters (in their opinion) do not have the right to endanger. The degree of concealment includes in this situation the level of material and psychic dependence, the age of the parents, the living conditions, etc. Lesbian women made “different” combinations of these factors explaining the reasons for concealing their homosexuality.

The condition for the existence of an unproblematic lesbian space is keeping its borderlines that are supported through non-representation of lesbianism and the lesbian space in other spheres. We see this process as a division of spheres in individual biographies, but the process of learning the rules for sphere distribution may be defined as “from mystery to routine”.

Reconstructing their experience in the interviews, lesbian women considered that the period of secrecy and concealment was linked to the time when homosexuality was highly problematic in their own conscience: “First it was difficult. Still the time was a bit different then, I was younger, yes, it was difficult. Because I had to conceal, again talk about my beloved as a neutral body. And now it’s completely gone, no problems, I have kept silence and it’s all and over now” (26, interview #2). An 18 years old informant describes her present life the same way: “We are hiding it... It’s a secret” (18, interview #6), not only from the parents and acquaintances but also from the passers-by in the street “We hold hands in the street only when nobody sees and when it’s crowded we walk just side by side... who knows how people might look at that, it’s not very pleasant” (18, interview #6).

In the period of “formation” and search for acceptable relation models, different aspects are made problematic. A 22 year-old informant (interview #5) undergoes a period of uncertainty in her relations with parents who do not know, and she does not want to tell them. But, on the other hand, she does not want to conceal: “My mother has a weak heart... I wouldn’t like them to know but I also wouldn’t like them to imagine some boy, some heterosexual nonsense” (22, interview #5).
The greater a woman’s homosexual and/or social experience, the better the skill to divide the spheres and the more of a routine character this process has. For example, a 30 year-old informant (interview #3) answered the questions just by nodding as her way of life did not cause any tensions: she has a private life, a permanent partner, friends whom she can tell everything, work where she occupies a high position and where she does not discuss her private life. She successfully earns her living, she is competent, she is not interested in lesbian clubs and passers-by and she spends her leisure in a jazz club. This amounts to the fact that her lesbianism is so much “included” in her everyday life that it practically cannot be distinguished from the routine.

What is interesting is the fact that young informants say that they need some social organizations, some people to change something in the society: “Something should be done, of course, it’s very important” (18, interview #6). This means that they need external favorable conditions to realize the lesbian lifestyle and supportive organizations. “Competent” ones do not see any sense in these organizations: “I don’t need them for example. Me personally. And, after all, what problems could arise that I would like to go to some center?” (26, interview #1).

Lesbian women not only learn to divide spheres of representation – realization/non-representation – non-realization of lesbianism, but also acquire competence in each sphere: women know the rules of the “game” in the lesbian as well as in the heterosexual space: “I just know how to make them [men] interested, how to keep the game going” (26, interview #1). Such sphere division does not make these women uncomfortable, does not cause emotional stress, they do not see themselves discriminated: “I think I have a normal life of full value, not restricted by anything” (26, interview #1). A similar double game is a routine, an everyday thing.

The lesbian sphere is constructed as a specific “private” one (a hidden sphere of experience protected from the external heterosexual control and interference where an individual can be him/herself\textsuperscript{12}), the unofficial public sphere. In the areas where important others and/or potentially important others are present, women represent heterosexuality trying thus to avoid negative after-effects and unforeseen situations. Thus both, the traditionally “private” sphere (the parents, the family), as well as the traditionally “public” sphere (the work), are the official “public” sphere where an individual follows the normative expectations (of heterosexuality).

However, the lesbian sphere is not only a personally created one – it is a specific structural sphere in the society that includes public institutions like clubs and internet sites oriented on lesbian community and on the networks of friends and acquaintances existing outside individual biographies and plural ones acting in this community. The fact that the lesbian space is an independent strictly limited sphere with its own rules and limitations is supported by the stories of “entering” the lesbian sphere: the lesbian sphere should be found, accepted as one’s own, interiorized and integrated in one’s lifestyle as a unity. That means one has to enter the community and support it by one’s practices and actions. Let us have a closer look at that in the empirical material.

As the homosexual experience is in the first place and to a great extent exclusive, only accessible to a limited number of people, and, in the second place, it has (as we have seen above) limited possibilities of representation in the public sphere, a lesbian woman, experiencing for the first time homoerotic feelings, has practically no information about other lesbians, about lesbian lifestyle, etc.: “I didn’t

know anything at all” (30, interview #3), “And where, for whom to look for? Where and how do they find each other at all? What can I do?” (26, interview 1).

Learning about lesbian clubs or internet sites, getting first homosexual acquaintances entails the widening of the lesbian world of a woman “I didn’t know at all that the world is so big, in this respect” (22, interview #5), getting confidence “… I just became freer in Petersburg,” became freer now. Maybe I became freer exactly when I met some people. Yes, I think it happened then.” (26, interview #4), and, to a certain extent, freedom: “It was the first time, we kissed openly for the first time in a crowd that might become familiar or was familiar to us. We danced for the first time, danced as we wanted to – it was great” (26, interview #2).

Thus, having entered the lesbian sphere, a woman gets maximum possibilities for realization and representation of the lesbian lifestyle. Moreover, different elements of the lesbian sphere (clubs and friends) form a whole of “one’s own” space. No doubt, norms and rules of behavior at home and in a club are different and formally these are the private and the public, but this sphere can be detached on the basis of common homosexual experience, and is actually an undivided lesbian sphere.

Learning the skills to divide the spheres and the “routinization” of this skills allows women to live relatively non-contradictory lives, avoiding discrimination and suppression, as well as to support the independence and the unity of the lesbian sphere in the society.

Therefore, we can conclude that the lesbian sphere belongs to the unofficial public sphere that is independent, complete and self-sufficient. The stability of its borderlines is kept through the absence of external public representation and problematization in public discussions. Entering the lesbian sphere, learning its internal rules (for example, representation of homosexuality) and its detachment from other spheres through non-representation of lesbianism in external social interactions allow women not only to satisfy their lesbian needs but also to live a non-contradictory life.

Thus, the representation of heterosexuality and homosexuality by lesbian women in post-Soviet Russia shows not the floating subjectivity, but a specific form of social space reorganization, which does not prevent them from defining themselves as purely lesbians and conduct a lesbian lifestyle.

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Abstract

The paper demonstrates the workings of a double “emptying process” by focusing on the appearances in mainstream Western advertising of queer cultural signifiers without the explicit connection being made between the item advertised and the sexual identity implied by the visual/textual representation. A small-scale research stands in the center of the paper’s argumentation: between November 2001 and March 2002 I followed three Hungarian and one Romanian media publication looking for advertisements that might illustrate a Central and Eastern European mainstreaming of queer cultural signifiers.

Introduction

The paper demonstrates the workings of a double “emptying process” by focusing on the appearances in mainstream Western advertising of queer cultural signifiers without the explicit connection being made between the item advertised and the sexual identity implied by the visual/textual representation. An example of how mainstreaming ignores the original meaning/connotation of an image or slogan, this phenomenon has been understood as a secret outreach towards the actually targeted queer identified consumers while keeping the straight audience as well. The narrowing down of advertisement signs referring to a queer/gay/lesbian context is paralleled by the total de-politicization of queer identity politics in mainstream public spaces: in this respect the process might represent the changes all subcultural elements undergo if mainstreamed in advertising.

A small-scale research stands in the center of the paper’s argumentation: between November 2001 and March 2002 I followed three Hungarian and one Romanian media publication looking for advertisements that might illustrate a Central-Eastern European mainstreaming of queer cultural signifiers.

Consumer culture and its dependence on advertising

Advertising, as a sphere of contemporary consumer culture, produces and circulates images or symbols multiply torn away from any possible “original” context. Embedded in the broader frame of late capitalism, the practices of advertising enhance the commodification process of consumer goods, since the meaning of the products is increasingly separated from the social and labor conditions of their production or purchase. This process could be shortly summarized, following Celia Lury (who builds on the arguments of Jean Baudrillard), that the emphasis is being turned from the “use-value” of goods to their “exchange-value” in the first step. Thus the goods

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1 I am using “queer” as referring to lesbian, gay and other non-heterosexual identities in general; whenever there is a need for, I differentiate between them. I also follow the word use of the authors cited if that differs from mine.

become important not for the utility in fulfilling the real needs of those who own them, but as the equivalents of a material value. As Lury mentions, Baudrillard conceives of a second step in this transformation: instead of the "use-value," the "sign-value" begins to determine the meaning and importance of consumer goods. Although his idea is a radically postmodern one – the limitations of which have been widely and justly criticized – the argumentation of this paper might profit from its presentation.

The case when "sign-value" influences the meaning consumers attribute to consumer goods might be seen in the phenomenon of "branding": this refers to the constant association of certain consumer items with certain values or characteristics that have nothing to do with their "material utility." Celia Lury, paraphrasing Baudrillard, mentions examples like the association of Levi’s jeans with sexuality or Marlboro cigarettes with "rugged masculinity." These allow for the trousers or the cigarettes to be understood and perceived by the consumers not (just) as clothing or smoking items, but as elements in the associated field of meaning: “[t]he meaning of goods created in a brand is understood by Baudrillard to be separate from the social relations of both production and consumption […] [T]heir meaning arises from their position in a continuing process of signification and resignification.”

The practice of advertising is important for this paper in the frame of reference described above: as a process of commodifying images and symbols, which in radical cases are dissociated from the practical “use- or exchange-value” of the products advertised and sold. This might be considered the counter-process of what Sut Jhally calls the “refilling of the emptied commodity” by the advertisement as an image and by the process of advertising itself. While on the one hand we have the advertised item separated from its early capitalist “use value,” on the other there are the images, also taken out from any functional context, except that of being associated with the advertised good. This double “emptying out” leads to mainstream advertising, aimed at the broadest possible audience, when both the advertised products and the images or symbols referring to them are stripped of particular, subcultural meanings or uses. Certainly, this is a radical version of how advertisements and advertised consumer goods “come together,” but as proved by the literature consulted, it can not be ignored as a significant trend. This paper tries to demonstrate the workings of a double “emptying process” by focusing on the appearances in mainstream Western advertising of queer cultural markers, without an explicit connection made between the item advertised and the sexual identity implied by the visual and/or textual representation.

Incorporation of queer subcultural styles and elements into mainstream advertising

Two terms that informed my thinking process in developing the argumentation of this paper are “gay window advertising” and “niche marketing.” In a sense, these might be seen overlapping, since commercial advertisements aimed at a queer audience represent a very clear case of “niche marketing.” What is specific about queer niche marketing is the audience’s position which is (relatively) hard to determine if

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4 “The function of advertising is to refill the emptied commodity with meaning. Indeed the meaning of advertising would make no sense if objects already had an established meaning. The power of advertising depends on the initial emptying out. Only then can advertising refill this empty void with its own meaning.” (Sut Jhally cited in Lury, “The Stylization,” 62.)
compared to class or racial minority niche marketing. To quote Rosemary Hennessy: “Increasingly, marketers of mainstream products from books to beer are aiming ads specifically at gay men and lesbians; *Fortune* magazine contends ‘it’s a wonderful market niche, the only question is how to reach it.’ (Stewart 199) Reaching it has so far involved manufacturing the image of a certain class-specific lesbian and gay population.”

As Danae Clark observes in her paper about a certain lesbian style visibility in an early 1980s North-American fashion magazines context, gay and lesbian audiences do not constitute a homogenous group from the point of view of classical sociological markers. Age, social status or income do not seem to be reliable variants by which to delimit a gay or lesbian target group; this is the reason why the process itself has started relatively late in the United States and even then proceeded along the class lines mentioned by Hennessy. In Hungary, a Central European, post-communist country, lesbian and gay identity politics has made visible the existence of these communities. Yet, any type of mainstreaming is far from being the case, all the more so in entertainment, fashion and lifestyle magazines.

Beside the more complex process of identifying the target audience in the case of “queer niche marketing,” there is a further element that differentiates this type of advertising from the “general” niche marketing. This has to do with the concept called “gay window advertising” and the level of homophobia built in the heterosexual and patriarchal social edifice of the Euro-American Western world. Producers and advertisers eager to multiply the possible audience layers might choose to “carefully” convey gay/lesbian/queer codes in the advertisement process, yet, as proved by the literature consulted, this results in the rarest cases in openly acknowledging the origin of these codes. In other words, among the causes of such “emptying” and ignoring practices the interest in keeping the homophobic straight audience (which forms the larger segment of the market) ranks high: “[i]f heterosexual consumers do not notice these subtexts or subcultural codes, then advertisers are able to reach the heterosexual market along with the homosexual market without ever revealing their aim.”

The fact that the commercial profit coming from a gay/lesbian market can not compensate for the loss of the homophobic consumers reveals a lot about the economic status of gay/lesbian consumers, as well as the rigidity of the homosexual-heterosexual opposition in contemporary Western societies. This is also an insightful argument against Baudrillard’s view on consumer goods that should be assigned (if anything at all then) some “sign-value” in contemporary media culture. If straight identified consumers avoid products precisely because they are implicated in gay or lesbian subcultural “branding” or connotation or origin, then it is a very clearly defined “use-value” that is at work in the process of their not choosing those items.

Nadine Milde introduces a new issue regarding the question of “mainstreaming queerness.” This refers to “inviting” the straight segment of

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6 As Danae Clark makes it clear, this usually has involved male consumers, while lesbians and other queer identities have been dismissed (Danae Clark, “Commodity Lesbianism,” in H. Abelove, M. A. Barale, D. M. Halperin, eds., *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 186-201).
7 Clark, “Commodity,” 188.
8 At least in the light of the texts consulted, however this might have changed in certain urban centers in the last years.
population “to discover its own queerness.”⁹ Such a development can be partially explained by Milde’s survey focusing on the second part of the nineties (as compared to the eighties analyzed by Clark or Hennessy) and also on a Western-European – French, German – media context of newspapers, television and advertising. Besides the different time period and social/historical/media traditions, the “queering of the mainstream” phenomenon seems to owe much to the spread of postmodern/poststructuralist conceptions of subjectivity and identity. Seen as changing and always discursively constructed, the postmodern subjectivity appears capable of occupying/witnessing quite different positions, be they related to sexual identity or fashion style.

Yet, the parallels made between “queerness” and “postmodernism,” or the incorporation of gay/lesbian/queer cultural codes into a mainstream media culture might obscure the actual experiences and needs of sexual minorities. Kaja Silverman’s perspective on the causes of mainstreaming subcultural fashion looks offers a possibility to assess the ‘real,’ material impact of such media instances as lesbian soap-stars, homosexual allusions in detective serials or implicit queer-style advertisements:

If a given “look” is appropriated by the fashion industry from a subculture or a subordinate class, that is because its ideological force and formal bravura can no longer be ignored – because it has won not only a style war, but a pitched cultural battle.¹⁰

Whether this contributes to a greater acceptance of others/ minorities or, on the contrary, enforces the atomized dispersion of docile consumers is a question to be addressed in the last section of this paper. In the meantime, Sue-Ellen Case’s formulation should summarize the main points about the “mainstreaming of queering” and “queering the mainstream” (advertising) phenomena: “[c]amp style, gay-identified dressing and the articulation of the social realities of homosexuality have also become part of the straight, postmodern canon […] Contemporary theory seems to open the closet door to invite the queer to come out, transformed as a new, postmodern subject, or even invite straights to come into the closet, out of the roar of dominant discourse.”¹¹

Random advertisements

a) The magazines searched, “gay window advertising”

My small-scale research has focused on the five months’ issues (between November 2001 and March 2002) of two Hungarian women’s magazines, Nok Lapja Women’s Magazine (weekly), Elle (monthly), and a free cultural program magazine, Pesti Est / Budapest Night (weekly). All these publications are rather “mainstream” than “alternative” within their genre, although they are by no means boulevard-type or

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scandal publications. It should be mentioned, however, that they differ in style, in the
target-audience and in the amount of “alternative” material comprised in them. Their
difference seems to be directly linked to the space devoted to any non-heterosexual
issue or representation in the period November 2001 – March 2002.

While no visual representation or thematic treatment of either lesbianism or
homosexuality (not to speak about other queer issues) has been touched upon or
alluded to in the first publication, relatively more clues are to be found in the other
two. This might be interpreted in terms of the standpoint of Nok Lapja / Women’s
Magazine, that is its liberal-humanist approval of heterosexuality and family, in spite
of the fact that topics like religion, marriage, women’s career or men’s contribution to
the household are treated from the perspective of emancipation. Certainly, a straight
audience’s attention is much too precious for the publication: the search for
advertisements possibly mainstreaming gay/lesbian/queer codes was totally
unsuccessful in the mentioned period.

Elle is a Western trademark; the audience profile is that of the independent,
working, career-pursuing and economically powerful women, as in the case of the
Western-European editions. Yet, there are at least two elements that point to local
particularities: part of the Hungarian crew of journalists previously worked at Nok
Lapja / Women’s Magazine, a publication with an ideology on women’s life different
from Elle. As for the readers’ letters, these also show a mismatch between the ideal
Elle woman and the actual readers, who tend to dispose of lesser money and bigger
family than supposed. Yet, it was in 2001 November issue of Elle that the
advertisement with the most clearly identifiable gay/queer visual/textual codes was
published. The magazine seems to be historically more open towards this practice: as
Danae Clark writes about an early 1980s American edition of the Elle, its “advertisers
(whether knowingly or not) are capitalizing upon a dual market strategy that packages
gender ambiguity and speaks, at least indirectly, to the lesbian consumer market.”

The 2001 November ad rather appeals to a gay male niche, thus confirming Clark’s
observation about the first examples of non-heterosexual “window advertising” across
the Atlantic being directed at a male audience. Certainly, the marketing strategies in
the case of Elle are negotiated between multinational interests and an attention to local
straight reactions.

Pesti Est / Budapest Night (and the related café in Budapest, taxi-network and
diverse cultural events exclusively linked to the publication) channels a very different
message towards a younger, more individualistic and richer, nevertheless a vaguely
defined audience. In a sense, it achieves this effect by grouping together different
targeted audience niches through a very consistent and effective visual and editorial
style and the free distribution of the magazine. In its late November issue an ad was
published which shows compositional and stylistic similarities to the mentioned Elle
November ad, however the possible “gay/lesbian window-advertising” is much more
latent in it.

b) What about “lesbian window advertising”? 

In addition to these two ads, possibly targeting a gay male (and lesbian-oriented?)
market, I found advertisements openly dealing with open lesbian sexuality in Pest
Est / Budapest Night only. However, and in line with Clark’s observation, these

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12 Clark, “Commodity,” 190.
13 If directed at any non-heterosexual audience at all…
belong to the field of sex-ads, advertising Budapest nightclubs with lesbian sex-scenes and allusions unimaginable in any other discursive field. By no means a comparison easy to support,¹⁴ I have also searched through a specific Romanian publication that is meant to be a local, ironic variant of the international Playboy magazine, Plai cu boi (Field with oxen). The reason for this is that it presents in a surprisingly high number nude photos of women groups, which, unlike the typical Playboy photos of single women, might allow for lesbian associations. Being (to my knowledge) the only mainstream publication in Romania that treats female nudity in a visual and discursive context that is not cheap porn but political parody and vitriolic criticism, Plai cu boi nevertheless filters possible non-heterosexual meanings through an eroticized, heterosexual channel. Therefore, together with the ads in Pesti Est / Budapest Night about night clubs with lesbian shows, it may be seen as offering the representation of female bodily closeness, intimacy and kisses as a show for heterosexual and masculine pleasure. In line with the argumentation of my paper (and certainly valid only for the period and publications examined), “lesbian window advertising” is converted into heterosexual (pornographic) pleasure, a safest strategy for keeping the straight audience.

c) About the two ads

Although the two ads offer interesting paths of reading, that is not intended in the rest of the paper. A short presentation and signaling of these possibilities is meant instead. The lowest common denominator that allows for their identification as possible candidates of “gay window advertising” and the “mainstreaming of queer codes” is Danae Clark’s definition: “[g]enerally, gay window ads avoid explicit references to heterosexuality by depicting only one individual or same-sexed individuals within the representational frame. In addition, these models bear the signifiers of sexual ambiguity or androgynous style.”¹⁵ Rosemary Hennessy’s observation that this type of niche marketing practice is most frequently associated with the world of fashion also has been useful through my research.¹⁶ In Michael Bronski’s view of the use of gay sensibility “as a sales pitch” is meant to confer on the “naïve” straight consumer such values as “distinction, non-conformity” and “a longed-for place” outside the mainstream possibilities, a view that further supports Hennessy’s view.¹⁷ These connotations might be related to what Nadine Milde sees as the essential similarity between a gay/lesbian/queer existence in a heterosexual world and a postmodern worldview, namely “learning to use the codes as codes (rather than accepting them as ‘true’, ‘essential’ categories of being).”¹⁸

Perhaps these sketchy meanings attributed to “gay window advertising” might account (at a very low level of analysis) for the high degree of artificiality, stylization and unusual composition of the ads I am referring to. The 2001 November Elle ad (pp. 37) is for Jean Paul Gaultier’s perfume mark, Fragile. The fashion-world connotation and the well-known eccentricity (and even a suggested homosexual orientation) of the creator Gaultier already situate the advertisement in the previously circumscribed field of reference. Four figures are visible on the picture: three of them are half-naked,

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¹⁴ Except my personal reading tastes.
¹⁵ Clark, “Commodity,” 188.
¹⁶ “Nowhere is gay more in vogue than in fashion, where homoerotic imagery is the epitome of postmodern chic” (Hennessy, “Queer Visibility,” 168).
¹⁷ See Michael Bronski cited in Clark, “Commodity,” 197.
¹⁸ Milde, “Pop Goes,” 140.
long-hair, muscular young men, (two) with closed eyes and ecstatic face gestures. They kneel (around) and surround a fourth figure, which is of a rather androgynous appearance. Being the only character who openly faces the spectator, this figure’s lower chest and genitals are covered with a piece of black material. Although this type of hiding the chest might suggest that the venerated figure is a she, the structural composition of the ad conveys a non-heterosexual meaning. This form of organizing four figures draws on Christian iconography, namely the moment of taking off Jesus from the crucifix. In such a constellation the middle character “structurally” must be a he, despite the fragility, white color and make-up this body displays. Another iconographical ancestor of this androgynous image seems to be Saint Sebastian, usually presented as a fragile, womanish, white and slender young man, being an important element of homosexual iconography as well. However, similar arguments could be given for the explicit heterosexuality of the Gaultier perfume advertisement: yet this would rather enforce, than weaken my proposition of its being a “gay window ad.”

The other ad that appeared in Pesti Est / Budapest Night (2001 November 29-December 5, pp. 39) is publicizing Samsung Electronics and its four new products. In a structural composition quite similar to the Fragile perfume ad, three kneeling figures surround and look upwards at a fourth one standing. Although all of them bear signifiers of their gender, there are several stylistic/visual markers that might imply a very clear attribution: they are all heavily made up, hair painted and unusually arranged, the clothes are of bright (yellow, orange, pink, blue) colors and certainly not commonsense streetwear. A high degree of artificiality characterizes the appearance of all four figures.

The anchoring “Desire suddenly makes sense” (Hirtelen értelmet kap a vágy) on a surface level refers to the high-tech product displayed on the body of the standing woman. Yet, it also refers to a sexual subtext involved in the bodily closeness, embracing and the looks of the kneeling figures. Although a heterosexual direction of looks is visible, this is destabilized by the artificial, theatrical appearance of the characters (the male on the left-hand might be read as a clear quotation of homosexual imagery). And there is a female figure holding on to the hip of the standing woman, who is also the closest to her: together with the anchoring this might allow for a lesbian allusion, if that is what the audience is looking for. Nevertheless, in both cases “‘gayness’ remains in the eyes of the beholder […].”

Assessing the value (use?) of such examples

The growing visibility of queerness in the Euro-American mass media and culture of the late nineties is a trend if compared to the media of the previous decades. This phenomenon might be explained as the effect of a higher recognition of sexual minorities, however the queerness represented in this sphere has mainly to do with a set of stylistic devices characteristic of queer subcultures, such as “lipstick lesbian”. The mass fascination with this cultural segment occurs on a surface level, without a serious involvement in the sexual rights activism, concludes Nadine Milde in her paper. The alternative explanations she offers for this phenomenon are related to the constant need of consumer capitalist culture to expand via the new on the one hand and with the similarities between postmodernism and the queer mode of defining identity as staged and constructed on the other.

19 Clark, “Commodity,” 188.
Yet, the parallels made between “queerness” and “postmodernism” or the incorporation of gay/lesbian/queer cultural codes into a mainstream media culture confine the actual experiences of exclusion and needs to recognition beyond the interests of the capital of sexual minorities. Thus, however interesting or tolerant “gay window advertising” might be, it cannot act as a basis for gay identity politics, since “[t]his stylization furthermore promotes a liberal discourse of choice that separates sexuality from politics and connects them both with consumerism.”

From my point of view, Milde’s suggestion to maintain both the possibilities of deconstructing and having sexual identity categories seems pragmatically justified. They pertain to somehow slightly different spheres as far as the actual aims of actions in them are concerned. Thus, the larger audience involved in knowing and acknowledging specifically gay/lesbian/queer codes together with the constant effort to emancipate non-heterosexual identities might serve best the aim of diminishing homophobia and patriarchy. And perhaps the strategy of young people watching TV commercials Mica Nava speaks about — “[they] consume advertisements independently of the product which is being marketed, and in the process bring to bear sophisticated critical skills […]” might prove fruitful for the case of re-appropriating mainstreamed and depoliticized gay/lesbian/queer meanings.

REFERENCES


20 Clark, “Commodity,” 196


FROM FRANKENSTEIN’S MONSTER TO HARAWAY’S CYBORG: GENDER IN MONSTROSITY, CYBORGOSITY AND (POST)HUMANITY

Theodora Eliza Vacarescu

Motto:

“I considered [the Monster] my own vampire, my own spirit let loose.”
Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* ¹

“I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.”
Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto* ²

Abstract

In this paper I argue that Mary Shelley’s Monster (more widely known as Frankenstein’s Monster) is a proto-cyborg, and, consequently, that the cyborg (Donna Haraway’s cyborg) is the modern version of Shelley’s monster. Although the argumentation might at first seem a “playful work on words and thoughts,” a thing that I myself acknowledge, I believe that the idea that leads this paper, the one according to which, since we are all cyborgs and the cyborg is the modern version of Shelley’s Monster, then we are all monsters, is by no means simple and easy to accept. However, since the Monster is not at all the evil creature the Western culture subsequently struggled to build the image of, it might not be such a bad thing to be one. Moreover, I believe that it is high time for us to question our humanity and acknowledge our cyborgosity and monstrosity in a post-human time.

Introduction

My thesis is based on two arguments: 1. there is no monstrosity outside humanity which follows there is no monster outside the human being, and therefore one can say that there is no monster which (who?) is not human, and 2. we are all cyborgs. I will argue in this paper that Frankenstein’s Monster (the monster that does not have a name and I would continue, the monster that can have/ borrow any name) is a proto-cyborg, or, rather, that the cyborg (Donna Haraway’s cyborg) is the modern version of Frankenstein’s monster.

For the sake of the argumentation and to challenge the imagination, let us suppose that the following hypotheses are true: 1. the cyborg is the modern Frankenstein’s monster (or rather Mary Shelley’s monster), and 2. we are all cyborgs. What comes out of this simple syllogism is the unexpected and by all means outrageous conclusion that we are all monsters.³

It is definitely not new and neither unexpected that a text which deals with the issue of monstrosity, however hard and wholeheartedly attempting to rigorously

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³ No one can contest the veracity of the deduction: if A is B and C is A, then it follows by necessity that C is B.
follow scientific canons, often ends up in being a literary piece. I therefore give up this anyhow lost-from-the-beginning endeavor and engage in writing a text that does not claim to be anything else but a modest quasi-literary, quasi-academic piece of writing. But my argument is also heavily political, as any argument dealing with humanity should be and can not avoid being.

*Frankenstein* and *A Cyborg Manifesto:
Reworking Monstrosity, Cyborgosity and Humanity within the Western Culture

If humans and monsters are so closely related, we should use inverted commas for either human being, or for monster. Or rather, we should use these two terms equally interchangeable, since the difference between them is not so relevant. But who would willingly accept to be called a “monster”?

The label “human being” is so much more comforting and reassuring; people have been fighting for it for centuries, whole “-isms” had it as the first and foremost desideratum on their agendas, and feminism was not an exception. However, no one fought to be called a “monster”, on the contrary, the label “monster” was used to designate the *others*, the enemies, the *non*-humans whom they fought against. But since people obstinately call each other “monsters” and there is no evident and clear-cut basis for the definition of their *others* as “monsters”, one might be rightly confused and not able to understand what in fact is a monster. It is definitely *not* a non-human being, since both parties involved accuse each other of monstrosity and they obviously present symptoms of humanness. But what makes a human being be a monster, or, at least, appear in the eyes of the others as a monster? Let us examine two instances of “monstrosity” and maybe the answer to this question will appear more clearly that one might expect or desire.

There are striking similarities between Shelley’s monster and Haraway’s cyborg. Yet, there are defining differences between the two, but, strangely, these dissimilarities seem more to bring them together and unite them in the same “faith” than work to separate them. Both, Shelley’s monster and Haraway’s cyborg are women’s creations; they are products of technology and science, as well as of culture and social reality; they both transgress/put into question normal measurements and classifications, as well as issues of gender and reproduction (as we know it); they both have problematic relations to their “fathers” and the list could continue *ad infinitum*.

Shelley’s monster is a hybrid of natural and supernatural, he (she?) is “a product of nature – his ingredients are 100 percent natural – yet by the process and the very fact of his creation, he is unnatural, the product of philosophical overreaching”.

I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body. [...] I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost the same colour as the

dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.⁶

But he is also the product of culture, both within the process of creation and outside it, he is culture just like (some?) humans are, for he masters the art of rhetoric, he masters language and culture. He is the combination of a “hideous body” and a “persuasive tongue”⁷, he is both a body to look at and a verbal creation, yet, the latter seems to define his being far more accurately and wholly than the former. And I emphasize “his” being, because the others (humans, and Victor Frankenstein, his within-fiction creator and “father”, is included here) can not go beyond the body-to-look-at, the deformed creature that he is, or, rather, was made. But as a verbal creature, Peter Brooks argues, the Monster is the very opposite of monstrosity, “he is a sympathetic and persuasive participant in Western culture.”⁸

He is not only the participant, I would add, but, maybe more importantly, he seems to be the creation, both physical and linguistic, of the Western culture. He seems: that is not he is. He might as well not be, for at the beginning he was “benevolent and good, [his] soul glowed with humanity” and only afterwards “misery made [him] a fiend”⁹. Hence, initially, in the stage of creation, he was not evil, he had not been tainted with “misery” yet, misery came from his encounter with and treatment by humans, by the Western culture. The fiend that he had consequently become is the creation of the Western culture, but this fiend is a perversion (in the sense of turning him away from his proper nature), not the actual real creation. He was not a fiend, he was turned into one, he was not a “monster”, he became one as a result of the contact with humans, that is with Western culture. But is it a monster what he became? Or is it more a human? Has he been tainted with monstrosity or with humanity? The boundary between human and monster appear here in its most fluid and unsubstantial way.

Coming back to how sympathetic and persuasive he was, I would argue that this issue is also problematic and questionable, since his odyssey is precisely built on his failure in being persuasive at both levels, visual and verbal, at the same time. He is, by all means, rhetorically persuasive, but his physical presence annuls his verbal eloquence (he can only “persuade” of his good intentions a blind man) and therefore as a whole, he is not persuasive before the Western culture. Moreover, his persuasive failure drives him away from any kind of sympathy towards humanity (“They spurn and hate me. […] Shall I not then hate them who abhor me? I will keep no terms with my enemies.”¹⁰), and finally exiles him far away from the West, in the lifeless polar regions.

Frankenstein’s monster, by his abnormal, godless, motherless, procreation-less creation is a blasphemy (how faithful this blasphemy might or might not be is another issue). And so is Haraway’s cyborg. Both, the monster and the cyborg, are myths springing out of their authoressess’s “ironic faith” and, in this respect, it is no wonder that both “creators” (or creatoresses) are women. The cyborg is, too, a hybrid made up of almost the same ingredients as the monster, he/ she is also natural and supernatural, nature and culture:

⁶ Shelley, Frankenstein, 55.
⁹ Shelley, Frankenstein, 96.
¹⁰ Ibid.
A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. […] The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women’s experiences in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.

Their creation eludes procreation, heterosexual coupling, the need for sexual difference, the need for both, woman and man, in the act of (pro)creation. Moreover, I would say, none are required in the creation of either the monster or of the cyborg. I do not agree with the argument that Frankenstein is the father of the monster and that he therefore eliminates the role of the mother. He is not the father, he is a genderless creator, who could have been a woman as well, and this would not have made her more the mother of her creation (though the monster’s life might very likely have been radically different if a woman had been his creatoress!) than it makes Frankenstein the father. Thus, it is not only the mother that misses in the monster’s creation, both parents are missing; mother and father, woman and man are eliminated. One should make it clear that creator and father are two separate things in the process of the monster’s creation, although the two words are used loosely interchangeable to name the same reality which is by no means parenthood (i.e. procreation), but creation.

The creation of cyborgs (and here the idea of “parenthood” is even more obviously ridiculous) too renders the role of woman and man futile: “Cyborg replication is uncoupled from organic reproduction.”11 But here we are faced with a strange complete absence of mothers from the discourse of creation. Fathers, though present in the discourse (not in the creation), are almost too obviously and radically eliminated from the site of creation:

Cyborgs […] are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential.12

Monster’s and cyborgs’ relationship to their “creators” on the one hand, and their needs and desires on the other, again bring the two of them together. These aspects are profoundly interwoven and can not be separated one from the other. Haraway herself mentions Frankenstein’s monster in comparison to the cyborg, but she underlies the difference between them, rather than the similarity in this respect.

Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein’s monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and a cosmos.13

I would argue against Haraway’s dissimilarity between the two, monster and cyborg. As Brooks also pointed out, in Lacanian terms, “the Monster’s call for a

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13 Ibid.
female companion, however sincere, may be only in the realm of conscious desire, may not have access to what lies under the bar.”

It is therefore questionable whether the mere fulfillment of the monster’s expressed desire would really satisfy him. It may as well not. What follows from this is the question of what or who is the object of monster’s real, yet unconscious desire. Brooks suggests, and there is no evidence that he might be wrong, that “[t]he Monster’s unconscious desire may most of all be for unconditional hearing, recognition, love from his parent.” In this view of the monster’s hopes, it is not the “restoration of the garden”, the “fabrication of a heterosexual mate” or its “completion in a finished whole” that the monster longs for and desires. What he desires is understanding, bonding, connection. And this is precisely what cyborgs also desire and need: “cyborgs […] are wary of holism, but needy of connection.” They are therefore not so different in this respect, after all.

The cyborg is neither female, nor male, or it is both, for “[t]he cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world.” The monster is apparently male, and nothing suggests that he would be otherwise. However, since he is not given the chance to sexually function as a male, and we never glimpse at those body parts that would make the difference, we might as well assume that the monster is a woman or that he/she is neither a man, nor a woman. In fact, this transgression of gender boundaries, this gender uncertainty of the monster is precisely what makes him a monster: “What is a monster? A monster might also be that which eludes gender definition.”

Unexpectedly, this leads us to the conclusion that, since the cyborg is a creature of a post-gender world, a creature that therefore eludes gender boundaries and definitions, the cyborg is a monster.

However this does not put an end to the debate over the cyborg and the monster, because, for the accuracy of the demonstration and the validity of the syllogism, the reverse must be also proved (i.e. that the monster is a cyborg), otherwise the equivalence between A and B is not complete. Let us consider some of the features of the cyborg: “the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense”, he/she is “an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space”. What does it mean “an origin story in the Western sense”? It is the one that “depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate,” and, therefore, “the cyborg skips the step of original unity.” In the cyborg, “[n]ature and culture are reworked”, and “[t]he relationships for forming wholes from parts are at issue in the cyborg world.” Frankenstein’s monster seem to perfectly fit this definition, he too has no original story in the Western sense, he is not born of the couple mother-father, in him too nature and culture are reworked and, above all, he is a whole made of parts.

The demonstration is not yet over, for it still remains to be proved that we are all cyborgs. But this is the most simple demonstration of all, one need only look around, if not at him/herself, and see that we are cyborgs, whether we admit it or not, whether we like it or not:

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17 Ibid..
19 Ibid.
20 A is B if and only if B is A.
By the late twentieth century [all the more by the early twenty-first century], our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics.  

We now have the veracity (though, not the truth) of the two hypotheses demonstrated: 1. Haraway’s cyborg is the modern version of Shelley’s monster, and 2. we are all cyborgs.

Conclusion

The title of this paper is formed of two parts: “From Frankenstein’s Monster to Haraway’s Cyborg” and “On Monstrosity, Cyborgosity and (Post)Humanity”. Leaving aside the inconsistency of naming in the attempted parallelism (it should be Shelley’s Monster, not Frankenstein’s Monster, because Frankenstein himself is Shelley’s) and the use of a nonexistent, or rather just created word (Cyborgosity), there still are other aspects that need clarification. While the first part of the title seems rather clear, the second one is by no means so. First, it appears redundant to the first one, as it overlaps the issues of monstrosity and cyborgosity, and second, it exiles the issue of humanity to the third and last place. From the three issues present in the title (and implicitly in the paper), humanity seems to be the least important, since it is driven to the last place. However, this eviction of humanity on the last place is not fortuitous at all, on the contrary, it is purposely done so and it emphasizes the central idea of the paper, yet, not directly related to the argument.

The immediate outcome of the demonstration attempted in this paper is that we are all monsters, since the cyborg is a monster and we are all cyborgs. But, maybe more important than this argument, which is nothing more than a playful work on words, is the profoundly monstrous idea or desire that came as a result of the encounter between humanity and monstrosity, between Frankenstein’s Monster and humans: I would rather be a monster than a creator.

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WOMEN IN VIDEOGAMES. FROM BARBIE TO XENA

George Popescu

Abstract

Videogames in Central and Eastern European countries became a big hit after the fall of communism, and the flourishing of software piracy in the region played an important role in this phenomenon. However, there is still a need for studies in this field. Further analysis of videogame players from CEE countries should try to identify cultural characteristics in this kind of manifestations of citizens in the post-industrial era. In this paper I try to offer a general perspective of the representation of women in videogames. I deal mostly with famous characters from best-selling games like “Tomb Raider,” but I also talk about characters from other games played by a handful of players.

Introduction

I used to be a woman and to live in the city of Lille, in France. I used to date a guy who was from Montpellier. We got to know each other by online chatting and one day I asked him to come to visit me. And then I left virtual reality and I became a man again.¹

This is only one of the many transgendered experiences one can have with the use of virtual reality. The effect of television programs and advertisements upon the gender roles expectations of both women and men has received considerable attention. However, as the popularity and accessibility of video games continued to increase, the question of the effect of the portrayal of women in video games upon gender roles expectations as well as upon the uses of violence arose.

In this paper I try to offer a general perspective on women’s representations in videogames. Although I dwell mostly on famous characters from best-selling games like “Tomb Raider,” I also talk about characters from other games that played by a handful of players. Videogames in Central and Eastern European countries became a big success after the fall of communism, and the flourishing of software piracy in the region played an important role in this phenomenon. However, there is still a need for studies in this field. Further analysis of videogame players from CEE countries should try to identify cultural characteristics in this kind of manifestation of citizens of the post-industrial era citizens.

An attempt to categorize women characters in videogames

In order to evaluate the roles of women in the game, the following categories could be useful:
- no female characters at all;
- female characters portrayed as sex objects or prizes (based upon physical appearance such as wearing revealing clothing or body shape, or other aspects, including women leaving with the male winner);

¹ It was during my BA studies, that I discovered the chat service and all the games that can be played while chatting. I was a frequent gamer at that time too, I was usually playing adventure games like “Monkey Island” and “Tomb Raider.”
female characters as victims (based upon the women who had been kidnapped or assaulted as part of the plot);

- female characters as the heroines (based upon whether or not there were female characters who were or could be the action character and winner of the game);

- female characters in feminine roles (based upon appearance, such as wearing pink, long dresses and the like, and other features, such as playing supportive roles to men).

In a classification which uses stereotyped names to designate different personalities of women characters in videogames, one can find: Barbie (such as the girls who are just getting a sun tan near the gulf course in one game), standing for the image of women as mere decorations; Lucy (the good-wife character, like most of the female characters in “The Sims”), representing women in most of the “god-simulation” and traditional simulation games; Xena (such as the women from the game “Mortal Kombat”), the famous warrior princess from the homonymous TV series. Sometimes, the three categories mix, as in the case of the famous Eidos Interactive production, “Tomb Raider,” in which Lara Croft is the prototype of the rich, beautiful and brave woman.

Of course, these classifications are just attempts to differentiate between many female characters in videogames, but they are based upon stereotypes, which can also be found in other mass-cultural productions (books, TV shows, motion pictures).

Barbie-like characters

We all remember the game “Donkey Kong” which featured the player as the male plumber Mario attempting to rescue princess Zelda from the giant male ape. The main point of the game was to dodge obstacles throughout the many levels and it was presumed that the theme of the male hero rescuing a woman in peril was sufficient to make the game appealing. This was found to be true. But videogames evolved a lot since that time.

Most of the women from the “Barbie” category are mere decorations and/ or bystanders in the game. Big breasts, small waist, sensual lips and perfect hair – this is the prototype of the Barbie-like characters. Some of them are not characters in the game, but the reward for winning a certain stage or the whole game, like the much-downloaded “Tina’s Strip Poker,” where a woman undresses herself if the player wins a hand. This game was a big hit in “Romanian Top 100,” an online service that indexes and monitors the most visited Romanian websites. The websites that offer “Tina’s Strip Poker” for download are always in the Top 10 list. “Tina’s Strip Poker” is only an example from the category of “desktop games” – simple games (in terms of kilobytes and interface) that can be played in the office, during work or between tasks. It is also the source of many “desktop companions,” animated characters, often women, that stand on the desktop and are willing to do whatever the user asks them to (including striptease shows).

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2 This game turned into a TV series. The most famous case of a videogame turned into a movie is, without any doubt, that of “Tomb Raider,” where Angelina Jolie plays Lara Croft.

3 A comprehensive list of game consoles in the last 20 years and a timeline of videogames can be found in the appendix of the book edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, *The Video Game Theory Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 303-314.

4 “Romanian Top 100.” Online. Available HTTP: <www.top100.ro> (last accessed May 6, 2004).
“Baldur’s Gate: Dark Alliance” gives the example of a hyper-sexualized non-player character who appears in the beginning of the game. The beginning is generally the critical moment for setting the mood, tone, and boundaries of the game space.

In “Need for Speed” the objective is to win a car race. But the races are illegal and fair-play rules do not apply here. In “Need for Speed Underground,” a new version of the widely pirated game, the player is introduced to the thrilling illegal car races by a sexy young woman. She is just introducing the user to the other players and she is presenting them the rules of the game and then disappears to let the “big boys” play. She is dressed in stretched blue jeans, a blouse that allows the player to take a peek at her breasts and she has a bandana over her hair. Surprisingly, she can be seen only at the beginning of the game, right after its installation and only if the player chooses to go underground. Although the woman character knows all the rules of the competition and the names and personalities of the other contestants, she is not participating in the race. There are no feminine contestants in “Need for Speed.”

A special case is the “Final Fantasy” series, which introduces characters inspired from the anime cartoons, the Japanese animation movies where characters have big blue eyes, red lively lips and exaggeratedly expressed emotions. The main character is Tidus, a young player of “blitzball,” who is once attacked by a malefic force: The Sin. In a universe dominated by mysticism and magic, Tidus is accompanied by several women: Rikku, a young girl member of the Al Bedh people, Lulu, a magician, Yuna, a worshiper.

One of the main changes in the X-2 version of “Final Fantasy” is the possibility of changing outfits even during battles. Drawing from all kinds of real-world inspirations – from high-fashion glossies like Vogue to the fantastical costume design in movies like “The Fifth Element,” the chief designer from the company Squaresoft, that coded the game, created a collection of clothing that would reflect the unique personality of each underlying job of the characters. In several interviews, the designer encouraged players to experiment “dresspheres,” suggesting that this was one of the best assets of the game and that aside from the story, that is what the enjoyment should be focused on. All three girls in the game can change on the fly during battle, and the player feels like changing the clothes at every other turn, in order to help with different monsters and different strategies. Clothes can give the player different powers in this game, but they also mix him/her with the other players. In the eyes of a player at the beginner’s level, even Tidus is a girl; his face and outfit are very important in reaching this conclusion.

Sometimes the appealing physical appearance of famous women in real life induces game designers to build products that are not very playful or inventive, but serve only one interest – spending time in the virtual world with a virtual avatar of the real star-system women. This is the case of a game called “Britney Dance Beat” which features the singer Britney Spears in the role of a choreographer. Featuring five well-known songs, the game claims to be capable of teaching teenagers how to dance on modern beats. But the most intriguing parts of the game are the same sexually provocative angles of female characters on the screen. The virtual Britney contributes to the success of the dance lessons through her erotic exclamations which include phrases such as: “Almost there,” “Don’t stop,” “That was hot,” “Now you’re getting it.” The confused male player does not know whether he has purchased a harmless dance lessons game or a sexual cybertoy. In one review, the author, who happens to

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be a woman, is stressing that, in fact, these exclamations distract the player from the real aim of the game.⁶

Magic solves all problems

In most videogames, women are associated with magical characters. Role-Playing Games (RPGs) and quest games are mostly suited to introduce characters with magical powers, because traditionally in this kind of games the main character has to use several tools and weapons, but also magical potions, wands and witchcraft. Usually, magical powers are used when everything else fails, but there are games – like “Final Fantasy” – in which these abilities are the main tools and weapons.

In “Project Zero,” Miku is the sister of a journalist who mysteriously disappears in a haunted mansion, during his search for a writer who had disappeared. All she has to do is follow the complicated hallways in the house, always in the dark, in search of clues to solve the mystery. Her only weapon is a magical photo camera that she uses instinctively: whenever she feels a danger or a phantom coming close, she pushes the button. The camera triggers the flash that weakens the phantoms. Then the photo reveals hidden things in the chambers that help her find the way. Miku is dressed in a tight shirt and a blouse underneath and wears a miniskirt. Although she is sometimes afraid in the dark, she manages to go on. An important thing is the random viewpoints. Although the main viewpoint of the game is the first person view (the player sees the game as if she/he were the main character), this changes sometimes and the player finds her/himself away from Miku, but still able to guide her. This eliminates in a way the need of male players to change viewpoints just to see the female character from different positions.

Good wife-like characters

The earliest versions of the game were insisting upon the image of women as good wives, by setting specific behaviors in the free-will mode. Characters now engage in same-sex relationships, polygamy and affairs, and even criminal careers are fair game. The goal of the game is to make the Sims happy. First, the player fashions one or more Sim characters by choosing from a menu that includes gender, skin and body type, age and various personality traits – funny or serious, lazy or neat, passive or aggressive. Players can develop as many Sims as they want, exchanging individuals or whole families with other players over the Internet.

The creator of The Sims made sure that certain kinds of behavior remained taboo. While characters can get into fights and even cause others to die, the game stops short of depicting anything but an occasional slap. Mia Consalvo thinks that this is not a good incentive for the player, as he/she does not always know whether the game is an imitation of the real world or a parallel virtual world.⁷

The fact that the player can choose and configure her/his own characters is refreshing in a videogame, but a closer examination of these choices suggests that

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underneath this diversity there are classical sex and gender stereotypes. The first example that pops up when you want to configure a character is a white man with a white shirt and pocket protector and gray pants, suggesting that this is the social norm of the game and the other characters only deviate from it.

There are sixteen bodies for women, five for children and eighteen for men to choose from. No body is disabled or fat, the majority being slim.

The game has six expansion packs now (they can be seen as six different games or six levels of the same game). “The Sims” is a game that never ends, as long as the player keeps his/her characters happy. The game evolved a little since its first expansion pack and now the player can have more options, like having same-sex characters kiss and sleep in the same bed and this kind of couples can adopt a child through an adoption agency. Same-sex couples are not allowed to get married (“The Sims” is an American production after all).

Power and beauty – the winning combination: the case of Lara Croft

Lara Croft is not just somebody men players want to bed; she is someone they want to be. It is a question that is often reduced to trying to decide whether she is a positive role model for young girls or just that perfect combination between a perfect body and the physical strength for the boys.

Lara Croft is a clear example of an ethnic hybridizing, as she has physical characteristics that identify her as a member of several ethnic groups. Could this be an attempt of the game designers to be “ethnically correct” or just a commercial move meant to make all (men) players to ethnically empathize with Lara?

It is clear that the producers of Lara wanted to market her as a character potentially appealing to women; her arrival on the game scene dovetailed with the “girlpower” movement of the ‘90s. One can locate Lara among a number of “aggressive” and highly sexualized female characters that rose to prominence in the ‘90s – including Buffy the Vampire Slayer, from the homonymous TV series. These characters have a strong “bimodal” appeal in that they manage to engage large groups of both young men and women.

“Tomb Raider” is a “third person shooter” where the player actually sees the body of her/his own avatar. The “third person” angled view of Lara Croft from behind and below, and the shifting close-up and wide-angle camera angles favor a visual fragmentation of Lara’s Barbie-like proportions. Part of the game is finding new ways to see Lara’s perfectly shaped polygons from different angles. Movements like “ducking” are preferred by men players as they offer “forbidden” views like Lara’s buttocks. This manipulation of the original code of the game (which is not secret in fact, as many players try the method of switching camera angles very often), along with the physical and mental strength that Lara conveys, offers a nearly complete virtual erotic experience (with masochistic accents, because changing camera views sometimes implies making Lara doing painful things and also because the player, in most cases, thinks he/she IS Lara). The absence of any romantic or sexual intrigue within the game narrative potentially leaves her sexuality open to conjectural appropriation on the part of the players. As I noticed from informal discussions with players of “Tomb Raider,” women players often prefer saying that they “play Tomb Raider” and men use the words “play Lara Croft.” This can be an effect of the great promotion that the game and the character had in the media and in many forms
(articles, books, TV features, motions pictures) but also a sign of the different approaches to the game based on gender.

Maybe the success of the game is based not only on the appearance of Lara Croft, but also on the fact that it was the first game to use state-of-the-art special effects, a three-dimensional impression of the environment and an original narrative (even though it was highly inspired by the story of Indiana Jones). But we can all agree that the use of a sexy female character as the main engine of the game was a surprise. People started talking about the way women are portrayed through this game only after they woke up from this shock. What was also interesting was the fact that people who had never played “Tomb Raider” or any other game before still knew what Lara was standing for and got their perceptions regarding women in videogames by the intermediary of this specific game.

“Tomb Raider” is a game that can be analyzed from multiple points of views: a movie, a game, a narration or it can be integrated in the queer readings. The last approach is favored by the fact that Lara is performing in a male-dominated environment. The jungle, suggesting mystery, power and risk, is the symbol of the stereotypic image of the environment men evolve in. Mia Consalvo is asking some questions that need to be further explored in other game studies: Could Lara be a woman in a male drag? In fact, is Lara still a woman, since her feminine characteristics are so exaggerated that we can say that they do not belong to a woman? Rigid gender roles are broken down, allowing the young boys and men who constitute the majority of “Tomb Raider” players to experiment with “wearing” a feminine identity. It is in a way the same phenomenon that the Internet experienced in the ‘80s and in the ‘90s, when chat rooms and Multi-User Dimensions allowing gender crossing were flourishing. After all, cyberspace allows safe gender crossing experiments and games fulfill some repressed sexual desires.

Conclusion

I am not a big player of videogames but I can say that I know who are the virtual characters that people “play with.” I find much pleasure in finding hidden treasures in old text-based games and I admire a lot the work and efforts game designers put in a production like “The Sims.” But I am sometimes amazed by the lack of imagination on gender portrayals in some videogames. We are still a long way from the ideal cyberspace that does not take into account at all “real-world” factors like gender, race, wealth etc. The games represented in this paper are not meant to be representative for all videogames in which women play a main or secondary role. These are only case studies that show the multiple facets that women’ portrayals can have in such productions of our modern era. Gender in videogames is one of their main components and theories in this emerging field of study need critique. Paraphrasing a famous advertisement for a game console, I must say, concerning the field of videogames: “Theorists wanted.”

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8 Ibid.
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PRIVATE AND PUBLIC ATTITUDES ON THE GENDER TOPIC.  
A CASE STUDY ON ROMANIAN STUDENTS

Silvia Branea

Abstract

This paper analyzes the representations of gender that teenagers hold, through a broad research undertaken five years ago, as part of my Ph.D. thesis. The research aimed at the partial explanation of the effects caused by watching TV series on students’ attitudes. The results pointed out a certain influence following the contact with the messages sent by soap operas, but at the same time a higher than expected degree of traditionalism. Such traditionalism is especially rooted in the great attachment to the family and to the related values. Even so, the male/ female students could be defined as more modern than traditionalist. Consequently, it is strange that the participants in the research did not make any statements denoting their interest for an up-to-date issue (modern/post-modern) – the gender topic.

Introduction

Emphasis on the affiliation to a certain gender seemed unnecessary in the case of the subjects of the research I made five years ago at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication Studies, even though most of the participants were female students (the research corpus was made up of 48 so-called subject-students and 25 subject-students of the control group). I find it edifying for a certain state of things encountered among young people: although there is an interest in the gender topic and manifestations of such interest have materialized in the participation in the activity of the non-governmental organizations and, whenever challenged, in supporting modern, up-to-date points of view, when they are not asked expressly to state their opinions about the situation of women, not even the young women are aware that they should highlight the gender affiliation and, not to mention that they should get involved actively in solving the great difficulties encountered by Romanian women.

Even though the female students participating in the research failed to recognize this topic, I consider it relevant to analyze the situation starting from Foucault’s notion about the importance of silent moments in a discourse: The manners through which an individual refers to a subject can be influenced to a greater or smaller extent by the ongoing public debate on the subject. Foucault perceives the discourse as the manner in which a certain phenomenon influences the knowledge, considerations, action and institutionalized practices regarding an object being discussed. The discourse also includes, along with several “verbal” ways of expressing the issues under question, also the “silence.” In other words, “saying nothing” has a “certain relevance” in an attitude and represents a part of the discourse.1

The research mentioned above targeted at the partial explanation of the effects caused by watching TV series on students’ attitudes. The results pointed out a certain influence following the contact with the messages sent by soap operas, but at the same time a higher than expected degree of traditionalism. Such traditionalism is especially rooted in the great attachment to the family and to the related values. Even so, the male/ female students could be defined as more modern than traditionalist.

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Consequently, it is strange that the participants in the research did not make any statements denoting their interest for an up-to-date issue (modern/post-modern) – the gender topic. For instance, in the questionnaires referring to future guidelines in the study of the reception of the TV series, there was no suggestion concerning the women’s condition as presented in the TV series, in general, and in the South-American TV series (telenovelas), in particular, the evading tendencies of the soap-opera female viewers, the quasi-lack of interest of such TV shows producers to bring forward female protagonists with successful careers and/ or independent from their spouses who carry out a major social role etc.

Female Subjects Prefer the TV Series Ally McBeal

Many authors, among whom Pierre Bourdieu as well (with his concept of habitus which, through its complex significance, comes closer and also exceeds the concept of attitude, even understood in its broadest sense), are concerned with the power relations in society. Mass culture analysis reveals that soap operas contribute to the reassertion of the social status-quo. Such a perspective on the gratifications received by the viewer indicates that soap texts are a faithful mirror of social hierarchy. The content analyses of soap operas as well as other fiction genres, artistic movie dramas for instance, reflect the power division in society. The research that analyzes mass media from this perspective indicates that generally, on television, men have a higher social status than women.

When building the profile of the students’ lot (mainly made up of female subjects) by means of answers to indirect questions such as “What series do you prefer?”, we noticed the rejection of “common” series, a reaction that we are trying to explain in the following lines. Most TV series, the ones targeted to the youth included, assign less committing jobs to women and full-responsibility jobs to men: Kelly, the most beloved heroine of the Beverly Hills series is a social assistant while Brandon, the most popular hero, is a journalist. We do not find the same distribution of social roles in Ally McBeal where the main character is a woman lawyer or in X Files, where one of the two main characters is a woman – an FBI agent. These nonspecific jobs for soap-operas women may be one of the reasons why the students in the experimental group made up of 38 girls and 10 boys wrote these series on top of the list of their favorite series.

Putting such observations (the relative lack of interest of female students in the gender topic) in a context – the recent criticism toward the feminist trends – could highlight this situation. There are voices that even talk about post-feminism in a moment when the return to traditional values, namely the loyalty toward the couple, the primordial role of the mother in taking care of the children seem to be the signs of the fade-out of the feminist discourse. Yet this context is not very representative for Romania, which seems to undergo a period of anti-feminist discourse having lived a very short and less significant period of feminism, which was long time ago, before communism. Presently, “rejecting feminism in the bizarre anti-feminism ‘alliance’” is perceived as a separation from any socialist ideology heritage, such as the

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2 Pierre Bourdieu, Meditatii pascaliene (Bucuresti: Meridiane, 2001).
emancipation of woman implemented by the socialist state.” 5 This state of things is explained by the Romanian author Mihaela Miroiu as follows: “on the one hand, many points of view on the agenda of the feminist movements are reached without a feminist movement: the right to vote, the participation to the production activity (over 47% of the labour force in communism, over 44% in 1996), the right to abortion, and, very recently (1997) the parental leave. On the other hand, evidence continues to indicate a sexist society with profound conservative tendencies as far as women are concerned.6

Further to the aforementioned research, related to the gender topic, supported by correlations with the new theory on the dual attitudes which is stated below:

The new terminology and the new approach concerning attitudes rely on recent research. One of the aspects that consistently contribute to the shaping of a new perspective on this concept is that of attitude accessibility. There has been an older concern of social psychologists for studying the way in which attitudes become active and the contribution of various stimuli to this process. The functional value of attitudes used to be conceived as a “help” from which the individual benefits; this “help” leads to great energy saving. During this decade, a great number of research workers have empirically confirmed the statement concerning the functional value of attitudes. Consequently, some studies have pointed out the fact that when there is not enough information about the stimulus or when time pressure does not allow a careful estimation in order to make a decision, attitudes offer an accessible, rapid and adequate basis for a decision.7 Further research on the functions of attitudes has mainly shown the benefits of attitudes greatly based on memory. Relevant research has relied on the strength of the association between the evaluating device and the attitude object. The experiments during which the association strength was either measured or experimentally manipulated have supplied convergent evidence in favor of the statement according to which the possibility of automatically activating an attitude when encountering the attitude object increases with the growth of the strength of the association between the mental evaluating device and the object. The consequences of this appreciation in terms of attitude functionality are very straightforward. The extent to which attitudes offer “help” to the individual depends on the extent to which attitudes are able to automatically become active from memory the very instant when the individual meets the attitude object. Being accessible from memory, attitudes release the individual from the meditative reflecting on object evaluation.8

Wilson, Lindsey and Shooler9 tried to draw a conceptual model to unify various approaches of dual attitudes; they noticed that numerous aspects of dual attitudes are empirically sustained but also that numerous assertions concerning the new approach either failed to be experimentally proved or the empirical testing led to a partial invalidation. They analyzed certain consequences of dual attitudes, reaching

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6 Roventa-Frumusani, “Identitatea,” 54.
the conclusion that the basic definition of attitudes has to be reexamined because individuals can have distinct evaluations of the same attitude object.

The hypothesis of dual attitudes can spring from two research lines on attitudes: the former indicates that attitudes are steadily automatically activated evaluations; the latter indicates that attitudes are context sensitive patterns, which frequently change.

The authors who pointed out the automatic activation function of an attitude considered that attitudes engendered in this way facilitate decision making. In 1992 and 1993, Fazio and Blascovich\(^\text{10}\) evaluated the size of the decision making effort in keeping with the autonomous reactivity.

Norbert Schwarz and Gerd Bohner\(^\text{11}\) relate attitude accessibility to response speed: A quick answer to a question concerning attitudes must point out that the previously made evaluation was accessed from memory, while a slow answer must point out that an attitude had to be built at that moment which took up some time. According to the context, the individual appeals to accessed information from the past (implicit attitudes) or builds up new attitude evaluations (explicit attitudes). Mental representations are very context sensitive, as context always influences the activation time that determines mental representations.\(^\text{12}\) After the individual built up a new attitude, it is stored in the memory and influences this behavior. Wilson, Lindsey and Schooler compared the built up attitude to the hand of the compass, which always shows several directions. This hand moves easily and is greatly influenced by the “context” environment. Once it stops to show one “evaluation” direction it remains there (it remains in memory), then it starts moving again.\(^\text{13}\)

Sociologically speaking, the observation that attitude revealing depends on the context is not surprising. Eventually, human judgement always depends on the context, whether it refers to simple psychophysical stimuli, or to complex social matters. Yet this context dependence takes various shapes so that the individuals may have durable attitudes in some situations and ephemeral attitudes in other situations. Through statements of the above mentioned type, the social judgement model contains both elements that contradict and elements that support the traditional concept of attitude.\(^\text{14}\)

According to the anchoring and adjusting model, elaborated for a better explanation of the attitude change process, when the individual is confronted with an attitude object, the stored evaluation comes to his/ her mind automatically. Then the individual, if it is the case, adjusts this attitude to other information accessible at that moment, such as the reasons s/he is thinking about at that very moment or the obvious aspects of the situation. Each of these information sources varies in strength and may thus get more or less importance.

To one extreme, the individual may not have a previous attitude, or has a very weak one; thus, his/ her evaluation is built entirely on the basis of accessible thoughts at that moment. To the other extreme, the individual may have a very strong previous attitude and his/ her evaluation only depends on these stored evaluations: accessible thoughts at that moment do not get weight and A2 = A1 (A1 represents the initial


\(^{12}\) Arieli, Sterkin, Grinvald and Aersten cited in Wilson, Lindsey and Schooler, “A Model,” 103.

\(^{13}\) Wilson, Lindsey and Schooler, “A Model,” 103.

\(^{14}\) Schwarz and Bohner, “The Construction,” 444.
attitude; A2 is the new attitude that replaces the initial attitude or coexists with it). There are also numerous in between cases when the individual confers significance both to stored evaluations and to accessible thoughts at that moment. A1 comes to the individual’s mind, s/he adjusts it to new accessible information and replaces A1 by A2.

Wilson, Lindsey and Schooler consider that the anchoring and adjusting model supposes that, in case of an attitude change, the new attitude replaces the old one. They suggest that, under some circumstances, people change their attitude to A2 and this new attitude is stored in the memory. In spite of that, attitude A1 (the original attitude) is not removed from the memory, it remains in the memory together with A2 resulting in the dual attitude. Five hypotheses derive from this model:

1. Explicit attitudes (Ae) and implicit attitude (Ai) can coexist in the memory in relation to the same object.
2. When there are dual attitudes, the implicit attitude is automatically activated, while the explicit attitude requires a greater capacity and a stronger motivation to be accessed from the memory.
3. Even when the explicit attitude was accessed from the memory, A1 influences implicit answers, namely uncontrollable answers (nonverbal behaviors, for instance).
4. Explicit attitudes change relatively quickly, while implicit attitudes such as old customs change more slowly.
5. Dual attitudes are different from ambivalent attitudes and from attitudes with discrepant affective and cognitive components. People with dual attitudes would rather report (reveal) the most accessible attitude than experience a subjective state of conflict.15

The Female Students Are Traditionalists in Family and Modern in Outside World

The young generation is open to novelty, but, at the same time, it is materially dependent on the parental support almost throughout the study years. Even though a great majority of the Romanian students have jobs during their study years, they can only partially manage to support themselves through salaries and state scholarships. Consequently, they tend to experience a spiritual split caused by the necessity of the agreement with the conservative parents, on the one hand, and the connection to the modern points of view expressed by the opinion leaders in the faculty, on the other hand. Thus, during a discussion following an episode of Beverly Hills that approached tangentially the issue of homosexual relationships, I noticed a particular interest of the “experimental TV viewers” toward such aspect, although it was not mentioned in the test filled out before the show. The strongest opinions belonged to the students classified by me – via different scientific procedures – as holders of modern points of view, in favor of the freedom of choice of the partner, even if he/she belonged to the same sex. Despite the vehemence of the modern students in supporting tolerance toward homosexuality, I assume, on the basis of my observation of these students in different contexts during the following years of study (the students that participated in the research during December 1998 and May 1999 were at that point in time in their 1st year of study) that in the family or, generally, in more conservative spaces, this

15 Wilson, Lindsey and Schooler, “A Model,” 104.
attitude toward homosexuality is not as emphasized. Also, from the perspective of the consistency of showing the true point of view, it is worth mentioning that the more traditionalist students did not have the courage to express their hesitations toward the statements of their “vehement” and, at the same time, modern colleagues, being less skilled in holding an argument, at least during the 1st year of study. In the case of the more traditionalist students, there is a bigger agreement toward the points of view of a majority in Romania, namely the disapproval of the current radical feminist movements, but also a more silent expression of these agreements and, respectively, disagreements, because of the activity carried out in a social space characterized by a great opening toward the modern attitudes, at least at a declarative level.

The theory of dual attitudes comes in hand when explaining the inconsistency of expressing points of view in private space and in public space. Thus, the implicit attitudes are in agreement with the approaches in the affiliation groups characterized, as seen, by a certain degree of conservatism, and the explicit attitudes correspond to the tendencies of the reference individual and groups. The first category – of conservative attitudes toward the gender topic – could include: the utterance of the superiority that man has over woman (for instance, the existence of professions that women cannot exercise as they would not be sufficiently intellectually gifted), the emphasis that women must circumstantially carry out more household activities than men, even if they also have a job, the acceptance of violence toward married women etc. As for the explicit attitudes, they may be less profound and long-lasting, getting shape under the influence of more or less occasional stimuli: TV shows, contacts with Westerners, statements of modern points of view by the opinion leaders or by the members of certain “emancipated” groups. In the range of attitudes corresponding to the implicit (modern) attitudes, here are: the emphasis on equality within the family and at the working place between women and men, the rejection of any form of domestic violence, the tolerance toward individuals involved in lesbian/homosexual relationships, etc.

The theorists of the dual attitudes state that the attitudes are used by people as an aiding means to connect rapidly and efficiently to the demands of the environment and to issue social judgements. Since the feminism issue is quasi-absent in the public discourse, what appears to the young individual as information stored in the memory is absorbed by what has been sent by the persons having played an important role in their childhood and adolescence. If such persons are their parents (relatives), teachers, opinion leaders, the information received by the subject-students of the research, but also the other young people of their age were deformed by the attitudes and conducts formed and, respectively, carried out by the significant persons in the last years of communism. Jack Goody says about the communist regimes that “they abolished firmly the religious constraints and permitted the divorce and abortion, diminished the birth rate, increased the employment rate, improved the educational system and opportunities for women, in general, allotting funds for child care, both in schools and outside schools.” If the final part of Goody’s opinions is relevant to a certain degree

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16 Radical feminism is promoted by those feminists who do not admit any cooperation with “oppressive” men, because men are dominated by “hegemonic desires” and could take control over the strategy of “liberation of women” in a way that would fit men (Mihaela Miroiu, Gândul Umbrei - Abordari feministe în filosofia contemporana [The Thought of the Shadow. Feminist Perspectives on Contemporary Philosophy] (Bucuresti: Ed. Alternative, 1995), 26-27).

for the communist Romania, too, not the same can be said about divorce, reduction of birth rate and abortion. Ceausescu had decreed the prohibition of abortion, which led not only to an increase in the birth rate, but also to children born at a time when they were not wanted by the family or unmarried women. Divorce was not favored by the communist authorities, which, in many instances, caused a prolongation of the marital life only for professional, social advantages, such as a good statute and/or hierarchical promotion. With respect to the approach to religion, the split between private and public, existing nowadays (on completely different grounds) was put into practice: while in public, people avoided to express any religious attitudes, “at home” they married in church, dowered young women for marriage, baptized their children, more or less in secret.

The significant persons for today’s young people have lived an uncertain life during the last decade of the communist period, as this was eroded both from inside and outside via information that reached us from the “free world”. Neither religious nor non-religious, neither feminist nor anti-feminist, under the burden of the difficulty of surviving (especially, for women), the adults that constituted guide-marks for the socialization of today’s young people could not convey a clear attitudinal message to the next generations. Thus, it is possible that under the layer of implicit attitudes inherited from the parents’ generation, the young people possess a referential baggage from those twice their age. In the case of the latter, the options were even more clear: the position toward the communist regime demanded a certain attitudinal clarification without which no one could survive in a society ambiguous enough, with schizophrenic accents even. Thus, people would pretend to accept the communist ideology in order to “survive” at their jobs, but they would play a different role out of the area covered by official “eyes”. These adults – now grandparents – would try to benefit from the advantages of the regime, but at the same time they would preserve, at least superficially, the inherited customs and traditions, which were embedded in the religious norms.

A quick answer regarding the attitude points out that a previously produced evaluation was accessed from the memory, while a slow answer indicates that an attitude had to be made at that moment, thus taking more time. The attitudes accessed from the memory are implicit attitudes and adapt to the context. They are said to be more powerful and perhaps that is the reason for the preservation of the men’s dominant roles within families, and girls’ choice of professions “suitable” for a girl.

In the literature on stratification, a special attention is paid to inequality of opportunities according to gender or family belonging that convey some coordinates of social competence: “The fact that some social competencies differ according to sex can be explained through children’s socialization. Numerous studies have shown that boys and girls were treated completely differently. Parents give more independence to boys and urge them to compete with the others, but they are more caring to girls, they reprimand them less and supervise them more closely.” The works on the differences of social competencies according to sex reveal the importance of the father’s example for the boys and of the mother’s example for the girls. Socially inadequate parents, the inferior position that some children have in relations to other children in large families can shape some features of social competence that are deprived of the very features that assure social success (assertiveness, empathy, cooperation).

The explicit attitudes are processed slowly – they can be closer to the intimate convictions of the respective individuals, but at the same time they are less powerful. Because the explicit attitudes are processed more slowly, we can estimate that the school, faculty, but also the contact with TV – transmitted messages may demand more significant evaluations from the perspective of assigning enough time for reflection.

In accordance with the model of anchoring and adjusting, an individual can undergo a radical or only partial change of attitude depending on the force of the implicit attitudes, but also on the relevance of the information provided by a certain context. What information regarding women’s issues reaches the Romanians’ ears? Some of the sources of this information are radio and television, where, from time to time, information about symposiums, round tables, gender seminars is brought to our attention; such information being usually placed at the end of the radio or TV news, and very briefly presented. Indirectly, the sensational news often presents women in leading roles, but, unfortunately, more often as victims of rape, domestic violence and slave trade. Other sources that may contribute to surpass the apathy of feminism in Romania could be the government-sponsored campaigns, which have aimed at, especially in the last years, stopping the violence against women and reducing the slave trade. The issue of the underworld people attracting young women willing to work abroad and who, unwillingly, get only to increase the number of prostitutes, makes the subject of a bigger campaign that, beside the usual concentrated messages disseminated via the media, also comprises numerous feature reports that speak about actual cases.

As for the involvement of women in the political decision-making positions, a slight change of perspective can be noticed. If, in the first years following the fall of the iron curtain, everybody’s opinion was that the percentage model was given up (promotion of a proportional number of women and men on the hierarchical scale, with the sole condition to demonstrate attachment to the Communist Party; appointment of mayors and county councils heads from among women) and the excessive and fatiguing reference to the merits of the life-long spouse of the Leader, Academician Elena Ceausescu, today more and more parties boast about having a woman or even more women at the top of the list of candidates for the local elections. This sudden interest of the Romanian politicians, overwhelmingly men, for a better representation of women on the list of candidates does not denote important intentions to improve women’s place in society, but rather the wish to increase the chances of their own candidates in the sites where the number of women is equal or even bigger than the number of men.

Concerning the impact of the non-governmental organizations in changing the idea regarding gender issues, even though things are not stagnating, there are no big projects on the horizon either. The activity of the specific non-governmental organizations focuses on issues such as: academic debate on gender; building establishments for women who are victims of domestic violence and single mothers, or for single teenage mothers; fund raising for organizing job fairs for unemployed women. Beside the differences between the non-governmental organizations related to approaches that are more theoretical or, on the contrary, more pragmatic on the gender topic, there is also a common feature: the small degree of militant activities.
Conclusion

Finally, what can be said about the possibilities of change in Romanians’ attitude toward the lack of equality when it comes to professional opportunities of men and women, lack of equality in achieving important political positions at the central and local level, assigning a superior decision-making position to the husband compared to the wife within the household, the physical and mental abuses against women? An edifying answer to the questions above would require a series of data about the political course of the future parliament, about the scheduling of the agenda of the main media and, last but not least, about the evolution of the Romanian economy.

Another final question is the following: Is it improper that people, especially young people, change their declarations regarding the attitudes toward gender depending on the private or public context in which they express themselves? If the answer to the previous question implies a greater number of unknown factors, this time the answer is easier to give. The alternation of attitudes expressed, depending on the space (private or public) where the social actors play, can be the sign of a transformation and, at the same time, of an assessing elucidation. If, at this moment, there were a unity of views regarding gender, it would be embodied by either an obsolete traditionalism or an undigested and non-lasting modernism.

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POLITICAL LIBERALISM VS. COMPREHENSIVE LIBERALISM:  
THE PROBLEM OF GENDER EQUALITY  
AND THE LIMITS OF REASONABLE  

Bogdan Popa

Abstract

The study begins by distinguishing two types of liberal justification, in particular, “the political camp,” which emphasizes the fairness of the procedure and “the comprehensive camp,” focused upon ideas of the good. Rawls and his critics essentially dispute the normative meaning of morality and suggest different approaches to justice. In the article, I maintain that the feminist arguments regarding state intervention to promote gender equality follow closely the disagreement between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ liberals. Accordingly, I explore the key differences between Martha Nussbaum and Susan Okin and conclude that the theoretical positions are mainly incompatible.

Introduction

This article focuses on what is the innermost disagreement between two camps within liberal theory. The first position, the political liberal stand (Rawls, Nussbaum\(^1\)), argues for the fairness of the procedure regarding sensitive issues such as abortion, gay rights or the scope of justice. The second camp, the political comprehensive camp (Sandel, Okin, Ball\(^2\)), emphasizes the shortcomings of the first position and tries to press for a moral argument which could be better justified from a liberal stand. Consequently, the core of the debate between “thin liberals” and “thick liberals” is their different normative meaning of the moral argument.

Therefore, the first part of my paper analyzes the political turn in justice as fairness (Political Liberalism) and the comprehensive objections that argue for the impossibility of detaching the right from the moral premises. For example, the argument for same-sex marriage and parenting for lesbians and gay men charges neutral liberalism with “moral bracketing.” In the second part, I try to translate the argument in the feminist camp and to understand the justification for the state intervention in promoting gender equality within the comprehensive/po`litical debate. Hence, in the case of conflicting values, the political liberals advocate a fair balance in each particular case (Nussbaum) while the liberal comprehensive position requires the priority of gender equality in every case (Okin).

The priority of right and the teleological objection

In Political Liberalism, Rawls argues that the case for liberalism is political, meaning it is neither philosophical, nor metaphysical. Comprehensive doctrines affirm political arrangements in the name of certain moral values and they include doctrines of what

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is valuable in human life, ideals of personal character, as well as ideals of friendship and of familial and association relationships. Political liberalism has three characteristic features:

- it is a moral conception worked out for the basic structure of society;
- it is a free-standing conception, considering that it is not derived from a comprehensive doctrine or does not take a stand between comprehensive views;
- its content is expressed in terms of certain fundamental ideas seen as implicit in the public political culture of a democratic society.

Political Liberalism's central idea was to amend the two flaws in John Rawls's A Theory of Justice. First, A Theory of Justice did not separate between moral and political philosophy, and thus there was no contrast, for example, between comprehensive liberalism and political liberalism. Second, the account of stability in part III was not consistent with the view as a whole. Nonetheless, the emphasis in Rawls's Political Liberalism upon the 'reasonable' and 'political' contrasted with 'rational' and 'comprehensive' was meant to accommodate the criticism of citizens lack of identity. Therefore, there are two meanings of identity in Political Liberalism. First, citizens have a non-institutional or moral identity as they are endowed with affections, devotions and loyalties that they believe they would not stand apart and evaluate objectively. In this sense, they conceive themselves and also the others as capable of the moral power of having a conception of the good.

The second moral power, the capacity for a sense of justice, points to the second meaning of identity, namely the political identity. From the standpoint of their cooperation in the social process, individuals are seen as capable of revising and changing their conception on reasonable and rational grounds. From this political conception point of view, they are free as independent from and standing apart from any particular conception that has a scheme of final ends. In order to have this double identity, Rawls needs the further assumption of citizens’ capacity to revise their doctrines of the good. If persons are capable of fundamental changes as conversion (Saul of Tars becomes Paul the Apostle), then they are capable to adjust their doctrines of the good to the political conception. Consequently, the citizen liberal persona is represented starting from the epistemic neutrality assumption.

One the one hand, the fact that humans have conceptions of the good, which they can not simply detach from, seems to contain the first claims made by Sandel in Liberalism and The Limits of Justice. For example, citizens obviously have conceptions of the good ('the constituent part' objection) and, in certain cases, they may regard as simply unthinkable to view themselves apart either from certain religious, philosophical and moral convictions, or from certain enduring attachment and loyalties ('the impossibility of truncating the good’ objection).

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3 Rawls, Political, 13.
4 Rawls, Political, 11.
5 Rawls, Political, 12.
6 Rawls, Political, 13.
8 Rawls, Political, xvii.
9 Rawls, Political, xvii-xviii.
10 Rawls, Political, 31.
11 Rawls, Political, 30.
12 Sandel, Liberalism.
13 For Sandel, in Liberalism, the essential objection against deontological theories consists in the argument for the possibility that the idea of good could be prior to the idea of right (the teleological
Still, on the other hand, the political conception has priority over different comprehensive doctrines. The restated priority of the right means two things:
- the ideas of good used must be political ideas, so we need to rely only on ideas tailored to fit within the political conception;
- the principles of justice set the limits to the permissible way of life: the claims that citizens make to pursue ends transgressing those limits have no weight.\(^{14}\)

In sum, Rawls’s intention in *Political Liberalism* is to simultaneously assert the priority of the right over the good and to accommodate the teleological objection, which argues for the impossibility truncating the good from its purpose (*telos*). It is obvious that Rawls compels us to think liberal citizens as ‘encumbered’ and capable of detaching from their ‘encumbrances.’ Moreover, abandoning the idea of comprehensive liberalism seems to undermine the entire liberal project since it is argued that ethical resources are forcefully promoted only in a thick moral liberalism.

The comprehensive camp claims vs. the limits of public reason

Sandel’s response to Rawls’s political liberalism followed closely his previous teleological claim. So, to what extent Rawls is still separating the right from the good? Is there a strict line between comprehensive and political liberalism? Thus, his allegations underline the fact that, by avoiding comprehensive stands (liberal or not), the revised conception will undermine the entire project of political liberalism. Since the good is prior to the right, there are persuasive cases then in which the comprehensive values should take precedence over Rawls’s political restraints.

Assessing the strength of the arguments in *Political Liberalism*, Sandel is offering three objections against Rawls attempt to deal with his citizen’s identity. The first objection is pointing to the fact that bracketing comprehensive and moral ideals is neither possible, nor reasonable.\(^{15}\) In fact, Sandel is arguing, for example, that in the debate on slavery between Lincoln and Douglas, the Lincoln argument against slavery develops from a moral and religious stand.\(^{16}\) For Lincoln, the government should treat slavery as a moral wrong and prohibit its extension, while slavery violates God’s intention of creating all men equal. Sandel’s point underscores the fact that a comprehensive conception was rightly used in order to oppose slavery and thus the political conception should not expel this fact of history.

Secondly, Sandel is claiming that “the fact of reasonable pluralism” is not just a matter of people’s beliefs, but furthermore it could be identified on the level of justice itself.\(^{17}\) In other words, if there are incommensurable conceptions of the good,

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it is hard to argue that incommensurability is absent from defining justice. If there are several conceptions of what is just and, for example, libertarians are rejecting the difference principle, then there could be more reasonable ideas on what justice is. Moreover, even if Sandel is granting Rawls that he has the best arguments against libertarian allegations, he furthermore underscores that in the matter of justifying egalitarian arguments, justifying reasonable conceptions of the good is a fair option. Considering the case of moral defensible arguments in the homosexuality debate, Sandel tries to push Rawls’s political liberalism toward accepting some conceptions of the good as being justifiable. Therefore, if egalitarians are right in the arguments against libertarians, why should the defenders of homosexual moral justification not prevail in front of the opposition against gay rights?

Thirdly, Sandel wants to indicate a central shortcoming in the idea of public reason, namely the fact that in political debates citizens should pass up the arguments originated in their comprehensive moral and religious conceptions. He argues that Rawls’s public reason prohibits indistinctly gay arguments sustaining the moral justification of homosexuality or fundamentalist arguments claiming the immorality of homosexuality. Whether political controversy reflects incompatible reasonable conceptions of the good, or whether it can be resolved by deliberation, it is an issue seriously restricted within political liberalism. Therefore, this restriction is narrowing too much the real political space and thus the idea of public reason should be revised. Overall, Sandel claims that Rawls is incorrectly detaching the right from the good, since the liberals should engage their foes renouncing their neutral undermining positions. As long as slavery was libeled with the tools of comprehensive liberalism, and the moral case for gay rights is supported only by liberal positions, and, moreover, the idea of public reason is expelling reasonable debates from the public space, then Sandel’s arguments give the impression of hopelessly undermining the political liberal position.

The Limits of Public Reason tries to deal furthermore with Sandel’s objections. Rawls separates between two understandings inner to his public reason idea: the inclusive and the exclusive views. In the exclusive view, reasons given explicitly in terms of comprehensive doctrines are never to be introduced into public reason. In the inclusive view, citizens are allowed to present what they regard as the basis of political values in their comprehensive doctrines, provided they do this in ways that strengthen the ideal of public reason itself. For Rawls:

Under different political and social conditions with different families of doctrine and practice, the ideal must surely be advanced and fulfilled in different ways, sometimes by what may look as the exclusive view, at others by what may look like the inclusive view.

However, the proviso for those who argue for comprehensive doctrines is to present in the public forum the way they intend to affirm public reason ideas. Comprehensive grounds are accepted in the inclusive view only for the sake of the ideal of public reason. In other words, the comprehensive arguments have just instrumental value in order to provide better justification for the ideal of public reason. The abolitionist arguments or Martin Luther King Jr. arguments are accommodated into the idea of public reason as long as they uphold the freedom and

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18 Sandel, Liberalism, 207.
19 Rawls, Political, 247.
20 Rawls, Political, 248.
equality principles. Consequently, the priority of the political values is reaffirmed, as long as comprehensive grounds do not contradict public reasons:

The abolitionists could say, for example, that they supported political values of freedom and equality for all, but that given the comprehensive doctrines they held and the doctrines current in their day, it was necessary to invoke the comprehensive grounds on which those values were widely seen to rest.  

However, Sandel’s and Rawls’s positions are still incompatible. We still have two versions of justification:

- the comprehensive grounds are justified because they uphold valuable comprehensive doctrines (Sandel);
- the comprehensive grounds are justified only when they are instrumental for the ideal of public reason (Rawls).

Carlos Ball’s argument for same-sex marriage and parenting by lesbians and gay men charges political liberals for “moral bracketing” or sidestepping the moral issues. For Ball, Rawlsian liberalism proves incapable of providing a justificatory framework that engages the moral issues that are part of the debates over whether society should recognize gay and lesbian rights. Ball reconstructs Martha Nussbaum’s arguments in the idea of a “moral liberalism” which explicitly incorporates notions of the good, and particularly what is required so that all individuals should lead lives that are fully human. Two main principles characterized moral liberalism: all human beings share basic needs and capabilities that are indispensable for the leading of full human lives, and it rejects the proposition that human beings are inherently individualistic creatures.

The morality that Ball advocates in his book is indeed very restricted, since he obviously rejects moral judgments from his moral evaluation, propositions that pass judgments on individuals for failing to live in certain ways or the other. Therefore, his morality is grounded on the universal premise that human beings should have individual autonomy and full capacity to choose in their lives. The position here is between Rawls and Sandel. Thus, Ball agrees with Sandel that liberals should be concerned with a particular form of the good, but this form of good is justified with a universal premise, namely the ability of all individuals to lead fully human lives. Clearly, Ball recognizes the strength of the perfectionist critique, when it “holds that principles of justice depend for their justification on the moral worth or intrinsic good of the end they serve,” but tries to stay close to the burdens of Rawls’s reasonable constraints. Basically, in the issues relating to homosexuality, Rawls’s idea of reasonable consists in the fact that these topics can be dealt with exclusively through the political values that constitute its overlapping consensus. However, Ball rejects the justifications expressed only in political values terms and charges as “too thin” the political liberal normative constraints. He thinks that neutral liberalism fails to uphold

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21 Rawls, Political, 251.
22 Ball, The Morality, 1.
23 Ball, The Morality, 6.
24 The label “moral liberalism” is Carlos Ball’s project, while Nussbaum would probably reject this description for her ideas.
26 Ball is quoting here Sandel’s LLJ, The Morality of Gay Rights, p.23.
27 See, for the idea of reasonable, Rawls, Political, 53.
same-sex marriage and parenting by lesbians and gay men and only a moral liberalism is better qualified to promote these issues on a public agenda.

Is it justified to assert the priority of gender equality against the freedom of religion?

One of the most important allegations from the feminist critique of political liberalism stresses that the focus of justice as fairness upon questions of basic justice or upon the distinction between basic structure and the background culture is overlooking injustice practiced within family. Whether or not principles of justice apply to family, Susan Okin’s argument was that principles that focus on basic structure do not secure equal justice for women and their children.  

How does Rawls try to accommodate Okin’s objection? His response to Okin, was in *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, where he argues that family must be seen, in part at least, as a matter of political justice. Political principles do not apply directly to its internal life, but they impose essential constraints on the family as an institution in order to guarantee the basic rights and liberties. In *Political Liberalism*, the individuals have two types of strings: a non-institutional identity (affections, devotions and loyalties that individuals believe they would not stand apart) and a political identity (the constraints of liberty and equality). Even if Rawls argues very clearly for the priority of the political identity over the non-institutional identity (the equal rights of women and the basic rights for their children as future citizens are inalienable and protect them wherever they are), he claims that there are spheres over which principles do not apply (these principles do not inform us how to raise our children, and we are not required to treat our children in accordance with political principles).  

However, Okin’s and Rawl’s positions are fundamentally opposed in the scope of justice. Eventually, the core of the disagreement is sited in the different meanings of injustice in Okin’s and Rawls’s views. In Okin’s comprehensive liberalism, the family is the linchpin of gender injustice and thus, all discriminations are forbidden. In Rawls’ s political liberalism, if, for example, the division of labor is fully voluntary, meaning that people on the basis of their religion adopt it, then the traditionally gendered division of labor is justified. In other words, Rawls stresses the argument that, even if women have more duties than men do in domestic spheres, with the proviso of voluntary division of labor and the norm of legal equal entitlement of household income, there is no violation of the principles of justice. And yet, if one of Sandel’s points was that religious doctrines are incompatible with political values, Okin is in fact restating the argument from the other side, claiming that political values are incompatible with religious doctrines. If we take Okin’s argument

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29 One of the reasons for which I put together Sandel and Okin objections is, in fact, their common purpose of challenging political liberalism from a comprehensive liberalism perspective. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum argument that Okin’s view resembles Mill and Raz positions in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, 108.
31 Rawls, *Collected*, 597.
32 Rawls, *Collected*, 599.
33 Rawls, *Collected*, 598.
34 Rawls, *Collected*, 599.
35 Rawls, *Collected*, 598.
seriously, it is fair to say that the priority of the political identity and the justification for voluntary religious duties seem incompatible. As we have seen, a different version of the teleological argument flourished within liberal theory. Hence Rawls emphasizes that comprehensive grounds are justified only when they are instrumental for the ideal of public reason. Basically, when the freedom of religion is confronting sex discrimination, political liberals are endorsing that fact that a fair balance should decide the best way in each particular case, while the liberal comprehensive position requires the priority of gender equality in every case.

As a matter of fact, Susan Okin vs. Martha Nussbaum debate is clearly a case in which arguments separate more accurately the assumptions involved in Okin vs. Rawls debate. In *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women*, Susan Okin is arguing that multiculturalism and the universal women rights are incompatible, since group rights are offering legitimacy for unjust cultural practices. Martha Nussbaum thinks that Okin’s argument is too easy, since it is underlining a false essential disagreement among values. First, by suggesting to religious women and men that their religion has nothing positive to contribute to the struggle for justice, she is alienating potential allies and thus makes her own struggle more difficult. Secondly, Okin is not taking seriously the intrinsic values of religious capabilities, as the ability to search for your own good should be a fundamental right in a liberal state. Thirdly, Nussbaum claims that the criterion to decide between the two rights should be whether a proposed law really does impose a ‘substantial burden’ on people’s free exercise of their religion. If the answer to this question is negative, the law may go forward.

She argues, for instance, that we may have two cases with two different answers. The answer is negative in her example of Christian inheritance law in India, which ended in unequal inheritance rights for women. The only change was that Christians treat women the way all the other laws of inheritance already treated them, and the claim that this was a substantial burden on the freedom of Christian was simply implausible. On the other hand, the law that outlawed polygamy for Hindu man probably imposed a substantially burden on the free exercise of the Hindu religion, and therefore the answer should be positive.

What is the response of a comprehensive liberal? Okin considers that the criticism raised by Nussbaum is claiming that her feminism is leading to intolerance. On the one hand, Okin agrees with Nussbaum with respect to the fact that balancing between the freedom of religion and fighting sex discrimination is a difficult approach. Thus, she considers that her argument is neither an attack against religion, nor an attempt to minimize the right of citizens to follow their conceptions of the good. Nonetheless she is offering strong reasons why the ‘substantial burden’ proviso is flawed. First, if a religious group wished to continue its sex discriminatory practices, under this proviso it would have vested interest in showing that sex discrimination was at the heart of its beliefs. Second, the proviso requires that courts rule on the centrality or peripheral nature of various doctrinal matters, which they

38 Ibid.
41 Okin, “Reply,” 128. Okin is arguing against Sunstein’s arguments that are similar to Nussbaum proviso.
generally tried to avoid doing. Third, she thinks that there is an even clearer case for prohibiting sex discrimination in the educational practices of religious groups than in practices opted into by adults who are aware of alternative ways of life.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Okin disputes the balancing tactic, since she considers that, by following this line of justification, the sex discrimination status quo will be preserved. However, she argues that her position, similar to Nussbaum’s considerations, is the middle way between comprehensive and political liberalism. It is hard to grant her this claim, while it is clear that the two positions are incompatible:
- comprehensive liberals are upholding the necessity of priority of equality in any case, since the basic discrimination comes together with tacit knowledge (Okin).
- even if the political principle of equality is prior to comprehensive doctrines, political liberals are offering reasonable grounds to accept in some cases conceptions of the good, which are not violating equality – the political version of the teleological argument (Rawls, Nussbaum).

Political liberal theorists have tried to accommodate the teleological argument and to offer reasonable grounds for balancing different conflicting values. The political version of the teleological argument maintains that, in some cases, conceptions of the good are not violating political principles. Claiming either monogamy for Hindu men or intervention in the family distribution of duties is too much to ask for from political principles. Still, political liberal grounds are incompatible with comprehensive grounds, since they rule out public justification for doctrines of the good and deny the absolute priority of one value over the others.

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42 Okin, “Reply,” 129.
43 Ibid.
44 Moreover, she argues that even Rawls is caught between comprehensive and political liberalism. Okin’s quote is, however, from the first edition of Political Liberalism and she seems here to have overlooked The Idea of Public Reason Revisited.


A (RE)NEW(ED) VOICE
EPISTEMOLOGICAL OUTSIDE INSIGHTS ON FEMINISM

Bogdan Popoveniuc

Abstract

The article deals with the relationship between feminism and its post-modernist epistemological foundation, with the way in which both the epistemological paradigm of contemporary feminism could have been born from the body of post-modern thought and, at the same time, the post-modern outlook has been made possible only through the modern feminism. The European history of thought followed, from modernity to nowadays, a “linear” evolution, from obtainment of political equality, which was done also by other social and cultural upheavals, to the paradigm of post-modern thought and subsequently to the paradigm of contemporary feminism. Thus, in the future, it is possible that the present humanist goal of a two-gender humankind should change to a non-generic human universality. If this is the case, it might happen that Eastern feminism should not follow the Western feminist way, but, on the contrary, it must choose its own means and approach.

The human being’s quality of being human is coming not from the outrunning of his/her biological nature, neither from the “liberation” of the determinations imposed by his/her social side, nor from its unilateral culturalization, but from the harmonization of these three heterogeneous elements within it. Every individual is both a biological being and a social and cultural one. But these three characters are in fact the human being. Borrowing the trans-rational Christian trinity image, the human being is a unique person, but not a unitary one. In the human history, thinkers of different times believed that they succeeded in capturing the human essence in one of these three sides of it. And because the instrument (the tool) of study, of knowledge and community was of a rational nature and, like any research instrument, it “built” (shaped) its own object, we ended up overvaluing the rational side of the human being.

On the other side, the need for order and symmetry, both at the level of individual and of society, seemed to be provided only by the existence of unique rationality. “The Miracle of intelligibility” created the feeling that universal rationality alone is the only pertinent way of access to reality and, because of that, the superior side of the human being. The huge successes in the evolution of civilization, the technical revolution strengthened even farther this belief in the superiority of the rational side of the human being. Thus, there were all the theoretical, instrumental and pragmatic premises so that the prejudice of superiority and pre-eminence of the reason should impose in the modern epoch.

However, at the same time, the great changes of human civilization, the emergence of the new economic and power structures determined the reassessment of the epistemological paradigm about the human being which lead to the appearance of the pragmatic perspective, and the so-called “post-modern” perspective about knowledge. From these changes, the social-political ones, which lead to the acknowledgement of the equality of women and to the appearance of the woman who held full rights, represented a constitutive factor of the change of the cultural paradigm that lead to the emergence of post-modernism. And indeed, is this passing

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1 I would like to thank Theodora-Eliza Vacaescu for talking some of these issues through with me as I was working on this paper.
from the pre-eminence of argumentation to the narrative style not owned to the appearance of women in the public sphere? The adversarial mode of discourse characteristic to the Argumentation, in which one side claims vindication by vanquishing the opposition, was replaced by the more seductive mode of discourse, which is the Narrative. If the pursuit of rational dominance, such as argumentation, seems to follow the male pattern role in combat, business or competition, the way of persuading by an enticing invitation to take up the perspective of the narrator, which excites one’s imagination and feelings seems to follow a persuasion pattern more specific to women. The Euro-Atlantic cultural paradigm changed along with women’s access to an equal political status to men. The humanity enriched its ways of access to intelligibility with new means so far less (or even not at all) valued.

From the epistemological point of view, one could consider that the postmodern paradigm came as a prolongation of the pragmatic one. The pragmatist view breaks down the classical paradigm of knowledge: there is an object, which follows to be known, as it really is, through the act of knowledge. In other words, that the result of the knowledge process is an objective discourse about things.

The first move in the process of breaking the ontological base of knowledge was made by the criticism view, which taught us that we cannot reach the things in themselves, but we can only know things for us, which amounts to the fact that the very act of knowledge is a transformation of reality, an act through which we transform/construct the object of knowledge in the shape of our possibilities of knowledge. This was the first step in altering the ancient relation between existence and knowledge.

The next step was the pragmatic conception. The pragmatic outlook is exclusively focused on the act of knowledge. An idea is true if and only if it functions, it works. An idea is made true by the facts, by its practical results. From now on the ontological ground of knowledge is forever lost. Unfortunately, the pragmatism did not make its own gnoseology. It can be applied in the field of human relation and beliefs/superstitions, but not in the field of natural sciences. And, at the same time, it is founded on the assumption that natural selection warrants that, in time, the “true beliefs” are those that work properly, those that offer us the proper instruments for knowledge. As Poincaré said “it would be impossible for the human species to survive if its knowledge deeply and constantly distorted reality.” In other words, at the basis of the pragmatist conception lays the ontological supposition according to which only those beliefs/ideas that are concordant with the true state of things. Pragmatism tries to ground its theory of knowledge on the act of understanding, on the relationship between the subject and the object of knowledge, but it failed (as epistemological theory of reality) because it overlooked the ontological assumptions.

Nonetheless, the postmodern paradigm takes even farther this assumption – that knowledge is only a discourse, an interpretation – and tries to build a rigorous epistemology. But its theory of knowledge is also limited, just like the pragmatic one, to the field of human relations. It is perfectly true (and this is the most important and undeniable achievement of the postmodern view) that there are various possibilities (i.e. conceptual systems) through which a phenomenon, a reality could be understood. Moreover, it is true that every society, every age, had its own way of understanding and seeing the world, but this does not mean that any such system or discourse is equally justified to be true. In the act of knowledge, its object, either a part of the physical reality, or of the social reality, has something to tell. We cannot depict a reality anyhow and in any manner, unless we are totally careless to what we want to know. The ontology of knowledge entails three members: the subject, the object and
the relation between them. We cannot overlook any of them. The postmodern view is
founded on the assertion that the discourse about the object of knowledge re-builds it
(in the manner of the discourse), for the mere reason that the object and the
knowledge about it are two different things. But if someone who constructs a
discourse is concerned with the truthfulness of his/ her knowledge, than he/ she is
forced to try to construct his/ her discourse as appropriate as possible for its object.
The reasoning according to which “every knowledge is a discourse” and therefore “all
discourses have the same value of truth” is a forbidden generalization. The reasoning
is fallacious: “I can only know in a discursive form,” ”The discourse is different from
its subject,” ”All discourses are equally justified (because anyway they are different
from their subjects).”

Moreover, unlike its rival theories, the postmodernist theory of knowledge
cannot endorse itself. Once one claims that every knowledge, every view is merely
one of multiple and equally possible theories, than it means that postmodernism itself
is one of them. Therefore, it is possible for postmodernism to be right or wrong, or, to
use its own words: postmodernism is one of the many discourses, more or less related
to its subject, the human knowledge.

With all these “deficiencies” this trend represents a step forward or, for the
sake of remaining within the post-modernism spirit, enrichment with a new
perspective over the human being. It represents a reference instant in the overthrow of the” rational monster” in which the human being was transformed by the previous
epochs. It is also an attempt to understand the human being in the complexity of
his/her existence and to destroy the unilateral paradigms on him/her. It sustains the
passing from the acknowledgement of “what” the human being is to “how” the human
being is.

I think that post-modernism is the frame which made possible the
substantiation of feminism as an epistemological vision on “its so far hidden half.”
Post-modernism is framed in the general tendency of overcoming the unitary unity of
the human being, a tendency made possible, in its turn, by modern feminism.
Contemporary feminism is, from the epistemological point of view, a form of
manifestation of post-modernism.

Without minimizing the achievements modern feminism brought about, in
reinforcing human dignity, in the changes within the human rights area, that dealt with
political-legislative equality between women and men, from the epistemological point
of view, modern feminism did not surpass the threshold of self-consciousness. It has
not yet achieved the level of self-consciousness. Simone de Beauvoir masterly illustrates
the result of modern feminism: “if you want to be equal to man, you must be a man.”
And this is because, in my opinion, although significantly determined by the socio-
cultural reality in which it exists, the intelligibility of self-existence and self-
consciousness is not reduced to these influences. Political and legislative equality,
political correctness measures are only exterior factors to the human being, which, in
order to become real at the level of consciousness, must be interiorized; the change
must take place inside as well as outside individuals’ consciousness. “We are not
born, but we become human beings,” means, “we are born men or women, only
partly.” This is why only the paradigm of contemporary feminism, the
epistemological paradigm (supporting the right to difference within equality) is the

2 It is about ” ‘deficiencies” from the perspective of unique rationality paradigm and not about intrinsic
“deficiencies” of theory, because the post-modern paradigm excludes the existence of an absolute
criterion to appreciate any kind of discourse, and the valorizing of a paradigm can’t be made from the
perspective of another.
one that builds a better forging of the feminist issue. And this paradigm is (in part) grounded in the largest view of postmodern thinking; it is actually a branch of it. Similar to the postmodern paradigm, the feminist way of thinking is oriented towards de-structuring, de-constructing and denunciation of the claim to objectivity and universality of the reason.

From the many “centers of conceptual and perspectival restructuring” on which the feminist trend focused, we will talk about the issues of rationality, with three of its manifestations: universality, duality (X/ non X), the disembodiment and the dis-centering. (This does not mean that other issues, such as affinity, situation, responsibility, the natural” or power, considered significant inquires for the feminist engagement with epistemology, are to be neglected, but the length of this article does not allow for the presentation of these aspects, not at all secondary or of little importance.)

The entire feminist theory is actually based on the belief that we live in a male-dominated culture in which men (the white, middle-class Western men) have developed the guidelines for society. The main objection against contemporary culture from the feminist vantage point is that it that this culture is built on the values of rationalism and objectivity and is widely assumed that intuitive knowledge is more primitive and thus less valuable than objective knowledge and objective modes of learning.4

In the middle of it there is the so much blamed concept of rationality and the universality tendency. But, actually, it is about a kind of rationality. As long as this issue is made aware of, everything is fine and the fight is worth being fought with all weapons, especially with the constructive ones. (But, hasn’t the term “fight” a masculine signification, as well?) However, when I talk about fight I have in mind not the destruction of the adversary, not the situation of two contradictory entities of which only one can win, but the fight as creation, the fight for existence first and than the development of different types of rationalities.

And this cannot be done by promoting the totalitarian epistems. Any discourse is a corruption of reality, an interpretation of existence in its own terms and through it. “If feminist epistemology is an epistemology which is favors the feminine as opposite to the perspective which favors the masculine, than this cannot be the purpose of postmodern feminism. A postmodern feminism would reject all masculine tendencies of rationalism, but would not replace them with feminine tendencies. Rather, it would consider that there is no single truth, but a plurality of truths, none being favored by gender considerations.”5

An example of this totalitarian epistemology is the method of false etymology (used also, on a large scale by representatives of “male philosophy,” such as Heidegger). This consists in the forced interpretation of the possible/ virtual roots of a concept, in terms of the paradigm to be supported. For the purpose of showing the masculine paradigm of culture, one can sustain, for instance, that even language reveals the oppression and the dictatorship of this culture through the hidden meanings of terms. So, one of the important metaphors of the movement shows that

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the entire history of humankind is in fact men’s history. The word history shows clearly that it deals with his story (His-story) and not her story (Her-story). But, in this case, the word is from Latin (historia) and it proves both the lack of meaning of any isolated word and the obstinacy to emphasize an oppressing reality that existed and still exists, but not necessarily in this form or with this intensity. Although this is used usually as a metaphor, we must be aware that metaphors can kill (remember just the metaphor of the “übermensh” and what consequences it implied in the history of humankind).

Another battlefront of feminism consists of dichotomies. Feminism criticizes the fact that modern rationalism founds and is founded on absolute dichotomies: good/evil, nature/culture, spiritual/material, 0/1, powerful/weak etc., but the binary structure is the one which conscious categorical existence is based upon. Consciousness is in opposition with what it is not. These dichotomies are not right or wrong; their use can be right or wrong. This does not amount to the fact that dual thinking cannot be surpassed in favor of one of a unique, but non-unitary existence, of a plural unity. The accession to existence can be done through various ways, not necessarily masculine or feminine. The reason is a way which tried out all its chances over two thousands years and it is high time it made way to rationalities. Moreover, it is forgotten that most dichotomies have, as Ilie Pârvu mentions, a middle term (positive/neutral/negative, spirit/form/structure/matter, intelligible/imaginative/sensible, dominant/recessive/dominant, necessity/probability/hazard etc.), or the philosophical conceptions which soften the state of contradiction of these polarities, like for example Mircea Florian’s recessive philosophy or Noica’s philosophy of (be)coming into being. Or even the logical systems (and philosophical, since we do not only take into consideration the formal aspect), which go beyond the static classical logic, as, for example, Stefan Lupascu’s dynamic logic of the contradiction.

The fight against rationality is also against universality. Since from Kant forward, the paradigm that has been enforced was that according to which reason cannot be but universal, and, for this reason, it must be but only one. Thus, the only thing left to do is the deconstruction of “universal rationality” (which involves “the unique truth,” “the supreme good” etc.), a thing that the postmodern critique has been and is trying to do.

In this case, postmodernism is falling into the paradigm that is trying to replace, the one of opposing and dual reference of alternatives. It is trapped in that “Ares logic” of strong and exclusive disjunction (or… or…), which can only allow for one winner (even if now it is not so obvious it is about a rationality or universality; however, the monopoly of a vision, of a paradigm, or of a method over others, has, after all, the same meaning). And the direction to be followed is, as the programmatic intention of postmodernism shows, the use of a weak thinking, the softening of rigorism, of universalism and of unity in the sense of a plurality of truth. This amounts to the building of comprehension on a “Hermes logic,” on a weak disjunction (or/and). Thus, we should not replace a rational structure with another, or a universe with

6 Unlike the reason, which implies the category, objective and order, the rationalities send to the intelligibility, they are related with the larger universe of understanding, domain in which the reason is just a alley in huge garden.
7 Mihaela Miroiu, Gândul, 49.
8 Are these designations (strong/weak) given by the medieval logicians for the two kinds of disjunction, and the necessity of operating with the second one, not a sign of the necessity to change the rationality paradigm towards a more feminine or towards an androgynous rationality?
another, we should replace the rationalism with rationalities and the universe (universul) with the multiverse (multiversul). This is possible if we accept the fact that the existence is not unitary, although it is one. We can achieve this if we move from rational philosophy to intelligible philosophy. “To philosophize as a feminist has meant for me the ongoing effort to undiscipline my mind, to learn the sounds of voices other than the one that seemed so natural to me... to let go the need for impose coherence, to enter into the conversation with no idea of where it’s going to go, to upset, and unsettle, to distrust the clear and distinct.” This is one of the ways of access to the existence, to what it is, to intelligibility, but not the unique and not the self-sufficient one in this form. In order to fulfill itself, it needs to build and to communicate its own rationality, to open to other ways of access to existence and manifestation, towards their rationalities.

Is this a new way of obeying, a new distortion of the original existence in terms of the rational? Not at all. It is about individual opening towards the non-generic universality; it is about placing it in the intelligibility realm. “If the reality is just an aspect of existence, and the rationality is just an aspect of the intelligibility, than, in order to accede to Philosophy, we must always place ourselves in the radicality of the thought, beyond the categorical and a-categorical, beyond rationalism and irrationalism, there where everything that exists is intelligible …”

The modern rationalism is also constantly accused of giving credit to the rational, equalized with the human and cultural, to the detriment of the instinctive equalized with the natural and the animalistic. It is true that the consciousness is different from the body, but this does not mean that the body has no part in it. The sex distinction is neither superposing over the culture/ nature one, nor over the mind-body one. We are not independent from our body just like we are not independent from our nature. The biologic alongside with the social and cultural is one of the sides, which make up the trinitary one of the human being. At the same time, the reason is not the only form of manifestation of human consciousness. To reduce the consciousness merely to reason amounts to turning the human being into a “rational monster,” especially since this feature was most frequently absent from the key moments of human history. Moreover, the reason itself cannot be the “first engine” or the energy, which sets in motion individuals or “cultures.” But, at the same time, to exaggerate the pre-eminence of the biological component of the human being is not a pertinent criterion for the difference that is on the basis of the non-generic universality of the humanity.

The feminist approach in this matter is not spared of the danger of doing exactly the thing it rejects: “I believe that talking about the separation between gender and sex, doing gender studies can be productive and interesting, but it is likely that this activity should be only another form of somatophobia and a centering on a new dichotomy as a manifestation of disembodiment.”

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9 I found this expression in an unpublished article of Acad. Alexandru Boboc.
12 Contemporary researches in cognitive sciences show that the functioning of the thinking process might not be based upon the categorial language. On the contrary, it might be very likely that this would have totally different underlying mechanisms, the language being only a system created later and at the surface.
13 Miroiu, Gândul, 69.
As a conclusion, contemporary feminist epistemology proves to have been possible in the larger frame of the postmodern paradigm. It would be a pity that this relationship with postmodernism should be contested only on programmatic grounds, such as the fact that the feminist paradigm must not be in any way related with the hegemonic culture of white Western men, and it must be independent from any intrusion or influence coming from this culture. First, because this would be impossible since both men and women participate to the non-generic universality of humanity, and, second, because this programmatic goal is, to some extent, anti-humanist: originating in the existence of an anatonic/ biological difference, to impose a total difference between individuals (and cultures).

Considering feminism as a product of postmodernism, an answer to those who contest the very foundation that made possible its emergence, can be given. See, for instance, Nancy Hartsock’s question related to the reason why the very moment when the feminist movements couch their own theory about the world, the incertitude regarding the possibility of theorizing the world appears. Though she does not suspect conspiratorial intellectual movements, she suggests that this state of affair is not accidental. And she is right because this very movement that brought us to question the possibility of seeing the world as a whole, the movement that questioned the existence of the universal objective of rationality, was the one that made possible, in the epistemological framework, the reinforcement of the feminist issue.

Thus we can consider that feminism is not (and it should not be) a trend torn away from the largest cultural trend of humankind, but a moment in the development of the human being’s consciousness in the spirit of his/ her affiliation to humanity. The fact that so many years of culture and civilization were necessary for the acknowledgement of this state of affairs shows that the human consciousness’ way to self-intelligibility is a hard and complex one.

In this context, Romanian feminism is not at all in a privileged position. The cultural isolation imposed by the communist years, followed by the hardships of this never-ending transition have by no means a positive influence on sensitizing the society in this respect. The experience of the fourteen years showed us how difficult it is for a people to regain its dignity and the conscience of its own value after so many years of dictatorship. The axiological disorder that the Romanian society drifts in renders more difficult the access to a humanist conscience and to an opening toward the other. The daily problems do not allow for the respite necessary for understanding the other.

All these left a substantial mark on our culture, in which the conquests of postmodernism are either rejected as “Western eccentricities,” or assumed only in their form and not in content. This could explain, on the one hand, Romanians’ unconsciousness, ignorance or even rejection of understanding the feminist inquiry, and, on the other, the lack of proper means to wake up to the reality of the twenty-first century. Romanian feminism is confronted, as Romanian society on the whole on many other issues, with the necessity to “burn” a few stages in order to reach the western way of conceptualizing the issue, or to find its own way to construct and conceptualize the issue in an appropriate manner for the Romanian reality. I believe that generally Eastern feminism, and, more particularly, Romanian feminism, should find its own original way to create the non-generic humanity, which will probably be the next step forward (untaken yet) towards real humanity.

I hope this short and partial approach (by an outsider) of some feminist epistemology issues can represent a little step forward in this great challenge that is for the human being the acquirement of his/her own intelligibility.

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GENDER ASPECTS OF SECULARISM IN TODAY FRENCH SCHOOLS: 
THE DILEMMA OF MUSLIM MINORITIES

Maria-Carmen Pantea

Abstract:

In order to defend its secular values, France passed a law that would ban ostensibly religious symbols belonging to students in public schools. The target of the interdiction clearly seems to be the veil, regarded as a sign of women’s oppression. Muslim women protested. Traditionalists also considered that the law is a form of religious discrimination. The paper highlights broader issues like: secularization, the different meanings of the veil, women's rights, feminist views on the recent law and religious education. I argue that forbidding the veil in schools is far from a solution for liberating women from prejudice and discrimination. I consider that the current issue of veiling in France highlights the institutionalization of the treatment of Muslim girls as objects. In my opinion, the educational system should assume the discussion of religious issues that intersect the social ones, and thus offer alternative viewpoints for Muslim girls in order to make a deliberate choice.

Introduction

In February 2004, France passed a law that would ban “signs and dress that ostensibly denote the religious belonging of students” in public elementary and high schools beginning with the 2004-2005 school year. Despite such rhetoric of universality, the target of the interdiction clearly seems to be the veil. The French government considers veiling as incompatible with the French system of laïcité. Mr. Chirac said in December 2003 that it violates the separation of church and state and would increase tensions in the multicultural society of France, whose Muslim and Jewish populations are both the biggest of their kind in West Europe.¹

My point in the article is to argue neither in the favor of veiling, nor the opposite. I argue for Muslim women’s right to have a deliberate choice. I intend to transfer the accent from the prevalent East-West debate on veiling/not veiling and to focus on Muslim girls as decision-makers. The dispute for the veil placed Muslim girls in the center. Still, they are not perceived as subjects, and so, capable of making their own decision to (un)veil. Neither the recent state decision, nor the traditionalist views actually represent the voices of Muslim girls. My opinion is that the current issue of veiling in France highlights the institutionalization of the treatment of Muslim girls as objects. I consider the subject relevant for a feminist approach, as the story of veil in contemporary France speaks about the different meanings of freedom as understood by Muslim minority women, Muslim men and by French state authorities. In the dispute around veiling, Muslim girls are caught between two forces: the one coming from the French administration and the other, from the Muslim practices.

The discussion of veil in France comprises much broader issues, of which my paper highlights: secularization, the meanings of the veil, women’s rights, and religious

¹There are more than 4,000,000 adherents to Islam living in France.
education in state schools. Although the topic of Islamic fundamentalism might also be of relevance for discussion, my paper does not cover this aspect.

Secularization

“Secularization” means a number of different things to scholars. Broadly speaking, it is a theory that defines the decline in the social significance of religion as a long-term and inevitable historical process. Deep-rooted theories had argued that modernization brings inevitably, the decline of religion. However, more recent theories argue that cities are centers of increased religious activity and religion survived and changed in parallel to modernization and, perhaps, because of it. The story of veil in contemporary France is such an example.

France has a long secular tradition, which goes back to the eighteenth century. The state is separated from religion. The trend of the French State was and continues to be on the one hand, to control and to take in charge the religion and, on the other hand, to marginalize it by considering that religion it a private phenomenon.

Why is the veil so meaningful for the French secular state and for the Muslim minority also? I will present some of the significance attached to the veil.

The veil

There is no Arabic equivalent for the Western word “veil.” There are over a hundred terms for clothing elements, many used for “veiling.” The way we usually may find the “correspondent” word for veil in Arabic, is “hijab.” It is the term used by many Muslim women to describe their head cover that may or may not include covering their face except their eyes. The way in which Muslims interpret this, if they choose to dress in accordance with hijab, varies greatly from individual to individual, and country to country.

To understand the concept of hijab, it is necessary to review the Islamic justification for the female dress code. Two are for the Muslim world, the sources of Revelation: one is religious, the Koran (the actual Word of God, recorded by Muhammed, seventh century) and the other is traditional (“Hadiths” and “Sunnah,” second–hand reports of Muhammed’s personal lifestyle). However, most of the time, there is no clear distinction between Koran rules and tradition in the Islamic world.

Religious Prescriptions about Veiling

The word “Hijab” is mentioned five times in the Koran. However, only once “Hijab” refers to what is considered to be the dress code today. Hijab, as it appears in the Koran,

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3 I assume the linguistic difference as a major limitation of the paper. Although I will use the English word “veil,” it is the Islamic polisemy of “hiding + sacred + modesty + privacy” which is to be signified.
is not related to Muslim Women’s dress code. There are three basic rules the Koran ascribes for dressing. The first rule the Koran has for the women refers to the righteousness as “the best garment.” The second rule prescribes the way of covering the bosom. Even when referring to clothing rules, hijab or any other way of covering the face is not mentioned. This supports the idea that veiling was not a stipulated practice for Muslim women.

The third rule includes the only Koran reference to the hijab as a cloth item. It sets the dress code for the Prophet’s wives in an explicit historical context. It does not regard veiling as women’s clothing, but as a practical solution to deal with the affluence of visitors in the Prophet’s place. Moreover, the Prophet’s wives are attributed a higher status than ordinary Muslim women. It is possible that the relation between the hijab and the status (more common in modern times) have its roots in the Koran.

On the whole, there is not enough proof in the Koran in order to sustain the practice of veiling. No precise dress code for men or women is prescribed in the Koran, and various Islamic scholars have interpreted the meaning of hijab in different ways. In effect, it is the prophetic tradition that offers much more support for it. Next, I will briefly discuss the relation between traditionalism and the veil.

Tradionalist Meanings of the Veil

The traditional writings (Hadiths) were collected, interpreted and compiled in the seventh and eighth century as a political attempt to find religious legitimacy for creating a new type of society for the new Arab empire. An unequal distribution of power relations took the place of the Koran prescribed equality. In this context, women’s place became the most disadvantaged one. The religion – law schools elaborated the “law of the veil,” a very strict prescription whose validity is still recognized. Islamic feminists perceive these traditional sources as a contamination of the true Islamic religion.

Patriarchal Meanings of the Veil

It is largely believed that hijab is a symbol of the submission of women in Arab and Islamic countries, and therefore contradicts the principle of the freedom of women. The veil is believed to be the natural outcome of a patriarchal society in which the father and the brother have the upper hand. The girl is compelled by her father, elder brother or boyfriend to veil, as a symbol of belonging and sexual unavailability. The risk of being raped is higher for the Muslim girls who are not veiled. Recently, the public opinion was shocked when media recounted about four unveiled Muslim girls who were raped and set on fire in a Muslim neighborhood from France. In many Parisian districts and other areas, girls are compelled to put on the veil so as not to be labeled as prostitutes. An important proof is the “no prostitution, no submission” movement which manifested this year was greatly welcomed by the French elite.

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5 Koran 33:59.
6 Koran 7:26.
7 Koran 24:30; 24:31.
8 Koran, 33:59.
Political Meanings of the Veil

For France the issue of veiling or unveiling is not new. The story of veil as a political instrument goes as far as 19th century, during French colonization in North Africa. The desire to unveil Algerian women became the colonizers’ political doctrine. Under the French power, veiled Algerian women refused to unveil and thus became the concrete manifestations of resistance. Under these circumstances, the veil became increasingly charged with new political meanings. It represented a commitment to a different religion and culture than the ones of the colonizers, an explicit form of opposing French authority. The battle for the veil put Algerian women in the center of the French colonization.

Today, the issue of veiling in France takes the form of cultural resistance to the secular French state policies. Many Muslim persons interviewed in the media, when asked about hijab, answered that hijab is not an Islamic obligation as much as it is a new political symbol associated with the Islamic movements that are gaining strength in France. Many first-generation Muslim women stopped wearing the headscarf as they adapted to French culture and freedoms. But some of their daughters started donning veils because their brothers or fathers made them, or because the girls wanted to make a political statement or reclaim their ethnic identity. The headscarf has become a way in which young Muslims express their rejection of mainstream French society.

The law

The recent history of banning the veil goes back to 1989 when three female students wearing hijabs were refused admission to their local public high school. At the time, the school principal was able to convince the girls’ parents to ask their daughters to remove the hijabs while at school. The high-school later reached a revised agreement with the parents; that the girls would remove their head-covering hijabs while in class, but could wear them on the corridors and playground. Most Muslim NGOs, including the Union of Islamic Associations in France, refused to accept that compromise. Since then, the hijab issue has fuelled strong feelings and an ongoing political-religious tension between the national government and French Muslims.

Following the unsatisfactory 1989 compromise, French Muslims raised the slogan „Our veil is our honor,” while French teachers raised a confrontational one of their own, „Let’s not give in.” In November 1989, at the French government’s request, the Council of State published a report on the “compatibility or incompatibility of the wearing of signs of affiliation to religious community with the principle of secularism” in state schools. However, the report still left it up to local school officials to judge. That was simply too much to ask from school administrators, who came under heavy criticism when they did not ban the hijab, and were just as heavily criticized whenever they did.

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9 The period of French colonization in Algeria lasted from 1830 to 1962.
10 Two schoolgirls who were banned from school in October 2003 for wearing scarves had begun covering their heads only earlier that year; their Algerian-born mother does not wear a headscarf, and their father is Jewish (See “Veiled concerns” by Josie Appleton. Online. Available HTTP: <http://www.islamonline.net/English/in_depth/hijab>, last accessed March 20, 2004).
In September 2003, Chirac urged the parliament to pass the law before the next school year starts: “I consider that the wearing of clothing or of symbols which conspicuously show religious affiliation should be banned in schools […] For that matter, a law is necessary. I want it to be adopted and enforced by parliament before the return to school next year […] Secularity is one of the republic’s great achievements. It plays a crucial role in social harmony and national cohesion. We must not allow it to be weakened.”

Chirac rejected the government commission’s proposal to mark the holy days of minority faiths with new school holidays, arguing that French pupils already had many official days off.

French Premier Jean-Pierre Raffarin argued that the controversial motion was designed to “defend secularism and protect all women from fundamentalist pressures. That is the main point. This is not about religion, it is about lifting constraints on women,” he claimed. A deputy in the National Assembly of France argued that “the law was not about the headscarf, it was about funneling Islam toward being a more acceptable religion for France”, adding simplistically: “There are good Muslims and bad Muslims. In France, we want good Muslims.”

This law caused a reaction wave. Support for the Muslims of France has been felt all over the world, and January 17 has been set as a day of worldwide protest against the actions of the French government. Muslim countries, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Germany condemned the law and emphasized that its enforcement would cause tension and entrenchment in France. They also asserted that the law was against religious freedom and basic human rights. But, so far, these reactions have not led the French government to retract its decision.

France is not the only state that banned the veil. Two German states have started actions to ban state teachers wearing headscarves in schools. Germany is considering a ban on teachers wearing headscarves. A similar ban appears to have broad support in Belgium. In 1999, Turkey banned headscarves in schools, universities and public offices on the grounds that they symbolized a politicized form of Islam.

There is currently no law banning headscarves in schools or elsewhere. It will be put into practice only in September 2004. Still, many abuses have called the attention of the public opinion. The issue of the veil has led to a number of well-known cases where girls have been suspended or expelled from schools for wearing headscarves in class, but there are still many schools who do not act against pupils who come to class wearing headscarves. However, since 1994, around 100 girls have been excluded from French state schools for wearing such veils. In half of these cases, the court subsequently overturned the decision.

Muslim minority’s views on law

The Muslim minority from France considers that the banning of hijab is a challenge to their identity. On January 17, 2004, over 20,000 French Muslims – mostly women wearing various forms of hijab – gathered in the streets of France in order to protest

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against the legislation. Countering the discourse that linked the “veil” to the subjugation of Muslim women, they insisted that their decision to wear the hijab emerged from their own free will. Moreover, the protesting women embraced their simultaneous identities as Muslims and French citizens. They carried French flags, marched with banners evoking “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, Secularism,” and even wore headscarves emblazoned with the French tricolor.

In perhaps the most evocative display of citizenship, demonstrators throughout the country waved their national identity cards while chanting some version of “one headscarf equals one vote.” “We cannot conceive that an exclusion law has been voted, a law that will prevent young adolescent women from their right to get education,” Khadidja Marfouk, a participant, said during the march in the Eastern part of Paris, according to “The Guardian.”

The president of the French Council of the Muslim Faith considered that a law on religious symbols in the school environment has the risk to stigmatize a whole community. Another Muslim representative presumed that the law “has nothing to do with being secular. This is probably because of the fear that Islam is sometimes linked to terrorism.”

There are women who argue that the law amounts to a war against Islam: “Is the current furor motivated by an extreme case of “secularism” or is it a “war on Islam? […] This is French Globalization. This is assimilation. The ban cannot be objective when only two members of the Stasi commission are Muslims and are both known for their anti-Islamic opinions.”

At a recent conference in Cairo, Dr. Salah Jaa’frawy presented an interesting point. He did not blame it all on the Europeans. He called upon Muslims to take some of the responsibility for the issue of veiling because of the misguided practices of some Islamic organizations and the average Muslims’ ignorance of Islam. He stated that there was 80% illiteracy among first and second generation Muslim workers, that there were 2,000 mosques in France, 2,000 in Germany, 1,500 in Britain, yet only 20% of these mosques were run by qualified imams.”

Feminist and human rights views

Feminism has a long history of trying to achieve liberation through clothing. Recently, Elle magazine published a petition signed by 60 prominent French women calling for a ban on “this visible symbol of the submission of women.” In previous cases, Western feminists have focused on analyzing and criticizing the symbols of women’s oppression,
rather than its causes. The fact that the French case is about Muslim women in a Western society – women who wear their veils in offices and schools in French cities – may make a difference in their standpoint. Many Muslim women argue that their veil is more a lifestyle choice, a gesture, than a sign of their subordinate position in society. Still, there are many situations when the young girls are required to veil, as one Iranian teenager from France argues: “The girls are trapped in the middle. The father says they have to wear it, and the school says they can't. The girls pay the price.”

Feminists have claimed that Muslim women are forced to wear the hijab against their will and thus they will never be able to grow into contributing members of society. “It is very wrong to make a law,” said Caroline Fontaine, a journalist for the magazine Paris Match. Although she disapproves of headscarves, she maintains: “The Muslim population in France is young, and we are a little afraid of them. And instead of trying to understand their culture and their needs and that fact that they are not fully accepted in France, we make a law against them.”

Farida Lesbet, who in 1982 founded the Association for the Triumph of Women’s Rights, the first women’s rights movement in Algeria, is strongly in favor of the law. Lesbet fled to Paris after receiving death threats at her home country for her political and religious stands. She said “the veil was fascist” because it was used by men to dominate women.

But a friend of Lesbet’s, who asked her name not be used because she feared for her family’s safety in Algeria, said the French law missed the point. She said the debate should not focus on the veil. Instead, it should center on problems such as poverty and unemployment that might be the root of the growing Islamic fundamentalist movement: “It is not essential to have a law [for headscarves], but it is essential to make political decisions to stop the fundamentalist movement.”

Alain Badiou, a French philosopher, argues that the law on the hijab is a pure capitalist law because “it orders femininity to be exposed. In other words, having the female body circulate according to the market paradigm is obligatory.” He also argues that if the veil is a sign of male power (belonging to the father or to the eldest brother) over young girls or women, the banish of women who obstinately wear it, is illogical.

The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights is also against banning the veil, arguing that wearing the hijab is an essential part of a Muslim woman’s religious identity.

The new possible role of school

In a recent poll commissioned by Le Monde and La Vie, 84% of educators overwhelmingly supported the legislation. Still, 59% of educators believe that discussing

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23 Noelle Knox, “Effort to ban head scarves in France,” USA TODAY (February 25, 2004): 11.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
hijab is a way to avoid speaking about the public school system’s more pressing concerns.\textsuperscript{27} France is the only country in Europe where there is no religious education in state schools. State education is completely secular (religion is a strictly private affair), and private schools are usually Catholic. Over the years, Catholic schools have become more secular (fewer teachers are members of religious orders), in exchange for some state help. However, there is an increasing awareness that French children are not equipped for life in the modern world: they lack awareness of the religious needs of others (especially Muslims) and do not understand religious conflicts.

The issue of religious education is very complicated: a confessional education may produce children who are committed to and knowledgeable about their own faith but also better able to understand the religious aspirations of others, while a multi-faith education may end up respecting the faith of no one and devaluing the concept of religion altogether. Teaching religion is forbidden, but not teaching about religion; the process thus has to be academic, not devotional. There are decisions that do prohibit Bible reading, school-sponsored morning devotions, and prayers. Still, they do not prevent teachers from teaching about religion as a significant force in human affairs. Schools should find a way of celebrating diversity without controversy. It may sponsor the study of religion, but may not sponsor the practice of religion. Schools may expose the students to all religious views, but may not impose any particular view.

I argue that forbidding the veil in schools is far from a solution for liberating women from prejudice and discrimination. In my opinion, the new legislation highlights the fact that the contemporary educational system is facing a crisis that reduces its capacity to deal with significant multicultural facts. By forbidding the wear of veil, the school refuses to assume the discussion of religious issues which intersect the social ones, and thus to offer alternative viewpoints for Muslim girls. Instead, the religious attitudes are left for other institutions to deal with.

Under these circumstances, veiling risks to be reinforced outside schools as a practice of resistance. The potential of the veil to acquire new political meanings is significant. I believe that the educational system should offer the Muslim girls means to interpret, from different perspectives, their choice to (un)veil. It is their right to have access to alternative views in order to make a deliberate choice. The ban on the hijab is not a solution. The best way to fight sexism, like racism, is to encourage women to fight to defend their rights through collective action of the oppressed. Then again, it is a task the state is far from assuming.

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