

Émigré Perspectives on Feminisms in Europe – East and West

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Feminist political and academic discourses have become increasingly internationalized, but the power and influence of different national feminisms are far from equal. The transnational dialogue tends to take place in spaces created by Western wealth and influence. Western feminists can take advantage of their countries more developed media, publishing and distribution capacities, and greater resources for education, travel, conferences, public advocacy, etc. (Heitlinger and Manicom 1996).

Since 1989, a variety of approaches to the situation of women in East Central Europe has been generated, both in East Central Europe and in the West. Nora Jung (1994a, 1994b), has found important differences in perspectives among East European scholars who were born, raised and remained in Eastern Europe, émigrés who left their countries and now live in the West, and Western scholars lacking first-hand knowledge of local languages and culture. Western feminist scholars have tended to rely on secondary sources and on interviews with the same 'key informants', thus repeating the knowledge produced by previous authors. Moreover, the dominance of English in international feminist exchange allows local speakers with proficiency in English greater access to Western researchers and audiences. Thus perspectives of East European scholars and activists who speak English, who are familiar with Western feminist politics and academic discourses, and who have contacts with Western feminists, tend to be privileged. Knowledge couched in (inappropriate-yet-familiar) Western feminist terms not only distorts the complex postcommunist reality, but also perpetuates the hegemony of Western feminist discourses.

Émigré feminists speak the local language. This is an important asset with which they can access indigenous documents, journals and public debates, and interview other than English-speaking informants without the need for an interpreter. However, émigrés can also experience unique problems in conducting cross-national research, since their exile location may determine the type of data they can gain access to. Local hostility to émigrés can also hinder research. Thus, an émigré status can create both special opportunities and special problems in transnational feminist research.

The main objectives of this paper are to (1) explore the role of émigré feminists in the cross-cultural translation and mediation of East-West feminist perspectives, and (2) use the contours of my personal and intellectual biography

as a Czech-born, British-trained, Canadian feminist scholar, to trace the ways in which I have reinterpreted my experiences and understanding of gender relations in my ‘home’ and ‘adopted’ countries. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of issues of ‘representation’ and ‘voice-appropriation’, and of the impact of different geographic and political locations on knowledge claims.

Émigré/exiled/expatriate/diasporic feminists are a diverse category. For the purposes of this paper, the common denominator are the migrants’ ongoing attachments to feminism, the adopted country, and the country of origin, however ambivalent these attachments might be. Émigré feminists therefore draw on at least four distinct traditions: (1) the history and culture of their country of origin, (2) the history and culture of their adopted country (or countries), (3) the history and politics of local, regional and international feminist movements, and (4) the exilic/diasporic experience of migration, displacement, and ethnic minority status. Émigré feminists in many ways embody the notions of ‘world-travelling’, ‘nomadic’, ‘migratory’, ‘hybrid’, ‘multiple’ or ‘resident alien’ subjects, elaborated by feminist and post-modernist theorists such as Mani (1990), Braidotti (1994), Sylvester (1995) or Wolf (1995).

The birth and evolution of a Czech émigré feminist

I was born in 1950 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where I lived until 1968. When the Warsaw-pact armies invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968, I was vacationing in England. Fearing the resurgence of antisemitism, my parents urged me not to come back. I agreed, and my life was changed forever. I stayed in the U.K., becoming a full-fledged exile. I suddenly lost my Czech roots, language and culture, and I did not know when I would be able to return.

At the same time, however, the conditions of my exile could not have been more favourable. I was very young and ready for new adventures, British public opinion was quite sympathetic to the plight of Czechoslovak refugees, the government gave all Czechoslovak refugees open work permits, and eligible students were able to enrol in post-secondary educational institutions already in October 1968, less than two months after our exile began.

The years of my undergraduate and postgraduate studies coincided with the emergence of the Women’s Liberation Movement (WLM), with whose goals, political style and membership I quickly identified. I was particularly attracted to feminism by the discovery that I did not have to use make-up, that my mother’s ‘double burden’ was not inevitable, and that it was possible for both parents to accept responsibility for domestic labour and childcare.

Given the oppressive political context of post-1968 communist Czechoslovakia, my role as an émigré feminist was of necessity limited to one-way flow of information *from* Czechoslovakia and the USSR *to* the U.K. and other Western countries. During the course of researching and writing my Ph.D. dissertation and my first book, *Women and State Socialism*, I gave little thought to any potential benefit the book might have for Czech and Slovak women. The book

is written in English (as are all my publications), and its major intellectual and political concern was the assessment of the relevance of the state socialist experience for Western feminist theories and practice.

When I moved to Canada in 1975 to take up a full-time teaching job at Trent University, my second emigration did not involve a major displacement, since this time around there was no loss of language, and only a minimal loss of roots and culture. In the early 1980s, I embarked on a new Czechoslovakian study, focusing on the social and individual management of reproduction. Published in 1987, my second book, *Reproduction, Medicine and the Socialist State*, was once again inspired by Western feminist concerns and by my on-going association with Czechoslovakia. At that time I was very interested in the growing Western feminist literature on the medical management of childbirth and I decided to extend the Western-based research to Czechoslovakia. Immersion in Czech and Slovak data soon convinced me that the topic of medical management of childbirth is too limited and that it would be more fruitful to broaden my focus to the whole reproductive sequence, from coitus to post-partum.

As time went on, I felt more and more at home in Canada. I also found my visits to Czechoslovakia more and more depressing, both because of the political situation there and because I increasingly felt that I had nothing new to say about the situation of women in East Central Europe. I thus began to explore research options that would include Canada and also Britain. In order to meet the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada requirement that research grant applicants had to demonstrate links with previous research, I eventually came up with the idea of applying my research on socialist women's equality and pronatalism to the very different social, economic and political contexts of Canada, Britain, and Australia. The results of this research were published in Heitlinger (1993).

The timing of the geographic and political shift in my research focus was highly ironic. As I watched the unfolding of the Velvet Revolution on my TV screen in Canada, I was about to start writing a book which had nothing to do with East Central Europe! In the spring and summer of 1990, many of my acquaintances visited Prague, but I went to Australia! I did not visit postcommunist Prague until May 1991, although I have gone regularly every year since. While annual or even bi-annual research visits were quite sufficient during the communist period — things changed rather slowly then — this mode of operation is clearly unsuitable for the current situation of rapid social change. I have found my location in North America, and the fact that I do not want to leave my family for more than a month at a time, a real disadvantage. The only way I can now conduct meaningful Czech-based research is in collaboration with locally-based researchers.

Having spent most of my professional career in efforts to explain variety of women's issues in East Central Europe to Western feminist scholars and activists, I was hoping that, with the fall of communism, I would finally be able to transmit something back from Canada and the U.K. to my country of origin. As a Czech-speaking feminist émigré scholar, I was looking forward to ex-

plaining to interested Czech women (and men) the scope and concerns of various Western feminisms. However, my personal experience as a young Czech émigré in the U.K., who in the early 1970s eagerly identified with the goals and political style of WLM, 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 now more Canadian than Czech. My knowledge of local culture has aged, since my memories, life-style, political concerns, and cultural and ethical values are very different from those of most Czech women and men.

My attempts to comprehend the negative Czech reaction to Western feminism eventually led me to the analytic notions of 'framing', 'frame resonance' and 'frame alignment'. I found that Western and Czech women are approaching a shared problem (of women's inequality) with frames based on very different life experiences, socio-economic contexts and ideologies. The world view of Czech women is informed by the social legacy of communism, and as such it currently lies outside the descriptive and theoretical frameworks of Anglo-American feminism (Heitlinger 1996). As an émigré feminist, I also had to confront the issues of 'voice-appropriation' and 'representation'.

I first encountered these issues in August 1978 at the Ninth World Congress of Sociology in Uppsala, Sweden, where I presented a paper entitled "The Women's Movement in State-Socialist Czechoslovakia". During the question period, the male head of the Czechoslovak delegation suggested that only Czechoslovak-based (and communist party-state sanctioned) sociologists could legitimately speak at international congresses about the lives of Czechoslovak women. He stated the following: "We have heard some strange things about Czechoslovakia, *a country we know, because we live there.*" The Czech sociologist then invited the audience (consisting mainly of Western feminist scholars) to visit Czechoslovakia to see for themselves "our beautiful girls". Not comprehending why he was booed and hissed for this remark, and assuming that the audience did not believe him, the Czech gentleman then made a complete fool of himself by repeating that "Czechoslovak girls are truly beautiful", without addressing any of the issues raised in my paper. More than a decade later, the events of 1989 finally ended the communist insistence that only 'home grown', party-sanctioned researchers could produce legitimate accounts about the lives of women in the region.

Regional and national feminisms are constrained and regulated by international mechanisms. For example, U.N. documents on the advancement of status of women disallow all issues which do not fit their criteria, and in this way dictate the kinds of categories which local women's movements and government policies must measure themselves by (Heitlinger and Manicom 1996). However, international standard-setting activities should be also seen in a positive light. International instruments could be helpful in creating alternative political spaces for local feminists, and in legitimating certain types of public protests, advocacy and lobbying. By using the U.N. instruments as standards by which to evaluate governmental actions and policies, women's

groups are engaging in legitimate democratic activity to hold their national government accountable.

Equally powerful in the regulation of national feminisms are the conditions imposed by funding agencies. The practices of funding agencies can be also seen in both a positive and a negative light. On the one hand, they might impose some inappropriate criteria and agendas, but on the other, they might create valuable alternative political spaces which otherwise would not exist. Thus the Prague Gender Studies Centre owes its existence not only to its founder, Jiřina Šiklová, but also to the financial assistance from the U.S.-based Network of East-West Women and the German feminist foundation Frauen-Anstiftung.

Conclusion

Émigré perspectives on, and participation in, local and global feminist movements are phenomena which have so far received little attention in scholarly analyses. My critical biographical self-reflection suggests that the role of émigré feminists in the transnational flow of feminist discourses and practices requires further substantive investigation and analysis.

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