

Workshop report

Feminisms in Europe – East and West

Astrid Hedin

The recent transitions to democracy in Central and Eastern Europe entailed simultaneous transitions in gender relations. And the continuing consolidation of new political patterns involves flux and stabilization of new gender systems. How can we analyse these changes? The ambition of the workshop *Feminisms in Europe – East and West* was to address the challenge posed to (Western) feminist theorizing by the democratizations of the European former Communist countries. The workshop brought together feminist researchers from East and West who, speaking from different experiences and contexts, have interesting differences in perspectives.

Masculinist transitions?

The myth of state socialist emancipation is long since peacefully laid to rest in the archives on Communist party propaganda. But Western feminist research has generally concluded a masculinist character of post-Communist transitions. The rapid democratizations and introductions of market economy seem to have given East and Central Europe unegalitarian forms of both: feminization of poverty and male dominated parliaments, coupled with a perhaps puzzling 'allergy' to feminisms. Adding the perspectives of East and Central European scholars generally makes the picture more complex. Key concepts that could characterize the workshop papers were differentiation and de facto feminism.

Across the countries of the former east bloc, differences in gender relations are very large, and within countries show contradictory tendencies, depending on the frame of analysis and perspective of the researcher. For example, the state parliaments of former East Germany presently contain on average 30 percent women, which is above the level of the federal German parliament. In contrast, only 19 of 200 Czech parliamentarians are women. Of the many Czech women's organizations created after democratization, few regard themselves to be political and most are sceptical of Western feminisms. As Jacqui True notes in her following article, these organizations are geared to solving professional, humanitarian, ecological and motherhood problems in every-day life.

'de facto feminism'

Reading these organisations as de facto political and de facto feminist, as True proposes, goes against not only Western feminist tendencies to view East

European women as conservative and victimized. It also expands the often narrow focus of research on democratic transitions on free elections and system stability. Deepening the definition of democracy, Czech women's organizing for self-management can in itself be seen as democratization. Furthermore, a vital civil society is precisely what the new democracies in East and Central Europe have been observed to lack. For the long-term quality of parliamentary politics, a democratic civil society can contribute to the formation and aggregation of interests, as well as to the development of democratic skills and other potentials for larger organizations and, as True observes, for possible future social movements. How would broadening the concept of political participation change the general picture of East and Central European women's engagement in politics?

Democratizing under globalization

Shifting the context of analysis, Czech women's organizing can be seen to be addressing issues that arise from the gendered impact of globalization, Jacqui True argues. Commonly, globalization is implied to mean the globalization of the economy, entailing the spread of certain (neo-liberal) state economic policies. The transitions to democracy are being ensued not by transitions into market economy, following the steps of early Western democracies, but into a global market economy. Under these conditions, the state is not necessarily the only optimal focus of feminist political efforts.

Globalization is also the transfer of political learning: of methods of political change, knowledge of the existence of alternatives and encouragement because of success elsewhere. When the grip of the Soviet Union loosened over the East Bloc countries, the international flow of information gave the impetus for pro-democracy actors to take their chances and launch democratic upheavals in country after country.

Feminist perspectives

One aspect of globalization is the intensified transnational diffusion of feminist political and academic discourses. But the diffusion of feminisms is part of the general pattern of globalization and, as Alena Heitlinger's text highlights, has not steered free of its inequalities. Using her own fascinating emigré biography, Heitlinger discusses the possibilities and limits of East, West and emigré scholars to do research and reach acknowledgement for their perspectives. She assesses the possibilities of emigré feminists to embody the 'migratory' or 'multiple' subject advocated by post-modernist theorists such as Christine Sylvester, and to act as interpreters between East and West.

Globalizing in Lund

Holding the conference at Lund University was a concrete experience of integrating east-west feminist research, with the ambition of enacting dialogues. The thirteen participants of the workshop "Feminisms in Europe" came from or lived in Poland, Lithuania, Belorussia, Germany (East), the USA, Canada, Finland and Sweden, divided evenly between former east bloc countries and

Western countries. The workshop's 12 papers could be sorted in under the broad themes: political transitions and civil society; globalization and 'modernization'; the social status of women after transitions; and state policy, work, family and time.

The sessions turned out to be an experience not only of an east-west dialogue, but almost more of an east-east exchange. Notably, most of the participants from Western countries had spent considerable time in their country of research or were, as Alena Heitlinger, migrants, which probably facilitated mutual understanding. The workshop facilitator, professor Myra Marx Ferree from Connecticut University, USA, started up the sessions by asking us to reflect on our own east-west position: to whom are we explaining what?

During the two days of paper-discussions, many of the participants found a common interest in doing more comparative work on former east bloc countries, with research agendas set for a home-country audience. Some of the participants decided to continue as a group and meet in Warsaw to focus around issues of family. In a later report on the workshop, one of the East German participants, who had interviewed women from the former GDR opposition movement, wrote that the workshop sessions had been an "unusual and productive" opportunity for her to articulate detailed analyses in discussions, without being immediately interrupted by Western models of explanation.

Differentiating 'Eastern Europe'

In applying Western theory to present developments, it is easy to slip into regarding current post-Communist politics simply as some deep-frozen and thawed earlier stage of the development of Western societies. With its lively discussions of the importance of perspective, context and standpoint, feminist research has good possibilities to be forerunners in acknowledging diversity of experience and interpretation in research on democratic transitions and consolidations.