

# **Between Theoretical Models and Self-Reflection: On Teaching and Researching Feminist Theorizing in Bratislava.**

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## **Introduction**

The professional theorizing and concept of women studies (or gender studies) was introduced to the intellectual and cultural spheres of former Czechoslovakia at the beginning of the 1990s. As we had no direct experience with feminism as a political movement, the main reason to introduce women studies in our country was our need to reflect upon and articulate those experiences which we had during the times of socialist practice of emancipation in our country. This reflection is also important as a starting point for understanding our situation nowadays and for shaping new routes for gender equality in the future. The absence historically of a true feminist movement in Slovakia greatly influenced the way in which introducing and later on establishing women studies at Comenius University took place. The close relationship between the political and theoretical activities, typical for early Western feminism, was not existing in our country at all.

## **Teaching feminist theorizing at Comenius University**

From the outset, the main intention behind our efforts was to acquire knowledge about Western feminist thinking, its basic theories, conceptions and arguments and to present these theories to our students. In this process, the need to reflect upon our life experiences was born. We needed some conceptual apparatus for this self-reflection, so we tried to use certain Western theoretical models as tools to interpret and explain our own experiences as well as to reflect upon our current situation. When organizing these courses we had mainly two aims: a) that the students would gain a basic knowledge about some of the most important feminist conceptions elaborated abroad; b) to encourage students to reflect upon our own experiences during socialism, with the concept of emancipation. Both of these tasks are, according to us, very important and we try to join our forces to fulfill them. Though we have not established a Women Studies Department at our University, developing these courses have been successful, both in terms of their thematical content and judging from the level of interest from the students. While in the beginning we worked in small

groups of 5-6 students at our department, focusing on some introductory themes, today we teach two-term courses for the entire student body of the university. They are attended by 20-25 students, women and men, from various disciplines. Besides this, there is also a variety of minor courses as non-compulsory, "electives," on subjects concerning particular questions or important concepts. For example, feminist epistemology and feminist ethics.

However, in hindsight we realize that the establishment and development of women studies as a "normal" and equally important subject at the University will take much longer than expected. No doubt, bringing in gender issues as a natural part of the political agenda will also be a much longer process.

### **Feminist Initiatives to Organize Women**

When we, in the academic year of 1990/91, began teaching feminist theory at the Faculty of the Arts at Comenius University, it was with a special focus on feminist philosophy. At the same time, feminist thinking was introduced into various other academic areas and topics. As part of this, we were involved in organizing several conferences and seminars and we also participated in a number of workshops concerning women's issues organized by different organizations in former Czecho-Slovakia. In connection to this, we would like to stress the fact that apart from the theoretical/intellectual problems that we have to face, we also always have to deal with quite difficult material shortages. Especially in terms of lacking books and journals, current and "the classics" alike! Not to mention having hardly any technical teaching aids, which in the West would be considered "standard" in most classrooms.

Nevertheless, we are also seeing hopeful lights on the horizon lately. Despite the lack of tradition of feminist thinking in our country, there have been several initiatives to promote women's issues. For example, in 1993 a Women's Association called *Aspekt* (an NGO) was founded. This association set out from the start to publish the first Slovak-Czech feminist journal, with the same name, *Aspekt*: *Aspekt* was put together by a group consisting of both Slovak and Czech women who cooperated with several feminists from abroad. The Alliance of Women of Slovakia was founded as a network of women from all over Slovakia. Its aim is to analyze the current state of women in Slovakia, to identify their problems and to propose strategies and solutions. Another initiative arising in 1993, was in the field of women's literary activities. The initiative came from among women writers who formed a support network called the Club of Women Writers of Slovakia. It promotes women's literature and reflects the need of many writing women to discuss literary problems and life experiences.

### **Current feminist research in Slovakia**

Since the feminist research has no traditions on its own and lacks a specific methodological apparatus, in our teaching we have decided to pay attention to philosophical/theoretical issues. To us it is of great importance that we, feminist researchers of Slovakia, start to theorize around these issues by relating

them with empirical feminist research. Our aim is to develop some methodological basis for conducting and summarizing their results. However, an obstacle to empirical research is not only a limited number of capable and interested researchers in the field. But also there is lack of solidarity between women, and, by extension, a lack of cooperation among women's organizations and clubs. Organized women are often times more interested in the political programs of their respective parties than in women's issues. Consequently they usually act more as members/sympathizers of their respective political party than as representatives of a particular women's group. This fact was acknowledged by several sociological researchers (for example O. Plavkova in cooperation with the University of Glasgow, as well as the organization IREX). In our teaching, we use these empirical findings as a basis and a point of departure for theoretical analyses and for our self-reflection. Although empirical research is very important as a basis for feminist theorizing, it cannot be sufficient for the development of a feminist consciousness and for implanting this to wider fields of thinking and acting.

The introduction of feminist thinking to our country was not, and still is not, easy. The problem is to find an adequate expression of how to explain the meaning and role of feminism in an academic, as well as in a wider cultural, context. The main reason is the lack of feminist tradition in our country; and, in comparison with Western countries, different social, historical, political and cultural conditions. It seems to us that because of the above mentioned differences, the content, goals, strategies and methods of women studies at Western and East/Central European universities are different. Western feminists were engaged more deeply in elaborating the theoretical issues and categories arising from practical needs. We, feminists in post-socialist Eastern Europe, have more practical experiences with realized emancipation which, in a certain sense, failed. What we urgently need is to elaborate on a contextually adequate conceptual and methodological apparatus. Furthermore, this is needed in order to analyze our practical experiences. In other words, it seems that the experiences of a socialist social order require another set of specific categories which will deal with these differences and not mask our specific historical experiences as women in former East bloc countries.

### **The future of feminist theorizing in Slovakia**

Because of our long isolation from Western feminism as well as our specific experiences, the task of developing a feminist theorizing which rises out of our context is difficult indeed. Despite the fact that various scientific branches begin to reflect women's issues or gender differentiated perspectives in their subject area (e.g. sociology and psychology) it seems that the old reluctance to deal with these questions is still alive. However, the situation in the public arena is even more complex. The term "feminism" still has a pejorative connotation. To many people feminism sounds like something strange or unimportant and marginal. Differences between attitudes of men and women to-

wards feminism in our days in Slovakia are shown in research made by Z. Butorova et al.

Until recently, the feminist way of thinking played no role in the consciousness of the scientific communities. On the other hand, there has always been the research, within the social sciences, with a focus on women and the family. The significant point is that this research did not analyze its findings from a feminist perspective. Even today, six years after the revolution when many efforts to introduce and establish feminist theorizing were done, there is still a lack of feminist perspectives. In some of this particular empirical research *gender differentiation* is taken to mean that gender differences are something "given" or "natural." Therefore their cultural and sociopolitical character remains hidden and unreflected. But there are also quite a few women intellectuals and researchers who never express, and probably don't feel any need for, a gender-differentiated thinking. These intellectuals are inclined to accept a so called "gender-neutral" perspective, identifying themselves with the traditional and stereotypical gender roles which are imposed on us all by social conventions.

To conclude, in Slovakia we are really at the starting point of developing feminist research. There are nevertheless also encouraging signs on the horizon. As we see it, something has started. A process of a rising feminist consciousness has begun. No doubt, this will eventually lead to the development of greater sensibility to gender issues and gender differentiation in our country.

## References

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