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Travelling Concepts of Feminist Scholarship: The East/West Divide

Sarolta Marinovich Resch is widely regarded for her scholarly work in the history and criticism of British and American literature. She is distinguished for her efforts to advocate feminist literary criticism and scholarship within the study of literature in Hungary. As an integral part of academic efforts, she delved into the exploration of Hungarian realities as a feminist scholar and published, with Susan S. Arpad, a seminal paper on the history and current state of a women's or feminist movements in post-socialist Hungary. It is a study that also analyzed the potentials and challenges for such a movement.

Their article, "Why Hasn't There Been a Strong Women's Movement in Hungary?", was published in 1995 in *The Journal of Popular Culture*. The investigations focused on the paradox of the absence of a powerful women's movement in Hungary after the regime change amid the gradual deterioration of women's rights and status in the late and post-socialist periods. Marinovich Resch and Arpad mapped the history of the public struggles in Hungary that had been waged to gain women equal rights and status. As part of that, they elucidated the intricate interplay between social, political and economic factors inherited from the socialist period that somewhat delineated the – quite limited – prospects for the emergence of a women's movement. They performed an extensive fieldwork to collect women's life narratives for their investigative efforts. This fieldwork originally started as a seminar in the English Studies program. Many of us participated in it as students or colleagues at the time. It was in fact the very first gender studies course in the history of the program. Their course expanded the traditional limits of both academic discipline and method.

In their analysis of contemporary realities, the authors also subverted the conventional bipolarity of the West/East divide. Marinovich Resch and Arpad argued for a relational logic that has shaped Western feminist presence and influence in Hungary. Their very collaboration itself counts as a successful instance of overcoming this divide within academia, contributing to more complex, insightful and reflective understandings and

assessments of social realities. This is the point we would like to take up and explore further now, some 15 years later.

In our talk we want to explore what happens when the boundary of 'East' and 'West' Europe is imagined to be open for mutual crossings in feminist scholarship in post-1989 Europe. In the wake of the fall of the Berlin wall the dominant discourse of the scholarly encounters in East (Central) Europe is articulated from a critical position. The dominant Eastern voice is critical of the unequal terms of interaction between the intellectual spaces of East and West. This critical, or resentful "Eastern" feminist scholarship protests against the perceived "Western" hegemony *in the name of 'authenticity'*.

We argue that emphasizing the difference of the Eastern social and cultural space in the name of authenticity is a counter-productive strategy. Even if against their intention, the logic informing the Eastern feminists' critique re-inscribes the very binary distinction of West/East they single out as working against them. To argue that the Central-Eastern European social and cultural practices, including gender relations of power, should be by definition different to the degree that it is only the 'locals' who could grasp it "properly" conveniently conflates position and standpoint, this way foreclosing any relative autonomy of signification. Experiencing is seen as coextensive with knowing, precluding any possibility of shared knowledge or dialogue. The possibility of change and transnational feminist activity (scholarly or otherwise) is an unimaginable encounter. Such arguments fail to see, on the one hand, that there have been productive crossings before 1989, which in itself blurs the sharp temporal diving line. On the other, they do not allow for the possibility that the flows of intellectual exchanges, including feminist thoughts, are not inherently unidirectional but two-way and they are not straightforward but uneven. The unidirectional differentiation, ironically, is too much of the pre-Berlin wall official ideology. Consequently, it is more productive for feminist scholars on the Eastern side of the imaginary Berlin wall to challenge the ideology of the 'two separate spaces or spheres'. As a result, we can assume that the interactions already existed before 1989 or may result in productive collaborations on equal footing. A non-binary, dynamic approach in conceptualizing the East/West distinction is even more important in the heavily antifeminist Hungarian context of post-1989 where the various official representations of feminism - albeit for different reasons - would like to conflate feminist thinking with the pre-1989 state socialist regime's policies of emancipation in the name of the so-called 'woman question'. They would happily stigmatize any appeal to feminism as politically retrograde nostalgia for communism.

At the same time, a dynamic approach to categorization could also effectively undermine the two major Western discourses in response to the end of the Cold War that Katalin Fábian identifies as the voice of “capitalist Missionaries” and „[those who idealize the East” (2002:271). The missionaries contend that women in the East would be much worse off than their male counterpart and, indirectly, that “Eastern women” are worse off than women in the West. Consequently, the western missionaries should come to their ‘rescue’. The other position idealizes the East. ‘the West seeks for its lost origins in Eastern Europe, its lost original experience of “democratic invention”. The two positions, in spite of their differential logic of argumentation, mutually result in entrenching the myth of the two spheres. However, the increased international contacts of Hungarian women’s groups and feminist scholars, such as Marinovich and Arpad’s scholarly collaborations, do not support such a binary separation between the East and West. The very existence of their work proves the point made by O’Brien et al argument (2000) about the intense globalization of politics and growing cooperation among groups of civil society – including feminist scholars’ networking as well.

We argue for the liminality of the differentiation of the East/West nexus. It is a much more productive position because that position acknowledges the existence of productive flows from within the East to the West *before* 1989. Once aware of this turn of the flow, we have no reason to be always already anxious about the “colonializing” West. There have been productive moments of agency in the past. To remember that past should help to rebuild our self-confidence now. As Susan Gal (2003) points out when discussing the intertextual aspects of translating, the impermeability of the two blocks is, ironically, the legacy of the so-called communist past. The East and the West were not necessarily hermetically sealed before 1989. Gal traces down how ideas travel in multiple directions and not simply from the so-called Western core or centre to the Eastern periphery. She looks at, for instance, which feminist discourses were translated from US authors into Hungarian in the 1990s. She finds that the choices and the favorable reception of the scholarly works can be explained in terms of a previous, counter-flow of ideas in the “original” English text that may find its intertextual connections more easily once travelling back to its previous location. In one example, Gal discusses the translation of a series of feminist essays in the late 1990s that engage in counterarguments to economic rational choice theory that is the corner stone of the new political regime in the 1990s. She contends that these feminist essays were better received by Hungarian feminist scholars in part because many of them employed arguments that developed in the United States out of economic theories that

“originally” came from pre World War 2 Central European authors (Gal 2003, 107).

We all should embrace these multidirectional intellectual flows for their potential to promote self-confident and positive scholarly action – and that way continue Sarolta Marinovich’s successful and liberating intellectual journey.



HUSSE 9th biannual conference at the University of Pécs, January 24, 2009. TNT members (left to right): Anna Kérchy, Erzsébet Barát, Éva Federmayer, Irén Annus and Sarolta Marinovich.

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