

Feminism and Civil Society¹

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When the end of state socialism in 1989 provided the opportunity for increased contact between women of Eastern Europe, Western Europe and the United States, the result was a profound surprise and dismay by all participants at the expectations voiced from the "other side(s)."² As a participant in some of these interactions, I can report that Eastern European women often saw Western feminists as proselytizers: messi-

anic, implicitly universalizing, and thus imperialistic. On the other hand, Eastern European women were often seen by Western feminists as disappointingly undeveloped politically; backward and ignorant in their rejection of Western feminism, and sometimes simply apolitical (see also Funk and Mueller 1993). The disappointment was made particularly sharp by the widespread expectation, in the West, that once the establishment of civil society gave women the liberty and opportunity to organize on their own behalf, feminist movements would easily and "naturally" emerge, given the obvious and much recognized wage-differentials and other economic disadvantages of women vis-a-vis men in Eastern Europe.

Significantly, scholarly commentary has moved beyond simply noting the genuine difficulty of dialogue. As I argue below, a salutary result is a renewed questioning of the concept of "civil society" in Eastern Europe, indeed an awareness of the need to rethink it in gendered terms. A further important effect is the growing understanding, paralleling other work on non-Western feminisms, that feminism is not some automatic reflex of gender identity, nor simply an outgrowth of women's opportunity to organize in response to economic and political oppression. Indeed, we cannot assume that "woman" denotes an unproblematic, self-evident, *political* category, or that such a political category is stable across social formations. It has become clear that feminism itself refers to forms of political activism that emerge in specific historical conjunctures, and, like other political movements, bear the mark of their particular cultural and historical contexts.³

Thus, the difficulties of communication between Eastern European women and American or Western European feminists raise important theoretical issues about the nature of political communication. They also point up a painful irony. Just when American fem-

¹ Excerpt from a chapter to be published in Scott and Kaplan (1996).

² Although such regional contrasts are often reduced to "East vs. West," it is important to remember that there are multiple centers involved, and a range of feminisms within each region.

³ The sociopolitical "embeddedness" of feminism is cogently argued by diLeonardo (1991). Whether or not feminism is a Western export, what definitions of it are legitimate, and for whom, are questions raised recently by non-Western feminist movements, as well as non-white women's movements in the United States (see, for instance, Jayawarda 1986, Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991). For a discussion of the constructedness of categories such as "woman," and the implications of this for feminist activism, see among many others Butler (1992).

inism is engaged in extensive self-examination concerning its understanding of diverse feminisms and culturally different women's movements across the globe, it still seems hard to recognize and respect the specific stands of Eastern European women when they say they are *not* feminists, or not in the ways that Americans expect. There seems to be a kind of reverse racism operating. Many American feminists who are particularly interested in Eastern Europe are the daughters and granddaughters of European migrants. More broadly, as a result of immigration patterns to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many white Americans, even social scientists, tend to think of Eastern European women as "like us." Indeed, in the familiar trope that renders the past another country, they are implicitly seen as "our grandmothers," and thus part of an imaginary genealogy of European feminism, even if temporarily dislocated.⁴ Perhaps this is, in part, what makes it more difficult to credit their difference than to acknowledge the stances of women whose cultures and genealogies are routinely viewed (by Americans) as more racially different, more distant, and more exotic.

But this only contributes to the urgency of understanding why, at the very moment when the introduction of civil society supposedly made voluntary organizations, interest groups, lobbies of every kind possible in Eastern Europe, feminism has largely remained a dirty word in the region, even an object of ridicule. Before looking more closely at several lines of explanation for this phenomenon, it is important to note that this is not a general political apathy or lack of social and political consciousness on the part of women in the region. An ethnographic example will illustrate my point.

In the town in southern Hungary where I have been conducting fieldwork since 1987, three women ran for office in the first multi-party local election in 1990, along with 20 men. All three women were elected, in a town council of 10. The women, like the men, were already among the moral leaders of the community: a bank vice-president, an accountant, a language teacher. Like the men who were elected, each of the women represented a form of expertise, but note that in no case was this the stereotyped feminine expertise of nurturing found in professions such as nursing or early education.

One of the first acts of the local government, now working with a very limited budget, was to close the town's daycare center. There were very few children in it, most mothers were home on maternity leave anyway, and the center was expensive to maintain. Although the women elected to the local government did not oppose this move, the five women working in the daycare center did. They organized and marched into a meeting of the town council, arguing vociferously: they had heard that a foreign entrepreneur was being lured to this small town and would establish a biscuit factory there. Indeed, they had heard that the town council was considering renting the daycare's building to the new entrepreneur. The women proposed that in exchange for their government-funded daycare jobs, they be guaranteed jobs in this new factory.

The five women got what they demanded, but the sad end of the story was that the entrepreneur could not make a quick profit, and a few months later closed shop and left town. My point is not the outcome, however, but the organizing itself. Notice that the women acted *politically*, and in concert with free-market changes in which they wanted their share. They justified their demands, however, in terms of *socialist* as well as *gen-*

⁴ Thanks to Cora Kaplan for this phrasing.

dered values. On the one hand, they felt they had a right to work and so the provision by the government of a replacement job was seen as part of their entitlement and, on the other, this particular solution would allow them to keep working close to home, for the sake of their own children. These women, along with the ones elected to the local government, are part of a much larger pattern in Hungary of women active in newly formed local governments. Indeed, women often represent over 50% of non-elected, part-time members of local policy commissions. More significantly, a comparison of per capita social spending of local governments since 1990 shows significantly higher spending on childcare, day care, homes for elderly and other social support services in that minority of localities where women are a majority on the decision making body (Szalai 1995).

This kind of evidence suggests that we should look for other explanations of Eastern European women's current neglect of various forms of Western feminism than a general lack of interest in public action, or in social issues more generally. Recent scholarly literature points to two kinds of factors.

First, because the gender regime of state socialism was differently configured than that of various parliamentary (welfare) states, women in "East" and "West" experienced the difficulties of their lives in distinct ways. As several astute analyses of the German case have argued, while both East German and West German women before 1989 developed grass roots feminist movements, these created quite different diagnoses about the sources of women's oppression (see Ferree 1995, Rosenberg 1991). First, East German women's already deep involvement in the labor force prevented them from seeing wage work as the solution to gender inequality that it was taken to be in the West. Rather, they analyzed their problem as the extensive intrusion of the state into their lives and bodies, and as a usurpation by the state of men's role in families. The paternalist state of state-socialism provided benefits such as generous maternity leaves for women, but also infantilized the entire population, taking over the "paternal role" of men directly through support of children and the socialization of some household functions.

In contrast, the gender regimes of parliamentary welfare states more standardly work by delegating power over women to individual men in families. These states support the relative power of men by indirect involvement in families through tax law, property and family law, and in allowing or encouraging the different bargaining power of men and women in labor markets among other means. In these kinds of systems, women experience gender inequality as arising from the actions of individual men, from whom they want to gain independence, autonomy, and non-interference. Indeed, women often turn to the state as individuals who have claims to rights, thereby seeking legislative and other help in gaining leverage against individual men. The juxtaposition of the two German cases provides a particularly clear example of the way in which feminisms are political movements that are perforce embedded in the particular gender regime and historical moment from which they emerge.

Despite the lack of any large, popular feminist movement in Hungary,⁵ my ethnographic work in urban and rural contexts reveals that the everyday analysis women de-

⁵ Note that there are several, and increasingly more, small but important women's organizations in the capital. For instance, one of entrepreneurial women, another of university women, another that mobilized around the abortion issue. A small circulation journal is now in operation, as well as a hotline. In addition, there is at least one organization of nationalist right wing women.

veloped about their own problems during and immediately after state-socialism took just the form one would predict: it neatly matched that of East German feminists, while contrasting with that of West German feminists. This became clear in conversations around the abortion issue, when the lenient law of the socialist period was challenged in the 1990s, and a more restrictive one proposed in Parliament.

Hungarian women were appalled that restriction of abortion ever became a political issue because they had come to see relatively liberal abortion regulation as an entitlement. Given the dearth of alternative contraceptive techniques, most saw it as a necessity in planning their lives, and in doing right by those children they did have. But, unlike supporters of legal abortion in the United States, for instance, they did not see this as a matter of women's privacy, control over their own bodies, or independence. Far from wanting sexual or social autonomy for such a decision, Hungarian women wanted men to be more involved in decisions to abort. Indeed, in public opinion polls, large percentages of women were willing to support the idea that men of the family must be legally obligated to participate. What they strongly rejected, on the other hand, was the state's involvement in abortion decisions. One woman voiced to me the opinion of many: "If the state makes me have the baby, the state ought to pay for its upbringing." Another said: "Who is going to provide the extra seat at the kitchen table for this extra child?" Both statements implied that since the post-socialist state was not about to take economic responsibility for children, it should stay out of the decision to abort (Gal 1994).

These analyses help to explain why East and West German feminists famously clashed over a variety of issues, although in some sense both sides believed that the "personal is political." Similarly, if American abortion rights activists were to sit down to discuss abortion with some among the vast majority of Hungarian women, their understandings of the issues would surely differ fundamentally, even though, on the face of it, they share the same goal: safe, cheap, and easily accessible abortions for women who want them. More generally, it is important to remember that the meaning of key terms such as "private," "public," "rights," and "needs" are hardly self-evident, stable or transparent; debate about their meaning makes politics (Fraser 1990). Any conversation about them that crosses the boundaries of states, political economies, and gender regimes is a productive, active, process of intertextuality that itself can promote or prevent mobilization or cooperation. This is because communication across such boundaries always depends on decontextualization of political terms and issues – tearing them out of one political situation – and their recontextualization or reinsertion elsewhere, into often quite differently constructed discourses. This recontextualization changes the meanings of arguments. It is a quite general semiotic process to which feminism is no exception (see Briggs and Bauman 1992). Thus, by focussing on the historically embedded way in which political issues are framed and understood, these examples provide insight into the structural sources of misunderstanding.

But the cases I have discussed so far do not address the question of why feminism as a social movement (with varying issues and arguments) is currently rejected in so many countries of Eastern Europe. For this, it is important to analyze the notion of "civil society" in gendered terms. Contrary to the popular, reigning theory, civil society in Eastern Europe is not a neutral space vacated by the state in which any kind of organization can flourish. Rather, I suggest we understand "civil society" not simply as a set of organizations or even a space for organizations, but as the ideological construction of

boundaries between the economic and political "public" on the one hand, and the domestic "private" on the other. And these categories are far from new in Eastern Europe. Indeed, during state socialism the social field between family and state was organized by an array of discourses and practices focused on shifting definitions of the "natural" in gender relations. Public and private were themselves linked to this "nature." In many countries of the region, an official discourse stressing the homogeneity and equality of all workers, regardless of gender, coexisted uneasily with another discourse that, though unofficial, was nevertheless supported by the state. The unofficial but sanctioned discourse stressed naturalized sexual difference and blamed "selfish," "overly competitive" women for the ills of men and children, and for the failings of the socialist economy (see Ferge 1987, for an example of such unofficial discourse in Hungary: Gáspár and Várkonyi 1985). Ironically, gender difference was also part of an oppositional argument against communism that looked back nostalgically to the bourgeois nuclear family as the ideal of "natural" gender relations. This oppositional analysis decried social homogeneity, charging that communism was illegitimate in part because it violated laws of nature that were more fundamental than those of any society. It was in such a complex and shifting discursive field – hardly an empty space – that the political changes of 1989 were embedded. Newly emerging political parties and movements built on and engaged these existing formulations, in order to create "the political."

It follows from this understanding of civil society that what can be legitimately political depends not only on people's perceptions of inequality, nor on the wherewithal to organize, important though these are. It depends as well on what identities and activities can count as part of the "public" in various historical versions of civil society. And, at the moment, all colors of political activity in Eastern Europe – the national, the neo-liberal, and the neo-socialist – implicitly or explicitly support a naturalized gender order in which, by various convergent logics, men are public figures and women, as a social category, are depoliticized.

In the current configuration, no political subjectivity for women is readily available that is neither the homogenized worker-with-reproductive-responsibilities of the state-socialist era, nor the privatized, sexualized, naturalized, and thus unpolitical, woman of nationalist discourse and neo-liberal civil society. In other words, as Watson (1996) shrewdly points out that in Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe today there is "an absence of a specifically political dimension to women's social identity as women." The descriptions, by Czech scholars such as Hanna Havelkova, of public issues in the Czech Republic provide important corroboration and expansion of this point. For women as well as men, social problems such as increased prostitution and violence against women, which would perhaps be framed as "women's issues" in Western Europe and the United States, are understood in gender-neutral terms as problems of increased border traffic, and as the disorder unhappily but inevitably produced by rapid economic changes. Women in the post-socialist societies feel a sense of equality with men *as workers* that they retain from the official ideology of state socialism. Relying on this, and being as eager as anyone else to be part of a capitalist democracy, women too want to think of themselves not as some special category of person but primarily as "individuals" and equal "citizens" of a new society. Thus, what has not been discursively constructed, at least for the moment, is the political category of "woman" seen not as a worker-recipient of communist entitlements, nor as the naturalized, sexualized private being of civil society, nor as

the sacred and inert mother of nationhood, but as an independent subject whose interests and issues can be publicly defined and debated.

The case of Eastern Europe provides striking illustration for a number of general propositions. Far from being an essential and ahistorical reflex of women's identity or of gender inequality, feminism is a social movement marked by the particular historical contexts in which it emerges. Although feminism clearly varies in content (hence the necessity of using the plural: feminisms), it is always predicated on a specifically political identity for women that must be discursively constructed. As feminist political theorists in the West have argued, this construction of political identity for women itself depends on challenging neoclassical notions of civil society (e.g. Pateman 1988, Bloch and Bloch 1980). In particular, it requires the questioning of assumptions about the linkage of maleness with the public, femaleness with the private; about the coding of the public as political and politics as a masculine endeavor. When analyzed from the perspective of this strand of feminist theory, then, civil society in the West is hardly a neutral space in which women can organize. Nor has it been so in Eastern Europe. Even before the withdrawal of the state, there were myriad informal organizations and a discourse about persistent natural sexual difference that, intertwined and counterposed to the official line asserting homogenization, organized gender relations in socialism. The optimistic expectation that civil society would provide a neutral social space in Eastern Europe was made possible not only by omitting feminist critiques from the discussion of civil society, but by ignoring how this quite active, but unofficial, set of ideas and practices around sex, "nature," and the "public/private" distinction which had enabled and legitimated state-socialism could have new political effects in a changed political economy.

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