

On the Road: Smuggling Feminism Across the Post-Iron Curtain

Jiřina Smejkalová

“What is your passport good for, they asked me. What else, I wondered, but for passing the border. . .”, one of my British friends said to me in describing his chat with a group of Bulgarian students at an international seminar. The question sounded less strange to him after he realized that not all passports are equal. For many people, including his Bulgarian fellows, one type of passport allows entrance to one space but blocks it to another. The reason these passports exist is to control people’s movements and to stigmatize the passport holders: they must either stay where they are or be smuggled through alternative pathways to the desired, but not officially designated, place.

Not only persons are issued passports, however. So are theories and ideas. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the case of “feminism,” which simply got the wrong passport for its journey to the public and intellectual context behind the post-iron curtain. Paradoxically, what traveled without major trouble and “colonized” both public and professional post-89 discourses was not “*Western feminism*” but *anti-feminism*. At the same time, many of the *feminisms* were waiting in a long queue (to be fair, they were not lonely but in company with many other theories) on the border for the right passports. The more active ones had to find smugglers willing to take a risk.

Movement of both subjects and objects is not a particularly new theme in the history of ideas about culture and society. One attempt to contemplate the movement of *ideas* is nearly canonical: Edward Said’s essay “Traveling Theory” (Said 1983). “Like people and schools of criticism,” Said points out, “ideas and theories travel, . . . the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity” (Said 1983: 226). I would argue that it is not always so. Indeed, Said himself, in his discussion of traveling theory, emphasizes that “[S]uch movement into a new environment is never unimpeded. It necessarily involves process of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin” (Said 1983: 226). However, the case of feminist theories in post-Cold-War Europe seems to offer a story which might be hard to understand in the frame of Said’s “discernible and recurrent pattern to the movement itself” (Said 1983: 226).

I would even go as far as to suggest that the metaphor of *traveling* might be misleading for understanding local feminist theoretical adventures. There are a number of reasons I find the metaphor inappropriate in this case. They are rooted not only in the very

history and character of modern feminism as such, but particularly in the specificity of intellectual and social practices in the Central and East European context.

To start with, let us try to follow the stages "common to the way any theory or idea travels" suggested by Said. As the first stage, he identifies the "point of origin, . . . , a set of initial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse." Secondly, this stage is followed by "a distance transversed, a passage through the pressure of various contexts as the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into a new prominence." Thirdly, Said points to the "conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances – which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration . . ." In the fourth stage the "accommodated idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place" (Said 1983: 221-227).

The troubles emerge immediately with the assumption of "origins" of the "theory" since one of the few points feminists agree upon is a profound disagreement over one single Theory, its roots, and moreover its single Godmother. The whole concept of "theory," as discussed by Said, presupposes Somebody's (such as Lukács or Goldman in his example) set of ideas, which after passing a certain distance is read/misread in the conditions of arrival. Said's scheme, however, does not seem to assume a space surrounded by borders. Such borders are erected in order to block certain ideas and its vehicles – be it persons or means of communication, such as books – from "traveling" in and out of that space. In such an environment both ideas and persons may be issued passports but, actually not all passports are good for crossing any border. Moreover, Said does not assume the context of an "economy of shortage" in which members of the local community have to control carefully the priority list of items to be smuggled in, and consequently to be accepted or resisted. Under these circumstances they may even have *no* intention, need or desire to put a particular idea/theory on the top of the list.

And yet, the issue of a starting point, of "a set of initial circumstances" raised by Said, is of special importance for any theoretical project, including the feminist one. In other words, where and how to locate arguments for smuggling a set of ideas equipped with the "wrong" passport? Shall we call for reinforcement of women's participation in an educational system where there is already a 50:50 portion of female and male students at all levels of higher education, and where the 'overfeminization' of schools, in positions of both teachers and students, has been often blamed for the decreasing quality of education as such? Shall we call for women's access to the working place in a country where almost 90% of working age women are fully employed? Shall we call for censorship of pornography in a country whose entire modern history is built upon an obsessive fight for freedom of expression? Could anyone who at least once opened a fashion journal issued in Prague in the 1970's filled with sex-less figures wrapped in color-less fabric mobilize seriously against abuse of women's body in the fashion industry and advertising? Shall we call for radical implementation of equality, gender or otherwise, in a community exhausted by ongoing waves of centrally controlled experimentation with constituting social sameness?

Those of us who in the late 1980's began to deal with issues of gender in the, both politically and theoretically, marginalized part of Europe paradoxically called "Central," were ready to take the risk for smuggling. We were willing to cope with our fellow-intellectuals' accusations of "ruining gender solidarity" in the historical period of run-

ning the "more important" project of de-totalization. At the same time, our intention was not to reproduce already quite powerful channels of hostility and phobia in the "post-revolutionary" community. Neither did we want to provoke or hurt the locally oversensitive "structures of feeling," to use Raymond Williams's term. To find a starting point for the project, which we even hesitated to call feminist, was rather difficult. For all the above mentioned accusations and hostilities created an umbrella effectively shadowing any serious attempt to uncover the complexity of gender-related humiliation in the context of socialist experimentations. We feared that due to this umbrella we might miss a chance to ask questions about the "old regimes" which would go beyond the realm of discussions about the planned economy and the Communist Party membership.

Whom to ask for help? Our "Western sisters," offspring of the "original," 1960's, radical street feminism? Actually, they significantly contributed to the process of issuing the wrong passport for feminism. Many of them rushed in with shining eyes in order to dismantle and articulate for us "patriarchal oppression" that we failed to see due to our underdeveloped gender consciousness. Their mission did not remain without achievements: they were able to make fascinating trips to the exotic, unknown parts of Europe, and to publish books on "Eastern Women" at a time when there was practically no competition in this field. Last but not least their enthusiastic public presentations helped our journalists and intellectuals to reinforce their visions of "feminism" as an aggressive ideology to be equated with bolshevism and even fascism.

We had to learn a lot about smuggling strategies while facing a border-wall built of many solid bricks, created from a mixture of a frozen 1960's feminism and of the local construction of horror-feminism generated by the most powerful Czech intellectuals returning from exile to their homeland. Their message was an honest warning about the dangers of the capitalist worlds embodied in, among other things, "feminism". On the top of this wall crawled barbed wire made of our own suspicions about the whole agenda, for we were not blind to its colonializing and simplifying potentials.

In trying to persuade my colleagues at the Charles University to open a seminar in gender theory, my argument was that it is time to acknowledge that in the course of last 30 years a concept called "gender," as a tool of social, cultural, and political analyses, has been developed. If we want to proudly present the "new" and "reconstructed" education through which we are to prepare our students to enter the new European intellectual context, we cannot hide this concept from them anymore. If we do, we will produce half-illiterate people unable to read any article in, say, the New York Review of Books today. Nevertheless, the trouble with *feminism's* passport to Czechoslovakia, just to take one East Central European example, has much deeper roots. As I have argued elsewhere,¹ those arose from various interconnected sources: from a broken psychoanalytic tradition, from a deformed Marxist tradition, and from the current lack of critical perception of deconstructivist theories in the local intellectual context.

Except for a brief period in the late 1960's, neither the works of Freud nor of his followers were released by Czechoslovak state-controlled publishing houses. *Psychoanalysis*, before 1989, was presented as a theory and practice which, due to its bourgeois

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the barriers which are making communication with the current Western feminist scholarship difficult see Šmejkalová (1994).

individualist roots, was dangerous to the “historical task of the working people” to build a class-less society. The consequences of discontinuity in psychoanalytical research and its related discourses go even further – the theoretical ignorance of the *body* in cultural and political representation in the local intellectual context is one of the most obvious ones. The hopelessly simplistic discussions of socially urgent issues such as pornography and prostitution are just two of many examples of such ignorance.

The sad adventures of “traveling” *Marxism* within the region of East and Central Europe are quite well known. In addition, the Czech context was lacking an equivalent of, for example, Lukács in Hungary. To put it differently, there was no thinker who enjoyed both national and international respect, and who was at the same time associated with Marxism. In fact, the label “feminism” was used by official propaganda as a favorite example of “false” practices and ideas ignoring the “real” sense of history by emphasizing gender issues over the class struggle. Moreover, the post-1968 “normalization” together with the Cold-War environment, generated patterns of expression and perception of the world in terms of clearly defined divisions between Truth and Lie, Friend and Enemy.

While the language of psychoanalysis provokes embarrassment or shyness, Marxist terminology invites misunderstanding and even hatred. One might expect that it would be the *de-constructivist* streams within feminism that attracted Czech intellectuals. For such streams helped the feminists to undermine the perceived naturalness of gender divisions and to cultivate articulation of the “I” as both She and He. However, the positions of Truth and Lie, often so painfully defended and thus strongly inhabited by many of the Czech oppositional intellectuals before 1989, seemed to resist any kind of *de-constructivist* attempts even after that period was over. In other words, precisely those traditions out of and within which many feminists work, posed obstacles to the traveling of feminist theories (not only those developed in the American academic context) to this part of Europe.

Said discusses the development of Foucault’s theory of power, in order to explain the point at which a theory can turn from “the methodological breakthrough” into “the theoretical trap” (Said 1983: 244). This happens when descriptions and particular observations are transferred into general statements such as “power is everywhere” not only by the thinker himself, but also by his followers. Unlike Said’s examples of traveling theory, neither one of the active feminist theories or politics, at least within last 30 years, had a chance in this region to develop into the “theoretical trap” version. And yet, a rather paradoxical situation followed the lifting of the Iron Curtain. This, in fact, feminism-free discursive space was immediately after 1989 flooded by an *anti-feminist* rhetoric, a rhetoric which was rooted in the same zero-level of knowledge about “feminism” as before 1989. What was even more frightening, was that traveling *anti-feminism*, rather than the various streams of feminism, occupied most of the discussions referring to gender differences and woman’s identity. Moreover, the aggressive and ironic style of the anti-feminist performances, be it in journals or in televised debates, also set up a simple-minded level of thinking and talking about gender, and consequently blocked it from being understood as a sophisticated intellectual agenda.

Thus any local project focused on issues of gender in the early 1990’s had to fight the media and public construction of feminism – described as a single-voiced monster designed by Western, bored, middle-class housewives and lesbians for beating men and

eating children. Let us look at few examples from Czech journals and newspaper to illustrate the anti-feminist exposures.

“The worst thing which can happen to a good idea is to have some fanatic, a lá Lenin, make it the basis of an ideology. What happens is this: The avant-garde of the educated elite teach the stupid but well-meaning masses how to hate, and thus transform social awareness and attempts to create social justice into a perversion of feelings and social hatred, which results in the exact opposite of any kind of justice. The newest example of this process we have experienced first-hand, is the latest adventure of American feminism,” wrote the exiled Czech writer, Josef Škvorecký.² Another Czech scholar described his experience of a meeting on preventing sexual harassment at Columbia University: “I felt as if I were at our Party [i.e. communist] training a few years earlier . . .” (Kovář 1992). In other words, *feminism* was constructed with the help of decontextualized details, as a monolithic body without internal structure in terms of both space (geographically) and time (historically).

It would be a mistake to blame ignorant, post-communist communities for not being brave enough to welcome enlightening, feminist ideas. One does not have to launch a devastating criticism of feminist ideas in order to recognize that feminist scholarship – as a result of the 1960’s political feminism in the United States and Western Europe – developed basically as *area studies* (i.e. analyzing a particular area or group under particular historical circumstances) with strong universalistic inclinations. Particularly in their “Intro to . . .” text-book versions, none of the feminist ideas could escape the trap in which “once an idea gains currency because it is clearly effective and powerful, there is every likelihood that during its peregrinations it will be reduced, codified, and institutionalized” (Said 1983: 239).

Thus the astonishingly hostile and ignorant perception of “feminism” in the post-Cold-War context, in my opinion, did not so much prove the traveling capacity of *theories*. Rather, it proved a different example of traveling. What seem to travel without passports across historical periods are deeply inhabited patterns of resistance to the unknown other, the tendencies to freeze meanings and build borders towards their movement in and out of certain spaces.

Is there hope for feminist ideas in this rather dark scenario? From the point of view of feminist theoretical adventures, Said’s note (on Raymond Williams) that “[w]hat we also need over and above theory, . . . is the *critical recognition* that there is no theory capable of covering, closing off, predicting all the situations in which it might be useful” (Said 1983: 242) seems to be particularly important. In his view, “[t]he critical consciousness is awareness of the differences between situations, awareness too of the fact that no system or theory exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported. And, above all, critical consciousness is awareness of the resistances to theory, reactions to it elicited by those concrete experiences or interpretations with which it is in conflict” (Said 1983: 242). The notion of “critical consciousness” seems to overcome Said’s own understanding of theory as *something* which moves across

² Škvorecký 1992. Josef Škvorecký is a Czech writer, poet, literary critic and translator, who left Czechoslovakia after 1968 and became a professor of Comparative Literature in Toronto. He is well known for co-founding the major exile publishing house ‘68 Publishers.

terrains or is denied access to the new territory. Theory in his frame becomes an object which circulates without the intervention of other agents – such as theoreticians and the institutions they belong to. Feminism understood as “critical consciousness” rather than Feminism as Theory may not only avoid such reification, but may also have a chance to overcome the local horror-construction of “Feminism”. Then it can also open the border for feminist ideas with a variety of passports. Hopefully it can prepare soil for creative re-reading of feminist theories and practices, and for the contribution of the local scholars to the established feminist canons.

REFERENCES CITED

- Kovář, Milan (1992): “Dopis z Ameriky o velkém sexuálním harašení (A Letter from America on a Big Sexual Harrasement).” In *Mladý svět*.
- Škvorecký, Josef (1992): “Can There be Sex Without Rape?” In *The Prague Post*, November 25 – December 1, p.17. Translated from the Czech cultural journal *Respekt*.
- Šmejkalová, Jiřina (1994): “Do Czech Women Need Feminism?” In *Women's Studies International Forum*, 17(2-3): 277-282.

Utopian Desires and Western Representations of Femininity

Mădălina Nicolaescu

Feminine identity and women's bodies in post-communist Romania can be viewed as a site where the clash between various political forces, ideological discourses and cultural practices are acted out. Some of these discourses and practices look backwards to traditions, values, and desires that were repressed during the communist period, while others look forwards, which often means westwards, to capitalist and/or postmodern, feminist views. The wide dissemination of Western mass media in Romania could be viewed as a significant intervention in the ongoing process of refashioning identity – new desires and pleasures, different norms and values compete with the older, local ones to reinscribe the bodies of post-totalitarian women. My essay focuses on the impact of Western representations of femininity in Romanian journals for women and discusses whether one can speak of their “colonization” by Western mass media. The paper insists on the processes of negotiation which these journals carry out between Western and Romanian culture. The approach adopted intends to keep a distance both from nationalistic positions, which bewail the nefarious influence of Western mass media, and from opposing standpoints, which pay too much lip service to Western culture and implicitly dwell on the “backwardness” of Romanian women in comparison with their “more liberated” Western sisters. At the same time, the paper sets out to prove the empowering effect of Western feminist theories upon scholars in Romania assisting their efforts to account for changes in traditional constructions of femininity.

RECONCILING DIFFERENT THEORETICAL POSITIONS

The theoretical starting point for this essay is provided by Elizabeth Grosz's deconstruction of the time-honored oppositions between subjectivity and the body, and implicitly between sex and gender, highlighting that “the very sense of the self is linked to the subject's sexual and bodily specificity” (Grosz 1994: 144). My essay relies on Grosz's insights into the way a libidinally invested image of the body is constructed out of culturally contingent meanings, desires and fantasies. Her approach foregrounds the process of continuous reconstruction of the sexed body, explicitly denying the existence of a “natural” body or of an original, unrepressed sexuality (Grosz 1994: 142-143). The emphasis on reconstructing and rewriting the body has an iconoclastic ring to a Roma-