

PASSING IT FORWARD: THOUGHTS ON ACADEMIC FEMINISTS AND THE FUTURE OF OUR IDEAS

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Abstract:

This article identifies a number of trends over the last two decades in the evolution of feminism in academia, with a focus on the significance of cultural studies, the experience of socialism and post-socialism for women, and new forms of feminist activism to suggest both points of tension and also necessary departures in order to render feminism still relevant.

Keywords: academia; feminist protest; empathy; communism.

A few months ago I had the privilege of attending a lively exploratory seminar entitled "Gender, Socialism and Postsocialism: Transatlantic Dialogues," where scholars from across the United States and Europe, together with American feminist activists in their sixties, sat around the table for two intense days of 'translation'.¹ We came from very diverse disciplinary backgrounds, we self-identified culturally with a broad spectrum of issues and values, we work on different case studies and with quite different goals, but we all consider ourselves feminists. Dialogue was indeed what we had as a goal—listening, moving outside of our own paradigmatic and ideological comfort zone, as well as speaking both respectfully and passionately about the themes that brought us to the table.

¹<https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/exploratory-seminars/gender-socialism-and-postsocialism> (accessed March, 14, 2013).

As such events often go, the first morning was all enthusiasm, witty repartees, and overall exploratory. Once we sat down to lunch, generational and disciplinary lines were drawn again along lines of comfort. As the first day progressed and especially by the evening, tensions came out into the open and remained unresolved. They sat on the table like a dead fish stinking up the room. The two most important lines of division were in fact generational and ideological, though manifested initially in terms of the 'public' versus 'academic' intellectual divide. One activist, in particular, who had cut her teeth in the tough days of feminist left-wing political activism of the late sixties and early seventies in the United States, came out expressing dismay at the worthlessness of questions that some of us, younger and more squarely on an academic path, were asking. It seemed we had failed to persuasively translate theorization, interdisciplinary hybridity, and overall gender analysis into something of any relevance to someone who noticed that economic and social inequality between men and women is still a profound question we are generally not addressing. What I sensed below some of these explicit expressions of frustration and criticism, was a feeling on the part of these feminists that we had lost our way, that academia ate the soul of our feminist passions and turned feminist activism into pedantic posturing in the name of scholarly sophistication.

In looking at the Occupy movements of the past year, I see a similar disenchantment on the part of many in the still younger generation regarding the standards and walls we have erected through feminist scholarship to render ourselves respectable and relevant to our colleagues in academia.² In a sense, this generational discontent is the fruit of our own efforts. As Joan Scott aptly described in her recent book, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (2011),³ the academic feminists of the last forty years or so have spent a great deal of our efforts knocking on the doors of the citadel of academic excellence, challenging existing paradigms regarding authorship, creative activity, excellence in teaching, or the professional training of graduate students. We spend a great deal of our time critiquing every type of articulation of patriarchy, and over the past twenty-five years have done so from a deconstructivist perspective of placing subjectivity and identity politics on a pedestal. This has come to bite us in the derrière: we have become part of the fortress of learning we were trying to knock down, and our discourse about patriarchy has become a self-

² See, for instance, Megan Boler, "Occupy Women: Will Feminism's Fourth Wave Be a Swell or a Ripple?," *truthout*, 16 May, 2012, available at <http://truth-out.org/news/item/9188-occupy-women-will-fourth-wave-feminism-be-a-wave-or-a-ripple> (accessed March 15, 2013).

³ Joan W. Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

gratifying and self-defeating approach to change and to feminist goals of redressing gendered socio-economic injustice. Our students look at us and see the establishment, rather than models worthy of emulating; the criticisms we so passionately put forth against patriarchy resonate with the younger generations in terms of the weakness of our own approach.⁴

What we have successfully passed on to younger generations as an intellectual skill is bitchiness. This is not a trademark of feminist scholarship; it is in fact a broad trend in academia.⁵ Critical thinking has been elevated to a level of sacredness that has become uncritical, and therefore empty of intellectual or moral value. For those living through post-communism, a good analogy is how communism and the left are regarded in academic discourse in many of those countries.⁶ We continue to be so concerned with empowering ourselves that we don't sufficiently acknowledge the debt of intellectual and political gratitude we owe our foremothers. The result is that of reinventing the wheel and failing to model collaborative generosity for younger generations. We place value in identifying weaknesses in scholarship (e.g., what has the authored failed to demonstrate? what are the unexamined undergirding assumptions?), but we do far less in trying to offer alternatives. Humility and quiet appreciation are not values we identify overtly or practice implicitly in our teaching. And when we try it, graduate students often express befuddled frustration: if they don't get a chance to show off their theoretical inter-textual chops in class discussion aggressively, they feel cheated.

So, what is to be done? If we are writing and reading these lines, it means we at least agree on one thing: feminism is of relevance to our knowledge-making intellectual endeavors, to our societies, and to our individual selves. The question then remains not so much how feminists can or

⁴ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *ManifestA: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

⁵ Examples of how bitchiness has been mainstreamed include the extremely popular feminist magazine *Bitch* and related online media; on the broader 'asshole' phenomenon in academia see: <http://thesiswhisperer.com/2013/02/13/academic-assholes/> (accessed March 15, 2013) and Robert Sutton, *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*. New York: Business Plus, 2007.

⁶ See, for instance, the recently launched interactive website: <http://www.istoriacomunismului.ro/#/istoria-comunismului-in-romania> (accessed March 15, 2013).

should adapt to today's world.⁷ Feminism has been part of the world for a while, and there is absolutely no need to make that case again. Therefore, the question has to be asked differently: how can we render feminism broadly relevant to a wide variety of concerns and approaches? How can we move beyond the recognition of those differences towards an integrative strategy for speaking persuasively to especially younger women and men regarding the reality of patriarchal privilege? How can we engage them with feminist visions of the common good in terms they find resonant?

Whether we are historians, gazing towards the past, philosophers, gazing towards the abstract, sociologists, gazing towards the structural, literary critics, gazing towards the discursive, or policy makers, gazing towards the here and now, it is absolutely clear that we need to keep the dynamic context in which younger generations develop as the anchor of our analytical enterprise. When the Pussy Riot scandal erupted in Russia,⁸ the board of the Association for Women in Slavic Studies (AWSS) in the United States⁹ turned down a suggestion I had about making a statement of solidarity with these women. I pitched the idea in the form of a fundraising opportunity for the association (I suggested designing T-shirts that featured our organization's logo on the front and some text about Free Pussy Riot on the back), with all proceeds going to the defense fund for the members of the group, and also with the explicit goal of engaging younger scholars in our organization, a weakness several of the same board members had repeatedly pointed out as a problem we needed to address. Out of a dozen of well-established scholars in a number of humanistic and social disciplines, one alone responded enthusiastically to my idea. The reasons for rejecting this idea ranged from personal discomfort (I presume, about featuring the word 'pussy' and the association with a group that once staged an orgy as a form of protest), to fear of retribution from the Russian state for such an action (i.e., not being able to secure a visa or permit to enter archives). The most absurd reason given, though it turned to be what held most water with this particular group, was 'precedent'. If our organization had never come out openly in favor of human rights issues during the Cold War, why do it now?

⁷ The CFP in *Analyze* asks: "Which are the ways feminism adapted to the new social, economic and techno-cultural environment of the 21 century?"

⁸ There are countless articles on this topic. On the group's own positions see <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/> (accessed March 15, 2013).

⁹ See <http://www.awsshome.org/> (Accessed March 15, 2013).

Good question: now IS the time to come out and support a movement that has clearly hit a raw nerve in a patriarchal society so many of the scholars in AWSS study and claim to bring important feminist insights to. One doesn't have to personally endorse punk rock music/art, the use of women's body parts (be they in word or deed, as is the case with the equally controversial group Femen from Ukraine¹⁰) in public statements about patriarchy, or the critique of specific religious institutions through loud and even profane means. An empathetic and more fully contextualized understanding on the part of established scholars of such powerful evidence that feminist is well alive and also morphing culturally and discursively, would bring us closer to being able to communicate across disciplines, generations, and positions we have assumed in academia and public life. There are indeed limitations and weaknesses to these and other public feminist articulations today, but those are not the aspects we need to focus on first. One might be able to more effectively and persuasively engage in such discussions after listening carefully and with an open mind to the passions and frustrations that drive this sort of activism. Most importantly, we cannot forget that the academic empowerment of feminists who now lead many women's and gender studies program, as well as increasingly academic institutions, brings with it responsibilities to become more self-aware about our own privilege and power. We also need to remember that those trying out new forms of academic analysis and activism from a place of marginality are more vulnerable than established scholars. We CAN afford more than younger generations to be generous, humble, and forgiving.

Possibly the most important issue in how feminism has evolved over the last twenty-five years and might develop in the future is the impact of gender analysis on feminist scholarship and activism. There is no doubt that gender analysis has assumed a hegemonic role in how scholars define questions and methodologies of studying patriarchy, misogyny, women, men, and feminism. There is a continuing tension in identifying what 'gender analysis' really is—from its object to its goals. Joan Scott has repeatedly expressed frustration in how her famous article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," has been used.¹¹ A common trope is to look at any analysis that focuses only on straight women (explicitly or implicitly) as being insufficiently gendered and too hetero-normative. Though likely well intentioned, such criticism strikes me as dogmatic, facile, and

¹⁰ See Jeffrey Tayler, "Femen, Ukraine's Topless Warriors," *The Atlantic*, 28 November 2012, at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/femen-ukraines-topless-warriors/265624/> (accessed March 15th, 2013).

¹¹ Joan Scott, "Unanswered Questions," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 113, no. 5 (2008): 1422-1430.

ultimately lessening of what gender analysis can be. In general, most academic studies in any social science field start with questions or case studies that can be managed from the point of view of both theorization as well as empirical breadth. When we look at questions about religious attitudes, for instance, we don't see the need to include every religious denomination (inclusive of atheism) as a sine qua non condition for studying and analyzing specific aspects of religious attitudes in a particular place at a particular time. Parsing out pieces of the whole of humanity in all of its glorious messiness is what scholars do. It is therefore strange to see the same criticism come up again and again about projects on women: "this book falls short of having a gender approach to the history of this event, because it only focuses on women."¹² If the criticism had been, "the examination of the case studies focusing on women's lives engages insufficiently in gender analysis because it doesn't theorize assumptions about gender norms," that would be intellectually useful and might be an accurate perspective. But to simply equate the absence of men from a study with the absence of gender analysis is to misunderstand and misrepresent the usefulness of gender analysis. Unfortunately, because of the growing preponderance of such attitudes in both written scholarship and our curricula, the currency of 'gender analysis' as a concept has become devalued.

Equally important for an accurate appreciation of gender analysis at the present time are two contexts: (1) the explosion of access to information across the globe, which renders the notion of waves in the development of feminism useless; and (2) the political manipulation of gender analysis by various regimes across the world. I will offer one single example focusing on China. Over the past two decades, there has been an explosion of studies on gender and sexuality translated into Mandarin. I recall the wonderment of my colleague Jeffrey Wasserstrom, at the beginning of the 2000s, when, upon returning from Shanghai, he shared a number of photos of lavish displays in a large bookstore, featuring translations of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1978) and Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). Separated by twenty-five years of revolutionary change in the study of sexuality and gender, these books became contemporaries in Chinese scholarly and public discourses about gender and sexuality. Much in the same fashion as this jumbled chronology of scholarly production, gender studies began to develop in various departments ahead of or instead of feminist analysis, especially in the discipline of

¹² See Maren Röger and Ruth Leiserowitz, "Introduction: Gender and World War II in Central and Eastern Europe," in Maren Röger and Ruth Leiserowitz, eds., *Women and Men at War. A Gender Perspective on World War II and its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe*. Warsaw: fibre Verlag, 2012.

literary studies, across universities in China around the same time.¹³ I watched with interest what this development might bring, and have come to see it as currently deleterious to any attempts to maintain a vigorous academic discussion and broader public awareness of the ways in which women are becoming economically and socially disempowered in contemporary China.

A recent powerful indictment of this trend comes from a colleague from Beijing, who presented a paper entitled "Socialism, Capitalism and Women: Why Should China Rebuild Marxist Feminism?" at a conference hosted by Rice University in March 2012. The paper concluded:

Based on this imagination of a desirable society, we should first above all conduct a self-criticism of China's women/gender studies, and be fully aware of the conspiracy relationship between women/gender studies and the neo-liberalism [sic!] system, so as to launch the community-based socialist feminist movement and actualize a revolutionary turn around. A theoretical critique of neo-liberalism must transcend the approach of cultural critique, and return to the political economic approach, and my suggestion is to return to the production and reproduction framework of Engels.¹⁴

It would be easy to dismiss this statement as dogmatically Marxist and an attempt by the author to ingratiate herself with the Chinese communist regime. That would also be a misinterpretation of the language used in the quote above. Shaopeng Song doesn't present the neo-liberal present in some Manichean contrast to the 'good old days' of the 1980s, or worse yet, the Cultural Revolution. In her paper, she rehearses both forms of empowerment and also retrenchment by the Communist regime under Mao and his successors in terms of legal, economic, and political gender equality. What she sees developing in contemporary China is a de-politicization of discussions about gender, whose main culprit she identifies as the officially endorsed growth of cultural gender studies.¹⁵

¹³ Wang Zheng and Gail Hershatter, "Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis," *American Historical Review*, vol. 113, no. 5 (Dec. 2008): 1404-1421.

¹⁴ Shaopen Song, "Socialism, Capitalism and Women: Why Should China Rebuild Marxist Feminism?," paper presented at the workshop "Communist Feminism(s): A Transnational Perspective," Rice University, March 2012, p. 24.

¹⁵ No history of sexuality or study by Alfred Kinsey would be published in China in 2000 in the way I described above without the tacit endorsement of the regime.

Most importantly, her Marxist theoretical frame of reference is not Mao, but Engels. It is entirely possible that Song's position vis-à-vis gender studies reflects the ideas of a minority of Chinese scholars interested in feminism. Yet her criticism in fact resonates across the world with other scholars. At the conference, this paper elicited the most comments and liveliest discussion of any presentation. Her criticisms rang true for many others around the table, whether they came from or worked on China, the United States, Romania, Mexico, Bulgaria, Vietnam, India, or Russia.

Returning to Engels strikes me as a good idea as well. His critique of patriarchy continues to have relevance today.¹⁶ We are also fortunate to have the benefit of over a century of Marxist activism, Stalinist reaction to, and feminist engagement with this powerful text, which means that we can also identify where we might become wiser than our forbearers in realistically engaging with patriarchy and misogyny: When as feminists we speak against dependency and for empowerment, we do so on behalf of others. The tension feminists have always faced has been between the personal story of the feminist speaking and the aspirations of those we seek to represent. I became very aware of this tension in a project I completed a few years back in Hunedoara County, Romania, which included a significant proportion of oral history interviews and focus groups with women ages 39-86. Focusing on gender and everyday citizenship, together with my co-principle investigator, Mihaela Miriou, and with the help of then doctoral students Diana Neaga and Cristina Radoi (both of them have since then completed their dissertations and one has published a book based on this project),¹⁷ I sought to listen to the stories of a hundred women regarding politics, family, education, empowerment, and many other aspects of our research theme. In listening to the rich narratives of these women of diverse backgrounds, education, talents, and overall choices in life, I have come to realize more and more the need for humility and empathy when attempting to interpret them as a collection of voices. Empowerment and fulfillment are such complex goals that to try to understand why and with what results women have made personal and professional choices requires constantly checking one's assumptions at the door. Relativism is certainly not the answer, but a sense of doubt regarding one's own voice and depth of understanding are both useful and necessary in order to broaden how, as feminist scholars, we make sense of other women's lives. In listening to these women, most of who lived under communism as children and adults, I have come to better appreciate how a non-democratic regime

¹⁶ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, available at *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (accessed March 15, 2013).

¹⁷ Diana Elena Neaga, *Gen și cetățenie în România*. Iași: Ed. Polirom, 2013.

of oppression and policing offered important tools of economic and personal empowerment to women.

The same project has brought home the extent to which motherhood continues to be a point of tension among feminists. In nearly all interviews mothering surfaced as a central component (whether these women had raised children or discussed children in general) of women's identity in Romanian society.¹⁸ Yet for many feminists motherhood has long been an issue of great tension, as it brings into discussion issues of biological identification with our reproductive functions and compulsory hetero-normativity. A century ago, for those like Aleksandra Kollontai, born of privilege, parenting could be a responsibility/burden that might be shifted on the shoulders of others in order to fashion herself into a free individual. Today, for many educated well-to-do women with high professional aspirations and a feminist view of their self-worth as individuals, those options remain viable, often made possible by the availability of poor women with few economic (and sometimes fewer legal) choices. The truth is, we can't have it all. The question is what do we want for ourselves, for other women, for our society to thrive in a more gender equitable way, and what are we willing to give up?

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¹⁸ The issue of women's continuing strong self-identification with motherhood in Romania was made apparent to me after the publication of the collection of autobiographical writings *Nașterea. Istorii trăite* ["Birth. Lived histories"], edited by Mihaela Miroiu and Otilia Dragomir. Iași: Polirom, 2010. The book, which had an overtly feminist introduction, received enormous and largely positive press, from both self-identified feminists and also a broader (non-feminist) readership.

