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Gender Studies in "New" Europe. Reflections on What Lies Beyond

When presented with the challenge of considering "gender studies and beyond" in relation to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), one might think of "beyond" in a double sense. There is one sense of "beyond" related to the question of what students will do with their gender studies degree. This is clearly an important question for gender studies students who are keen to prepare for their professional future and who would like to continue to build on their intellectual and political activities after graduation. It is also an important question for individual academic departments which are regularly asked to justify themselves to university administrators who want to see evidence of a tangible worth to each degree. Additionally, the introduction of the European Union (EU) gender mainstreaming policy which resulted from the Amsterdam Treaty ratified in 1999 has resulted in an expanding professional market for gender studies graduates to which the discipline would be wise to respond.

However, there is a second aspect of "beyond" gender studies other than questions of employability for gender studies graduates. This second "beyond" is the larger political, cultural and economic context that shapes the discipline, sometimes in quite significant ways. Central and Eastern Europe provides a particularly rich example of the importance of the larger context for the discipline. While Eastern Europe has some similarities to Western European gender studies, such as the impact of EU initiatives like the Bologna Process reforms and gender mainstreaming, there are some important differences as well, especially with regard to the development and funding of gender studies programs in CEE and in the former Soviet Union (fSU) since the 1990s. This larger political landscape is crucial not just for placing our graduates in good jobs, but also for remaining cognizant and deliberate about what the political agendas are with which gender studies education is being aligned. In this essay, I consider some key issues regarding both dimensions of the "beyond" of gender studies. My comments are offered not as an elaborate research argument, but rather as prompts for our collective consideration of our priorities, values and opportunities in European gender studies (East and West) at this historical juncture. My discussion grows out of the work and dialogue around these issues in which my colleagues and I at the Central European University (CEU) Department of Gender Studies in Budapest have been engaged. It also builds on the genealogy of funding of gender studies in CEE and fSU Susan Zimmermann has provided. Moreover, my comments reflect the institutional strategies we as a department have adopted to try to use the current "gender climate" in Europe to the maximum advantage of our graduates.

A Brief History of Funding of Gender Studies in Central and Eastern Europe

As Susan Zimmermann documents in her analysis of the development of gender studies in CEE and fSU, the discipline has benefited significantly from the influx of private and governmental financial support for higher education in post-state socialist countries (2007). With the dismantling of state socialist governments, many private sponsors sought to invest money in the region in order to develop market economies, democratic institutions and civil society. Much of the support came in fairly traditional forms, such as loans, and assistance from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, a great deal also came in the form of grants for educational initiatives and reforms. Given how intertwined education and Marxist ideology were and given the need to support the command economies of states, understandably, education became a target for "transitional" help.[1] What is perhaps more surprising is the fact that gender studies received a great deal of support in this climate of educational transformation. Part of the reason for this was no doubt due to the strategic and energetic efforts of individual scholars in the region who wanted to open up a space for gender research and teaching in the conservative academies in their countries. In this respect, gender studies in CEE developed in ways similar to other regions and countries. Certain scholars took on additional work to train themselves. They created a community for gender studies with other interested scholars and students in the form of reading groups, conferences and other activities. They battled university administrators and state governments to introduce gender to the existing curriculum. And they creatively developed mechanisms to help train more scholars in this interdisciplinary field. And indeed, such efforts continue in the region as committed individuals work to introduce, expand, or in some cases, save existing gender studies programs both within and outside of the university.[2]

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[1] See Susan Gal and Gail Kligman's discussion of the problems with using the term transition. Like a number of social science and feminist scholars, they argue that this term is flawed in so far as it suggests a natural and inevitable teleological movement from state socialism to capitalism. It implies that the path is unidirectional, and assumes that this "development" is one of progress out of repressive state socialist structures into democratic ones. Gal and Kligman argue that, in reality, there is nothing inevitable about this development and moreover, there are many different models of transition. Additionally, there are a number of arenas in which East European has historically been more "advanced" than West European (Gal and Kligman 2000, 10; see also Einhorn and Sever 2003). Thus, I place this term in quotation marks to signal its problematic nature. However, I have deliberately used the term here because the assumption and aims of most of the funding activity I describe does in fact rest on the political assumptions that Gal and Kligman criticize.

[2] An interesting feature of gender studies in the post-state socialist region is that it does not always exist within universities. The Zagreb Women's Center is an impressive example of an independent academic institution for gender studies. Instead of offering a formal university degree, the Zagreb Women's Center offers a graduate certificate for its numerous students who have gone on to become important participants in gender studies and in various other arenas within the former Yugoslavian region.

However, the efforts of individuals were supported in many cases by Western funding. This funding aimed to foster democratic institutions and political culture, and to help develop market economies through educational reforms. Gender studies has been financially supported by the Ford Foundation in Russia (Moscow Centre for Gender Studies and at the European University in St. Petersburg); George Soros' seed money and grants in Hungary and throughout the region (Central European University and Higher Education Support funds), the World Bank and Eurasia Foundation (Center for Gender Studies Baku, Azerbaijan), OSI Network Women's Program (also Soros funded), private donors (Kharkov Center for Gender Studies in Eastern Ukraine), the MacArthur Foundation (Women's Center, European Humanities University, Minsk Belarus), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Kazakhstan, and by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) in Bosnia.

Gender studies was a winner in this political project for a complex set of reasons as Zimmermann analyzes. Zimmermann argues that gender studies offered an alternative analytic to academic knowledge production in the former Soviet bloc in so far as its theoretical frameworks do not operate strictly around class analysis (2006, 10). She also reads this generous financial support for gender studies in Eastern Europe by Western donors as a form of cultural and economic imperialism with gender studies as a symbolic marker of certain modern Western values. In this way the discipline is instrumentalized similar to the way the "woman question" was employed as a mechanism for the imposition of Western political will in many colonial contexts. Zimmermann writes,

> The education policy actors involved here formed the spearhead of a higher asymmetrical functionalization of 'gender' as a symbol and instrument of transnational interest politics as part of unequal or conflictual international relations. They were interested in the promotion of women's and gender studies not for and in themselves, or in other words not, or not only, for the purpose of the academic strengthening and deepening of efforts concerned with the equality of women and men and the protection of the human rights of women. Their political strivings were concerned rather more with two other highly politically contentious objectives. (2006, 8-9)

These two objectives were 1) transforming education to align with the norms of institutions in liberal-capitalist economies and 2) instituting the cultural values of the West. Zimmermann concludes, "At this level it is not gender studies or the rights of women that is the real agenda. The commitment of women's and gender studies is far more a vicarious substitute for a commitment to values of (largely Anglo-Saxon) western democracy and liberal social economic order ..." (2006, 9) And indeed one might read the political results of EU Bologna Process reforms (which seek to produce a knowledge society in order to make the economies of European Union countries more competitive within global capitalism) as furthering this political work begun by private Western donors.

If CEE and fSU gender studies has a complex historical relationship with the neo-liberal capitalist agenda, what are its prospects? On the one hand, it is certainly not surprising that gender studies scholars should find themselves working with constituencies who prioritize human rights, democratic institutions, and reforms which will make the university system in Eastern Europe more open to other groups and approaches. On the other hand, even if gender scholars can remain uninfluenced by the political motivation of their funding sources, the discipline must still cope with the use of gender as a marker for certain Western cultural values. There is much more to be said about such trade-offs, but given the space limitations I cannot fully address this issue here. Nonetheless, suffice it to caution that gender studies scholars must remain aware of the large political projects that dovetail at times with efforts to institutionalize gender studies in the region. This is necessarily the first move in protecting ourselves against complicity with things that are, at the end of the day, incongruous with the goals people have in the discipline. As Zimmermann's institutional history traces, CEE and fSU gender studies has a particular constellation of political allies and historical antecedent which are particular to it as a so-called transitional area of the world. However, my larger point is that all gender studies programs are embedded in local, national and transnational political processes of which we cannot afford to be naïve or ignorant, especially as gender and women's rights becomes increasingly "relevant" to mainstream society.

Gender Studies as a Vocation

Another aspect of the "beyond" of gender studies is the relationship between gender programs and the significant political shifts in Europe since the Amsterdam Treaty was ratified in 1999. On a very basic level, the treaty confirmed the feminist insistence that gender and sexuality have important stratifying effects in all arenas of society. Furthermore, gender was affirmed as a legitimate lens through which to analyze society. Thus, on subtle and symbolic levels, gender studies has been strengthened by the introduction of gender mainstreaming, even if programs and individuals continue to be asked to justify their project.

The impact of these EU policy changes and of the rise in minority activism in Europe has had significant material effects on gender studies as well. Quite simply, a great deal more data collection and policy making on gender and women is now underway for EU states to comply with gender mainstreaming requirements. Granted, there is a lot one might say about whether gender mainstreaming actually helps achieve the goals feminists have fought to achieve; I will return to this issue shortly. However, apart from questions of its efficacy, EU gender mainstreaming and the general rise in minority rights have impacted the job market that gender studies graduates now enter. There is now an expanded array of professional positions that require the kind of training (such as analytical training and history) which women and gender studies programs provide their students.

Traditionally, with no clear career path for their graduates, women and gender studies programs tended to think about the training they give students in terms of an overall liberal arts education. In such training, students were taught less professionally oriented skills and instead most had training in analytical and critical thinking, writing, and reading. Gender programs were most successful in preparing students for a professional career in academia. Yet now that there are more professional jobs related to gender, there are additional skills that academic programs might offer students which would complement their traditional liberal arts style education. Naturally such training would ideally provide skills particularly suited to these new gender positions; such training might include courses in gender policy, critical qualitative analysis, and on the development and politics of NGOs. Far from "selling out," adding such a focus would be a way of providing the particular critical understanding of the policy and activist realm that graduates are entering as well as research skills that interesting gender mainstreaming careers might require.

The CEU Gender Studies Department is probably fairly typical of how changes in EU policy concerning gender and education (the Bologna Process reforms specifically) have impacted our programming. Recently, the Hungarian state accreditation board opened the door for applications for 2-year MA programs necessary after the introduction of the 3-year BA. Gender studies programs throughout Hungary considered how this initiative could create an opportunity to have gender studies degrees recognized by the Hungarian state for the first time in history. With the help of colleagues at other Hungarian universities, through a concerted effort of our own faculty, and with a certain degree of luck, CEU was successful in getting gender studies added to the list of officially recognized master-level degrees. Our new 2-year MA program in Critical Gender Studies in turn has introduced a means for students to focus on professional training. More specifically, it offers two "tracks" (concentrations) wherein students can either prepare for a career in an academic field (which would require their going on to a Ph.D. program) or they can do the second track entitled "gender professional." This second track involves courses designed to provide students with the kind of additional historical, analytical and research skills that I mentioned already. It also involves an extensive internship in some gender-related organization. This internship is meant to give students the opportunity to acquire professional experience, to help them form a realistic idea of what such professions entail, and to allow them to gather research material for their final thesis. Students will write a theoretically informed thesis on an issue central to the organization itself; or they might focus their thesis on an issue or a set of practices that relate more tangentially to the organization. This research will eventually provide the basis for the MA thesis. This example illustrates the way one gender studies department responded to the changes in the political and professional landscape surrounding gender programs in Europe. Our aim was to create a rich academic experience for students and constitute our graduates as "specialists" who would be more competitive on the gender job market.

Like many of our colleagues in the discipline, we were concerned that much of the gender mainstreaming work is being done by people with little training in women and gender studies and who, therefore, lack a historical and analytical framework for developing especially smart policies. Certainly, there are some well-trained and talented people involved in designing, implementing, and assessing gender programs. However, non-feminist professionals who have influence over these programs do not usually have the same motivation to hire people with a solid training in gender studies. In fact, people within the EU bureaucracy might have reason to want to hire *ineffectual* people who will not fight for more radical policies. This reality means that the increase in gender-related policy and activity in the "real world" represents not only an opportunity, but a responsibility for us in the academy. We need to engage in strategic behavior to insure not only that our well-trained graduates get jobs in fields related to their degree, but also that the larger effort to create more equality through policy and programming does not get hijacked by people with different (and in some cases, contradictory) priorities than feminists.

Additionally, there is a tendency for some already within these professions to try to retool themselves as gender experts without undergoing any systematic training in gender studies. Many within gender studies are critical of the limits to what gender mainstreaming actually achieves. But we need to continue to maintain control and influence over this new domain which is the outcome (even if compromised in heartbreaking ways) of much feminist struggle. If gender mainstreaming is being called feminism, it does not make sense to abandon it, leaving others to define and control an arena that could potentially have a significant impact on people's lives. Rather, perhaps this is the opportunity to re-appropriate it.

Finally, in Central and Eastern Europe there has been concern among feminists that while these gender positions are expanding, they still remain out of the reach of most gender studies graduates. This concern rests on two observations about the context of this region. One is the fact that especially government bureaucracies still maintain a high degree of cronyism, making it difficult for people without the right social connections to get hired for positions – even when they hold superior qualifications. The second cause of pessimism is the reaction by a significant number of people in the region to EU "pressure" to implement so-called politically correct policies. In some sections of Hungarian society, for instance, there is resentment that political correctness is being forced onto CEE by Western European EU member states. It is fairly easy for critics in Hungary to belittle initiatives related to gender equality, Roma rights, homosexual rights, disability rights, etc. as foreign imports. In this context, gender equality mandates are yet another imposition on Hungarian autonomy, not unlike the imposition of the terms of the Trianon Treaty that significantly diminished the country's territory following the end of World War I (I kid you not). One hopes that this discourse will weaken in time; however, it is

often tied to nationalism, a discourse that looks unlikely to fade in influence in the near future.[3]

Conclusion

One of the strengths of women's and gender studies has been our awareness that the work we do at the university is necessarily connected to the larger world surrounding it. There has been a lot of attention to the way power relations in other arenas of society are reflected in and shaped by our knowledge production activities in the academy. However, there are many dimensions to the relationship between gender studies programs and the larger society. For instance, the role of the university has shifted from one of providing a humanist education to one of creating a "knowledge society" to support economic domination (see Readings 1996). This shift has enormous implications for our goals and priorities within gender studies that must be thoroughly analyzed. Moreover, the promise of economic growth has increased European political leaders' interest in incorporating women into the paid labor market; and gender mainstreaming has created a great deal of new activity around gender analysis and policy development. All of these developments at the turn of the 21st century mean that we are confronted with exciting and interesting challenges to our disciplinary vision(s). Not the least of these challenges is to help our graduates imagine possible futures for themselves as both good global citizens and, more recently, as professionals in a vast array of fields.

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[3] These points developed from discussions with Eniko Jakab and I thank her for the way our collaboration on the conference panel that preceded this essay helped develop my understanding of the issues.