



Ralitsa Muharska

Silences and parodies in the East-West feminist dialogue

Identity as problem

Eastern European feminist discourse is confronted with a dual exclusion: from the Western feminist discourse from which it borrows its terms, and from its own societies, where its foreignness is distrusted. Here, one eastern European feminist describes how her discourse becomes a parody of Western feminism, and how the alienation this produces is compounded by a perceived lack of societal normalcy. In this respect, parody becomes a subversive response to a reality felt to be absurd. But whose interests does this subversion serve?

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The virtual absence of a feminist movement in eastern Europe is an important factor for the absence of a specific discourse developed to meet the needs of such a movement. Thus, eastern Europeans tend to talk and write about their experience even when they talk about theory. A typical example: at an international event where the discussion was supposed to address theoretical problems of gender representation in eastern European cultures, 70 of the 90 minutes allotted to the topic were unexpectedly diverted into a heated argument about the significance of the image of the woman on the tractor during socialism. As the theory in question is mostly "Western", there is a gap between theory and experience that often remains unfilled. The fact that Western theory is not based on Western experience, but also deeply rooted in it, also needs to be emphasized here. "Speaking feminist" in the national political environment simply does not happen. Furthermore, "speaking feminist" in the national academic community tends to cause problems with acceptability, because of its difference; it is looked upon as politicized and deviant discourse (as opposed to "neutral" and "objective"), and so must overcome resistance. On the other hand, there is undoubtedly a need to implant feminist theory in this context, and serious efforts are devoted to meeting this need across the region.

The gaps in the theory of feminism, especially the social aspects of it

The cultural specificity of the dominant feminist discourses as an access-limiting factor tends to result in parodic/ironic discursive practices - this is also a consequence of the necessity to "experientialize" the discourse that has already been theorized. Eastern European feminism, instead of developing the natural way - from grass roots (the gradually growing mass social movement) to theory, seems to have reversed the process: by "translating" feminist theory, we hope to help our societies develop gender awareness and everything that comes with it.

As I mentioned, because feminist theory has developed outside eastern Europe, it rarely, or with questionable adequacy, problematizes the specifically eastern European (female) experience, or, for that matter,



other "other" experiences. There is always the question, of course, whether there is a specific experience. Ironically, there also arises the question: if there actually is an experience, who is to say it is specific? Who has the representational authority? Is it the people living through it? They have no tools of their own to explain it and need to borrow these from the West. The West has developed the language and the politically determined discursive strategies, the system of talking about female experience, which claims the universality of this experience: feminist theory. Western feminists, however, can have only a vicarious and therefore limited knowledge of the eastern European experience (with some exceptions). So, while both sides are in a position of questionable adequacy where speaking and representational authority is concerned, they are also in a position of questionable legitimacy. Both positions are more-than-one-dimensional, and this affords an impressive multitude of opportunities for displacement (or misplacement) of voices, for ambiguities, ironies, and problematic interpretations.

For example, when eastern European feminists speak "outward" - that is, to the West (and whenever they speak out - outward - they speak [in]to the West, the West is what they look up to, rely on, hope to be integrated into), they assume a representative function. So in many cases they speak/produce texts in a narrative mode, with the purpose to present, inform, show, and fill information gaps. The problem of necessary generalization is important here. Along with generalization come the accompanying potentialities for distortion: "two-speak"; mockery (intentional or not); the playing up - or down - of facts merely to please a particular audience; the personal prejudices or limitations of the speakers/authors; the possibility - and temptation - to present as fact what may be simply opinion; the possibility that with the act of "speaking out", an eastern European feminist is claiming more power, not only for eastern European feminism, but for herself as well.

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Borrowing feminism

In eastern Europe, societies tend to look upon feminism as something borrowed, even where women's movements have a longer tradition and more public prominence than in Bulgaria. The irony of borrowing is that we need to borrow not only the discourses but the practices of the feminist movement: consciousness raising, gender awareness, etc. Borrowing social practice has proved historically problematic; on the other hand, it is and has been taking place everywhere, and seems to be inherent in the very idea of historical development. Another consequence of the absent feminist movement in eastern Europe worth mentioning is the "individual feminist" - the eastern European figure of dubious cultural as well as political status, who can be seen as a parodic phenomenon herself, illustrating the oxymoronic cultural blending of an activist without activities, representative without representation, other without same(s), both desired and undesired, different but similar.

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