

CONTRADICTIONS

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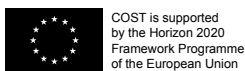
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EDITORIAL

Toward Left Feminist Theory and Historiography

The relationship between the left and feminism has never been exactly simple, and this remains true at the present day. Times change, but one may still find the spirit of the Second International haunting contemporary left intellectuals. It was the Second International that forged a seemingly indissociable link between feminism and the attribute “bourgeois,” and which made of feminism a social and political force antagonistic to socialism. Beginning in 1896, this line was formulated by Klara Zetkin and sustained by her female successors, who were attempting not only to win women supporters for social democracy and later for communism, but also to gain support and recognition from their male comrades. Later historiography has only further confirmed the clear dividing line between feminism and the left.¹ One doubts whether the reasons which led the Second International to pose “bourgeois feminism” against socialism as such have disappeared. And today it is as if the very same question, whose outcome was a clear divide between class politics and feminist politics, has returned in discussions of so-called “identity politics.”² And despite the fact that one of the sources of the second wave of the feminist movement in Western Europe and the United States was the “New Left,” there are certain left critics today who identify feminism with neoliberalism and regard women as symbols of neoliberalism.

While there is room for posing the question of feminism and the left differently, this is impeded by the very genealogy of the socialist movement and by the impulse to defend class politics, without differentiation, against neoliberalism. Perhaps a degree of caution is indeed in order vis-à-vis the interminably repeated requirement to make the left’s struggles “intersectional” struggles. For one thing, the term “intersectionality” has come to be used with such vagueness that it becomes necessary to reconstruct this

¹ Cf. Marilyn J. Boxer, “Rethinking the Socialist Construction and International Career of the Concept ‘Bourgeois Feminism,’” *The American Historical Review* 112 (2007), no. 1, pp. 131–158.

² On this, see particularly the second issue of *Historical Materialism* in 2018, above all the editorial introduction: Ashok Kumar et al., “An Introduction to the Special Issue on Identity Politics,” *Historical Materialism* 26 (2018), no. 2, pp. 3–20.

approach and clarify what it has to contribute.³ Moreover, the radical-democratic visions of building a socialist hegemony based on the articulation of equivalencies between anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-capitalist struggles have not come to fruition.⁴ A certain scepticism is thus understandable. This, however, should not be a reason for failing to investigate the relations between class and gender (and other manifestations of human difference, which are given social significance in line with how society is structured), between capitalism and the gender order. Today one of these theoretical opportunities arises in social reproduction theory, at whose core is the process of sustaining and reproducing of human life in its everyday form across the generations. That is the topic of several texts in the issue of *Contradictions* presented here.

But neither has feminist theory or the feminist movement, for a long time now, created a favourable environment for anti-capitalist left-wing approaches. In the 1970s theoretical discussions in the USA on the connection between capitalism and patriarchy ran into a dead end, and feminist theoretical approaches became increasingly open to poststructuralism. Historical materialist approaches came to be marginal in feminist theory.⁵ A new interest in socialist feminism as a normative political theory, and in historical materialism (or Marxism) as a method or paradigm, arrived with the period following the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis in the years 2008 and 2009.

In Eastern and Central Europe after 1989 reception of second-wave socialist feminism was ambivalent. As Jiřina Šmejkalová-Strickland argued in 1994, the commonality of Marxist and feminist approaches, both of which denaturalise social phenomena, contributed to the rejection of feminism in Czechoslovakia in the early post-November period.⁶ In this context, it is all the more interesting (if we look at the case of Czecho-

³ Cf. Kateřina Kolářová, "Paradoxy úspěšné teorie. Intersekcionalita mezi kritikou a stvrzováním hegemonie" [The paradoxes of successful theory: intersectionality between criticism and the reinforcement of hegemony], *Gender a výzkum* 19 (2018), no. 2, pp. 11–31.

⁴ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London, New York: Verso, 1985).

⁵ This is evidenced, among other things, by the discussion on materialist feminism. Cf. Rosemary Hennessy, "What's Material about Materialist Feminism? A Marxist Feminist Critique," *Radical Philosophy* (2000), no. 101 (May/June), pp. 18–28; Momin Rahman and Anne Witz, "What Really Matters? The Elusive Quality of the Material in Feminist Thought," *Feminist Theory* 4 (2003), no. 3, pp. 243–261; Ľubica Kobová, "Čo je materiálne? Rod, sexuálna diferenciacia a sexualita v materialistických feminizmoch" [What Is material? Gender, sexual difference, and sexuality in materialist feminisms], in Libuše Hečzková (ed.), *Vztahy, jazyky, těla. Texty z 1. konference českých a slovenských feministických studií*. Prague: Fakulta humanitních studií Univerzity Karlovy v Praze & Ermat, 2017, pp. 298–312.

⁶ Jiřina Šmejkalová-Strickland, "Do Czech Women Need Feminism? Perspectives of Feminist Theories and Practices in Czechoslovakia," *Women's Studies International Forum* 17 (1994), no. 2, pp. 277–282, here 278. For a prime example of this denaturalisation common to both feminism and Marxism, cf. Monique Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 9–20.

slovakia and the Czech and Slovak Republics as *pars pro toto* for the region) that during the first fifteen years after 1989 a number of second-wave left feminist “classics” were nevertheless published.⁷ They remained, however, without any noteworthy reception,⁸ as if to embody the kind of intellectual exchange between East and West observed by Hana Havelková, who referred to “Western theories, Eastern reality.”⁹ At the same time (as also argued by Havelková, as well as Libora Oates-Indruchová¹⁰ and, in this present issue of *Contradictions*, Jan Matonoha), despite the new regime’s suppression of the women’s movement with the rise of state socialism in Czechoslovakia in 1948, one can trace certain moments of feminist reflexivity and gender critique even after this moment. It was manifested in expert forums, in philosophy and sociology, and also in literary prose and film.

In the light of the above, one could say that to write politically in favour of left feminism and to explore left thinking and left movements from a critical gender perspec-

⁷ They appeared in the journal *Aspekt*, published in Bratislava: Barbara Ehrenreich, “Život bez otce. Promyšlení teorie socialistického feminismu” (orig. “Life Without Father: Reconsidering Socialist-Feminist Theory”), trans. Kateřina Lišková, *Feministický kulturní časopis ASPEKT* (2000/2001), no. 2-1, pp. 38–41; Heidi I. Hartmann, “Rodina ako miesto pre rod, triedu a politický boj. Príklad domácich prác” (orig. “The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class and Political Struggle: The Example of Housework”), trans. Jana Juráňová, *Feministický kulturní časopis ASPEKT* (2000/2001), no. 2-1, pp. 10–25; Maria Mies, “Kolonizování a domestikace žen” (orig. “Colonisation and Housewifization”), trans. Kateřina Lišková, *Feministický kulturní časopis ASPEKT* (2000/2001) no. 2-1, pp. 26–38. Also published in translation in *Aspekt* was Herbert Marcuse, “Marxismus a feminismus” (orig. “Marxism and Feminism”), trans. Pavel Siostrzonek, *Feministický kulturní časopis ASPEKT* (2003/2004), no. 1, pp. 157–160, with a translator’s introduction: Pavel Siostrzonek, “Herbert Marcuse, lidská emancipace a feminismus” [Herbert Marcuse, human emancipation, and feminism], *Feministický kulturní časopis ASPEKT* (2003/2004), no. 1, pp. 155–156. Some translations also appeared in mimeographed collections published by the Prague Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences: Christine Delphy, “Spjatá s domovem. Materialistická analýza ženského útlaku” (orig. “Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women’s Oppression”), trans. Hana Navarová, in Marie Čermáková and Lumír Gatnar (eds.), *Sborník překladů z evropské a americké feministické sociologie* (Prague: Sociologický ústav AV ČR, 1992), pp. 89–98; Barbara Ehrenreich, “Feminismus a třídní konsolidace” (orig. “Feminism and Class Consolidation”), in Marie Čermáková, Lumír Gatnar, and Eva Nechvátalová (eds.), *Sborník překladů z evropské a americké feministické sociologie II* (Prague: Sociologický ústav AV ČR, 1993), pp. 91–98; Heidi I. Hartmann, “Gender, třída a politický boj v rodině” (orig. “The Family as the Locus of Gender, Class and Political Struggle”), trans. Hana Navarová, in Marie Čermáková and Lumír Gatnar (eds.), *Sborník překladů z evropské a americké feministické sociologie* (Prague: Sociologický ústav AV ČR, 1992), pp. 61–75.

⁸ Cf. Lubica Kobová, “Are We All Neoliberal Feminists Now?” in Eszter Kováts (ed.), *Solidarity in Struggle: Feminist Perspectives on Neoliberalism in East-Central Europe* (Budapest: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2016), pp. 54–59.

⁹ Hana Havelková, “Abstract Citizenship? Women and Power in the Czech Republic,” *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 3 (1996), nos. 2–3, pp. 243–260.

¹⁰ Libora Oates-Indruchová. “Unraveling a Tradition, or Spinning a Myth? Gender Critique in Czech Society and Culture,” *Slavic Review* 75 (2016), no. 4, pp. 919–943.

tive means to stand in a place that is both somewhere and nowhere. I believe that the contents of this volume, in both its Slovak-Czech and English issues, will show readers that to occupy this contradictory location is not only possible and, for that matter, not only intellectually useful: for a fuller understanding of what is occurring socially and politically, it is essential.¹¹

*

The texts published in this double issue of *Contradictions* draw on two major sources of inspiration. The first is contemporary feminist left theory, which thematises the articulation of the capitalist mode of production in liberal democracies, with an emphasis on the contradictions that this articulation creates. A major source of inspiration is historiographic, and part of what this involves is research on the gender regimes of state-socialist societies, their gender culture, and Marxist theory of the period, which took part in the establishment of these regimes but also criticised them.

An important reference point for the Czech- and Slovak-language part of this volume is the debate provoked by the 1966 Czech translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. This material, editorially prepared and provided with an extensive introduction by Marianna Placáková, contains first of all an oft-remembered exchange between the philosopher Jan Patočka (who also wrote a preface and afterword to the Czech edition of the book), the sociologist Irena Dubská, the journalist Helena Klímová, and the philosopher Ivan Sviták, in the journal *Literární noviny*. The debate became a forum for reflection not only on the form of women's emancipation in Czechoslovakia in that period, but also on what it means to do philosophy from a gender perspective (or to fail to do so). In an effort to broaden this topos of feminist reflexivity, which is anchored in the context of the Prague (or as A. J. Liehm insists, the Czecho-Slovak) Spring, Marianna Placáková moreover draws on responses to the exchange by readers of *Literární noviny*. The materials presented are enriched by a response from Soňa Koželková (editor of the popular women's magazine *Vlasta*), who critically distances herself from what later, according to Placáková, could be called difference feminism, that is, the position of Helena Klímová. In an abbreviated form, this discussion also appears in the English-language issue of *Contradictions*.

¹¹ The aim of this issue is not to educate anyone. Educating oneself is a duty which ought to be imposed on the relatively privileged, though often it is conceived in quite an opposite way as a service rendered by the less privileged, who allegedly perform it in their own interest. Compare Audre Lorde in 1979, paraphrasing Adrienne Rich: "White feminists have educated themselves about such an enormous amount over the past ten years, how come you haven't also educated yourselves about Black women and the differences between us - white and Black - when it is key to our survival as a movement?" Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, Cal.: Crossing Press, 1998), pp. 110-113, here 113.

In Ivan Sviták's contribution to the above debate we may see a prefiguration of what Jan Mervart identifies in his paper: non-reflection on gender inequalities in Czechoslovak Marxist humanism. According to Mervart, Marxist humanism failed as an emancipatory project for women as well as men due to its abstract universalism, and in this respect it proved less capable of general reflexivity than the techno-optimistic current of post-Stalinist thinking. Mervart connects the discussion of *The Second Sex* with his interpretation and analysis of the thinking of the period, and also refers to Jan Matonoha's research on literary history and Una Blagojević's study of intellectual history. Articles by both these authors appear, as does Mervart's article, in the English-language issue of the journal.

Jan Matonoha, in his paper, develops his conception of Czech *belles lettres* published during the 1948–1989 period, tracing the strategies of silencing and wounded attachments which, the author argues, prevented full-blooded articulations of feminism. On this occasion, he explores the nature of gender consciousness among writers in dissident circles. At the conclusion of his text he proposes five periodisations/differentiations/plateaus, which in his view testify on the one hand to a practically non-existent gender awareness among male authors, and on the other hand to a gradual disappearance of gender reflection by female authors from the 1950s to the 1990s.

In the journal's Slovak/Czech section, part of the above-mentioned period in Czechoslovakia is covered in a review of Alena Wagnerová's *Women During Socialism* by Michaela Appeltová.

A broader theme in many of the texts is Marxist humanism, a philosophical tendency developing during the 1960s and 70s in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia. Its basic concepts are clarified by Petr Kužel in a further entry to the "Conceptual Dictionary" that appears regularly in the Slovak/Czech part of the journal. While the above-mentioned article by Jan Mervart was concerned with what might be called the gender ideology of Czech Marxist humanism on the level of theoretical conceptions, Una Blagojević's article, published in the English-language issue, focuses on the no less important question of how women were represented among Marxist humanist authors, and specifically in the journal *Praxis* and the philosophical school concentrated round it. In *Praxis*, female intellectuals were involved principally as reviewers and translators, hence in a certain mediatory role, enabling a transfer of ideas between East and West. To what extent these female thinkers belonged to the school of *Praxis*, whose lack of feminist perspective was vividly illuminated with the emergence of "the new Yugoslav feminism" in the 1980s (in which many of the women considered here were active) is debatable. According to Blagojević, Blaženka Despot, who published many reviews and translations in *Praxis*, did not regard herself as part of this school of Marxist humanism. Nonetheless Zsófia Lóránd, in her text introducing a translation from Despot's work, shows that this writer regarded Marxist feminism, whose basic contours she herself was elaborating, as an instrument for critical reflection on the emancipation of women

within the self-governing socialism of Yugoslavia. According to Lóránd, Despot took her bearings from Marx and Hegel, and within the conceptual framework thus formed she criticised the “sexual racism” that oppressed women, on the basis of their role in the reproduction of human beings. Lóránd acknowledges the value of this change in conceptual register for the designation of oppression, and she makes readers aware of the development of gender oppression along with gender-conditioned violence, which Despot plainly names in her 1981 text “Women and Self-Management,” reprinted here. How the thinking of women intellectuals such as Despot and others developed into a “new feminism” in the 1980s in Yugoslavia, under the crucial influence of second-wave feminism and its practice of consciousness-raising, is traced further by Katarzyna **Stańczak-Wiślicz** in her review of Zsófia Lóránd’s book *The Feminist Challenge to the Socialist State in Yugoslavia*, published in this journal’s English-language issue.

Particularly texts in the Czecho/Slovak issue of *Contradictions* present two important discussions of feminism and Marxism that have been developing since the 1970s. These relate to the problems of primitive accumulation and housework.

In an erudite interpretation of Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch*, Michaela **Pokutová** considers primitive accumulation in a comparative setting, not merely in light of the general problem of explaining the emergence of capitalism, but also as a process which is constantly occurring and is essential to the running of capitalism. Using gender as a category of historical analysis in the spirit of Joan Wallach Scott, Pokutová adds new interpretive layers to the understanding of Federici. Deliberately set alongside this coherent presentation of Silvia Federici’s principal work, there are reviews of Federici’s work written by Markéta Jakešová (in the Czecho/Slovak issue) and Veronika Flanderová (in the English issue). Jakešová, reviewing *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, traces with Federici how witch trials and violence inflicted on women became an accompanying feature of the ongoing primitive accumulation of capital; Flanderová, in her review of *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin*, concentrates on the damage which oppressive and exploitative systems inflict on bodies. In the latter work Federici also formulates her criticism of the modern idea of the mechanical and exploitable body, where there is an accumulation of differences that assist the continuation of capitalism. Among the three above-mentioned writers who address the thinking of Silvia Federici, Flanderová offers a comprehensive and comparative survey of Federici’s individual works.

Discussion of housework, which was in progress among Marxist or other socialist feminists on both sides of the Atlantic, reached its high point in the 1970s. As explained in Lubica **Kobová**’s introduction to a Czech translation of the concluding chapter of Lisa **Vogel**’s *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* (1983), this work is one of the culminating points of this discussion, which played out on a field shaped by Marx’s labour theory of value. If perhaps even the strands of this discussion often petered out in undecidable or scholastic disputations, it was Vogel whose thinking presented reproduction as a central framework of Marxist feminism. That is the thought-frame within which currently social reproduction theory continues to be

elaborated (works from this theoretical current have already been reviewed by Miroslava Mišíčková in the last Czecho/Slovak issue of *Contradictions*).¹² The Czech and Slovak readership, after several translations from an opposing theoretical current in the discussion on housework (represented by activists of the Wages for Housework movement, among others the above-mentioned Silvia Federici), have an opportunity to make more detailed acquaintance with Vogel's reworked argumentation and judge for themselves to what extent the foundations of social reproduction theory are structurally sound.

Tereza Reichelová's article addresses one of the sustaining dichotomies of Marxist and feminist thinking, the human/nature divide. Reichelová offers a critique and analysis of the ecofeminist thinking of Teresa Brennan, which may have the unintended consequence, in the author's opinion, of clearing theoretical terrain and providing politically fertile ground for conservative ethno-nationalists. The ideas of environmentally anchored thinkers, while ideologically diverse (besides Brennan, Reichelová engages with the anarchist Bookchin and the ecofascist Tarrant), are surprisingly congruent in their understanding of the relation between the human being and nature; they propose, however, different political solutions for the ecological crisis. The themes of Reichelová's article link up with a slowly unfolding line of thinking (in *Contradictions*) on nature, on the metabolic process between nature and society, and on the climate crisis. We believe this trend of thought will develop further, producing a more concentrated development of these issues by writers in subsequent issues of our journal.¹³

Last, but by no means least in terms of importance, a further group of articles directly poses the question of the possibility of resistance to oppression and exploitation from a feminist perspective. If feminist theory searches for the origins or sources of oppression, it does so in order to formulate effective feminist strategies. Or, as the article by Ewa Majewska shows, feminist theorising may even begin from the comprehension of resistance – in this case raising complaints, in order by this means to grasp the nature of power in the neoliberal academy and the possibilities of criticising it. Majewska, in a certain contradistinction to the strategy of strikes promoted today, designates complaint as a kind of “weak resistance,” which nonetheless she regards, one way or another, as a component of the workers' struggle. A discussion paper by Selin Çağatay, then, maps the ever more frequently theorised and applied strike initiative, taking shape transnationally under the auspices of the “International Women's Strike.” Feminist strikes are breaking out today from Argentina (which, at the time this journal went to press, was nearing a relaxation of its restrictive abortion laws) through Poland (where, on the contrary, in

¹² Miroslava Mišíčková, “Desať nových odpovědí na jeden starý problém” [Ten new answers to one old problem], *Kontradikce/Contradictions* 3 (2019), no. 1, pp. 225–235.

¹³ See Vít Bartoš, “K problému dialektiky přírody” [On the problem of the dialectics of nature], *Kontradikce/Contradictions* 2 (2018), no. 1, pp. 13–40; Anna Mikulenková, “Marxova politická ekonomie a ekologická krize” (review of Kohei Saito, *Marx's Ecosocialism: Capital, Nature and the Unfinished Critique of Political Economy*), *Kontradikce/Contradictions* 2 (2018), no. 1, pp. 249–253.

the autumn of 2020 the repressive state provoked what were originally feminist protests; continuing pressure led the protestors to hegemonise a great many originally disparate political demands) to Turkey. Çağatay's paper gives a compact overview of this new type of activism, which she has long been exploring ethnographically. Leading proponents of the strike (in addition to the Argentinian theoretician and activist Verónica Gago) include the authors of the manifesto *Feminism for the 99%*, reviewed in the English issue of *Contradictions* by Elisabeth Pedersen. While the reviewer acknowledges the contribution made by the manifesto, she declares that, paradoxically, it does not sufficiently emphasise the role of care. The issues raised by combining a variety of political struggles unfolding from different categories of identity, which must be at the core of an anticapitalist feminism for the 99%, likewise form the core of Ashley Bohrer's book on intersectionality, reviewed by Eliška Kubicová in the English-language section. The specific political opportunities provided when alliances (or at any rate, stronger bonds) are forged between feminist and class politics: this is the subject presented by Lubica Kobová in her discussion paper in the Czecho-Slovak section, entitled "For a Popular Feminism."

The English-language section contains Jan Sůsa's interview with Katerina Kolozova, who has been developing a speculative Marxist "non-philosophy" inspired by François Laruelle. As she explains, she wants to desubjectivise the understanding of universality, and furthermore to divest dialectical materialism of the ontological character which, she believes, Marx ascribes to it. In her writings, Kolozova generally draws creatively on, for example, the thinking of Judith Butler (from whom another book, *The Force of Nonviolence*, is reviewed by Jan Bierhanzl in the Czecho-Slovak section). Other important works of feminist-theoretical production are reviewed by Hana Janečková (in the English section), Barbora Černušáková, and Marianna Placáková (in the Czecho-Slovak section). Černušáková's review summarises Melinda Cooper's critical contribution towards understanding "family values" in the reproduction of neoliberalism; Janečková, reviewing *Full Surrogacy Now* by Sophie Lewis, discovers new forms of queer family and non-family bonds, focused on a commitment to care. Placáková's review essay trains a critical eye on *Second World, Second Sex* by the US-American anthropologist Kristen Ghodsee, whose broadly accessible texts on socialism and feminism have gained her adherents in Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁴ At the conclusion of her review, Placáková objects that Ghodsee is instrumentalising the East for the benefit of current political goals, subordinating everything to the criticism of non-regulated capitalism and liberal feminism.

¹⁴ Cf. Czech and Slovak translations of *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism*: Kristen R. Ghodseeová, *Proč mají ženy za socialismu lepší sex a další argumenty pro ekonomickou nezávislost*, trans. Sylva Ficová (Brno: Host, 2020) and Kristen R. Ghodsee, *Prečo majú ženy v socializme lepší sex a ďalšie argumenty pre ekonomickú nezávislosť*, trans. Zuzana Szabóová (Bratislava: Literárna bašta, 2020).

One review essay (by Juraj Halas in the Czecho-Slovak issue) and two reviews (by Jakub Raška in the Czecho-Slovak issue and Damian Winczewski in the English-language issue) do not directly touch on the main theme of the issue. Juraj Halas takes account of two initiatives in the translation and edition of Marx's works. Based on a wide-ranging comparison of various editions of *Capital*, he stresses value of the reader-friendly German edition of vol. 1 of *Capital* published by VSA-Verlag. By contrast, the selection from Marx that appear in new Czech translations under the title *Hledání ztraceného smyslu práce* (In search of the lost meaning of work) do not in the reviewer's opinion measure up to expectations, rather the contrary. Raška's review of the history of Czech social democracy and the Czech workers' movement (2011), by the since-deceased Zdeňek Kárník, is distinctly more favourable. Even here, though, he declares that the work was not completed by the author and, alas, nothing has been done by way of editorial work towards making up for this lack. Finally, Winczewski reviews the collective monograph *The Practical Essence of Man*, which is concerned with the late Soviet philosophical school centred on Evald Ilyenkov.

In 2020 three outstanding figures, all with a formative influence on our field of interest, left us. In the English section Joseph Grim Feinberg remembers Robert Bird (1969–2020), scholar of Russian literature and film, and the anthropologist David Graeber (1961–2020). Again, in the Czecho-Slovak section Ľubica Kobová recalls the work of the sociologist and political philosopher Hana Havelková (1949–2020).

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In conclusion, I would like to offer my thanks to the entire editorial collective for the work and trust invested in this issue; further, to all who participated in the workshop on Left Feminist Theory and Historiography, which was held in September 2019 and led to this issue; and above all to Jan Mervart and Joe Feinberg, without whose enthusiasm, industry, and strategic thinking the "feminist issue" of *Contradictions* would not have appeared.

Ľubica Kobová

STUDIES

COMPLAINT AS COUNTERPUBLIC

Weak Resistance and Feminism in Neoliberal Academia*

Ewa Majewska

Abstract

This article critically engages in the perplexed ontology of the complaint, which crosses the boundaries between the personal and the public and at the same time undermines the presuppositions organizing said division within the academic workplace. A feminist counterpublic – as Nancy Fraser defines it – opens ways of opposing the existing inequalities by producing a discursive space of critique of the status quo from an oppressed or marginalized position. Following the analysis of the complaint offered by Sara Ahmed, this article emphasizes the political dimension of the complaint, showing how it actually needs to become something else, probably more than a mere procedure, to bring any change. The passage from complaint to counterpublic built here is an effort to combine the critique of academic procedures of justice as potentially discriminatory practices

* The process of writing this article was long and painful. Most academic work is in fact a collective practice, and in the case of this article this was particularly true, and on many levels. I therefore would like to thank my friends and colleagues, especially Barbara Godlewska-Bujok, Agata Lisiak, Beata Kowalska, Elżbieta Korolczuk, Katarzyna Kasia, Monika Rogowska-Stangret, and Mikołaj Ratajczak for their constant support, in theory and in the practice of academic life. I also need to thank Joe Grim Feinberg and Ľubica Kobová for their generous feedback; Tereza Stejskalová for feminist solidarity, and – *last but not least* – to my students, and particularly: Dominik Puchała, Sebastian Słowiński, Amel Mana, and Filip Wesołowski for engaging in the academic counterpublics.

within neoliberal academia with a suggestion that perhaps a more public and labour rights oriented strategy is better suited to accomplish equality.

Keywords

The complaint, counterpublics, diversity work, feminism, academic labor

In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its Gypsy encampment, to be in but not of – this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university.

Stefano Harney and Fred Motem, *The Undercommon: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*¹

To be identified as willful is to become a problem.

Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*²

In *Changing Difference*, the French philosopher Catherine Malabou depicts the situation of women in her discipline as follows: “Still today the professional or personal achievements of a woman cannot be seen as anything other than an act of emancipation.”³ And she continues, more specifically: “Philosophy is woman’s tomb. It grants her no place, no space whatsoever, and gives her nothing to conquer. [...] The violence women suffer in this field is not just physical.”⁴ In Malabou’s description, academia, and philosophy in particular, is *par excellence* a field of gender inequality. Undermining it seems inevitable for women, yet the institutions tend to resist change. In neoliberal academia, scholars are usually overwhelmed with work, thus there is little energy for supporting those making complaints, let alone filing a complaint of one’s own. And yet, making a complaint seems like the option many women in academia are considering, although only some eventually decide to do it. Sometimes a complaint helps to articulate a problem, and if further backed by others in public, and by debates, petitions, or even strikes, it may become a tool for reshaping an institution or at least change some part of it. Such scenarios, however, are extremely rare as most of us simply avoid any confrontations with the institutions we work at, and for good reasons. As Sara Ahmed and other scholars argue, the complaint’s separation from the public makes it particu-

¹ Stefano Harney and Fred Motem, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 26.

² Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 3.

³ Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference. The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 92.

⁴ Malabou, *Changing Difference*, p. 100-101.

larily difficult for the issue under investigation to become an element of a public debate.

This article attempts to provide a critique of academia's failures of transition towards being a more egalitarian institution. It follows several cases of complaints and analysis of such cases based on an analysis of institutions as refusing and opposing change, as was shown in Mary Douglas's important analysis in *How Institutions Think*; the article discusses the practice of diversity works provided by Sara Ahmed, the work against sexual harassment by Catharine MacKinnon, and approaches the feminist and leftist critiques of neoliberal, precarizing academia offered by Briony Lipton, Monika Rogowska-Stangret, Mariya Ivancheva, David Graeber, Henry Giroux, and multiple others. It concludes with a strategic shift towards counterpublics – understood as a critical engagement, transversally crossing the public/private divide, as was argued by Nancy Fraser – as a possible solution to the impossible dilemma of accepting academic institutions as they function now or rejecting them entirely, which seems to be the alternative being currently maintained.⁵ As my main focus is on the situation in Poland and the research conducted by Sara Ahmed around her own university practice, as well as on the research, based on a small number of in-depth, reflective interviews, that is depicted in *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, covering the ethnography of diversity work in the UK and Australia, I cannot legitimately claim to be discussing “globalized academia.”⁶ However, some tendencies, particularly the secrecy of complaints as well as the general overdose of caring for the university's good name rather than an interest in finding solutions, can be seen as globally present.

The critical analysis of the complaint offered here should be understood as a part of a larger critique of the neoliberal academia, undermining the process of imposing smoothness and profitability over the need for a due diligence of institutions in solving harassment and discrimination-based complaints. Additionally, in the general shift from stable employment to neoliberal precarity, academia lost not just its ability to grant decent conditions to its workers, especially those without tenure and in the early stages of their career; today's profit-oriented academia often disregards the rights of the employees so as not to risk losing sponsors or their good position in the rankings.

⁵ See Briony Lipton, “Gender and Precarity: A Response to Simon During,” *Australian Humanities Review* 2015, no. 58, pp. 63–69; Monika Rogowska-Stangret, “Sharing Vulnerabilities: Searching for ‘Unruly Edges’ in Times of the Neoliberal Academy,” in B. Revelles-Benavente, A. M. González Ramos (eds), *Teaching Gender: Feminist Pedagogy and Responsibility in Times of Political Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 11–24; Mariya Ivancheva, et al., “Precarity, Gender and Care in the Neoliberal Academy,” *Gender Work & Organization* 26 (2019), no. 4, pp. 448–462; David Graeber, “Anthropology and the Rise of the Professional-Managerial Class,” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (2014), no. 3, pp. 73–88; Henry Giroux, “Neoliberalism's War against Higher Education,” *Limite* 10 (2015), no. 34, pp. 5–16.

⁶ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012).

Thus, as Sara Ahmed emphasizes on many occasions, many complaints are simply swept under the carpet instead of being meticulously processed. This critique cannot be challenged by simply enumerating the list of new, anti-discriminatory procedures, equal rights opportunities, and affirmative action programs in academia. Capitalism is a system based on contradictions, and its neoliberal version has a tremendous capacity for embracing opposing tendencies, including those concerning gender relations.⁷ Henry Giroux rightly contests the neoliberalization of academia, identifying it as a “war on higher education” and claims: “Under the reign of neoliberalism, economic and political decisions are removed from social costs and the flight of critical thought and social responsibility is further undermined by both the suppression of dissent, an assault on higher education as a democratic public sphere, and an ongoing attempt to suppress the work of educators whose work strives to connect scholarship to important social issues and develop forms critical to an education whose aim is to translate private troubles into public concerns while promoting what Paulo Freire once called ‘education as the practice of freedom.’”⁸ In such a context the work towards equality, including procedures of justice known as “complaint,” which Sara Ahmed identifies as “diversity works,” constitutes a moment in a larger context of the social. The harm, marginalization, oppression, and exploitation suffered by scholars and students in universities might be enhanced by the accelerated search for profit of neoliberal capitalism, and thus the desire to be a part of academia for many scholars becomes a painful reminder of their unprivileged status rather than a satisfying pursuit of knowledge, prestige, or educational mission. Lauren Berlant discusses “cruel optimism,” in which the affective investment, once started to sustain and enhance the subject, becomes a toxic attachment, endangering the integrity of the subject and even its very survival.⁹ In neoliberal academia, this already problematic optimism tends to be even more cruel for women, since, as Mariya Ivancheva, Kathleen Lynch, and Kathryn Keating claim, “The academy is a highly individualistic, competitive and greedy work institution in time terms, increasingly governed by new managerialist norms of overworking that the care-free alone can fully observe. An increasingly segmented labour market exists where tenured faculty build careers at the expense of the precarious professional *and* affective relational lives of those who unable to give that 24/7 commitment, the majority of whom are women.”¹⁰ I believe that, for many women and other discriminated groups, staying in academia means precisely such a cruel attachment, in which the optimistic premises upon which one accessed the institution – which supposedly is progressive, modern, or otherwise holding up the promise of better procedures – was with time

⁷ See Lipton, “Gender and Precarity.”

⁸ Giroux, *Neoliberalism’s War against Higher Education*, p. 5.

⁹ See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Mariya Ivancheva, et al., “Precarity, Gender and Care in the Neoliberal Academy,” p. 452.

revealed to be operating by violent discriminatory practices. In her article *Sharing Vulnerabilities*, Monika Rogowska-Stangret argues that within the neoliberal academia the bodies of scholars are submitted to exhausting mechanisms that supposedly enhance productivity, but in fact only protect submission. Recognizing the impossibility of the separated self, and embracing the always already existing multitude in a Spinozean, feminist materialist perspective, she demands the caring approach of “slow science” rather than the accelerated neoliberal performance of success, often built over the exploited body of the scholar. Following Donna Haraway and Isabel Stengers, among others, Rogowska-Stangret argues: “In order to disarm the painful repercussions of neoliberal individualization one may be willing to look into how the self is produced – or better put – out of what it emerges. Self-*poiesis* – as demonstrated above in the elaboration on response-ability – is the relational category per se. It means that there are no conditions that “add” the relational aspect to the self, since it is relational from the start (as we have seen in the example of organic response).”¹¹ As we will further see, staying together in a situation of a complaint seems particularly demanding, yet, it also proves to be necessary. This article is written partly as a research work and partly as a form of engagement in the effort to dismantle these structural forms of oppression.

The Complaint: From a Phenomenological to a Critical Perspective

A complaint is a formalized way of reporting someone’s behavior as a violation of the existing law or regulations. In this article, I will only discuss cases of anti-discriminatory and anti-harassment complaints from academia, and their phenomenological analysis provided by Sara Ahmed, as well as my own critical theory-inspired approach, developed in relation to the notion of counterpublics.¹² One of the reasons for writing this article is a pessimist constatation, repeated by various feminist scholars, that the academic system of preventing and combatting discrimination and sexual harassment at universities is dysfunctional. As Catharine MacKinnon states in her recent article, “A Brilliant Study by Professor Louise Fitzgerald Called ‘Why Didn’t She Just Report Him?’ found that the answer to that question is that women’s lives were worse off, both subjectively and objectively, when they reported being sexually harassed. That’s why they don’t report – because it makes their lives worse.”¹³ MacKinnon recognizes

¹¹ Rogowska-Stangret, “Sharing Vulnerabilities,” p. 17.

¹² My main references concerning the complaint in academia are publications and lectures of Sara Ahmed, see Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017); her blog, “The Feminist Killjoy” (online at: <https://www.saranahmed.com/complaint> [accessed Dec. 11, 2019]); and her lectures, Sara Ahmed, “Complaint as Diversity Work,” Cambridge University, 9 March 2018 (online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ_1kFwkfVE [accessed Dec. 11, 2019]).

¹³ Catharine MacKinnon in conversation with Durba Mitra, “Ask a Feminist: Sexual Harassment in the Age of #MeToo,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44 (2019), no. 4, pp. 1027–1043,

the important influence the #metoo movement has on the law, emphasizing how the sudden visibility of women's testimonies of assaults committed against them years ago and never reported resulted in changes in legal practice.

In her lectures, as well as in blog entries and books, Ahmed offers a series of descriptions of the complaint, which I would like to discuss here in recognition of the existential dimension she emphasizes in her analysis, thus making of the complaint an experience rather than merely a procedure. The complaint indeed is an experience, which – in the process of unfolding – involves the entire person. Eventually, the complainant becomes the complaint, and – as the old song had it – “nothing else matters.” The complainant becomes the complaint, and their research, scholarship, academic credentials – all this disappears, swept away by the wave of the scandalous: “she did it!” In Ahmed's texts, the complaint has been depicted as: a work that “has to be done” to “accommodate diversity and people who have been discriminated against,” as a “magnifying glass” and as a process which “literally becomes you” – one gets reduced to the complaint they file. All the rest of their work, life, persona, is gone, “here she is, the complainant, the complaint.”¹⁴

A diversity framework is a set of ideals and normative guidelines issued by an institution – here, an academic one, in order to regulate the conduct, employment, knowledge production and archive, in order to achieve and/or protest such values, as: equality, inclusivity, and freedom from discrimination and harassment, including sexual harassment. Usually, such frameworks are connected to the persons and/or commissions appointed by the universities to handle cases of misconduct and complaints.

In the book *On Being Included*, Ahmed explains her perspective on diversity works as one rooted in phenomenology. She claims: “Phenomenology allows us to theorize how a reality is given by becoming background, as that which is taken for granted. Indeed, I argue that a phenomenological approach is well suited to the study of institutions because of the emphasis on how something becomes given by not being the object of perception.”¹⁵ The unseen bias, prejudice, divisions, and inequalities of academia become more perceptible in Ahmed's account; she does not however build strong normative conclusions as she criticized and left the university but did not present a strong alternative framework for the better handling of the complaints. In my view, this can be seen as a flaw in her position. However, the amount of work, effort, and time she spent to diagnosing, criticizing and publicizing the failures of academic institutions to

here 1031. I would like to thank Luba Kobová for suggesting this reference. I need to stress that while I agree with MacKinnon on most of her critique of sexual harassment in institutions, I do not share her views on pornography and sex work. Some of my own views on censorship were expressed here: Ewa Majewska, “Censored Bodies, Censored Selves: Towards a Feminist Critique of Neoliberal Anti-Porn Legislations,” *Transverse* 2010.

¹⁴ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*.

¹⁵ Ahmed, *On Being Included*, p. 21.

realize their own diversity politics are nevertheless more than any other scholar had done on this topic.

The critique of injustice has no means to form a claim on its own. Within the description of complaints constructed in the phenomenological method, such critical activity would certainly constitute an intervention based on prior presuppositions, such as readiness to connect the perceived data and experiences in a negative way, leading to undermining the injustices of the observed context. This in turn would ruin the principle of “unbiased observation,” the practice of *epoché*, which Ahmed appropriates in her analysis. This is a point in which I partly disagree with Ahmed’s methodology: I believe phenomenological observation can indeed allow some insights in the procedures of invisibility within the university institutional work, but I do not believe that it is sufficient to undermine, challenge, and change its biased proceedings. Ahmed’s use of phenomenology is different from that offered by Iris Marion Young.¹⁶ When Young studies children’s behavior in an effort to see the gender difference, she notices how boys and girls are socialized differently, thus her (unbiased) observation allows a strengthening of the feminist analysis of gender formation, leading to a contestation, and possibly a rejection of, behaviorism and psychoanalysis as inadequate tools for explaining at least some aspects of gender difference. The topic of Ahmed’s analysis is however very different – discrimination or harassment are defined legally, unlike throwing a ball (well, this can be defined legally in some contexts, but still...). It is therefore necessary that the observation and epistemology organizing it embrace this institutional context. Phenomenology is in my view insufficient to allow such contextualization, and thus, although it brings up the often forgotten experience of the complainant, it is insufficient to understand what the complaint is. The use of phenomenological method in the context of the complaint is thus perhaps necessary but insufficient to grasp its specificity, and thus also to challenge the problems the complainants are facing in academia and other institutions.

The very possibility of the “unprepared eye” of the observer, who happens to be an engaged feminist and antiracist scholar representing several minority groups at once might also generate severe doubts, as it seems to be foreclosed by the scholar’s experience and social practice. Thus, I believe that the critical theory framework, already acknowledging the initial engagement of the scholar as well as their context, the entanglements of the institutions, and the will to transform the encountered bias, might be somewhat more effective. While in disagreement with these aspects of Ahmed’s method, I also acknowledge that the critical position has, or has for a long time had, a disadvantage brought to light by Ahmed. The critical position usually assumed access to the moral ground already prior to observation, it often tends to act before taking

¹⁶ See Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,” *Human Studies* 3 (1980), no. 2, pp. 137–156. I am grateful to Luba Kobová for suggesting this comparison.