

## Forum

### Is Gender – Women's Destiny? A Postsocialist Perspective

In response to Joan W. Scott's article:  
"Millennial Fantasies – The Future of 'Gender' in the 21st Century"<sup>1</sup>

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One of my former female students tended to be suspicious of the word 'gender'. "Of course, it is always useful to view gender roles as socially constructed identities, but what can we do further?" – and she continued: "How can I see myself, how can I approach myself as a *gender*? How can I say *I am committed to gender issues*? It doesn't make any sense." The question of subjectivity formation runs parallel to dilemmas of gender formation, leading to a paradoxical situation. At first glance, the use of gender as a concept appears to be generally accepted by feminists from both "West" and "East". However, upon entering into deeper analysis of various approaches, the concept of gender assumes the attributes of a mysterious code: a feminist "trouble" rather than a feminist challenge.

What is evident by now is that there is neither any type of feminist "consensus" on what to do with the concept of gender or the sex/body distinction, nor any vociferous claims for clarification of its use – especially within activist grassroots circles. A lack of debate implies both an absence of motivation to engage theoretically, as well as "recognition" of the meanings, functions and plausibility of the term gender. Indeed existing concepts, ideas and notions are multiple and diverse, from a range of essentialist and constructivist approaches – "biosexual integrity", "bodily difference", "sexual difference" – to explorations of the "technology of sex" (a Foucauldian notion), gender politics as parodic performance, according to Butler<sup>2</sup> and "Queer Gender", in addition to theoretic-

1 Joan W. Scott, *Millennial Fantasies – The Future of 'Gender' in the 21st Century* (dt. Die Zukunft von "gender". Fantasien zur Jahrtausendwende, in: Claudia Honegger u. Caroline Arni Hg., *Gender – die Tücke einer Kategorie*. Joan W. Scott, *Geschichte und Politik*. Beiträge zum Symposium anlässlich der Verleihung des Hans-Sigrist-Preises 1999 der Universität Bern an Joan W. Scott, Zürich 2001, 19–64).

2 Vgl. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London 1990.

cal inter-weavings and interplays between the above. Furthermore, gender often transcends feminist or queer theories, cultural studies, women's studies or gender politics; it translates into different practices and strategies, operating in those junctures where social discourses and knowledge get transformed.

"Gender" itself within these sets of frameworks somehow becomes a universal normative notion that tends to harmonize the status of both sexes towards human equality within a wider theoretical or political and ideological scope, functioning as an assumed normative code that fits things into a so-called "order". In a sense I agree with those feminists who warn of the artificiality of gender, or gender distinctions based on forced or recycled assumptions of gender difference – for the most part assumptions of socially constructed sex difference – which abound in the theoretical and the academic fields of literary writing, criticism, and theatre. The artificiality of gender renders the concept devoid of meaning or creative power, unable to strengthen women's agency or movements for social change. It is rarely possible to escape the complexities raised by the various debates, which cannot be reduced to two distinct views or positions regarding the sex/gender opposition. Similarly complex is the women/gender division and the conceptual frames pertaining to these divisions within "legitimate" discourses.

What is being questioned is not only the content of notions; the aim here is not merely to prod biologism versus culturalism into a more analytical shape. Rather what is at stake are the possibilities of feminist mapping and the creation of powerful analytical tools in favour of women. The emergent concept of gendered subjects or genders as subjects cannot be analysed without looking to histories of feminisms or feminist activities and asking the following questions again and again: Do we really disturb male-dominated power structures by using "gender"? Do we transform mainstream policies in favour of oppressed gender(s), or is gender only an exercise in mainstreaming? Is "gender" of any use for valuable analysis of the relation between social production of gender roles and power imbalances – and is it a productive force for any legal change – and ...?

Of course there are more questions which need to be raised here. In this regard, I found Joan W. Scott's article "Millennial Fantasies – The Future of 'Gender' in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" pertinent, both in the way it addresses profound dilemmas related to gender notions and in its invitation to articulate and position gender within highly contextualised maps, or mappings. In questioning the real, creative or potential use of gender nowadays, Scott opens up for debate wholly under-theorised procedures for employing the category of gender and creating gender politics within specific discursive and ideological contexts. I personally do not feel comfortable using the notion of "gender" and thus use it very rarely. Living in a postsocialist country such as Croatia, within a "transitional" framework (ideological, economic, theoretical, among others), I find the concept of "gender" both tricky and ambiguous. What has happened over the last decade throughout the whole post-socialist region is that "gender" has become a sort of "habit" among some feminist circles, women's groups and in academia. It exists as a convention or necessary term, but certainly not one that has been thoroughly thought through as a concept, nor examined for its subversive potential for feminism(s).

Two open questions occur to me. How has gender become a habit or norm? And to what extent is this phenomenon related to West/East paradigms or points of conflict

around Western/Eastern feminists? Yet perhaps it is of greater concern to establish *why* the phenomenon of gender happened than to lose oneself in descriptive accounts of how it happened. My argument is that gender has been "adopted" by diverse women's and academic circles since the early nineties as a functional – that is political or financial – investment rather than having been received as an energizing tool of the feminist movement, or a valuable outcome of the treasures of feminism<sup>3</sup>. In other words, the more the technology of fundraising and the "import" engineering of so-called democratic standards or political equality within higher education or mainstream politics has developed in general, the more the term "gender" has come into play, but it has never been truly problematised. From the mid-nineties introduction of the notion of "gender", especially within women's groups, became intensified in the countries of former Yugoslavia via "gender-awareness" trainings, seminars and "financial support" for women's groups, as in other postsocialist and transitional countries. Of course different contexts need to be distinguished and approached sensitively; with specific reference to the Croatian situation, theoretical insights into the works of American feminist authors, in particular Judith Butler and her performative concept of gender, greatly influenced the reception of the notion of "gender" in performative art and feminist theory, but this has only taken place in the last few years.<sup>4</sup>

However more comprehensively – with reference to areas where authentic feminist initiatives have existed for a longer time, and where such initiatives have been rooted in the realities of respective countries up until the nineties – the notion of gender has not only been uneasily welcomed<sup>5</sup> but it has been unable to adapt to the visions of women: their concepts of doing, acting, contemplating and resisting. Therefore, I agree that "gender" – rather than feminism itself, which has its origins here too – is a Western "import". Joan W. Scott has addressed these issues in her article. There are still open questions and dilemmas as to whether these two notions can be interchanged, if at all, and to what extent (bearing in mind the situation of the feminist movement as well as of theoretical efforts concerning feminism and women's questions within these feminist circles). In my own view, even the replacement of one notion with another is not possible theoretically, since the two notions are incommensurable and have shifted historically.

Furthermore, the two notions of gender and feminism have existed in parallel and overlapping spheres over the last decade and their usage depends on the different dynamics of influential concepts from abroad, in addition to feminist traditions, awareness of local women's groups, feminist agendas, the conformism of elitist theorists, and of one's own power of naming. Emerging from the points of juncture between these various aspects is the theoretical problem of self-representation, more precisely understood as the threat of "totalising feminist discourse": a form of mimicry or globalised discourse from the West,

3 I perceive feminism as more an ethical investment than anything else.

4 Lada Cale Feldman, *Nevolje s izvedbom* (Troubles with performance), in: *Frakcija*, 12/13, Akademija dramske umjetnost, Centar za dramsku umjetnost, Zagreb 1999, 154–165.

5 Referring to my opening remark, the more long-standing and well-known feminist circles that have existed in Zagreb, Belgrade and Ljubljana for example, have not been willing to make the shift to "gender", nor to take the concept of "gender" for granted – finding feminist perspectives and women's issues to be still powerful.

imposed upon feminists in local communities in the following ways: through the power of Western feminist knowledge – as ideological cliché has it; through recognized programs (structuring women's ways of knowing) from the West<sup>6</sup>; through West/East tensions; through mutual stereotypes and "(re)discovering the East".<sup>7</sup> To what extent, and how, the concept of "gender" shows a new type of "intellectual colonization"<sup>8</sup> particularly through internationally imposed "financial programs of exchange" or scholarship and fellowship programs<sup>9</sup>, is still open for discussion.

From the mid-nineties, feminist and women's groups in post-Yugoslav countries have more readily used the term "gender" for the requirements of fundraising, in turn referring to a series of international conventions which consciously shift the meaning of not only the words but of the efforts of feminists and women's movements. (As a rule) artificial and meaningless phrases such as "gender and development", "gender and poverty", "gender in development" etc. cover a wide spectrum of women's positions, often neutralizing the effects of injustice coming out of sexual difference and women's struggle for change. Critiques against the (mis)use of the term gender – which have been posed in the last fifteen years both by postcolonial theorists (Gayatri C. Spivak, Vandana Shiva etc.) and local grassroots activists, and which have been simultaneously accompanied by questions such as: Who authorizes knowledge? Who brings in new theoretical concepts, including

6 The study "Women's/Gender Studies – Integration into the Croatian University System" has shown that Gender Studies has become the dominant name in almost all of the postsocialist systems, especially in the countries of the former Soviet Union. In the countries of former Yugoslavia, independent centers which have shaped their own curricula and programs, such as Belgrade (from 1992) and Zagreb (from 1995), are based on original feminist initiatives from the early eighties, and call themselves "Women's Studies". Vgl. Valerija Barada, Juliette Janusic, Biljana Kašić, Jasminka Pesut, Zenski /Rodni studiji – integracija u hrvatski sveučilišni sustav (Women's Studies/Gender Studies – Integration into the Croatian University System), Centre for Women's Studies, Zagreb 2002, 28–45.

7 Vgl. Csaba Dupcsik, Postcolonial Studies and the Inventing of Eastern Europe, in: East Central Europe/L'Europe du Centre Est: Eine wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift, Budapest 26, 1 (1999), 1–15; Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York/Oxford 1997.

8 One peculiar type of "colonisation" occurs through linguistic usage. The word "gender" was installed in most Slavic and other "domestic" languages in non-translated form, especially within local women's groups (for example with reference to the post-Yugoslav context in Kosovo, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the term is used mostly to point out women's equality, women's status, and to highlight important women's issues). Given the non-distinct nature of the approaches and issues which can be covered by a concept such as "gender", this is not about a dispute over meaning and especially not a dispute around the concept of "feminism" and "gender". Nevertheless it is important to note that in many Slavic languages the term gender is not just one of "grammatical usage" or a purely linguistic term, but possesses a semantic genealogy related to "nation", "family" and "members of family", making the debate even more complex and the very use of the notion of gender even more questionable. Furthermore, the very meaning of "woman" comes from this same genealogy.

Vgl. Rada Boric, *Zenski identitet u jeziku (Women's Identity in Discourse)*, in: Trecia. Centre for Women's Studies, Zagreb 1, 1 (1998), 37–47, 37.

9 Biljana Kašić, "Women's Studies: Ideological Images, Common Problems and Dilemmas", in: Gabriele Jaehnert u.a. Hg., *Gender in Transition in Eastern and Central Europe Proceedings*, Berlin 2001, 356–361. Vgl. also: Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, in: Chandra Talpade Mohanty u.a. Hg., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Indianapolis 1991, 51–80.

the concept of "gender" among others?<sup>10</sup> Which contexts provide a possibility for theoretical presentation and debate on an equal basis? How may platforms be created? – have yet to be challenged by feminists in postsocialist countries.<sup>11</sup>

There is also the question of whether gender is merely a free-floating signifier for an epistemological-lag, covered over by "urgent" topics (rape, trafficking, women's human rights, violence, women and the capitalist market) rather than stimulating theoretical self-reflective or self-directed thoughts of meaningful use for feminist theory in a postsocialist context. Should I therefore acknowledge the extensiveness of its claim right here and now as the most important issue for feminist agenda within local communities? Or is the question around "gender" in itself a sort of "import dilemma" imposed upon so-called southeastern feminists. This seems to me to be another controversial issue. We are still on the threshold of starting discussions around these issues.

Most striking is that the debate on gender touches upon the "authorization" of "social experience as the contingency of history" in a postcolonial sense<sup>12</sup>, which in this case transcends the "ultimate" gender concept in postsocialist practices. To encounter the "gender concept" or "gender politics" means, first of all, to acknowledge the existence of different historical periods and women's memories; i.e. to acknowledge the formative contribution of the "women's question" as a basic Marxist concept to both the status of women and women's equality and feminist achievements. This means that before any specific analysis or exploration of the use of "gender" can be done, the process of identification through the re-establishing and reaffirming of a sense of one's own female and feminist authorization needs to take place. In contrast, the notion of gender might be understood in a Bourdieenne sense, that is, in terms of an unreflexive "... 'choice of the necessary'".<sup>13</sup>

Examining the purpose and the manner of this shift from the women's question, which existed as a Marxist "concept" for more than half a century, to gender concepts occurring in the nineties – and addressing key issues on the feminist horizon today – depends primarily on which agents possess the power to deal with this reinscription. Such efforts offer a real chance to overcome the position in which many of us here in postsocialist Europe find ourselves, namely defending the *status* of gender over its substantial meaning. To conclude: is it possible to discuss and renegotiate the meanings we need in order to articulate our ways around the ambivalence of authentic positions, concepts or paths?

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- 10 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason – Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge/London 1999; Tania Modleski, *Feminism and the Power of Interpretation: Some Critical Readings*, in: Teresa de Lauretis Hg., *Feminist Studies Critical Studies*, Bloomington 1986, 121–139.
  - 11 I hold that feminists from these countries need to pose these questions whilst being aware of the experiences and knowledge of feminists from "Third World" countries and respecting all the while all "others" ("Western" feminists, "Eastern" feminists, theorists, activists, and today's outstanding critical thinkers).
  - 12 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Postcolonial and the Postmodern: The Question of Agency*, in: Simon During Hg., *The Cultural Studies Reader*, London/New York 1993, 189–209.
  - 13 Roy Boyne, *Bourdieu: From Class to Culture – In Memoriam Pierre Bourdieu 1930*, in: *Theory and Culture*. SAGE Publications, Vol. 19, 3 (June 2002), 117.