

An Insider-Outsider Perspective on the Status of Women in Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic

Researching women and feminism in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution

Having spent most of my professional career in efforts to explain a variety of women's issues in East-Central Europe to Western feminist scholars and activists, I was hoping that, with the fall of communism, I would finally be able to transmit something back from Canada and the U.K. to my country of origin – the Czech Republic. As a Czech-speaking feminist émigré scholar, I was looking forward to explaining to interested Czech women (and men) the scope and concerns of various Western feminisms. However, my personal experience as a young Czech émigré in the U.K., who in the early 1970s eagerly identified with the goals and political style of the WLM, turned out to be a poor guide to the understanding of Czech women's reaction to Western feminism. I soon found out that, like many other long-time émigrés, I am now more Canadian than Czech. My knowledge of local culture has dated, since my life experience of a North American middle-class lifestyle, political commitment to feminism and anti-racism, and cosmopolitan multi-lingual pluralistic orientations are quite different from those of most Czech women and men.

My attempts to comprehend the negative Czech reaction to Western feminism eventually led me to the analytic notions of 'framing', 'frame resonance' and 'frame alignment'. I have found that Western and Czech women are approaching a shared problem (of women's inequality) with frames based on very different life experiences, socio-economic contexts and ideologies. Feminism does not strike a responsive chord with Czech women (and men) "because the world view of Czech women is informed by the social legacy of communism, and as such it currently lies outside the descriptive and theoretical frameworks of Anglo-American feminism" [Heitlinger 1996: 90].

I soon discovered that I could learn more from my local informants by listening to what they had to say, rather than attempting to 'enlighten' them about Western feminist theory and practice. I conducted interviews with various academics, activists associated with the Gender Studies Centre, and officials at the Ministry of Health, the Czech Association of Nurses, and the Association of Home Care. My informants considered me as 'one of them', an insider rather than an outsider. They felt quite free to complain to me about some of their frustrating encounters with various Western visitors. 'Feeling free to complain' was often more important to them than learning something about Canada. What the Czech informants particularly resented were those Western visitors who 'wasted their time', either by asking uninformed questions and/or by imposing inappropriate research agendas and analytical frameworks.

Young Women of Prague

How does one then move away from Western dominance in feminist analyses and research agendas? One possible approach is to engage in collaborative research projects. While during the communist period my research visits every two or three years were quite sufficient to produce credible knowledge – things changed rather slowly then – this mode of operation is clearly unsuitable for the current situation of rapid social change. I

have found my location in North America, and the fact that I do not want to leave my family for more than a month at a time, a real barrier to maintaining an on-going research association with my 'home' country. The only way I can now conduct meaningful Czech-based research is in collaboration with locally-based researchers. They do not have to be Czech-born and raised, but they need to speak the Czech language and have a first-hand current knowledge of local culture and politics.

My most recent research project was on the lives of young, 'ordinary' (as opposed to 'successful') Czech women who came of age in the aftermath of the Velvet Revolution. It was conducted in collaboration with Susanna Trnka, a second-generation Czech American, who spent the 1995-96 academic year in Prague. The publication resulting from this qualitative research project is a collection of interviews with fourteen women of similar age and education, but varying work, marital and childbearing experiences. Unlike many informants whose voices 'disappear' in random quotes and aggregate statistics and graphs, our respondents – 1989-90 and 1990-91 nursing graduates – get to speak for themselves, and come across as real personalities. The fourteen chapters of interviews are preceded by a background chapter outlining the social and historical forces that have shaped these women's lives. A concluding chapter analyses common themes that have emerged from the interviews, linking them to legacies of communism as well as to the current post-communist transition. Both English and Czech editions of the book have been published [see Heitlinger and Trnka 1998a, 1998b].

This small-scale qualitative study attempts to combine an insider's understanding of the local situation with an outsider's analysis. Addressing the problem of diverse audiences and multiple reception identified by Mani [1990], the English edition has an extended section on Czech history, while the Czech edition has an additional section on feminist methodology.

The politics of location as an insider-outsider

As a researcher who has grown up in communist Czechoslovakia, who has maintained an on-going association with her country of origin, but who has lived for more than 30 years in the Anglo-American milieu, I am simultaneously an outsider and an insider in both realms. Being a 'stranger' (or, to use a post-modern term, 'the other') is generally seen in sociology as a privileged position from which to conduct research, since 'strangers' are allegedly more objective, and can offer useful comparative insights.

Émigrés speak the local language. This important asset enables them to access indigenous documents, journals and public debates, and interview other than English-speaking informants without the need for an interpreter. However, émigrés can also experience unique problems in conducting cross-national research, since their exile/émigré location may determine the type of data to which they can get access. Local hostility to émigrés can also hinder research. Moreover, as we noted, émigrés' background knowledge of local culture and politics can date. Over time, émigrés can lose their familiarity with the nuances of the local situation, and become instead more knowledgeable about the cultural and political environment of their adopted country. Thus émigré scholars, especially those writing for a Western audience, are not immune from gazing at women in East-Central Europe only through 'Western eyes'.

Conclusion

Since an émigré status can create both special opportunities and special problems in transnational research, the best way forward in pursuing research on Czech women is to engage in a mutually respectful dialogue and collaborative research projects between 'émigrés', those 'who stayed', Western and East European scholars without an ethnic Czech connection, and a new generation of feminist scholars and activists, whose research agendas may cut across all these locales.

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