

Alena Heitlingerová, Zuzana Trnková:
Životy mladých pražských žen [Lives of
 Young Prague Women]

Praha, SLON 1998, 207 pp.

In the current Czech intellectual context, still so suspicious with anything related to gender and/or feminism, to deal with works on these issues generates a dilemma, in fact resembling the situation of *samizdat* production in underground circles not so long time ago. One gets trapped in a dilemma – symptomatic for any marginalised sphere – of tribal solidarity versus professional responsibility. It works along the following lines. A piece of work has a number of obvious problems. One possibility is, in the name of solidarity with the marginalised, to cover up its negatives, and to celebrate the very fact that it appeared at all, with the risk of supporting a lower quality production in the field, area or genre. The other possibility is to critically acknowledge the weak points of the piece, but at the same time to reproduce the commonly shared assumption that nothing interesting or valuable can be done in that particular direction anyway. The choice is far from easy. I would suggest that regardless the dramatic lack of original work on gender issues in the local context, the only way to promote the development of this area is to apply the highest criteria. As I take this approach, I have to admit that the book under review can be seen as a missed opportunity to say something innovative and original about young women in the Czech Republic in 1990s.

The book deals with the lives of fourteen “ordinary” Prague young women, graduates of a nursing school, who reached maturity around the time of the ‘Velvet Revolution’. Beyond the introduction and historical context drafted at the beginning and in the conclusion, most of the book is filled with transcriptions of the interviews conducted by Trnková in 1995–1996. The women answered a more or less standard set of questions on their attitudes to female and male roles, towards parenthood and family life, to the meaning of their nursing education and the profession today in general. According to the authors – an established professor of sociology at Trent University in Canada and a Princeton University graduate stu-

dent, both of them of Czech background – the book aims to address those, “who are interested in the position of women, in qualitative feminist methods, but also those interested in the problems of health care...” Does the project fill these expectations?

The limited space of this review does not allow a consistent critical analysis of the issues and conclusions presented in the text. Nevertheless, a few points regarding the object of study, the methodology applied, and the evaluation and elaboration of the research material presented in the book should be mentioned. The first question emerges: Why write a book on fourteen Prague nurses? Can an insight into their lives help us (i.e. including the international academic community, since the English version of the book was published by Macmillan Press under the title *Young Women of Prague*) to understand better the issues of gender in transitional societies?

The authors’ intention to focus on representatives of a “generation unburdened by the values of the past” is in fact very challenging and inspirational. But what did they get out of them? Reading almost hundred pages of these young women’s answers to similar questions is not easy in sense that after the third interview the identity of the individual story, and more importantly the sense of its cognitive value becomes obscured. Even a book with the highest academic ambitions is to be written in order to be read. The women’s answers could be used as a basis for anthropological or sociological analyses, but their narrative value is very problematic. The authors even explicitly admitted that “the women in our study have not tried to divert from the given questions and to bring into the interviews any new themes.” and “with few exceptions avoided all purely political, controversial and conflicting questions” (p. 14, 15). In other words, the capacity for self-reflection of the women chosen for this project seems to be rather questionable.

This brings up the question of the qualitative research methods applied. What an already rich – and in the book not even mentioned – local experience with the methods of oral history has taught us is that the most challenging moment appears at a point where ‘classic’, in this case feminist, research methods success-

fully applied in, for example the Anglo-American context, may fail in a different environment. To take just one example from the book: it is hard to believe that researchers with an Eastern European background and competence explicitly express their surprise at discovering "that concept of 'life strategy', commonly used in the West, has a very limited application in the context of the Communist area" (p. 12).

Even though I have serious doubts about the author's opinion that "feminists studying women's lives by the method of interviews don't usually have major problems with the process of interview," potentially fruitful methodological issues are raised. For example, the authors claim that regardless of the original intention to conduct open non-standardised interviews, they in the end decided to apply a structured set of questions. The question of why they took this decision goes unanswered. Here is precisely a moment at which the project might have brought a new light to the application of feminist methodology in the post-communist context. Such discussion has been one of the substantial points of a major women's oral history project in the Czech Republic, entitled *Women's Memory*, which has been conducted by the research team at the Prague Gender Studies Centre for several years. It is surprising that the book does not refer to it at all.

It is impossible to mention here all the arguments I find problematic in the theoretical introduction, in the chapter entitled "Historical and Social Context", as well as in the analytical conclusion. Contradictory arguments about the definition of the private and public spheres, simplifying statements such as "women did not choose emancipation" or "family was conceived as a somewhat public institution" would need more sophisticated discussion. Beyond some data quoted from some local and international sources, very few truly new and so far unknown issues on gender in post-communist society are raised. There are number of themes, however, which at least for me, came up in the course of reading the texts of the interviews and would have been worthy of further discussion in the final analytical part. These are the function of informal networks in the process of

managing the balance between family and professional roles, the homophobia, racism and ageism visible in the women's comments, the controversial reception of feminism in the Czech context, and finally the very issue of why Czech women, as the researchers discovered, are, compared to they 'Western sisters', not eager to speak out.

My last comment is related to the formal qualities of the text itself, especially concerning the references and the language used. Had I had an access to the English version of this book, the review might have been about something else. Some of the concepts and syntax used in the Czech text give the impression that it has been carelessly translated from English. The final point is the bibliography. The field of gender studies in this country, no matter how marginalised, is gradually developing. In a book published in 1998, it seems inappropriate to include a reference to the latest work of one of the leading scholars in the field (Čermáková) dated 1991.

Disregarding the moralistic and somewhat cautionary concluding point of the book advising 'Czech women' to take on a more critical attitude towards their own "economic, social and political helplessness" there is one more issue to be mentioned. Considering the lifelong internationally respected work of Heitlingerová on the issues of gender and totalitarian societies, one wonders why she has committed herself to such an incomplete project, moreover, presented under a rather misleading generalising title. This is certainly not a book on 'young women of Prague'. Perhaps the group of women studied here could have been an interesting dissertation theme for a graduate student, the result of which, however, does not seem to be ready for a publication. The rather confusing analyses of a small sample of interviews conducted with persons limited in terms of age, social and professional background, and most importantly experience, cannot but reproduce myths and stereotypes on gender issues in post-communist societies. For the Czech social science community, which is still rather allergic to gender topics, such a publication carries risk of promoting suspicion of not only feminist but qualitative research methods as such.

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