

**Elaine Weiner: *Market Dreams: Gender, Class and Capitalism in the Czech Republic***

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*Market Dreams* explores the workings of free-market economics as a discourse in the post-socialist milieu, and specifically does so for the case of the Czech Republic. Decisive here is Weiner's focus on the market as a discursive form, an approach which she argues breaks with realist approaches to the market, where the market is understood as a mechanism for co-ordinating the trading, buying and selling of goods and services. Instead, and in the author's own words, this approach understands the market as also functioning as 'a mental model informed by particular cultural and political referents'. In making this move, Weiner is not simply claiming that for the citizenries of post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) the free market is an ideological phenomenon expressed via discourse, but also that this discourse takes shape as a narrative, and more specifically as a metanarrative. Crucial for Weiner here is that metanarratives are not only grand stories. Unlike other narratives, metanarratives naturalise – they work to render social phenomena as given and taken-for-granted. Therefore, Weiner's argument is that in the post-socialist milieu the free market achieved such a metanarrative status, indeed, that for post-socialist CEE spaces, in the wake of the ideological void created by the collapse of socialism, the metanarrative of the free market became hegemonic and unrivalled.

But the fascinating aspect of *Market Dreams* is that Weiner is not simply content to tell a story of the ascendancy of the free market as a public narrative. It certainly does do this. It provides, for instance, a fascinating account of how political elites mobilised neo-liberal discourse to legitimate a new economic order. But it does a lot more besides. Specifically, it also explores how in

the post-socialist milieu the free market is lived, that is, how the metanarrative of the free market mediates experience. It does so by exploring how particular groups of workers – twenty-six Czech female managers and forty-eight Czech female factory workers – engage with the metanarrative of the free market, indeed how these groups of workers have anchored their experiences in this metanarrative. In showing how a free market narrative mediates lived experience, at the most general level *Market Dreams* shows how metanarratives allow some stories to be told and not others – how metanarratives delimit what is and what is not culturally intelligible. For Weiner, the stories and experiences of these two particular groups of workers were selected for study because of their apparently oppositional locations in the transition to the free market. On the one hand, factory workers were selected as they were widely predicted (for instance in Marxist and neo-Marxist literatures) to be the losers of the ascendancy of the free market in post-socialist spaces and even to pose a radical challenge to the free market. On the other hand, managers (a new occupational grouping in post-socialism) were predicted to be the winners of the transition, both materially and symbolically. And complicating this story of course is that all of the workers selected were women – a group predicted (for instance, by certain feminists) to be the losers in the transition to the free market.

While, as Weiner makes clear, the transition certainly opened up an enormous socio-economic gulf between factory workers and managers (not least because in the new market economy factory workers exceeded demand while managers were in short supply), nonetheless the significant finding of her research is that both of these groups of workers drew – albeit in different ways – on the logic of the market metanarrative to construct their own narratives and to make sense of their own experiences. Czech women managers, for ex-

ample, identify as winners in the transition and attribute their own success and membership of a new elite grouping to knowing how to take advantage of their own abilities; and in the telling of their experiences draw heavily on notions of personal responsibility, self-reliance, and independence. Moreover, for the women managers the market is understood as a source of empowerment, whose transformative effects have reconstructed not only their working lives, but also their roles as citizens, partners, wives, and mothers. In contrast, the women factory workers are acutely aware of their economic marginalisation, indeed aware of the fact that they are members of the new poor. Thus, these women give vivid accounts of economic vulnerability, dependence, exploitation, uncertainty, and precariousness. Yet they understand this location and these experiences not as an outcomes of external forces, for instance of prevailing socio-economic conditions, but as the outcome of internal factors, specifically as the outcome of their own personal flaws, failings which are understood by the women to be specific to a generation born and raised under socialism. For the factory workers interviewed by Weiner, their own disenfranchisement did not discredit the market metanarrative; indeed their perceived problem is 'their "socialist" disease, not its "capitalist" cure'. Crucially while this group of women see that in their own lives they will suffer, they understand that future generations will benefit from this pain and reap capitalism's rewards. Despite their marginal socio-economic location, in the stories of women factory workers the market metanarrative therefore reigns triumphant.

In contrast to many of the predictions regarding post-socialist spaces, and regardless of the enormous differences in their socio-economic locations, neither group of women interviewed by Weiner understood themselves as straightforward losers in the transition to a neo-liberal socio-economic regime. And for Weiner, this commonality

in the narratives told by the women is to be explained by the hegemony of the market metanarrative, a hegemony which means that the women's stories 'share the same causal emplotment in which socialism is seen as the source of their problems (their oppressor) and capitalism is deemed their means of resolution (their liberator)'. Indeed the hegemony of the market metanarrative renders a straightforward personal narrative of loss or of losing unintelligible. *Market Dreams* is therefore not simply a book about narrative, it is also one about the formidable force of a specific narrative – that of the market – of how the lives, actions and identities of seventy-four Czech women are 'market metanarratively constituted'. Certainly this empirical focus on the storied self enabled Weiner to productively challenge a range of assumptions regarding post-socialist spaces. But one cannot help but wonder in our current context of global economic crisis – which many commentators understand to be a crisis in neo-liberal accumulation – what narratives women such as those Weiner interviewed may now be enacting. Indeed, in this context, one wonders if Weiner may have overplayed the stability and homogeneity of the market as discursive form. And perhaps this in turn should lead us to ask, if Weiner had confronted literatures on the market examining not just its stability and homogeneity but also its heterogeneity and instability, could the story presented in *Market Dreams* have been a rather different one?

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