

**Ioana CÎRSTOCEA, *Learning Gender after the Cold War: Contentious Feminisms*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, ISBN 978-3-030-97887-7, 412 p.**

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Despite its daring enterprise of “decoding” the genealogy of feminism(s) and gender studies in formerly socialist Eastern European countries, Ioana Cîrstocea’s thoroughgoing volume, *Learning Gender after the Cold War: Contentious Feminisms*, has received scarce attention since its first edition was issued in French in 2019. This book covers the decade of the transition, i.e., the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall, up until the 2000s. Broadly, it advances an interdisciplinary sociological and geopolitical exploration of the transnational networks of circulation of feminist ideas and practices as a common ground for Eastern and Western women involved in knowledge production on “gender.” The main aim is to unravel the intricate national and international dynamics of how feminist thought gets integrated into the civic and educational platforms of ex-socialist countries. Moreover, the study approaches feminism and “gender” as liberalization and democratization tools specific to a neoliberal world, examining their institutionalization through philanthropic funding. Setting out to grasp the role of expert discourse on gender, of radical feminist activism, and of academic contributions to gender studies and feminism, Cîrstocea’s project offers an overview not solely of a “traveling theory,” as Edward Said termed it, but also of essential individuals—intermediaries of theory and practice from East and West alike—for the discussion on “gender.”

The first chapter, “(Re)Making ‘Gender’, (Un)Making ‘Eastern Europe’. Introduction,” expands upon the methodology employed and surveys the meanings attributed to “gender” and “Eastern Europe” by aligning and interrelating the two. For instance, Ioana Cîrstocea credits socialist ideology for its emphasis on gender equality, but she also reminds us of the widespread criticism directed at socialist ideas within the international political scene. Whereas “[w]omen-friendly bills and policies establishing equality in all areas of social life” (8) were adopted in the states from the former “Soviet bloc,” it was only within a liberal climate that women’s

movements could arise and stabilize themselves. What is requisite here is the institutionalization of gender, for the author acknowledges that in the Czech Republic of the 1990s “‘gender’ moved from being an absolute linguistic and theoretical novelty to becoming an institutionally established area of knowledge production, recognized as much in higher education and research circles as in those of political decision making” (3). Even though the term itself was imported from the West—untranslatable as it was and still is—due to the early transnationalism of gender studies, it occasioned in the former socialist countries the rise of a new knowledge domain whose origins can be traced, for example, in the “[p]ieces of Western feminist literature [that] crossed the ‘Iron Curtain’ via informal or private channels” (23). After the Cold War, the circulation of texts and research on gender studies was facilitated by democratizing policies, but “[i]n Romania, for instance, a scholar who would become the most visible spokesperson for gender studies states that she knew nothing about feminism before the regime change” (23). The book in fact deals precisely with the socio-political processes that allowed the advocacy for women’s rights in post-socialist states and generally for feminist thinking inside and outside the field of academia.

The first part, “Transnational Mobilizations: From Discovering the ‘Post-socialist Other’ to Professional Activism Beyond Borders,” primarily depicts and questions the relationship established between Eastern and Western feminists and their internal debates while also examining the roots of the process of NGO-ization of feminism and gender studies. The purpose of this overview of “transatlantic conversations” is to scrutinize the dynamics of the Network of East-West Women (NEWW), considering that “the international resources of the first ‘gender experts’ established in Eastern Europe arose largely from exchanges within this group, while its members produced some of the most visible works on the theme of women, gender and (post)socialism” (76). The symbolic leader of the group, Ann Snitow (1943-2019), shared an interest in the precarious life experiences of women under state socialism with Western feminists who recognized the potential to extend their politics to the women from former socialist countries. In this chapter, the figure of Slavenka Drakulić from Yugoslavia, seen here as representative of Eastern Europe, is also relevant. At a conference in New York City in April 1990, she highlighted that “democracy without women is not democracy” (80) and insisted on the emancipatory transnationalizing character of “sisterhood” and activism beyond borders. Ioana

Cîrstocea even presents profiles of US feminists involved with NEWW, such as Nanette Funk and Sonia Jaffe Robbins, and of “in-betweeners,” as she called them, such as Joanna Regulska from Poland and Slavenka Drakulić from Yugoslavia, for:

[e]ven though NEWW was structured based on the energy, the political know-how and the experience of US activists who had come from the “second wave feminism”, the emergence of the transnational activist project of the network also benefited from the input as well as from the participation of Eastern European natives engaged in international trajectories. Such women were genuine “in-betweeners”, or cultural mediators, connecting different societies and spaces on the one hand and, on the other hand, contributing forms of knowledge crystallised in diverse socio-political contexts. (96)

As Western feminists in the US had already acquired socio-economic privileges by the time the question of women socialized in Eastern Europe was raised internationally, the latter were conceived both as figures of “sisterhood” and “difference,” historically situated in a sort of “combined and uneven development” of knowledge production. The NGO-ization of NEWW, despite the anti-institutional beliefs of its members, was engendered by a lack of resources, as the author points out: “Their limited resources, both material and in terms of time for volunteer activities, were stretched to the point that in 1993 the founders decided to raise funds and hire staff” (124). Since the group soon adopted an “NGO form,” the funds it earned permitted its members to launch projects oriented towards self-defense, digital education, academic activity, and other initiatives. The author underlines the importance of training in internet use facilitated by the program “On-Line Initiative” as a means of digitally connecting the Eastern feminist cause: “In the first year of operation of the program, 30 internet access points and email accounts were set up for the women’s groups based in the former socialist countries, including those of the Bucharest-based organization AnA—Society for Feminist Analysis, started on 8 March 1995” (135). Accordingly, NEWW became a site of professionalization or expertise on “gender” and a space for feminist knowledge production made in West-East circulation.

The second part, “The Institutional Building of International Gender Expertise,” explores the neoliberal strategies of transnationalizing knowledge and expertise on “gender.” In other words, it deals with the contribution of OSI (The

Open Society Institute founded by George Soros) to the pursuit of women's political rights through democracy-oriented ideals and the emphasis on anti-communist ethos that marked the transition towards democracy. This funding intervention led to the appropriation of feminist criticism into the objectives of the Soros Foundation as a means of encapsulating this new field of knowledge production. As the author summarizes the problem, “[m]erging the repertoires of activist groups and those of expert circles amounted to consolidating the neoliberal political and economic model that was being globalized during the 1990s” (171). This “young philanthropic foundation” did, on the one hand, offer needed resources for developing institutional programs oriented towards feminism and gender studies and “[b]y the end of the 1990s, the OSI was the main international cooperation actor engaged in promoting ‘women’s and gender issues’ in the former Soviet space” (219); on the other hand, it succeeded in fighting communism in Eastern European countries by supporting the liberal elites and by employing the rhetoric of liberalization and democratization. For example, the case of Romania is telling of such a pursuit of anti-communist political beliefs:

With the offices in Bucharest and Timișoara, the Romanian OSF recruited to its committee intellectuals who were known for their critical stances during the socialist regime, for instance, the philosopher Mihai Șora or the historian Andrei Pippidi. [...] Those who benefited from the various foundation programmes included prominent figures of the “civil society” in the making; they were academics, NGO people and representatives of the new liberal political and intellectual elites, as well as most of the “pioneers” of feminism and gender studies. (177)

In addition, OSI intervened in the process of incorporating gender studies in several higher-education institutions. These “international transfers” of knowledge on gender issues were conducive to a certain degree of academic institutionalization, and thus transformations occurred in the fields of teaching and research, even though the bibliographies were mostly occupied by imported Western feminist authors, which is still the case nowadays in Romania, for instance. Cîrstocea dwells upon the democratizing mission of integrating the question of “gender” in universities from post-socialist countries and argues for the activist origins of this then emergent space of knowledge production.

The third part, “A Sociography of Eastern European ‘Gender Pioneers,’” addresses case studies of activism and scholarly activity in the East from a sociological point of view. The roots of the emancipatory interventions of transnational feminism in Eastern European countries seem to be linked to the scholarly activity of individuals in local academia and communicating with their fellow researchers across the board. To this end, the eighth chapter treats the problem of “Gender Studies and the Higher Education Reform in Romania.” The author asserts that the liberalization of Romanian universities took place in 1990 as a consequence of an agreement with the World Bank which endorsed the dominant “entrepreneurial” model, since “[d]iscourses produced and circulated in that context accredited representations of higher education as a competitive ‘market,’ of education as a ‘service’ and of students as ‘clients’ entitled to ‘quality’ in the training on offer” (296). Due to this liberalization of higher-education institutions, members of universities benefited from the autonomy of managing their own resources and thus establishing their own contents, which facilitated the integration of gender studies in Romanian curricula. Moreover, the Romanian NGO AnA, including personalities such as Mihaela Miroiu, Livia Deac, and Doina Olga Ștefănescu, was behind the MA program in Gender Studies at Bucharest National School of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), which was already open for applications in 1998. In that sense, the author of the volume affirms that “[f]eminism successfully entered the academic establishment through the private sociability networks of the ‘pioneers,’ who were friends and belonged to a circle that had been constituted before the political regime change” (305). These networks were developed during the 1970s and 1980s, and without their constitution, the emergence of gender studies programs would have been tremendously slowed down. Hence, the sociological history of traveling knowledge on “gender” has a lot to do with established elite groups interacting from afar on issues of common interest. In its introduction, the ninth chapter portrays the complex case of former Yugoslavia and its “ambiguous paths” towards the professionalization of gender studies. The legacy of an extra-academic place for knowledge production on women’s issues added up to the problem but finally “allowed pursuing feminist education projects and disseminating historically structured political knowledge” (343).

To conclude, I reiterate the “global” cause the volume highlights in its attempt to meticulously map out the flow of feminism(s) from the Western political and

cultural scene to the Eastern transitioning one. Besides dealing with the transnational dispersion of a radical movement, the author takes care to touch upon the prominent figures who made it possible for knowledge on “gender” to circulate extensively. Western feminists were looking forward to expanding their politics “beyond the borders,” and so, implicitly, to create a common site for sharing ideas in places where otherwise they would have been unattainable. This was particularly advantageous for Eastern women whose interest in “gender” increased and, as a result, allowed for the circulation of feminism in a climate of transition. Ioana Cîrstocea’s analysis of the transformations of higher education, groups of activism, and professionalized discourses on “gender” opens a prolific discussion on thinking of “gender” as a “socialization platform” (36) as the author names it. To conclude, *Learning Gender after the Cold War: Contentious Feminisms* is of foremost importance for understanding the routes of institutionalization of feminist thought in post-socialist Eastern European countries.