



Searching for feminist geographies: Mappings outside the discipline in Poland

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Abstract: Feminist geography in Poland does not exist as a sub-discipline of geography. While there are individual Polish geographers pushing for feminist perspectives, most feminist analyses of issues relating to place, space and politics of location can be found within gender studies or feminist sociology. In this sense, feminist geography in Poland cannot compare to Anglophone feminist geography and attempts to incorporate it within such an established field risks being reductive. Instead, in this report, we shift the focus to the scholarship and activism that does exist in Poland, outside of geography. This contribution focuses on shedding light on geographical questions such as the body, the city and gendered geopolitics that have been recurring themes in gender studies, feminist sociology and feminist activism in Poland. We conclude by pointing to the need to mobilise broadly, and internationally, between disciplines with the intention of de-centering dominant knowledges. For feminist scholarship this is particularly important in the context of recent political successes of right-wing forces.

Introduction

The exercise of mapping feminist contributions to geography in Poland largely confirmed what we already knew about the absence of feminist perspectives from some of the established disciplines in Polish academia. While it is true that feminist geography in Central and Eastern Europe cannot compare with its Western counterparts as it barely – if at all – exists as a sub-discipline of geography, the task of bringing into being something that does not exist risks becoming yet another attempt to make up for epistemic absences in our region. Questions of place and space, the human environment and society are tackled by academics in other relatively visible disciplines in Poland, mostly in gender studies and feminist sociology. Feminist scholars analyse issues such as access to public space, urban development or the interdependence of geography, economics and gender relations in neoliberalism using the lenses of critical sociology, queer theory or postcolonial studies. Therefore, we decided to map feminist scholarship and activism in Poland, focusing on some questions and issues which are key to feminist geographers today. One such issue is the struggle for the right to abortion that been central in the formation of a democratic public sphere in Poland, resulting in the criminalisation of abortion almost immediately after the democratic transition in 1989 (Fuszara 1993). In the last few years a new wave of anti-feminism led by right-wing populists and religious groups has been spreading across Europe. They oppose reproductive rights, the presence of ‘gender studies’ at universities and challenge the very concept of ‘gender’ in public discourse (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Suspicious of intellectual elites and existing institutions of higher learning, anti-genderists also challenge the legitimacy of feminist research. As we have argued elsewhere: ‘Just like second wave feminism established itself in the academic world in the form of gender studies the present wave of anti-feminist activism seeks to legitimize itself by establishing *anti-gender studies*.’ (reference removed). Polish women have been at the forefront of the

struggle against right-wing groups. Since the right-wing government came to power in 2015, women's bodies have become a constant presence on the streets in Poland. They have held demonstrations in key sites of male institutional power, engaged in blocking right-wing marches and organized in cities and villages against further restrictions to reproductive rights. Recognizing the transnational character of the right-wing mobilization the Polish women's movement is also internationally oriented.

Feminist geographies outside of geography

Social and economic geography in Poland, which is the equivalent of human geography in some Western contexts, focuses predominantly on quantitative and positivist knowledge production, actively distancing itself from what are considered overtly 'political' areas of research (Lisocka-Jaegermann 2016). This lack of a critical approach has been credited to the Polish transformation context (Timar and Fekete 2010, Wójcik and Suliborski 2014). In a post-socialist country where Marxism and feminism are routinely delegitimized as the legacy of Soviet imperialism, a critical strand in human geography - one that is invested in challenging inequalities, Western imperialism, and capitalism - simply did not take root, which in turn resulted also in an absence of feminist geography (Lisocka-Jaegermann 2016).

There are important exceptions to this dominant trend due to individual geographers pushing for feminist perspectives, such as Bogumiła Lisocka-Jaegermann from the Institute of Regional and Global studies at the University of Warsaw. She brought the term 'feminist geography' into Polish Geography textbooks and has been teaching feminist perspectives in geography within and outside the academy. Lisocka-Jaegermann was also one of the organisers of the International Geographical Union Gender Commission workshop in Warsaw in 2014 'The Gendering of New realities: Unequal Challenges and Responsibilities' (Lisocka-Jaegermann and Grochowski 2014), an event that gathered scholars advocating for more inclusive feminist geographies that go beyond the Anglophone context (Huang et al 2017). While important, such initiatives focus on the discipline of geography, thereby inevitably excluding Polish researchers who work within the much broader, interdisciplinary, field of feminist scholarship. Feminist geographies in Poland often develop outside of the disciplinary confines of geography, for example within the field of Gender Studies.

The history of feminist and gender research in Poland is usually discussed in the context of the post-socialist transformation and the process of institutionalisation of the women's movement in the region. However, the first seminars on feminist studies were already being organized in the early 1980s, first at the University of Warsaw and then at Jagiellonian University. The first Women's Studies Centre was founded at the University of Łódź in 1992 and throughout the 1990s courses in Women's Studies and/or Gender Studies became available at many universities. As a named degree at undergraduate or postgraduate level, Gender Studies was (and still is) a graduate level course, incorporated administratively but not financially into the structures of specific universities, hence the students are required to pay for these courses. But feminist perspectives have also found their ways into mandatory courses in several disciplines, e.g. anthropology (Chołuj 2002). In this respect Poland appears quite advanced compared to countries like France or Germany where hardly any Women's or

Gender Studies existed until the mid-1990s (Griffin and Braidotti 2002: 2). While in the United States the institutionalisation of Women’s Studies began in the 1970s and in Great Britain in the early 1980’s, in most European countries this process took off much later.

In the 1990s feminist scholars in Poland focused their research mostly in three areas: culture, political and democratic participation, and sexual and reproductive rights (Grabowska 2013, Graff 2003). The main fields of inquiry changed over time and by the mid-2000s scholars began to analyse economic and social aspects of EU accession, gendered aspects of class dynamics and migration, work conditions in feminized sectors, urban development, motherhood, and experiences of the LGBTQ communities. Questions tackled by different strands of feminist geography, including mobility and separation, micro-geographies of the body, colonialism and postcolonialism, and the relation between gendered societies and the environment, surfaced in these analyses (see Bobako 2017, Majewska 2018, Urbańska 2015).

Space, Place and Politics of Location: challenges to hierarchical frameworks

Politics of location and the question of space has been a recurring theme in gender studies in Poland. Because of its geopolitical position and history, the country is often depicted as located between two different worlds: the East and the West, and while it is seen as more culturally ‘advanced’ than its eastern neighbours, Poland remains perceived as a laggard in relation to the West (see Janion 2006). These hegemonic discourses of belonging and development are of course gendered. The West is depicted as ‘the force of good’ promoting women’s rights and gender equality, in order to challenge local ‘oriental’ traditions, rooted in religion. Many Polish feminist scholars and activists have adopted this frame, either unreflexively or strategically trying to ‘catch up’ with the West (Regulska and Grabowska 2013). During the last decade, however, gender scholars have begun to argue that we need ‘to challenge the existing hierarchical, binary frameworks perpetuated in transnational feminist scholarship, [and] to recognize the second world as a site of global struggles’ (Grabowska 2012: 387). Focus on the East/West divide has been replaced by a more nuanced view, which pays more attention to local conditions and transnational connections. This shift is reflected for example in the critiques of the waves metaphor which originated in the Anglo-phone world but has been employed to measure the development of feminist movements everywhere else (Graff 2003).

The question of location becomes even more important due to increasing mobility within academia, where scholars from outside western academia migrate to western countries. We are Polish-born feminist scholars and activists, who engage with geographical issues including gendered claims to the city (**reference removed**), social mobilisations (**reference removed**), politics of the body (**reference removed**) and gendered conflicts in the public sphere (**reference removed**), and we both work abroad and publish mostly in English, reproducing hegemonic modes of knowledge production that benefit the Anglo-American and more broadly, western scholarship. As Huang et al (2017) point out, publishing outside of what is considered ‘mainstream’ and ‘high impact’ international journals is risky to scholars. This is particularly significant in the current neoliberal climate and in the context of the reform of higher education introduced in July 2018 that strengthens a trend in Poland that favours publishing in English. This means that when non-Western feminist academics

produce scholarship in their countries, that is outside of the dominant spaces of knowledge production, their work remains unknown to broader international audiences. However, when they focus on disseminating their work within the dominant spaces of Anglo-American journals and conferences, they often end up as deliverers of raw data and case studies, enriching the already well-developed field and further impoverishing what is already marginalised. Hence, it is important to critically assess the politics of knowledge production and dissemination, recognising existing and new patterns of power and marginalization.

Gender and the city

Another field of inquiry, which exists in Poland in spite of the lack of feminist geography, concerns the relation between gender and place. While a strong current in mainstream Polish geography indeed focuses on the city, these analyses routinely lack a feminist perspective. Instead, feminist engagements with space and place are being employed in other academic disciplines, including feminist sociology, and outside the academy, mostly in feminist activism. Already in 2013, feminist economist Zofia Łapniewska and feminist anthropologist Katarzyna Puzon developed and taught the course 'Gender and the City' introducing key geographical concepts to students at the University of Warsaw. Łapniewska also teaches a shorter course titled 'Feminist City Studies' at the Polish Academy of Sciences. In 2017 feminist urban activist Sylwia Chutnik ran an interdisciplinary workshop called 'City and Gender' for students at the University of Warsaw (Chutnik 2016). There is also a growing number of publications that explore the city through a feminist lens, often produced outside of academia by activists (Furgał 2010, Łapniewska and Puzon 2016, Erbel 2010, Arteria 2010).

Conclusions

In the Polish context, feminist engagements with geographical perspectives happen outside of mainstream geography, in the broad and interdisciplinary field of gender studies and feminist sociology, and they are often threatened by socially conservative groups and political shifts. The recent wave of opposition to gender equality, including attacks on gender scholars, further cuts in funding for gender studies and de-institutionalization of gender equality by the Law and Justice regime show how precarious the position of feminist scholars is in the academic world, and how contested the very existence of the concept of gender remains. It also attests to the need to mobilise broadly, and internationally, around academic freedom and to strengthen exchange of knowledge between disciplines. To succeed, such initiatives must be done with a clear intention within universities in the English-speaking world to de-centre dominant knowledges, which includes reconsidering where we search for feminist geographies in the first place.

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