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'Unsettling' women's studies, settling neoliberal threats in the academia: A feminist gaze from Croatia

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SYNOPSIS

This article critically engages with the effects of the neoliberal turn on the complex position of feminist agency within the Croatian academia, taking the 'unsettling' Women's Studies within the academic framework as a point of departure. By focusing on the neoliberal impact on the status of feminist scholarship, politics of feminist epistemology within/crossing the academic framework and the role of feminist scholars, the analysis shows various shifts and contradictions on how the neoliberal procedures operate within this distinctive context and to what extent specific geopolitical contingencies matter in this regard. It also explores the modes of how an emerging neoliberal 'rationality' enhances not only the *depoliticisation* of the discourse on sex/gender issues but also new moments of coercion around areas of dependency and academic neo-colonialism that queries the self-critical referential stand of local feminist scholars and shifting perspective in understanding the different positions of feminists towards neoliberal claims.

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Introductory notes

The intention of this paper is to show how the increasing rise of the global neoliberal hegemonic order has influenced the already complex and ambiguous position of feminist agency within Croatian academia, and to trace a certain meeting ground for a more rigorous critical analysis on the contexts and conditions of its emergence. Part of the task that faces us at present is the need to address specific signs, contradictions and shifts that the neoliberal effects provide to the positioning of feminist scholarship within the Croatian higher education system. In this regard three issues are of my particular concern: the mode in which the neoliberal claim tends to reconstitute and deposit feminist scholarship through normative directions by undermining its theoretical foundations and critical impulse; its impact on feminist theory's epistemological politics and location within/crossing the academic framework; and shifts in positioning that feminist scholars carry and express. Specific attention will be given to certain aspects of academic neocolonialism, and the areas of dependency that neoliberal 'rationality' enhances and operates through them along with examining how the emerging neoliberal discourse has an impact on the depoliticisation of sex/gender issues. In addition to exploring

these on-going tendencies, the paper aims to somehow reflect the process which I myself am experiencing as I am constantly in the position of "in-between", situated simultaneously within the academia and an independent women's studies centre. By expressing to what extent my position entrenches these questions and forces me to see things differently, I will endeavour to open some other provoking points and unexpected avenues into the issue. Since the overall problem in this field in the Croatian context goes beyond neoliberal framing and that the specific geo-political contingencies which are implicitly present here reflect numerous impregnated obstacles and untheorised questions, I am taking a risk in this regard.

On feminist scholarship in the Croatian academic context

In trying to address the problem of feminist agenda in the Croatian academic context in order to detect the sites of the more pressing neoliberal turn, I cannot avoid the layers of epistemological and emotional burdens that recall its 'unsettling location' along with my own annoyance that this 'issue' leads us to a new, even more complicated distortion. By 'unsettling location' I mean that women's/gender studies have

never been integrated within the higher educational system in Croatia as an educational or research institutional unit (department or centre, e.g.), or as a coherent programme within academic curricula. Thus some of the questions that arise from feminist scholarship requirements, such as what would constitute an intellectually rigorous Women's Studies curriculum or what can be its role in the faculty area of expertise, have not been the subject of any leading academic discussion. Currently this issue has seemingly become even more irrelevant, undermined or blurred through the neoliberal demands on the university. On the other hand, what makes the issue almost absurd, and which shows our situation as kind of unique in this regard, is the fact that the only comprehensive and interdisciplinary place for women's studies has existed for almost two decades outside of the academic structure¹ – as an autonomous and alternative educational programme created on its own model, content and tools. Emerging in 1995 within the context of (post)war conflicts and the dissolution of the union of Yugoslav states as well as on the foundations of intertwined rich feminist theoretical traditions and movements, the Centre for Women's Studies took on theory as a critical tool against nationalistic ideology and war paradigm, and as a kind of feminist ethical survival. By gathering domestic and regional feminist scholars, artists and activists to carry out the Women's Studies programme at the crossroads of disciplines, artistic practices and activism, the Centre still persists in its mission throughout all these years and despite facing various obstacles. Through a wide range of educationally enhanced programmes it offers students innovative multi- and interdisciplinary education based on critical pedagogy and continuous self-experimenting approaches and perspectives.

There are many paradoxes around our specific context in this regard and much has been written about this during the last two decades (Barada, Janušić, Kašić, & Pešut, 2003; Kašić, 2001, 2006; Potkonjak, Arsenijević, Demiragić, & Petrović, 2008). Here I will address only two in order to uncover which sort of absurdity or even obscurity is at stake. Gender studies entered the scientific categorisation of disciplinary areas recognised by the Croatian National Council for Science in 2009, and is classified as an interdisciplinary field of science² even though neither gender nor women's studies as an integral knowledge area are part of the academic curricula in Croatia or supported by academic authority. In the meantime some women's studies subjects have been included within educational curricula of certain faculty departments due to the efforts by feminist scholars both from within and outside academia. The second paradox, apart from showing a running normative inconsistency, seems even more bizarre. Namely, parallel to the affirmation of gender-sensitive education in the regulations related to gender topics that followed after adopting the Gender Equality Law [*Zakon o ravnopravnosti spolova*] as part of the politics of gender mainstreaming, and almost two years after the recognition of gender studies as an interdisciplinary field of science, the guideline on the necessity of integration of women's/gender studies into the university system was withdrawn³ from the National policy document.

Thus the politics of gender mainstreaming, including its specific aim such as gender-sensitive education, apparently became one of the most visible signs of how neoliberal governance operates. How else, I ask myself, can we understand

these normative gestures, except as modes of neoliberal normativity calculated to produce guidelines and rules for its own sake without any substantive relevance for such education or any explicative reasoning that supported it. There are certain critical points around gender-sensitive education itself which show both the cognitive ambiguities and often the pointlessness of the exploration of sensitivity regarding gender issues. What does it really mean to "be sensitive" to gender issues, and which implications does it have to any particular sex or gender, or how can this concept be made operational in the academic classroom, and by which methodological tools? Moreover, how to produce epistemic change through gender-sensitive education? This is far from a clear stand in scrupulous academic terms as the entire idea of gender-sensitive education is messy and contradictory (Forde, 2012: 7). According to this, it seems to be even more problematic to imagine an implementation of gender-sensitive inquiry within the context in which there are no women's/gender studies units within academia.

What demands special attention is its instrumental multi-tasking demands in light of the neoliberal trend impregnated with the old fashioned order of academic design that counts on (neo)conservatism instead of challenging it. Seemingly, the neoliberal 'rationalities' rely on power working to normalise hegemonic masculinities and femininities (Amsler, 2012) embedded in androcentric presuppositions in academic structures rather than enabling deliberative strategies to deconstruct them. On the other hand, they empower every type of canonisation of the field of women's/gender studies in terms of policy measures invented, for example, either through 'harmonising' of the European higher education system via the Bologna process,⁴ or EU bureaucratic institutions. While Mary Evans (2006: 312) questioned the standardisation and homogenisation present throughout the European technocratically designed educational framework and quality assurance policies, Clare Hemmings (2008: 123) points to the risk of "disciplinisation" of women's/gender studies through European benchmarking that leads to a canonisation of the curricula itself.

Since the Croatian politics of gender mainstreaming is part of a wider political hegemonic discourse, articulated mostly through European expert governance although the transnational neoliberal economy framework determines its implementation, it is quite clear what kind of difficulties are at stake here. Slovenian theorist, Vlasta Jalušič, significantly termed the implications of the politics of gender mainstreaming as a process that, despite its initial intention, directly produced "de-gendering" (Jalušič, 2009 60), but also the depoliticisation of "feminist issues". A study by feminist theorists Emanuela Lombardo, Petra Meier and Mieke Verloo published in the text "Discursive Dynamics Gender Equality in Politics: What about Feminist Taboos?" (Lombardo, Meier, & Verloo, 2010: 105–124) clearly shows how the use of the political concept of gender equality in the last decade has affected the process of depoliticisation of the discourse on sex/gender issues and the achievements of feminist engagement, and has thus had a direct impact on the production of feminist knowledge. One of the reasons is the tendency that research on sex/gender topics is being performed in such a manner so as to confirm a presumed normative discursive framework, by which feminist articulation itself is being increasingly expressed and evaluated.

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