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Feminism and Feminist Scholarship Today

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Feminism as a Balancing Act

My identity as a feminist scholar and activist in Poland is a hybrid one; perhaps it is even incoherent and fractured. I keep going back and forth between (1) the academic world of feminist analysis of literature, film, and media, and US women's history; (2) my work as an essayist and columnist addressing the general public (I publish in the mainstream press and have a regular feminist column in a popular parenting monthly); and (3) the various spaces where feminist organizing and strategizing takes place (the left-wing think tank Political Critique, several women's NGOs, the annual women's march known as Manifa, the Women's Congress). I generally view my mix of roles—academic, activist, writer—as a useful combination of theory and practice, but at times it feels like a dangerous balancing act that may end in a harsh fall. It depends on the day, my level of exhaustion, and the nastiness of attacks against me. But I keep doing a bit of everything and enjoy my many faces and styles.

I yearn for theory that is helpful in strategizing and understanding the “here and now” of feminist politics. As I see it, the “here and now” of Poland is a bizarre mix of neoliberalism, politicized religion, nationalism, and good old misogyny. The reality the women's movement must confront includes a lack of basic reproductive rights, the indifference of the state towards domestic violence, a largely dismantled welfare system, and the swindling of women employees in the name of “flexibility.” Since 1989, traditional gender roles have come to function as Poland's “specialty” in Europe. I needed to understand how and why this happened, so I picked my readings in feminist theory accordingly, looking for frameworks that link gender, nation, and religion, and for analyses of scenarios somehow analogous to ours. I found my answers in works of Nira Yuval Davis, Floya Anthias, Cynthia Enloe, Anne McClintock, Anne Phillips, Ruth Lister, as well as in scholarship on and from Eastern Europe and the Balkans (Barbara Einhorn, Lynne Haney, Julie Mostov, Tamar Mayer, and others). If I were to name two books that had the greatest impact on me, it would be the edited volume *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Susan Okin's essay and the polemics that followed) and Joan Wallach Scott's brilliant study *The Politics of the Veil*.

The “here and now,” however, is not my favorite place to be. The most worn books on my feminist shelf are histories and memoirs (among them Ruth Rosen's *The World Split Open* and *The Feminist Memoir Project*, edited by Ann Snitow and Rachel DuPlessis) and anthologies from the early 1970s. The feminists I read and reread for pleasure tend to be ones associated with the second wave in the US, both classic and more recent texts. My favorites are Adrienne Rich, Susan Brownmiller, Joreen, Audre Lorde, Katha Pollitt, Ellen Willis, and—yes!—Betty Friedan. What brought me into feminism and keeps me there is not high theory, but a tone of ethical and political commitment, a belief that change is possible, even inevitable. I like feminist essays that are emotional as well as intelligent. And I love feminist anger of the late 1960s. Valerie Solanas's SCUM continues to thrill me, as does Hedegus and Pennebaker's documentary film *Town Bloody Hall*, which records Norman Mailer's encounter with “Women's Lib” in the person of Germaine Greer and other radicals. My personal commitment to feminism is perhaps nostalgic at heart—what I truly yearn for are the good old days of the feminist revolution.

Academia is my origin and home base, but I thrive in confrontation and lose patience with feminism that locks itself in the safe spaces of gender-studies programs and specialized journals. In my view, today's scholarly feminism—especially as it functions in the West—is too often busy talking to itself, too distanced

from political struggles of the day. While I respect the need for professionalization, institutionalization, and for theorizing at a high level of abstraction, I must admit that doing pure “theory” has lost its appeal to me years ago. I read and write texts that aim to convince; my best work happens when I imagine my addressee as someone who has never taken women’s rights seriously. Feminism is about social change, and preaching to the converted is not my idea of affecting history. In Poland, feminist academics tend to wear multiple hats: many of us venture into politics, we are present in the media, we set up and run women’s organizations, organize public debates, etc. When I travel to the States, Britain, Norway, or France, I talk to academics and I talk to activists, but find that they are rarely the same people, and the two groups don’t seem to know each other well. This split may be the greatest difference between Western feminism and the women’s movement in my country (as well as what I have seen of other Eastern European contexts, the Middle East, and Third World countries).

***Agnieszka Graff**, a leading Polish feminist activist, is a professor at Warsaw University and author of many publications on women’s rights and gender relations in post-Communist Poland and Eastern Europe.*