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## Developments and Changes in Polish and East Central European Women's and Gender History\*

**Abstract:** The article aims to deconstruct the narrative of Polish and East Central European Women's and Gender History, on the one hand, as one of catching up or playing catch-up, and, on the other, as of otherness and specificity. It offers insights into that history beyond the oppositions of progress and backwardness or of an exotic specificity. Using the examples of research topics and recently published studies, I will highlight ways of decentralizing gender history via (1) presenting the possibilities of transregionality, (2) proposing transgressive use of studies from divergent contexts or with divergent topics, and (3) expanding the scope of discussions about paradigms.

**Zarys treści:** Artykuł ma na celu dekonstrukcję narracji dotyczącej historii kobiet i płci w Polsce i Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej, przedstawianej z jednej strony jako nadrobienie zaległości lub dążenie do nadrobienia zaległości, a z drugiej strony jako odmiennność i specyfika. Artykuł oferuje wgląd w tę historię wykraczający poza opozycje postępu i zacofania lub egzotycznej specyfiki. Na przykładzie tematów badawczych i niedawno opublikowanych prac naukowych podkreślono sposoby decentralizacji historii płci poprzez: 1) przedstawienie możliwości transregionalności, 2) zaproponowanie transgresywnego wykorzystania badań z różnych kontekstów lub dotyczących różnych tematów oraz 3) poszerzenie zakresu dyskusji na temat paradygmatów.

**Keywords:** Women's and Gender History, historiography, transregionality, Poland, East Central Europe

**Słowa kluczowe:** historia kobiet, płęć społeczno-kulturowa, historiografia, transregionalność, Polska, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia

Since 1989, on the initiative of historian Anna Żarnowska, then professor of the Instytut Historyczny (Historical Institute, now the Faculty of History) at the Uniwersytet Warszawski (University of Warsaw), and Andrzej Szwarz, assistant at the same institute, where he has worked as a professor since 1995, a series of

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conferences on women's history has been held, published as *Kobieta i ...* (Woman and ...) and has gained some notoriety among those who have studied and continue to study women's history in Poland.<sup>1</sup> In 1996, the Komisja Historii Kobiet Komitetu Nauk Historycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk (Women's History Commission of the Committee on Historical Sciences of the Polish Academy of Science) was founded. It brings together historians dedicated to women's history in Poland, serves as a venue for exchanging information, promotes methodological discussions, and organizes additional conferences and publications.<sup>2</sup> These initiatives are widely regarded as the beginning of women's and gender history after communism, as they fulfill practices commonly considered necessary for establishing a discipline, such as joint conferences and lectures, publications, and institutionalization.<sup>3</sup>

So how can we tell the story of the emergence of post-communist Polish and East (Central) European women's and gender history? At first glance, the most convincing plot seems to be the one that leads from an additive history of women to a more differentiated gender history. The story would start with the conferences and publication series of Żarnowska and Szwarc and end in a broad field of women's, gender, and queer studies.<sup>4</sup> It goes hand in hand with overcoming socialist silence on feminism and/or a double standard of women's politics: the ideology of gender equality and the real oppression of women, especially the triple burden they had to face. It is a story of specific Polish history and/or the specific history of East Central

<sup>1</sup> Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarc (eds), *Kobieta i świat polityki: Polska na tle porównawczym w XIX i w początkach XX wieku. Zbiór studiów* (Warszawa, 1994); eid. (eds), *Kobieta i społeczeństwo na ziemiach polskich w XIX wieku. Zbiór studiów* (Warszawa, 1995); eid. (eds), *Kobieta i edukacja na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku. Zbiór studiów* (Warszawa, 1995); eid. (eds), *Kobieta i kultura: Kobiety wśród twórców kultury intelektualnej i artystycznej w dobie rozbiorów i w niepodległym państwie polskim. Zbiór studiów* (Warszawa, 1996); eid. (eds), *Kobieta i kultura życia codziennego: Wiek XIX i XX. Zbiór studiów* (Warszawa, 1997); eid. (eds), *Kobieta i praca: Wiek XIX i XX. Zbiór studiów* (Warszawa, 2000); eid. (eds), *Kobieta i kultura czasu wolnego. Zbiór studiów* (Warszawa, 2001); eid. (eds), *Kobieta i małżeństwo: Społeczno-kulturowe aspekty seksualności, wiek XIX i XX* (Warszawa, 2004); eid. (eds), *Kobieta i rewolucja obyczajowa: Społeczno-kulturowe aspekty seksualności, wiek XIX i XX* (Warszawa, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> See [https://khk.pan.pl/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=featured&Itemid=47](https://khk.pan.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=featured&Itemid=47). According to Nina Seiler, there was already a Komisja Historii Kobiet przy Polskim Komitecie Nauk Historycznych (Commission for Women's History at the Polish Committee for Historical Sciences) in 1966, which Żarnowska chaired. See Nina Seiler, *Privatisierte Weiblichkeit: Genealogien und Einbettungsstrategien feministischer Kritik im postsozialistischen Polen* (Bielefeld, 2018), 73. I assume, it is a typo.

<sup>3</sup> Angelika Schaser and Falko Schnicke, 'Der lange Marsch in die Institution: Zur Etablierung der Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte an westdeutschen Institutionen (1970–1990)', *Jahrbuch für Universitätsgeschichte*, 14 (2013), 79–110, here at 87–88; Marilyn Boxer, 'For and About Women: The Theory and Practice of Women's Studies in the United States', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 7, no. 3 (1982), 661–695.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Maria Bucur, 'It's Complicated: The History of Sexuality in Eastern Europe Flourishes', *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, 16, no. 1 (2022) 189–199.

Europe. In her 1998 article on gender history in Poland, Natali Stegmann observed that adherence to the concept of "Mothers of the Nation" (Mütter der Nation) served as a powerful, all-encompassing explanatory frame that underscored the specifically Polish nature of women's and gender history. However, she also noted that a number of studies had focused on the social diversity of women. Nevertheless, she stated that the shift to gender history rather than women's history, which would focus on the power relations, relationships, perceptions, and ideologies of both sexes, had not yet been carried out in the Polish context, in contrast to "Western historical studies".<sup>5</sup> This gives rise to two interpretations of women's and gender history in Poland/East Central Europe: on the one hand, that of catching up or playing catch-up, and on the other, that of otherness and specificity – of exoticization.<sup>6</sup>

These interpretations remain unsatisfactory because, as has been noted many times, they ultimately confirm the normative function of a "Western/Western European" model of history. Larry Wolff and many others have demonstrated in their studies the powerful significance of space and time: the historical construction of the East as backward, catching up, as the "inferior other", and the construction of the West as the norm-setting center where history was invented and established.<sup>7</sup> Powerful spatial arrangements went hand in hand with corresponding instrumentalizing constructions of temporality, whereby these arrangements were shiftable when historical Poland-Lithuania acted as a colonial power or when the Russian Empire understood its eastward colonial policy as a "civilizing mission".<sup>8</sup>

These orders of oppositions also have an impact on women's and gender history. They influenced the historical positioning of the activities of women from the region, their marginalization and disregard, and in many cases, shaped their self-perception. However, they are also reflected in the historiography of women's and gender history, in which marginalization and disregard (exclusion from the canon) are repeated.<sup>9</sup> The spatial and temporal hierarchization of the world is not only historical, it is also historiographical.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Natali Stegmann, 'Von "Müttern der Nation" und anderen Frauen: Zum Stand der historischen Frauenforschung in Polen', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 46 (1998), 269–275.

<sup>6</sup> See Katharina Kinga Kowalski, *Feminismus als Denkstil: Zur Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung im Polen der Transformationszeit* (Frankfurt a.d.O., 2024), 33, though somewhat less pointed.

<sup>7</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, 1994); Frithjof Benjamin Schenk, 'Mental Maps: Die Konstruktion von geographischen Räumen in Europa seit der Aufklärung', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28 (2002), 493–514.

<sup>8</sup> Clara Maddalena Frysztacka, *Zeit-Schriften der Moderne: Zeitkonstruktion und temporale Selbstverortung in der polnischen Presse (1880–1914)* (Berlin–Boston, 2021), 1–59.

<sup>9</sup> Zsófia Lóránd, Katarzyna Stańczak-Wislicz, and Adela Hincu, 'Introduction', in Zsófia Lóránd, Adela Hincu, Jovana Trbovc, Katarzyna Stańczak-Wislicz (eds), *Texts and Contexts from the History of Feminism and Women's Rights: East Central Europe, Second Half of the Twentieth Century* (Budapest, 2023), 1–19, here at 1–6.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Sproede and Mirja Lecke, 'Der Weg der postcolonial studies nach und in Osteuropa: Polen, Litauen, Russland', in Dietlind Hüchtker and Alfrun Kliems (eds), *Überbringen –*

My reflections on the developments and transformations of post-communist women's and gender history in Poland/East Central Europe, therefore, take up the spatial (Polish and East Central European) and temporal (post-communist) components of the narrative to deconstruct the construct of a "(Western) European modernity", which dominates not only history but also historiography.<sup>11</sup> I therefore understand "developments and transformations" as an opportunity to read existing studies differently and to exploit their potential for a decentralized gender history.<sup>12</sup> Using the examples of research topics and recently published studies, I would like to highlight ways of decentralizing gender history via (1) presenting the possibilities of transregionality, (2) proposing transgressive use of studies from divergent contexts or with divergent topics, and (3) expanding the scope of discussions about paradigms. My aim is to offer insights into the history of gender history in Poland/East Central Europe beyond the oppositions of progress and backwardness or of an exotic specificity. Therefore, my focus lies on the perspectives that open up with an integrative reading, not on evaluating the works or even on a comprehensive analysis of the subjects. I will not provide an overview of women's and gender history from, about, and in the region since transformation, especially because it is far too extensive and diverse.<sup>13</sup>

Starting with (West) German history, before turning to Polish and East European history and now working at the University of Vienna, I will do so, so to speak, from the position of a *white* female scholar of Polish/European gender history. My own focus is on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, on women's movements and feminist activism, and on a gender-oriented history of rural areas during communism.<sup>14</sup>

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*Überformen – Überblenden: Theorietransfer im 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne–Weimar–Vienna, 2011), 27–66; see also Angelika Epple and Angelika Schaser (eds), *Gendering Historiography: Beyond National Canons* (Frankfurt a.M. – New York, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton–Oxford, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Claudia Kraft, 'Die Geschlechtergeschichte Osteuropas als doppelte Herausforderung für die "allgemeine" Geschichte', *Themenportal für die Europäische Geschichte*, 2006, <https://www.europa.clio-online.de/essay/id/fdae-1378> (accessed 15 Nov. 2025); Dietlind Hüchtker, 'Zweierlei Rückständigkeit? Gender History and the History of Eastern Europe', *Osteuropa*, 58, no. 3: *Transfergeschichte(n): Peripherie und Zentrum in Europa* (2008), 141–144.

<sup>13</sup> Women's and gender history was and is interdisciplinary; from the outset, it has been closely linked to Gender Studies. See, for example, the volume by Anna Artwińska and Janine Schulze-Fellmann (eds), *Gender Studies im Dialog: Transnationale und transdisziplinäre Perspektiven* (Bielefeld, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Dietlind Hüchtker, *History as Performance: Political Movements in Galicia around 1900* (New York, 2021); id., 'Traktoristinnen, Rockstars und der polnische James Dean: Die Performativität popkultureller Zeichen in der Volksrepublik Polen', *L'Homme: Zeitschrift für feministische Geschichtswissenschaft*, 29, no. 1 (2018), 87–105; id., 'Challenging Socialist Village Structures: Polish Youth in Rural Regions', in Liesbeth van Grift, Dietmar Müller, and Corinna R. Unger (eds), *Living with the Land: Rural and Agricultural Actors in Twentieth-Century Europe – a Handbook* (Berlin–Munich–Boston, 2022), 325–344.

## Transregional perspectives

How to avoid the container of a specific Polish history? The history of science is a field where we gain insights from a transregional perspective. For Poland, Barbara Klich-Kluczevska and Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz have highlighted the existence of women's studies already during communism. They show how biographical experiences, social engagement, and scientific contacts shaped the academic life of four sociologists.<sup>15</sup> However, as Katharina Kowalski points out, women's studies existed primarily in sociology, but hardly at all in history.<sup>16</sup> The study on women in communist Poland (*Kobiety w Polsce, 1945–1989: Nowoczesność, równouprawnienie, komunizm*) examines their history as specifically Polish and specifically socialist, but with a perspective on regional and transnational contexts that vary depending on the topic.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, global popular cultural symbols play just as much of a role as transnational expert knowledge, e.g., about sexuality. On the other hand, the authors emphasize the specific opportunities for social advancement that women from rural areas and working-class backgrounds had, especially in the first decades of state socialism.<sup>18</sup> These studies connect transregional and global with local contexts. They develop histories beyond spatial containers and temporal allocations.

Research on the topic of “sex trade/white slavery” around 1900 provides an opportunity to reflect on the historicity of intersectional issues. The topic is part of the history of Polish, Jewish, and East (Central) European regions, and at the same time also part of the history of Europe and the world.<sup>19</sup> Studies on prostitution in Rzeszów<sup>20</sup> or on a court case in Lviv<sup>21</sup> that sparked public debate on “sex trafficking” and prostitution show that the topic transcends the concept of spatial

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Klich-Kluczevska and Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, ‘Biographical Experience and Knowledge Production: Women Sociologists and Gender Issues in Communist Poland’, in Anna Artwińska and Agnieszka Mrozik (eds), *Gender, Generations, and Communism in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond* (Abingdon – New York, 2020), 146–165; Agnieszka Mrozik, ‘Gender Studies in Poland: An Unfinished Project’, in Artwińska and Mrozik (eds), *Gender*, 83–98.

<sup>16</sup> Kowalski, *Feminismus*, 123–124.

<sup>17</sup> Małgorzata Fidelis, Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, Piotr Perkowski, and Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz (eds), *Kobiety w Polsce, 1945–1989: Nowoczesność – równouprawnienie – komunizm* (Kraków, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, *Feminist Studies*, 14, no. 3 (1988), 575–599.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy M. Wingfield, ‘Destination: Alexandria, Buenos Aires, Constantinople: “White Slaves” in Late Imperial Austria’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 20, no. 2 (2011), 291–311.

<sup>20</sup> Jolanta Kordzikowska, ‘Prostytucja w przestrzeni publicznej i prywatnej Rzeszowa na przełomie XIX i XX wieku: Zarys problematyki’, in Jolanta Kamińska-Kwak, Szczepan Kozak, and Dariusz Opaliński (eds), *Kobieta w Galicji. Nowoczesność i tradycja* (Rzeszów, 2016), 90–99.

<sup>21</sup> Nancy M. Wingfield, *The World of Prostitution in Late Imperial Austria* (Oxford, 2017), 17–46.

containers. It did not end in the cities, nor at state borders, although the latter shaped jurisdiction and criminal prosecution. The topic reflects the historical and historiographical power of the “West”, colonial and imperial power structures of profit and market, as well as a history of anti-Semitism and racism, which, however, were not only part of “Western” power politics, but also of East (Central) Europe.<sup>22</sup> Around 1900, knowledge about prostitution and sex trade spread around the world as scandals, mobilizing the intervention of feminist, health, and morally motivated organizations that acted internationally and reached international agreements and human rights activism.<sup>23</sup> The studies classified sex trade in prostitution practices and prostitution policy, but also in a history of migration, border regimes, and the structure of global labor markets for women.<sup>24</sup> In doing so, they also contributed to thinking about agency. What role did the “Jewish traffickers of women” play, who were perceived with anti-Semitic clichés,<sup>25</sup> what choices did the women have, how did they deal with (scandalized) ideas about prostitution, sexist gender roles, and gender-specific earning opportunities?<sup>26</sup> The topic refers to the intersectionality of gender, class, and race, yet raises questions about the historicity and situational nature of these categories of power. How did race relate to colonialism, but also to intra-European anti-Semitism? How were the working conditions of workers in the entertainment industry at the turn of

<sup>22</sup> Robert Blobaum, “Panika moralna” w polskim wydaniu: Dewiacje seksualne i wizerunki przestępczości żydowskiej na początku XX wieku’, in Żarnowska and Szwarc (eds), *Kobieta i rewolucja obyczajowa*, 265–276.

<sup>23</sup> Jolanta Sikorska-Kulesza, ‘Handel kobietami z ziem polskich na przełomie XIX i XX wieku – historyk między głosem prasy a milczeniem sądu’, in Jadwiga Hoff (ed.), *O kobietach: Studia i szkice. Wiek XIX i XX* (Rzeszów, 2011), 120–137; David Petrucci, ‘Pimps, Prostitutes and Policewomen: The Polish Women Police and the International Campaign against the Traffic in Women and Children between the World Wars’, *Contemporary European History*, 24, no. 3 (2015), 333–350; Rachael Attwood, ‘Stopping the Traffic: the National Vigilance Association and the International Fight Against the “White Slave” Trade (1899 – c. 1909)’, *Women’s History Review*, 24, no. 3 (2015), 325–350; Marion A. Kaplan, *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany: The Campaigns of the Jüdischer Frauenbund, 1904–1939* (Westport, 1979); Edward J. Bristow, ‘The German-Jewish Fight Against White Slavery’, *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 28 (1983), 301–328; Bettina Kretzschmar, ‘Gleiche Moral und gleiches Recht für Mann und Frau’: *Der deutsche Zweig der internationalen abolitionistischen Bewegung (1899–1933)* (Sulzbach i.T., 2014); Jean Allain, ‘White Slave Traffic in International Law’, *Journal of Trafficking and Human Exploitation*, 1, no. 1 (2017), 1–40.

<sup>24</sup> Julia Laite, ‘Between Scylla and Charybdis: Women’s Labor Migration and Sex Trafficking in the Early Twentieth Century’, *International Review of Social History*, 62 (2017), 37–65.

<sup>25</sup> Keely Stauter-Halsted, ‘Ravishers or Tradesmen? Understanding East European Jewish Traffickers at Home and Abroad, 1880s–1920s’, in Sonja Dolinsek and Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska (eds), *Histories of Prostitution in Central, East Central and South Eastern Europe* (Paderborn, 2023), 75–97.

<sup>26</sup> Sonja Dolinsek and Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, ‘Introduction: Approaches to the Histories of Prostitution in Central, East Central, and South Eastern Europe’, in ead. (eds), *Histories of Prostitution*, IX–XXIX, esp. IX–XV.

the century linked to gender? Research on sex trade thus integrates Polish and East (Central) European history into a transregional context and emphasizes the region's relevance to European and global history. It also highlights the need to historicize concepts such as race, class, and gender. Empirical studies on Polish and East (Central) European women's and gender history open up transregional perspectives that stress the complexity and historicity of postcolonial, feminist, and class-reflective approaches. They make "the second world" visible in post-colonial spaces.<sup>27</sup>

### Transgressive readings

While "sex trade/white slavery" contains transregional and intersectional elements by virtue of its subject matter, it can also be fruitful to look for intersectional connections of topics from different regions, different media, and different historical contexts: In her monograph *Masculinities in Polish, Czech, and Slovak Cinema: Black Peters and Men of Marble*, Ewa Mazierska, a film scholar at the University of Lancashire with a research focus on Polish film, analyzes male heroes in Polish, Slovak, and Czech films in the second half of the twentieth century. Among other things, she has examined the relationships between fathers and sons portrayed. She observes physically and/or emotionally absent fathers, sons' hatred of their fathers, competition between fathers and sons, the impossibility of parental care – in short, conflicts and problems, as befits good films.<sup>28</sup> The historical background, the experiences of the Second World War, the history of communism, and the period of transformation play a role in Mazierska's interpretation, which raises both the question of the significance of cinema for gender and generations in the postwar period and the question of the significance of gender and generations for the cinema in the postwar period. In this volume, however, the spatial arrangements remain limited to East (Central) Europe, specifically Poland and Czechoslovakia.<sup>29</sup>

But the physically and emotionally absent fathers of the first postwar generations are not a phenomenon exclusive to Poland or East Central Europe. In his

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<sup>27</sup> Magdalena Grabowska, 'Bringing the Second World In: Conservative Revolution(s), Socialist Legacies, and Transnational Silences in the Trajectories of Polish Feminism', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 37, no. 2 (2012), 385–411; see also Martin Müller, 'In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South', *Geopolitics*, 25, no. 3 (2020), 734–755.

<sup>28</sup> Ewa Mazierska, *Masculinities in Polish, Czech, and Slovak Cinema: Black Peters and Men of Marble* (New York, 2011), 83–130.

<sup>29</sup> Mazierska has also published an interesting anthology on Polish cinema in a transregional context together with Michael Goddard, see Michael Goddard and Ewa Mazierska (eds), *Polish Cinema in a Transnational Context* (Rochester – New York, 2014).

study on the changing roles and problems of fathers and families in the United States, Jürgen Martschukat emphasizes the silence of fathers in the postwar period whose war experiences found no resonance in the American society of economic growth during the decades after the Second World War.<sup>30</sup> This was no different in war-torn Europe. Lu Seegers used interviews to examine the experiences of the generation born during the war in West Germany, East Germany, and Poland. She argues that fatherlessness became a transnational and cross-system generational experience, and is nevertheless affecting different social systems and different representations of war and masculinity.<sup>31</sup> The transgressive connections of absent and silent fathers are reflected in the global representation of the actor James Dean as a figure of identification. The People's Republic of Poland also had "its" James Dean, the actor Zbigniew Cybulski.<sup>32</sup> These figures represent the transregional negotiations of postwar masculinity and postwar generational conflicts.

Mazierska and Martschukat remain within their respective national frameworks of explanation, but when read together (and combined with Seeger's findings), the transregional and cross-system significance of postwar family and gender-specific constellations becomes clear. Despite fundamentally different war experiences, there were similar family constellations. These findings, which are only touched upon here, point to the intertwining of varying time levels and various spaces, the scope of which should be made visible in the research process.<sup>33</sup> The intertwining of time levels is evident in the medium of film, which links memory, contemporary diagnosis, and future options (both good and bad), while the spatial connections are apparent in the simultaneous transregional similarities and local differences. Popular cultural media, such as cinema, played a central role in the transregional and cross-system dissemination of such icons, but their meanings were inscribed in regional or local (and inter-sectionally different) histories. On closer inspection, the research offers insights that enriched or could have enriched the approaches and categories of women's and gender history had they not been perceived as a "Polish (or East (Central) European) special case" – even if it had only been a matter of questioning dominant and universally valid assumptions. So what is the scope of contexts, such as political systems, religious affiliation, and social and cultural characteristics, for specific histories?

<sup>30</sup> Jürgen Martschukat, *Die Ordnung des Sozialen: Väter und Familien in der amerikanischen Geschichte seit 1770* (Frankfurt a.M., 2013), 263–291.

<sup>31</sup> Lu Seegers, "Vati blieb im Krieg": Vaterlosigkeit als generationelle Erfahrung im 20. Jahrhundert. *Deutschland und Polen* (Göttingen, 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Hüchtker, "Traktoristinnen", 95–97; Mazierska, *Masculinities*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, 1994).



## Discussing Paradigms

In a 1994 article on the significance of family in nineteenth-century divided Poland, Żarnowska noted that its “privacy” could be understood as a sphere of repressed public politics in a society without state and political institutions.<sup>34</sup> Claudia Kraft has shown that, for the actors in opposition to communism, the private sphere was upgraded to a substitute political public sphere, while housework, as private privacy, became doubly invisible.<sup>35</sup> In another context, a “Western” academic one, Karin Hausen has criticized the normative settings of the public sphere as male and privacy as female. She emphasizes the intertwining and reciprocity of spaces that were accessible to both sexes.<sup>36</sup> Hausen’s distinctions – without any reference to East (Central) Europe – and Żarnowska’s and Kraft’s reflections on a different order of public and private spaces share a message: the deconstruction of the universal validity of historical concepts, in this case the equation of public/private and male/female – or the decentering of a male Western European norm. On a theoretical level, Susan Gal has called for a more systematic analysis of the “contrasting bundles” of binary concepts in different political systems.<sup>37</sup>

Research on feminism is a good example to discuss the effectiveness of questioning paradigms. Based on the dominant narrative that the emergence of gender studies was closely linked to the (Western) women’s movements of the 1970s and 1980s, women’s and gender studies in Poland and the post-communist states were associated with the emergence of a women’s movement/feminist initiatives only after 1989. Feminism in the 1970s and 1980s was thus implicitly (or explicitly) conceived as “Western” and pioneering. Feminist activism in post-communist states was considered “catch-up” and women’s studies a “catch-up” feminist discipline, which was seen as possible only in a *post*-communist society. Zsófia Lóránd, Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz, and Adela Hîncu have edited and contextualized feminist publications in Eastern (Central) and Southeastern Europe during communism and the period of transformation. They show how widespread feminist thinking

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<sup>34</sup> Anna Żarnowska, ‘Prywatna sfera życia rodzinnego i zewnętrzny świat życia publicznego – bariery i przenikanie (przełom XIX i XX wieku)’, in Żarnowska and Szwarc (eds), *Kobieta i świat polityki*, 5–28; see also Seiler, *Privatisierte Weiblichkeit*, 44.

<sup>35</sup> Claudia Kraft, ‘Paradoxien der Emanzipation: Regime, Opposition und Geschlechterordnungen im Staatssozialismus seit den späten 1960er-Jahren’, *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, 3, no. 3 (2006), 381–400.

<sup>36</sup> Karin Hausen, ‘Öffentlichkeit und Privatheit: Gesellschaftspolitische Konstruktionen und die Geschichte der Geschlechterbeziehungen’, in Karin Hausen, Heide Wunder, and Gisela Bock (eds), *Frauengeschichte – Geschlechtergeschichte* (Frankfurt a.M., 1992), 81–88.

<sup>37</sup> Susan Gal, ‘A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction’, *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 13, no. 1 (2002), 77–95.

and feminist interventions were already then.<sup>38</sup> For some time now, interpretations as catch-up feminist activism and a newly emerging women's and gender history only after 1989 have been questioned by research on communism. There has been much discussion about the extent to which communist women's policy can or should be regarded as a kind of state feminism, which, with reference to the historical demands for equality made by socialist movements, created civil law and conditions relating to gainful employment that were only introduced and achieved in capitalist or non-socialist societies several years or decades later.<sup>39</sup> Francisca de Haan has demonstrated the powerful impact of Cold War paradigms, which led to women's activism under communism being forgotten or disqualified as non-feminist, using the examples of a transnational women's activist, Hella Wuolijoki, the Congress of American Women, a grassroots organization of left feminists, and the Women's International Democratic Federation.<sup>40</sup>

All these studies expand the scope of discussions about paradigms. They ask for the meanings of feminism, progress, emancipation, the conditions of gender equality and gender inequality, or women's organizations. They question the close link between feminism and the women's movement, but also the association of feminism only with "Western" societies. Though the juxtaposition of two political systems and the Cold War paradigms persists,<sup>41</sup> the studies raise fundamental questions that go beyond the understanding of feminism, conditions of gender, and women's and gender studies. By this, they historicize women's and gender history in one way or another and question assumptions that are taken for granted.

<sup>38</sup> Lóránd, Hincu, Trbovc, and Stańczak-Wiślicz (eds), *Texts and Contexts*; Kowalski, *Feminismus*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, the debate with Nanette Funk, 'A very Tangled Knot: Official State Socialist Women's Organizations, Women's Agency and Feminism in Eastern European State Socialism', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 21, no. 4 (2014), 344–360; from several responses I will mention Kristen Ghodsee, 'Untangling the Knot: A Response to Nanette Funk', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 22, no. 2 (2015), 248–252; see also Francisca de Haan, Kristen Ghodsee, Krasimira Daskalova, Magdalena Grabowska, Jasmina Lukić, Chiara Bonfiglioli, Raluca Maria Popa, and Alexandra Ghit, 'Ten Years After', *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, 10, no. 1 (2016), 102–168; Kristen Rogheh Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* (New York, 2018).

<sup>40</sup> Francisca de Haan, 'Continuing Cold War Paradigms in Western Historiography of Transnational Women's Organizations: The Case of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF)', *Women's History Review*, 19 (2010), 547–573.

<sup>41</sup> See Kristen Ghodsee and Agnieszka Mrozik, 'Authority, Authenticity, and the Epistemic Legacies of Cold War Area Studies', *Aspasia: The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History*, 17, no. 1 (2023), 31–52; Francisca de Haan, 'Writing Inter/Transnational History: The Case of Women's Movements and Feminisms', in Barbara Haider-Wilson, William D. Godsey, and Wolfgang Mueller (eds), *Internationale Geschichte in Theorie und Praxis/International History in Theory and Practice* (Vienna, 2017), 501–536.

## Conclusion

How can historiographical concepts be extracted from a Western-dominated understanding of history, how can their historicity be represented, and how can the dominance of specific discursive spaces that frame, limit, and challenge research be made visible at the same time? How can dichotomous comparisons between Eastern and Western feminism and Eastern and Western women's politics be deconstructed, thereby historicizing the power structure of measuring and catching up (feminism)? There is reciprocity, though unequal and anchored in political constellations and academic power structures. I have offered examples that aim to develop approaches to overcome the historical writing that seeks to catch up or exoticize Polish/East Central European history in one way or another. The studies should be conceived as bringing together transcending stories from the West and the East, the North and the South. The stories of Polish and East Central European women's and gender history have changed and should change the master narratives anchored in so-called "Western modernity". A closer look at Polish and East Central European gender history could transform history into less teleological narratives of modernity.<sup>42</sup> They demonstrate the relevance of Polish and East (Central) European gender history for deconstructing historiographical assumptions of backwardness and progress. It is not important to bring together all regions of the world in one volume if they remain isolated from one another. Studies that focus on a specific region and a specific period but discuss them in a transregional and transcending context are just as suitable. Thinking in terms of possibilities refers both to global structures of dominance and interpretive authority in scientific contexts and to the willingness to question this frame of reference.

I therefore return to the beginning: there was a movement from women's history to gender history at a time when this had long been discussed in various places – but not in others. Stegmann's observation of the dominance of "Mothers of the Nation" as an explanatory concept can be demonstrated, as can the focus on social differentiation among women (intersectionality before intersectionality). It is therefore time to tell women's and gender histories more from the perspective of their possibilities – certainly also because their existence and recognition are no longer guaranteed – and not only in the "East", but also in the "West", the "North", and the "South".<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Maria Bucur, 'Between Regional and Transnational Contexts', in Katalin Fábíán, Janet Elise Johnson, and Mara I. Lazda (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (London – New York, 2022), 9–17; Dolinsek and Saryusz-Wolska (eds), *Histories*; Michael Goddard and Ewa Mazierska, 'Introduction: Polish Cinema beyond Polish Borders', in eid. (eds), *Polish Cinema*, 1–20; Artwińska and Mroziak (eds), *Gender*.

<sup>43</sup> Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa (eds), *Anti-Genderism: Sexuality and Gender as Arenas of Current Political Debates* (Hawthorne, 2015); on Poland, see Bożena Chołuj, "Gender Ideology" as a Key Concept in Polish Anti-Genderism', in Hark and Villa (eds), *Anti-Genderism*, 219–237.

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