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Who's Afraid of Feminism in Romania? Misconceptions, prejudices, stereotypes

Abstract:

The paper presents several cases of feminism rejection from the part of influent Romanian intellectuals. The misconceptions and prejudices surrounding feminism are sometimes difficult to interpret, as long as there are not many individuals ready to accept the feminist label. The author analyses the reasons of this phenomena, establishing the correlations among the rejection of feminism and other Western ideologies, such as multiculturalism and political correctness. Finally, it attempts at sketching several solutions, by emphasizing the importance of support groups where the feminist identity may be promoted and practiced.

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I will begin my paper with a real life anecdote. Some time ago, I took dinner with a couple of friends who live and work abroad. After a polite conversation about weather and other innocent stories, the woman got enough courage to question me tentatively: "We heard about you that you are a feminist...". The sentence was deliberately unsure and equivocal; such as they would expect me either to contradict it or to confirm it. "Yes, it's true", I replied. Visibly encouraged by my answer, she continued: "So, how is it? How is it to be a feminist in Romania?!"

Something was striking in her questions, and it still is. The tone suggested (and it did rightly) that it is somehow not OK, or that is something problematic, or at least that it is not very fashionable to be a feminist in Romania. But why? In a country that proclaims itself democratic and free, why does the word "feminism", that was so recently re-discovered by our post-revolutionary past, carry such a disputable meaning? And if feminism is nothing more than (an)other Western-imported ideology (such as liberalism and Christian democracy, for that matter), why is it still so hard to find people ready to declare themselves "feminists"?

Of course, my paper is not going to answer all these questions. Instead, it will focus on a single dimension of this rejection phenomenon applied to feminism in Romania, and particularly on the one that, in my opinion, is the most difficult to live with: that of some Romanian intellectuals. Why? Because, if one is ready to accept the prejudices from somebody that had no interest and education in these topics, it is incomparably more difficult to tolerate the misconceptions of several distinguished, highly educated and very sophisticated intellectuals, who additionally got the opportunity of doing research abroad and studying in Western universities.

I will attempt at investigating several types of misconceptions, prejudices and stereotypes concerning feminism and feminists in Romania, to find the reasons of these attitudes, and to suggest some solutions for overcoming.

Multiculturalism and feminism: or who is the enemy after all?!

In many cases, feminism is rejected not as a single phenomenon, but in correlation with other, similar ones. Such is the case of the relation between feminism and multiculturalism¹. The most striking feature is that they are usually discussed as a single topic, if ever; generally speaking, negative references about multiculturalism have included, implicitly or explicitly, critiques on feminism.

One of the most spread critiques is the one that assimilates both multiculturalism and feminism to the ideology of political correctness.² Such an example is Horia-Roman Patapievici, a quite famous author who usually is identified as a very pro-democratic, pro-liberal, and anti-nationalistic. He criticizes political correctness in a very virulent language, referring to it as a mere “aberration” that is imposed through “intellectual terrorism” and “institutional aggression”, aiming at “transforming the American society based on fusion and integration (melting pot) in a multicultural and multilinguistic society strictly fragmented”. This ideology further imposes an unpardonable equalization between “Christian theology” and “Polynesian myths”. The most serious accuse (in his view) is that, by rejecting “the liberal” view, multiculturalism represents in fact the “American communism”.³ (I have to say that, for the Romanian audience, this accuse equivalents with the complete termination of the notion)

This radical (but by no means extraordinary) position can be very easily criticized. It is obvious that the opposition communism=multiculturalism Vs. liberalism is at the very center of his argumentation. Therefore, one can easily comment that this distinction misrecognizes the basic assumption of all the three political trends; neither communism is the simple distorted reflection of liberalism, nor liberalism is such a clear-cut and without nuances political ideology. There are in fact some important liberal thinkers who are also multiculturalists, such as Will Kymlicka or Joseph Raz⁴.

I also think that one cannot equalize multiculturalism (or feminism) with political correctness. This process also ignores the American debates about political correctness itself. If some multicultural trends (the “aggressive multiculturalism”, to use Agnes Heller terminology) can manifest an intolerant tendency, other ones (the “critical multiculturalism”, to use Goldberg’s terminology) are looking for other types of solutions, through intercultural mediation and dialogue. As Peter Caws puts it, multiculturalism stands for a huge variety of social articulations, ideas and practices that cannot be reduced to the “ism” of political correctness⁵. Not to mention the fact that here, in Romania, very many respectable public figures complain about the stupidity of political correctness, in the absence of such a think. At least, I never heard that somebody was publicly discredited for displaying a misogynist attitude.

In the same time, the supposition on the inner solidity and homogeneity of feminism and multiculturalism, with or without the political correctness, is proved illusory for anybody who read more than one book on these issues. It is hard to say even about feminism that is “one and unmodified”, as some authors would want it, that made many other writers to speak about “feminisms”. In any case, if the political diversity is not accepted for the case of feminisms (Rosemarie Tong speaks about 13 types of feminisms,

and the list remains open), one must at least indulge it for historical sake: it is sure that one cannot speak of the same feminism in the case of, say, John Stuart Mill and Naomi Wolf (!).

The same (hypothetical) construction “political correctness/ multiculturalism/ feminism” is denounced virulently in one of Patapieviçi's books that proved to be a best-seller: *Omul recent* [The Recent Man]. Here, on some two hundred pages out of the book's 500, the author criticizes the excesses of the PC-multi-feminism. Unfortunately, the bibliographical apparatus on which the critique stands is not as solid as for the rest of 300 pages. I could barely count some 6-7 titles in his bibliography, very unequal and not at all representative for the issues they tried to depict. For instance, one can find Alan Bloom, Eduard Behr and Camille Paglia, all of them being recognized for their attitude against the three currents. It is more difficult to find some book of a feminist or multiculturalist author. No feminist author is mentioned with her name and/or her books in the entire volume and as for the multiculturalism, the only identifiable authors are A. Margalit and ... Frantz Fanon, the last one being claimed more vividly by the post-colonial studies, but this is another story.

Another Romanian author, who is rejecting multiculturalism and feminism, in a similar polemical manner, is Monica Spiridon⁶. Her reasons are different: she thinks that multiculturalism is “out of date”, because it promoted unconditionally and aggressively the “Saint Trinity” of “race, gender, class” in universities, but which finished by being rejected inside the very country that invented it. Multiculturalism is promoting, anyway, two types of errors: “the supposition that group values and beliefs are incompatible and incommensurable” and “the supposition that all our value choices are determined by our belonging to a group”. The result of practicing this “aggressive parochialism” was “cultural atomization pushed to its limits, hopeless enclavization into a racial, classeist and gender ghetto”. Romania, says the author, must by no means adopting this “dangerous fashion”, because this will not lead the country toward Europe, but toward the darkness of racial and gender separation.

The strategy of saying that a concept is bluntly “out of date” seems to me very poor (indeed, the very act of contestation proves to be, if nothing else, a strange way of re-enforcing the concept itself). Anyway, this is surely not the case of multiculturalism, which continues to provoke debates in American society. Besides, the mere rejection of the concept implies the supposed monovalence of it, which again denies the ongoing debates and reformulations. For instance, it completely ignores the existence of a “critical multiculturalism”. Or, this “critical multiculturalism”, as proposed by D.T. Goldberg, which argues for hybridization and cooperation of cultures, is much more closed to the “inter” or “trans” cultural view that the author herself endorses⁷. Finally, the relationship between multiculturalism and feminism is not as straightforward as implied by the triad race, gender, class, and a good example is the famous book of Susan Moller Okin (with respondents), *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* in which the relation multiculturalism-feminism is problematized, and critically discussed.

Again, in this case one has problems in identifying precisely who are the feminists and/or multiculturalists the author is so virulent about. In both cases, of Horia Patapieviçi and Monica Spiridon, the bibliographical references to identifiable feminist and multiculturalist authors is very thin, if exists at all. More easily to trace is the reference to similar detractors from the Western world, such as Eduard Behr, Alan Bloom, or Dinesh d'Souza. But in this situation, our pure Romanian intellectuals talk about second-hand ideas, from second-hand sources that are the least to say, biased. So, who are these

authors fighting with? Some non-localized phantoms called “feminism”, “multiculturalism” or “political correctness” that the Western world is full of while, thanks God!, Romania is still better off? In any case, I find the sufficiency and superficiality of the authors of this rank to be unpardonable.

Sketching reasons, advancing solutions

In an issue of *Observator cultural*⁸ dedicated to a survey of feminism and feminist activities in Romania in the last 14 years, some well-known public figures associated with and or/self-declared feminists mentioned at their turn several reasons for this lack of presence of feminist ideas in the majority intellectual discourse, as well as in the majority political, social, economical, and cultural discourses. Mihaela Miroiu, Laura Grunberg, Liliana Popescu, Roxana Tesiu, Cristina Ilinca, Ovidiu Pecican talk, among others, about the opacity of the intellectuals to what they call “Western-imported ideology”, although the Romanian feminism, far from being a grass-root movements, has found a niche in the academic and civic spheres. Some possible solutions that are advanced by several of them regard especially the educational field. Unfortunately, there is still a long way towards a non-discriminatory educational process, as many of the papers from today have shown, and as one can find out from surveys and reports⁹.

In an article published in the same journal *Observator cultural*, Florin Irimia tries to find some more philosophical reasons for this rejection of feminism inside the Romanian intelligentsia. Thus, in the case of men, the author says, they tend to regard feminism “if not with condescendence, than with a sort of tolerant amusement, as a kind of female nonsense characteristic to Western societies and to the American one in particular”¹⁰. The main reason is, to his view, as we also noticed, the blatant ignorance of the feminist theoretical program, that is such comprehensive as to include “all the normative cultural systems and trends”.

As far as women's attitude is concerned, the author notices, together with Ion Bogdan Lefter, the violence with whom “fine, cultivated ladies, eventually publicly well-known personalities abjure the label: “no, I am not at all feminist!”, “I don't like these feminisms!””¹¹. Far away from despising those women, the author tries to explain their reaction by invoking the patriarchal fallogocentric roots of Romanian culture (and of many others), that naturalizes the gender differences and condemns each and every individual that attempts at breaking them.

The author also proposes a solution for this state of facts: “For a possible taking over and identification with feminist typologies to take place, there would be necessary an integral re-organization of discourse, through which several cultural constructs would be unmasked as inherently discriminatory”¹². But he also warns about the possible consequences of such a daring act: those willing to assume it will have to situate themselves outside the margins of the patriarchal culture, and in the process they will lose the legitimacy granted by it. In the same time, it is highly predictable that the critiques and deprecations of feminism will permeate more easily into the Romanian intellectual audience, especially because of the high market value of authors and opinion makers such as those previously discussed

In search for conclusions?

Among sophisticated ignorance, bad will, “constitutive impossibility” (in Kantian

terms), and marginality, what to choose? The logic answer would be: none of the above. In the same time, one must be aware that, in feminism as in other cultural fields, one needs to have a support group that would promote her and her ideas on the so-called "market". In a much criticized book, *Boierii mintii*, Sorin Matei¹³ shows how ideas and books are circulated, promoted and finally sold on the market not only because of the author's inner merits, but rather due to the influence of his support group. This explains in a supplementary way why feminist ideas are so rare in our cultural panorama: there are few prestigious support groups who would risk promoting their ideas. Instead, there are very powerful groups who support authors such as Patapievici.

But this gives another dimension to meetings, conferences and gatherings such as ours. Through open discussions, confrontations and contestations, through the publishing of their results and dissemination in the cultural landscape, they may become the key points for coagulation of such support groups that become powerful through their members. I can only wish that this would be the case for initiatives such as *gendeRomania's* one. In this way, I hope that, in 20 years from now (the magic number predicted for social change in Romania also!), when I'll have dinner again with my foreign friends, none of them would find surprising the fact that they will stay at table with a Romanian feminist.

References:

1 Also critical of multiculturalism is Claude KARNOOUIH, "*Un logos fără etos. Interculturalism și multiculturalism in Transilvania*" [*A logos without ethos. Interculturalism and multiculturalism in Transylvania*] in *Altera* no. 6/1997; see also Nicu GAVRILUȚĂ, *Imaginarul social al tranziției românești*, [*Social imaginary of Romanian transition*] Dacia, Cluj, 2001.

2 This equivalation is also found in western and American critiques on multiculturalism and feminism. See Edward BEHR (1999).

3 Horia-Roman PATAPIEVICI (1997), "*Comunismul american*" [*The American Communism*], in *Politice* (ed. a II-a), [Politics] Ed. Humanitas, București, p. 122-128.

4 See for instance Joseph RAZ (1999), "*Multiculturalismul: o perspectivă liberală*" [*Multiculturalism: a liberal view*], p. 5-22. On the relationship between multiculturalism and liberalism, see Levente SALAT, "*Puncte de vedere la interpretarea multiculturalismului in România*" [*Perspectives about interpretation of multiculturalism in Romania*], p. 23-46. Levente SALAT is the only Romanian author of a doctoral thesis about multiculturalism, which was published in 2001.

5 Peter CAWS, quoted in David Theo GOLDBERG (1994), p. 4.

6 Monica SPIRIDON (1999), "*Splendoarea și mizeriile unui concept: multiculturalismul*" [*Splendors and misery of a concept: multiculturalism*] in *Altera* nr. 12/1999, p. 26-34.

7 Margit FEISCHMIDT (1999), "*Multiculturalismul: o nouă perspectivă științifică și politică despre cultură și identitate*" [*Multiculturalism: a new scientifically and political perspective about culture and identity*] in *Altera*, no. 12/1999, p. 5-25. For the alternative of critical multiculturalism, see Isabela CORDUNEANU, "*Identitate, memorie și multiculturalism: reconsiderări metodologice*" [*Identity, memory and multiculturalism: methodological recommendations*] in *Ibidem* p. 35-47. See also Enikő MAGYARIVINCZE, "*Negocierea multiculturalismului*" [*Negotiations of multiculturalism*] in

Kiserletek Kulturalis Elemzesre / Experimente in cercetarea culturală / Experiments in Cultural Analysis, EFES, Cluj, 1997, in special p. 293-295.

8 One of the Romanian journals more openly committed to publishing quality articles and book reviews on feminism, due to the pro-feminist orientation of the former director, Ion Bogdan Lefter. Unlike other Romanian civic journals, such as *Revista 22* or *Dilema*, where feminist ideas were presented more or less episodically, and anti-feminist attitudes may accidentally appear, in *Observator cultural* there were regularly published texts with a feminist orientation. This is why the whole journal was accused of exposing the shameful “political correctness” (by journalists of *Dilema*, for instance). Now, that the director of the journal was changed, we are wondering about the continuation of this trend.

9 For an introduction on the topic in the 1990s, see the volume Mihaela Miroiu (eds.), *Gen si educatie. For an analysis of gender perspective in Romanian higher education*, see Mihaela Miroiu (2002), “Fetele patriarhatului”, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, no. 3, summer 2002, <http://hiphi.ubbcluj.ro/JSRI>. For a recent survey on this issue, see *** (2004), *Perspective asupra dimensiunii de gen in educatie*, Institutul de Stiinte ale Educatiei, UNICEF.

10 Florin IRIMIA (2001), “Către o secularizare (feministă) a discursului cultural românesc”, in *Observator cultural*, No. 72, 10.07-16.07, p. 14, my translation.

11 *Ibidem*, my translation.

12 *Ibidem*, my translation.

13 Sorin Adam MATEI (2004), *Boierii mintii. Intelectualii români între grupurile de prestigiu și piața liberă a ideilor*, Compania, București.