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Gender regimes of the school in the late ceaușism

Abstract: My work will deal with an analysis of the way by which the romanian communist school constructed or reproduced femininity and masculinity during the last decade of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime, a period which I refer to as late ceaușism. The purpose is to describe and interpret the gender order, delineated by the school, as an important element of the socialist socio-economic system. The gender order consist of a set of cultural conceptions and social practices that prescribe behaviors and gender relations (both feminine and masculine), but also of power relations between women and men which give birth to gender hierarchyes and structures the division of labor and the decision making processes. The next pages represent only the preliminary theoretical considerations of the work.

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My work will deal with an analysis of the way by which the romanian communist school constructed or reproduced femininity and masculinity during the last decade of Nicolae Ceauşeşcu’s regime, a period which I refer to as late ceauşism. The purpose is to describe and interpret the gender order, delineated by the school, as an important element of the socialist socio-economic system. The gender order consist of a set of cultural conceptions and social practices that prescribe behaviors and gender relations (both feminine and masculine), but also of power relations between women and men which give birth to gender hierarchies and structures the division of labor and the decision-making processes.

In discussing about school I am interested in the communist state and the politics that he imposed upon this area, taking account of the assumption that no matter what political regime a state has, the educational system will follow the route assigned by this one and has a decisive role in constructing the society.

I should give some explanations regarding the interest in this subject: first of all, I consider that gender as a social factor has an important role in the development of the individuals, of the relations between them, but also of the social system in its whole, so gender is a central element of the social world; then, I see school as the second institution, after the family, responsible of this development and of reproducing the socio-political system. So, the gender regimes of the school are being structured by the social system and this one is reproduced also through them.
The newness of the work is given by the intention to discover the factors (economical, social, political, ideological) who – notwithstanding the homogenisation tendency and the desexualisation of gender identities – influenced the school in the last ceausism to construct or to reproduce some behaviors and relationship models defined as masculine or feminine which have marked not only the school, but also the world outside it.

The society is changing through the school, so by doing research on the institutional aspects of the last one, I am not talking only about the school, but about the multiple faces of people’s lifes and thoughts at one moment by which they act as members of society. My analysis will be done on two levels, trying to identify at each one the gender regimes (behaviors, power relations, the division of work, decisional processes). The first level will follow the official communist discourse, taking as milestones the themes: the new desexualised person, women and men on labour market (gendered labours), the socialist education (the organisation of the educational system), educational politics, curriculums and textbooks, women and men in the family, state and citizen. The second level will allude to daily practices in school having as themes: the relations between teachers, the relations between teachers and staff, between teachers and students, the school and the party.

According to Connell, gender is used mostly as a marker for the cultural differences between men and women, based on the biological division between masculine and feminine. There could be objections to these definition: our image about gender is dihomotomic, but if so, it excludes the differences between women and between men from the concept of gender. The solution to pass over these difficulties could be the reorientation from differences to relations, gender is first of all based on social relations. Connell developed a set of four types of relations representative for the concept of gender: power relations, production relations, emotional relations, symbolic relations, all these working hand in hand. We cannot think about masculinity and feminity as fixed by nature, but we cannot think about them neither as imposed from the outside by the social norms or by authorithies. People are constructing themselves as masculine or feminine, we ask for a place in the gender order or we accept the place that was given to us by the way we act in everyday life.

In analysing the gender regimes of the school, I will use the theory of gender as performed. In doing so, my starting points will be Candace West and Don Zimmerman and Judith Butler.
Candace West and Don Zimmerman have extended Goffman’s theory on gender displays. They developed a theory of gender performance where they positioned *gender* as something that people do. People are asking their rights of being members of different sexual categories through the gender performances for which they are responsible.

Butler developed a theory of gender performativity where gender is said to be performed through discourse, which includes social interaction, but also the discourse from textbooks, media, legislation. In contrast with the notion of self that performed gender, like West and Zimmerman puts it, Butler argues that there is no gender identity that can motivate gender performances. She suggests that the recurrence of some gender performances creates the illusion of a self supportive gender identities.

If at Butler gender is *performed* through discourse, at West and Zimmerman gender is produced through interaction, gender is *done* in interaction. Butler distinguish between *performativity* and *performance, as act*, arguing that performativity consist of reiteration of the norms that precede the performer and in this sense they cannot be considered as his own wish or choice.

Both perspectives (Butler; West and Zimmerman) have similar answers about what is and how gender works: both are based on the dichotomy, and the critique of the dichotomy, between *sex* and *gender* and the variability of gender; both catch sight of gender as an activity, rather then an attribute; both sustain the omnipresence of producing gender, but also the possibility of resistance and transgression.

*The fear of feminism*

Feminism is seen as a subversive movement which purpose is to destroy the natural order of the things. The fear of those who contest feminism is that it will replace the masculine hegemony with a feminine one. (Miroiu 1997:62) The fear of feminism is generated by a person’s fear of losing his own benefits. (Miroiu 1997:71)
Paradoxically, the current that reach over the surface after 1989 at the public and professional levels as well, was not “western feminism”, but anti-feminism. (Smejkalová 1997:25) Western feminism was perceived as a „one voice monster, created by middle class housewifes and lesbians, and having an anti-masculine orientation”. (Smejkalová 1997:31) The attitude towards feminism was also generated by the parallels between this term and the other kinds of ideologies, the –isms (marxism, bolsevism, ceausism), right after 1989. (Šiklová 1997:39) The interaction between East and West lead to the idea that western women that came to Eastern Europe had proselyte intentions: they were seen as messianic, with universalizing and imperialist intentions. On the other side, eastern women were seen as undeveloped politically and ignorant in rejecting western feminism. (Gal 1997:89) Attacks on feminism frequently merge into a wider misogyny and the term feminist might be the name given to the disliked or despised woman. (Oakley and Mitchell 1997:XIX)

Feminism is a discourse always in move, changing its senses in different contexts, it is anything but monolithic (Kaplan 1997:XVIII). There is anyway an element that is always there: feminism has always a „story” to tell about what is bad for women in a society and there is always an engagement for changing that thing. The most important is that what is considered „bad” for a person or group of persons might be different from what is „bad” for other groups. (Verloo 1997:115)

How is gender bound to women and feminism?

Gender – femininity and masculinity – is the parallel cultural term of the biological referents female or male. It was originally a grammatical one, referring to the sex of words, and linked to the term “genus”, though it also had another meaning to do with copulation and generation. (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary apud. Oakley 1997:32). In modern usage, gender refers to the multiple differentiations of bodies that occur in social space and are mapped on to the biological ground-plan. (Oakley 1997:32)
First-wave feminism focused on the question of women’s civil and legal rights, second-wave feminism is distinguished for taking up the challenge contained in Simone de Beauvoir’s famous assertion that women are not born, but made. But than another question rised, if women are made, how are they made? What are the cultural processes and context which produce feminity and masculinity as social forms? The answer to this question demanded a way of separating the bodies of human beings from their social fates. This was how the idea of gender as a cultural product came to be an essential tool of modern feminist analysis. Gender performs an invaluable function in analysing how women and men are made rather than born. These processes cannot be understood in terms of sex and sexuality as attributes of the natural body. (Oakley 1997:29-30) That gendered behavior is to some extent socially constructed is irrefutable, given that these behaviors, and those assigned appropriate to one gender or the other, vary between cultures and historic periods. (Skelton, Smulyan, Francis 2006)

Gender has collected a history of both uses and abuses, of political purposes and deviations, of slippages and confusions, and it brings this history along with it wherever it goes. Because gender is a linguistic marker for women, what has happened to women is bound to be reflected in what has happened to gender. Because women always signifies feminism on one level or another the fate of gender is also bound to follow feminism’s destiny. (Oakley 1997:53) In this sense the history of feminism and the history of gender are intertwined.

Today, gender slips uneasily between being merely another word for sex and being a contested political term. The history of gender is actually quite like the history of women. Gender become sometimes simply another word for women. Academic feminists gain respectability by naming what they do as “about gender” rather than as “about women” (because the study of man remains the only really respectable tradition). Such a strategy only works because gender was invented to help explain women’s position: men neither wonder about theirs nor need to explain it. (Oakley 1997:30) “I am a man! What’s to talk about?”

As Oakley (1997:33) states we all came to understand that everything is a matter of gender. Women’s oppression owes its particular nature to the ways in which society has built up layers of cultural expectation and prescription and has constructed material and political edifices to support these. Women, in the sense of woman (biologically speaking), are indeed cultural artefacts. Without gender, they are nothing. They are taken into account as socially constructed
persons, there is no situation in which they count only for biology, no matter how essentialist would that interpretation be, there is always social construction (gender) beside biology in the analyses of women and men as well.

Women referring to themselves as feminists or womanists or simply as activists have been challenging those who hold power internationally. (Kaplan 1997:XIV) This got something to do with the role ascribed to women in relation to their families. Social stability depends on the happy family, and the family depends on the self-sacrificing mother who keeps her feelings and needs to herself and draws her identity from providing for others. Feminism destroyed all that. In the place of mothers and families, feminism brought us women. (Kaplan 1997:XV)

Make way for Butler

From a “humanist” perspective, “behind” the social order and experience are the human beings who make meaning, have experiences and so on. Structuralists argue that humans only think they make meaning, but it is “beyond” them. In other words, structuralists “decentre” human experience and meaning; the conscious subject is displaced from the centre of understanding. So, while the humanists saw the subject (individual) as intentional, choosing and fully conscious, structuralists undermined this, saying that history, culture and language had its own logic beyond individual intention. (Jones 1997:264)

It is surprising to find Gender Trouble falling victim to an all-too-common misreading in which Butler is faulted for articulating a voluntaristic notion of a subject who willfully decides one day to adopt one gender position, with the implication that it could just as willfully adopt a different gender position the next day. Such a reading misses the dimension of her thinking on the question of the subject as it understands her “performative” as some kind of voluntaristic “performance”. (Schrift 2001:13)

While Butler, like Sartre, wants to frame the self (whether understood as consciousness or identity) as constructed after the fact of action, they both face the same intractable paradox of
agency, that is, they both have great difficulty accounting for the “who” that makes choices and the “why” that motivates the choices made. (Schrift 2001:19)

We can bring these into discussion the distinction between dividuality and individuality. Dividuality is, as it were, a different form of repetition than individuality; the individual is called on, constrained, to repeat its identity in its various existential pursuits. Men are constrained to enact a repetition of masculinity at home, on the job, in their social lives. Failure to do so results in the assigning of a different identity to that individual and the concomitant penalties that accompany that assignation (failure as a father, lack of the aggressivity needed to succeed in business, lack of manliness in the bar or at the sports event etc.). But the dividual is constrained to a repetition of short term activities, activities designed to maintain financial viability, achieve sexual satisfaction, and maintain health and continued life. One must be aggressive at work, sensitive at home, daring at sports, and cautious in the bedroom. But while dividuality is a danger, individuality is also. In broad terms, Butler’s argument is that we are dominated by regimes of power and knowledge that constrain us to adopt gendered identities that are linked to biological sex. Instead of gender being a pre-discursive characteristic of sex, it is a performative construct, a becoming, within discourse/practice. (Colwell 1996:213; Gedalof 2000:50)

Of course the problem is that conceiving the essential structure of women or men or the human is to exclude those who fail for whatever reason to fit the prescribed essence. The strategy of disruption that Butler proposes is one that reveals the performative and constructed nature of gender in a way that subverts the privileged and legitimated position of the binny opposition of masculine/feminine. According to Colwell (1996:214) the paradigmatic example here is drag. In drag, a person of one (biological) sex portrays the gender normally associated with the opposite sex through the adoption of dress, body gestures, voice inflection, and mannerisms. What is interesting about drag is that it is not the attempt to reconstruct one’s gender, to be another gender, it is a temporary adoption of another gender, a slipping in and out of different gender performances, a transient becoming-other of gender. What drag reveals is the performative character of gender. What it subverts, or rather, perverts, is the illusion of gender as the natural expression of sexual identity. Butler’s opinion is different: “the problem with drag is that I offered it as an example of performativity, but it has been taken up as the paradigm for performativity, I don’t think
that if we were all more dragged out gender, life would become more expansive and less restrictive”. (Osborne, Segal 1994)

Butler insisted on the differentiation between performance and performativity: “it’s important to distinguish performance from performativity: the former presumes a subject, but the later contests the very notion of the subject. When one starts to think carefully about how discourse might be said to produce a subject, it’s clear that one’s already talking about a certain figure or trope of production. It is at this point that it’s useful to turn to the notion of performativity, and performe speech acts in particular – understood as those speech acts that bring into being that which they name. This is the moment in which discourse becomes productive in a fairly specific way. So what I’m trying to do is think about the performativity as that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names. This production actually always happens through a certain kind of repetition and recitation. So if you want the ontology of this, I guess performativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established. Performativity is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed”. (Osborne, Segal 1994)

Butler argued that language creates our understanding of society and if we want to change society we better change our language. Feminism is not just a perspective, a methodology – it has a prescriptive purpose which is to bring about social change to make women’s lives better. The postmodern perspective pushes the notions of gender and sexuality often to the point of meaninglessness and is no building block to a society more based in feminine values. Where is feminism left if we deconstruct the notion of being a woman leaving only biological differences? The struggle over whether to name academic programs „Gender Studies” or „Women’s Studies” reflects this tension. The postmodern feminist scholars are now coexisting uneasily with the more traditional women’s studies scholars, such as Martha Nussbaum, who try to ground their work in concrete concepts that generate implementable strategies to improve the lives of women. (Stanhope 1999:10)

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