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Provocateur

Closing Roundtable (Session VIII)

Taking my role as *provocateur* seriously, I have decided to tap the potentials of *provocation*, that is, to whet your appetite for intellectual confrontation by addressing two of the hot issues this conference has been engaged in. I will be doing this even at the risk of receiving sneering criticism or agitated rebuttals, but this is what a provocateur is for, isn't she?

Let me begin with the **Bologna Process**. It has been so vehemently bashed by so many people here (who may have ample reasons to do so themselves) that I have decided to defend it. Indeed, I believe the Bologna Process could just as well be regarded as a great resource for Hungarian universities to help end their isolation and be integrated into a larger network of European institutions of higher education. What a stimulating experience it is to no longer feel stranded on the periphery but getting involved instead in the daily business of European higher education. How rewarding it is to teach Portugal, German, or Finnish students in our courses in Budapest or elsewhere, while sending ours to Portugal, Germany or Finland, not to mention Hungarian academics' professional gains from teaching abroad under the auspices of the Teaching Mobility program of *Erasmus*.

To be sure, this relatively new openness impels us to go against the Hungarian grain, that is, to assume a radically different attitude to well-rehearsed, self-congratulatory or self-absolving myths. In short, we can't but quit most of our pet myths we've been latched on to for long. So nowadays—without making ourselves utterly ridiculous—we can no longer afford to celebrate the superiority of Hungarian education "having granted so many Nobel Prize recipients to the World." Likewise, we can no longer afford to ensconce ourselves in the abysmal self-pity of the Victim ravaged by Fate, history, historical "destiny," the Trianon Treaty, the Russian Empire, international capitalism, the US, the East, the West, or anyone in between.

These changes are certainly beset by all sorts of insecurities, since the production of tradeable knowledge for a highly competitive global knowledge market is most demanding and the stakes are high. But again, looking to competition as a resource, under this pressure we will, perhaps, become more determined to revamp our university system by reorganizing study programs to produce tradeable modules that lean on inter- and transdisciplinarity as Sabine Hark has explored them in her talk.

Some other advantageous aspects of the changes on the home front relate to gender studies and interdisciplinarity. **Gender Studies** has become a tradeable discipline among Hungarian and other universities in the EU, considerably owing to the increased dynamics of the international market of knowledge production affecting Hungarian higher education, as mentioned earlier. A catchword for top academic bureaucrats today, **interdisciplinarity** is carrying the ball in the guidelines of their accreditation committees poised to upgrade university programs all over the country. No matter how much faddism is attached to it, this incremental promotion of interdisciplinarity, say, in English and American Studies, seems to attest to the end of a rigidly compartmentalizing and isolationist Hungarian university system.

The other issue I want to address is **imperialism**. At this conference we have heard convincing discussions of how feminist ideas might constitute yet another form of

imperialism within the transnational flows of globalization, how Western feminist scholars might indirectly benefit from the structural inequalities persisting on the East, and to what degree the East-West divide can (or can't) be conceptualized along lines of a feminist "core" and "periphery." I agree with what Allaine Cerwonka has suggested today that it is high time we dislodge essentializing identity categories of "West" and "East" (the latter asserting its difference from Western imperialism). Among others, I have this urge in mind when I propose yet another look at the slippery nature of identity categories, namely those of East and West, periphery and center, colony and empire. The cursory example is again Hungary and some of the discourses of many people here whose political affiliation is not always easy to define. (I am thinking here of the extreme right.)

As so many of us are witnessing today in this country—a young member of the EU confronted with a great many social, economic, and environmental problems that could as well be adequately handled—there is an ongoing discursive construction of a country with a past that has never existed but which is taking an increasingly strong grip on people's imagination as real. This is a country of ORDER, showcasing a homogeneous national identity with fixed gender order rooted in patriarchy. The quintessential object of this nostalgia is a specific period of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, namely the years between the 1880s and 1910s, when the incumbent governments, as historians tell us, practically invented the fiction of Hungary as a single political nation and held firm to it. The ethno-political imaginary, however, happened to be at odds with contemporary realities: Hungary was, in fact, a culturally an ethnically heterogeneous entity, with only 45% of the population identifying themselves as Hungarian. This was the time, then, when increasing Hungarianization was taking place to foster a patriotic spirit even at the cost of the forced assimilation of minorities, especially the Jews.

Typical of the times, well-known politician and publicist Miklos Bartha had no qualms about declaring his conviction that there were two kinds of Jews in Hungary. On the one hand, there were the "good Jews," who were old-immigrant, assimilated, and Christianized Jews; on the other, there were the "bad Jews," who were newly arrived and unassimilated "Galician Jews." What is, however, more worrying, a few years ago the very same argument intoning the rhetoric of Bartha about the imminent danger of "Galician Jews"—who were about to disrupt the harmony of ethnically and culturally homogeneous Hungary—was picked up again by an extreme right-wing Protestant minister (also referred to by Zsazsa Barat yesterday). The vocabulary and message reminded us of some of the painful continuities in Hungarian history we hoped would disappear in the 1990s.

Besides the last decades of the Dual Monarchy as an object of desire (mostly for the wrong reasons), we can perceive a mounting nostalgia today for the 1920s-30s as well, when, in postwar Hungary (though truncated and disgraced by the Trianon Treaty resulting in the loss of 2/3 of the pre-war territories), order is said to have prevailed. I would skip historical elucidation here and only mention that despite the promise of educational, scientific, and cultural renewal, the Horthy era was rife with internal conflicts of traditionalist politics in a counter-revolutionary period, complete with rigid class, ethnic and gender hierarchy. So one wonders about the irresistible attractions of the era for people of the 21st century.

Speaking of current Hungarian nostalgias and dreams as a nation, I must also make passing reference to Hungarian hopes of becoming a "middle-sized power," a "strong" and "leading" nation in East-Central Europe. Varied as they may be, the chief reasons for such aspirations are grounded in assumptions many still seem to adhere to: we have had the longest tradition

of democracy and (quasi-)market economy in the region. All these hopes, however, I must add, seem to have recently fizzled out with Hungary producing the highest budget deficit in the European Union.

Besides nostalgias and hopes, there are also anxieties suggesting a Hungarian fixation on empire. We can witness a deep-seated self-pity over the loss of empire (see the Treaty of Trianon as above); current anxieties about the Russian empire, emblemized by Hungarian ex-communists, allegedly returning to power in a socialist-liberal guise; anxieties about the European Union with imperial aspirations to enslave Hungary (in fact, even the spectre of the EU reminiscent of the Ottoman Empire—ruling Hungary for 150 years—has been evoked to caution us against the imminent threat that the EU holds in store for us with regard to our country's sovereignty, unique language and culture, in short, to our sheer existence); and last but not least, there is the dark vision of the American Empire unleashing globalization, consumerism, mass culture in an effort to eradicate our traditional values.

Not surprisingly, last night, when I got home from the conference, I found a flier in my mailbox addressing me as a potential ally in a sacred war to be waged on infernal powers poised to erase me and my family off the face of the earth. The authors who call themselves "The National Alliance" urged me to support their project to dissolve Parliament, restore Hungary's "historical constitution" and national order, complete with national education, national economy, and national family policy. Finally, they pointed out the imperative of observing national interests above all conceivable interests. Completely flummoxed by this piece of writing, I decided to look on neo-liberalism (critiqued so convincingly at this conference) as a lesser evil, although I empathize with Eva Cherniavski's concerns about the implications of the vision of the Soros Foundation.

In summary: within this framework of imperial dreams and anxieties where rising political populism hand in hand with menacing ideologies are looming large, Hungarian feminists and gender studies scholars are indeed confronted with a series of challenges to contest, theorize and act against.