

‘Communicative’ Approaches to Women’s History in Hungary

Medien, Orte, Rituale. Zur Kulturgeschichte weiblicher Kommunikation im Königreich Ungarn. Edited by Lilla Krász, Brigitta Pesti, and Andrea Seidler. Vienna: Praesens, 2020. 367 pp.

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In Hungary, both writing women’s history and the neglect of works thus produced has had a long history. In the state-socialist era, propaganda proudly proclaimed the solution of the ‘women’s question’ and the fulfillment of women’s emancipatory project. Thus, any discussion about existing inequalities immediately became political¹—all the more so because feminism was interpreted as a Western ‘bourgeois’ ideology that had no relevance for socialist societies. Women’s studies, therefore, could not be institutionalized and the discipline mostly remained on the margins of the academic world. There is no space to discuss the complex processes that have shaped women’s social and family roles since the change of regime, the reception—and mainstream rejection—of Western feminism, and the ideal(ized) gender and family models which are inseparably linked with the different political ideologies. Suffice it to say that in the Hungarian academic world institutionalization progressed slowly: the Research Center of Women’s History was, for instance, founded in 2015 at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE).

The collection of essays entitled *Medien, Orte, Rituale* is the result of a joint enterprise and extensive research project conducted by the Finno–Ugrian Institute of the University of Vienna, the Historical Institute of the Slovakian Academy, and the ELTE Research Center of Women’s History. It is to the merit of the three editors that they were able to implement this long-term collaboration among women’s historians and literary critics from the three countries by offering a unique opportunity both to established scholars and early-career researchers to “come together” and engage in fruitful dialogue, the result of which has materialized in the form of this impressive volume of collected papers.

1 See, e.g., Zimmermann, “In an Out of the Cage.”

In her introductory essay, Lilla Krász singles out two important objectives of the book. First, the editors seek to offer a truly transnational history of the ways, modes, possibilities, networks, and rituals of women's communication in early modern Hungary and the Hungarian Kingdom under the Habsburg Monarchy. Second, the collection demonstrates that, in spite of all the odds, women's studies constitute an integral part of Hungarian history-writing, and eminent scholars from their respective fields have been addressing 'entangled' subjects at the crossroads of women's history and communication studies. This presupposes an interdisciplinary approach, and a refreshingly novel relation to the study of sources and the choice of methodology. By bringing together eighteen authors from different academic and national backgrounds, *Medien, Orte, Rituale* shows that the region which is alternatively called Central or East-Central Europe (depending on the geographical and historical angle of the observer) constitutes an integral part of a shared European history. The book addresses a German-speaking audience, in relation to which a shared past cannot be disputed; I would, however, go one step further to argue that it is also true from a European perspective, which the book nicely demonstrates.

It cannot be the intention here to introduce all the papers from the collected volume, whose topics cover a wide range of historically as well as 'laically' exciting questions, from the communication strategies of the nuns of aristocratic origin to the public spheres of aristocratic marriages, the role of female patrons in the printed literature, the communication and defense strategies of accused women and women from the provinces, the networks that can be constructed from memory albums (*album amicorum*), women's roles in the writing of an 'enlightened' scholar of the monarchy, the journalistic writings of Júlia Jósika, the wife of an exiled writer after the defeat of the 1848–1849 revolution and War of Independence in Hungary, the letters of a deaconess who went on an 'exotic' mission from Pest in the second half of the nineteenth century, or the memories of a famous actress, Mari Jászai, in Hungary. If we take a look at the construction of social roles, we also get a very diverse picture of how some women succeeded in transgressing traditional gender roles in early modern Hungary (and how others failed to do so), how coercion and resistance strategies from below shaped the ways midwives became professionalized in Hungary, and how (some) women succeeded in conquering 'male' jobs such as those of journalist and doctor in the first half of the twentieth century in Hungary. The listing of the research questions itself reflects the thematic, methodological, and conceptual richness of the volume; thus, the reader always gets a historically constructed picture of women's changing social and gender roles in Hungary from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries.

There are two further important aspects that I would like to stress. First, that development was not unidirectional. Different historical epochs were associated with markedly different social images which could be—and often were—sharply

contradicted by the social reality of people. During the time of the Ottoman conquest, Hungary was a military stronghold and it was customary for aristocratic (and non-aristocratic) men to spend years away from the family. In this situation, the role of the wife (or widow) automatically changed as she became responsible for running the 'extended' household and keeping together the family estate. The wars of religions caused further conflict within families; literary patronage was, for instance, as Brigitta Pesti observed, undoubtedly motivated by the *Kulturkampf* of the confessions. Aristocratic women's skills, education, and literary knowledge, of course, widely varied. Zsuzsanna Lorántffy was, for instance, not only a generous patron but also a cultivated and educated woman, while Erzsébet Czobor's letters suggest that she had problems expressing herself in writing.

The second aspect is the concept of intersectionality. Indeed, according to the normative narrative, the writing of women's history started in the 1970s—of course, in the Western world. This was followed by gender studies, which put the emphasis first and foremost on the sole category of sisterhood—that is to say, made the assumption that the category of gender essentially precedes all other social and political categories. The next invention was the recognition that fundamental social categories should be examined together. The task of the researcher is to find historical and social causality rather than stress a presupposed common identity for all women—which is a truism of all academics who have been adequately trained in historical methods. This new paradigm became well known as intersectionality, which refers to the simultaneous investigation of multiple social categories, thus the addition of categories such as social class, race, religion, citizenship, etc. into the study of gender. The authors of the book all work with the assumption that without the historical context one can but list commonplaces and reproduce existing stereotypes that in any case characterize the Western construction of gender roles in the region.

In his book *Inventing Eastern Europe*,² Larry Wolff argues that even at the time of the Enlightenment Western people viewed Eastern Europe as a region where, for example, women were treated as slaves who could even be offered to guests as sexual objects or be physically punished without any legal consequence. This 'exoticized' view of the Other received fresh impetus with the fall of the Iron Curtain, when any exchange between the two halves of Europe became difficult and dangerous—and thereby the latter's knowledge of each other again became highly politicized.

The change of regimes failed to deconstruct Cold War stereotypes—and in some cases, the post-1989 literature only reconstructs these culturalist-(covertly) racist discourses. *Medien, Orte, Rituale* is, from this perspective, a refreshingly new

2 Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*.

‘collective voice’ on the market which dares to transgress these mental boundaries. It does show that there were pre-given ‘scripts’ about women’s roles in the region; but it also shows that women’s social reality often differed from the world of the moralistic writings that the men of the era produced. Andrea Seidler, for instance, analyzes the writings of Joseph von Sonnenfels, an Austrian scholar from the eighteenth century, who compared the tasks of women to those of the absolute ruler in the sense that both should seek happiness in (different forms of) serving people (*glücklich sey, dadurch, dass man glücklich machet*). This perspective already forecast a different social milieu: the construction of the bourgeois family, wherein gender roles—according to the classic study of Jürgen Habermas—were strictly differentiated into the ‘public’ and the ‘private’. Of course, the theory can be debated; nonetheless, it had a very lasting impact on our understanding of these ‘prescribed’ gender roles.

Here I have to mention one criticism. While the early modern papers mostly succeed in being truly intersectional, in those about the nineteenth and twentieth century few tackle the problem of the specific nature of Eastern European development and the ‘incomplete’ (or mostly missing) processes of embourgeoisement. In a paper, Eleonóra Géra discusses the letters of a deaconess, Hermine Biberauer, in the second half of the nineteenth century, who was of German origin, and wrote her letters to her brother—not surprisingly—in German. As Géra notes, Hermine was very cautious in formulating political opinions, not only because her letters were read in the congregation, but also because her brother supported the Prussians against the Austrians, while she had a more Austrian identity. It would have been worth giving a deeper analysis of what German or Austrian identity really meant and how the change of ethnic identities impacted the social and political opinions—and social mobility!—of the *magyarized* bourgeoisie.

Apart from the above-mentioned credits, I would like to draw attention to some papers in which it is described how women succeeded in transgressing both gender boundaries and pre-existing ‘exoticized’ stereotypes. Ildikó Horn analyzes the everyday life and social-cultural network of a famous monastery in Bratislava (Pressburg/Pozsony, in today’s Slovakia), showing that women of aristocratic origins who became nuns also functioned as ‘information centers’ and continued to support their extended families in many ways (through providing a forum for the exchange of information, educating children, etc.) As the letters of Anna Franciska Csáky show, being a nun did not necessarily mean withdrawal from the outside world; quite the contrary, a nun could act as an organizer and a matchmaker, and she could also satisfy her interest in politics.

As Anna Fundárková notes, in the marriage of Maria Fugger and Nikolaus Pálffy a strong woman met a strong man, and their correspondence shows that not only did Maria, as the daughter of an influential family, support the career of her husband, but

they also had strong feelings for each other. This is shown by the mixed use of the language: e.g. Pálffy called Maria “mein aller Herz liebste Baba,” while Maria wrote that even the “nénék és húgok” (aunts and sisters in Hungarian) missed Pálffy.

Erika Szívós makes use of memory studies, and from the example of the memoirs of Mari Jászai (a very famous Hungarian actress, 1850–1926) she analyzes the construction of her self and her self-therapy on the basis of ego documents. Judit Kerpics chooses another ‘extraordinary’ woman, Júlia Jósika, who gained popularity due to her multicultural approach associated with the duplex cultural transfer between Brussels and Pest. Lilla Krász studies the professionalization of midwives in eighteenth-century Hungary, showing that given the lack of experienced midwives, many women continued to practice the profession without official authorization because they could not pass the medical exam. She also analyzes desperate letters in which midwives complain of the difficulty of the exam and refer to their old age as an excuse.

The long *durée* perspective and the interdisciplinarity and intersectionality that *Medien, Orte, Rituale* applies expands the category of gender, thus endowing the writing of ‘old’ women’s history with a new dimension. At its dawn, women’s history focused on great historical female personalities in an attempt to show that ‘his’ story has always been complemented with ‘her’ story—no matter what the grand narrative of ‘sisterhood’ claimed about the inherent victimhood of women, which can never be adequately verified in our common story. The writing of new women’s history makes productive and multifaceted use of contemporary social theories and attempts to understand the widely debated and even more widely misunderstood category of gender in a social, cultural and political context, which has always been contingent upon a common history of women and men.

Literature

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Zimmermann, Susan. “In an Out of the Cage: Women’s and Gender History Written in Hungary in the State-Socialist Period.” *Aspasia* 8 (2014): 125–49. <https://doi.org/10.3167/asp.2014.080107>

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