

**Kamil Aksiuto, review of: *Feminizm [Feminism]*, eds. Maria Marczevska-Rytko, Dorota Maj, Marcin Pomarański, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press, Lublin 2015, p. 517.**

In the West, for better or worse, feminist perspective has by now become an established part of an academic *curriculum*. Yet, the situation is quite different in Poland where both as a scientific approach and as a social and political movement feminism is still approached with a large dose of suspicion and even greater dose of ignorance. Granted that there has been certain improvement over the course of the last years, the discussions of issues connected to feminism, like the status of women in society and the relations between both sexes, are still clouded by mutual misunderstandings and ideological fervor. Therefore, a new book edited by Professor Maria Marczevska-Rytko is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on this controversial subject. Hopefully, it will help to dispel some of the popular misconceptions.

The essays collected in this volume offer a comprehensive overview of the field. The opening article by Professor Marczevska-Rytko provides a reader with a concise and insightful analysis of subsequent waves of feminism. It directs reader's attention to some of the challenges that contemporary feminism has to face and serves as a good starting point for discussion of a wide variety of topics. The other essays range over issues such as: examples of both historical and contemporary activity of women in such different countries as Romania, Russia, Norway and India, beauty contests at Polish universities seen through the critical lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theory, the struggles over the Equal Rights Amendment to the United States Constitution and the Internet memes portraying feminists, to name just a few. This thematic variety is reflected in the division of the book into separate parts dealing with: 1) theoretical and methodological questions raised by feminism, 2) different practical applications of feminist and quasi-feminist ideals all around the world and in Poland, 3) social and religious contexts determining to a large extent the role of women in a given society and, last but not least, 5) the image of feminism proliferated in media and literature. It is evident that I will not be able to discuss here most of the issues which were raised in the volume at length which they most definitely deserve. Therefore, I shall choose only a few which, in my opinion, merit special consideration.

In his article, Dr. Waldemar Bulira examines whether the category of "biopolitics"<sup>1</sup> often used by feminist scientists, can be applied to feminism itself. More specifically, the author makes use of an approach to biopolitics developed by Hungarian philosophers Ágnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, founders of the "Budapest School". While Heller and Fehér, as should be expected from thinkers influenced by Marxism, appreciate the emancipatory potential of feminism, at the same time, they remain fiercely critical about some of its aspects. They draw attention to the "self-closure" of the radical feminists who present their own great meta-narrative<sup>2</sup> about women's emancipation as the "final truth". Feminists tend to give a fixed meaning to concepts such as freedom and justice, by interpreting them in the light of universalized (absolutized) sexual difference [pp. 55–56]. In the process, they deny the fundamental modern conviction that

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<sup>1</sup> This term was introduced by a French thinker Michel Foucault who is often associated with post-structuralism and postmodernism, though the latter affiliation is much more controversial.

<sup>2</sup> I am using this term in a sense given to it by Jean-François Lyotard.

emancipation is a dialectical, open-ended and therefore permanent process [p. 55]. Furthermore, Heller and Fehér point out that feminism politicizes woman's body and, as a result, is bound to discover relations of power inside the spheres which were usually perceived as apolitical, like the family life. But this amounts to the abolishing of the division between what is private and public, a distinction absolutely crucial for liberal-democratic politics. The effect of total politicization advocated by radical feminism is potentially very dangerous [p. 59]. Indeed, one can even go further than Hungarian philosophers and Dr. Bulira, and question whether any talk of emancipation is intelligible within the scope of this theoretical approach? First of all, given the postmodernist deconstruction of subjectivity, it is not at all clear who should be freed and, secondly, from what? If relations of power are understood in a Foucauldian manner, they can be shifted but cannot simply evaporate. It seems to me that these are the most pressing questions, especially for the radical strands in contemporary feminism.

Professor Jarosław Macała touches on a different, though not unrelated, set of issues in his text about feminist approach in geopolitics. The revolution in social sciences and humanities which started a few decades ago forces us to pay attention to the broader social and cultural contexts in which scientific theories are being created. Feminism as a specific approach to political geography and geopolitics exemplifies this trend. On the one hand, it is surely right in rejecting naïve, positivistic view of science as neutral and objective. Therefore, feminist reevaluation of classical texts and concepts in geopolitics is of some value, as it brings out an unreflective reproduction of cultural (and often patriarchal) stereotypes in science [pp. 44–45]. Feminist geopolitics can also inspire research in previously neglected areas [pp. 49–50]. Yet, to reject the wrong answer is not the same as to find the right one. Firstly, the claim that all knowledge reflects and promotes the interest of some particular group is blatantly self-referential. If feminist researchers assert that geopolitics reproduces masculine domination, then it must follow that their own theory also expresses particular interests of a different group, but particular interests nevertheless. Moreover, it might be even too generous to speak of a feminist theory of geopolitics. Professor Macała seems to be suggesting that the key concepts and assumptions are too blurry to justify any coherent methodological approach which would give substance to feminist geopolitics [pp. 51–52]. One can wonder whether this doubt does not also extend to some applications of feminism in other disciplines.

If one might register just one, minor complain, about the reviewed volume, it would be that a complex relationship between issues which usually occupy feminists and various religions could have been examined in greater detail. We do find in the book engaging essays about the status of women in Hinduism, Orthodox Christianity and in the workings of the Conference of European Churches. Still, there is no chapter on Buddhism, Islam and, perhaps even more surprisingly, none directly dealing with Catholicism. The latter deserves particular attention not only and not primarily because Catholic Church in Poland continually and persistently "naturalizes" women's role as mothers and wives. Two things are worth remarking. Firstly, women play a very active part in many Church affiliated organizations. It is interesting how does this fact affect the feminist attitude towards religion and how does it shape the attitude of the Catholic Church towards women's rights. Secondly, some of the most perceptive commentators sympathetic to the cause of feminine equality have repeatedly warned Polish feminists, especially those in academia, that the path to emancipation of women in our society cannot automatically follow the Western example. The reason for this is simple, in Polish culture, as in other Slavic ones, there are strong matriarchal elements which have been only reinforced by Catholicism

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(unlike in protestant countries of the North-West). Those observations could potentially result in a scientific debate more vital than the well-publicized gender issue which might turn out to be merely a seasonal controversy.

All things considered, *Feminism* is definitely a recommended reading for those accustomed to the subject as well as for relative beginners. Were it to become a reference point for future discussions about women's emancipation and equality, Polish science would undoubtedly benefit. This is because the aforementioned book explores a complex relation between theory and practice and provokes some vital questions. Not the least important of the latter is which theory can be reasonably expected to achieve and which not? Therefore, it compliments well an already impressive series of publications devoted to ideologies and political movements of which it forms a part.