

# Contested Feminist Narratives of Three Decades. Uncertain Prospects of Czech Gender Studies

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## Introduction

The history of the establishment of Gender Studies as a discipline in the Czech Republic has been well documented, especially by Hana Hašková in her two 2011 articles, one published in *Aspasia*, the other in *Travelling Gender Studies* (Hašková 2011a, 2011b). Various relevant texts also appeared more synchronously with the events as they unfolded during the immediate post-1989 period, when Gender Studies and feminism were being introduced and debated in the Czech post-socialist context. Jiřina Šiklová (1993a, 1993b, 1998), Hana Havelková (1993, 1997), Jiřina Šmejkalová (1993, 1995), Jana Hradílková (1993), Laura Busheikin (1993), as well as Ann Snitow (2020) are among those who left behind a written record of these often heated post-1989 debates about the relevance of feminism in the Czech, and more broadly Eastern European, context. While most of these texts focus on Prague, the context of the Moravian metropolis of Brno is also discussed. Věra Eliášová, Simona Fojtová, and Martina Horáková's 2014 essay focuses specifically on Brno and on the role played by the Masaryk University's English and American Studies students in the post-1989 discussions concerning gender studies.<sup>1</sup> In terms of more recent assessments, Blanka Nyklová's (2017, 2018) reflections concerning the impact of the neoliberalization of Czech universities on Gender Studies are especially relevant.

In reviewing literature that has been published on the topic, the main dilemmas faced by the early Czech Gender Studies scholars were found to include: 1) Absence of awareness about and dismissal of feminism in pre-1989 socialist Czechoslovakia, as well as direct hostility toward feminism on the part of the Czech public and many Czech academics post-1989. 2) Questions about the best institutional setting for the discipline in the Czech context: Should Gender Studies be established outside or inside the traditional Czech

1 We do not capitalize the term gender studies when using it to denote an area of studies or as a different term for gender issues/topics. When it denotes an academic department/program or discipline, we capitalize the term.

academic structures? Created as a separate program and/or department or as knowledge and tools incorporated into various already existing disciplines?<sup>2</sup> Following a set disciplinary line or respecting interdisciplinary nature in Gender Studies? A variety of different approaches to institutionalization were discussed, and this plurality of possible paths was not generally seen as a contradiction. Rather, it was understood that various paths and approaches might need to be explored and pursued for developing and furthering Gender Studies as a discipline.

Three decades later, Gender Studies has been established as an autonomous discipline at three Czech academic institutions. Additionally, individual faculties across Czech universities incorporate gender issues and topics into their courses within a variety of different departments. However, as we discuss in the second part of this chapter, while the trajectory of the establishment of Gender Studies in Czech academia between the early 2000s and circa 2017 appeared to be one of a more or less steady progress, in recent years Gender Studies as a field of study has suffered some institutional setbacks, and the future trajectory of the discipline's development is far from certain and set. Today, Czech Gender Studies scholars face continued apathy towards feminism among the general public, assaults from increasingly emboldened conservative anti-gender pundits, as well as an overall indifference by most (although not all) university administrators.

## Back to the Beginnings: Early to Mid-1990s

In the Czechoslovakia of state socialism, feminism was dismissed as a bourgeois ideology irrelevant in a socialist context where women had become fully employed outside the house (and thus were presumably emancipated) and where men and women were expected to share a common goal: together, side by side, to struggle for a communist future. While Czechoslovak sociologists, including Šiklová (1993a) and Marie Čermáková (see Čermáková quoted in Tupá<sup>3</sup>), did write on the topic of Czechoslovak women's position in socialist society, they were not familiar with the research being done in the fields of feminist theory, epistemology, or feminist sociology in what was known as 'the West'. Western feminist texts were simply unavailable to Czechs before 1989, including to dissidents. And the strong local tradition of feminist

- 2 As Karin Aleksander has observed in her 2013 article on the history of women's studies libraries in West Germany, discussions about autonomy and/or integration were a feature shared by many early women's projects as they were undergoing institutionalization (2013: 36–37).
- 3 We first found this reference in Hana Hašková's article "Establishing Gender Studies in Czech Society" (Hašková 2011a: 146–147).

activism in pre-1948 Czechoslovakia was generally not known or ignored by scholars. Among others, Šiklová, the founder of the Gender Studies Foundation (1992), and Čermáková, who founded the Department of Gender and Sociology at the Czech Academy of Sciences, have both commented on the dearth of feminist texts behind the ‘Iron Curtain’.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, Jiřina Šmejkalová’s 1993 essay “Do Czech Women Need Feminism?” discusses the consequences of the absence of discourses from the Czechoslovak intellectual context that she identifies as underpinning (in the early 1990s) Western feminist conceptual thinking: psychoanalysis, Western Marxist academic discourse, and deconstruction. Šmejkalová takes each of these discourses and outlines the ways in which their absence in the pre-1989 Czechoslovak setting posed hurdles to the post-1989 communication between Western feminists (versed in these philosophical traditions) and Czech scholars (used to working with a different interpretive framework). Studying feminist theory is no linear task; it is filled with digressions under the most straightforward of circumstances. Imagine the task of ‘catching up’ on feminist theory (with digressions into psychoanalysis, deconstruction, Western Marxism, post-colonial thought, critical race theory, queer theory, etc.) in the immediate post-1989 years and in a foreign language – the dictionary helping only at the level of signifiers.

The socialist regime limited the Czechoslovak public’s exposure to Western (and thus presumably ideologically suspect) thought by a number of means, including maintaining linguistic gaps. Strict limits were set on the numbers of students permitted to study English (and other foreign languages with the exception of Russian) at Czechoslovak schools and especially universities. Particularly in the pre-1989 context, a public untrained in Western foreign languages tended to be left dependent on state-controlled translations for any substantive exposure to knowledge and views from outside national borders. Additionally, while much of the population (especially older generations) did speak German, West German literature was as restricted for Czechoslovak citizens as the highly suspect literature written in English. In this context, it is fascinating to ponder the existence of debates about feminism among some academics in pre-1989 East Germany, also a member of the Soviet Bloc. While this topic warrants further research, to our knowledge,<sup>5</sup> these feminist conversations did not travel from East Germany to Czechoslovakia. This was likely due to the generally quite limited cross-border exchanges between academics even within the Soviet Bloc, as well as due to

- 4 For Marie Čermáková’s comments on this topic, see Hana Hašková (2011a: 146–147). For Jiřina Šiklová’s comments on this topic, see for instance Šiklová 1993a (especially page 8).
- 5 Šiklová was similarly unaware of any information about feminism leaking into Czechoslovakia from East Germany prior to 1989. E-mail correspondence between Jusová and Šiklová, August 10, 2020.

the semi-official, not exactly sanctioned, nature of pre-1989 feminist discussions at East German universities.

Some of the earliest post-1989 Czech-speaking Gender Studies scholars, including Gerlinda Šmausová, Alena Wagnerová, and Jana Valdrová, were German language and (West) German context oriented.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, some of the first foundations that provided important financial support to the Gender Studies Foundation/Center were based in Germany, including Frauen-Anstiftung and Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. But other financial support arrived from English-speaking countries, particularly the Open Society Fund sponsored by the Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros. Since English had by the early 1990s become the de facto global language of the Women's and Gender Studies discipline and due to the impact of US feminist scholars arriving on Fulbright and other scholarships in Prague post-1989, English quickly became the dominant mediating language for the discipline of Gender Studies as it was taking root in the Czech Republic.<sup>7</sup> Renate Haas's edited book *Rewriting Academia: The Development of the Anglicist Women's and Gender Studies of Continental Europe* focuses on the role played by Anglo-American studies in the establishment of Gender Studies as an academic discipline at universities across Europe, including in the post-1989 Czech context. Eliášová, Fojtová, and Horáková's chapter in Haas' book discusses the lively conversations about feminism among Anglo-American studies students at Czech universities, and specifically Masaryk University, throughout the 1990s. Possessing a working knowledge of English, these students had the linguistic skills needed in order to access English-language feminist literature, and they also played an important role in translating early Western feminist texts into Czech (Eliášová, Fojtová and Horáková 2014: 204–205). By and large, those who had had the opportunity to study English prior to 1989 found themselves at a great advantage on all fronts post-1989, including in discussions concerning feminism.<sup>8</sup> Those who did not have access to Western foreign languages prior to 1989 quickly realized English was the language that would open the Gender Studies field to them.<sup>9</sup>

6 Šmausová and Wagnerová were Czech academics, who prior to the 1990s, lived and worked in exile in West Germany.

7 The centrality of English as the mediating language in the Gender Studies field in the Czech Republic was solidified by the backing of the Ford Foundation and the Canadian Embassy, and later, in the 2000s, by the European Union funding available for gender studies related projects in the Czech context.

8 French-written feminist texts also had some influence in the immediate post-1989 Czech context, specifically within the ecofeminist circles at Masaryk University.

9 Beyond the specific Czech context, see Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (2002) on the implications of the Anglo-American domination of feminist knowledge during the establishment of Women's/Gender Studies as a discipline across continental Europe. Braidotti's discussion of the early debates among European feminists about whether the term gender should be translated into local languages or adopted in its English version is also relevant (Braidotti 2002).

The post-1989 debates between US, Canadian, and German feminist academics on the one hand and local intellectuals and activists interested in women's issues on the other hand have been well-documented (Busheikin 1993, Šiklová 1993a, 1993b, Havelková 1993, Šmejkalová 1993, Hašková 2011a, 2011b, Fojtová 2016). While the Czech participants in these exchanges were initially somewhat ambivalent about the usefulness of feminism and Gender Studies for the local post-socialist context and were often frustrated with (some of the) Western feminists' attitudes of superiority, they were also clearly curious about the field. They remained involved in the cross-cultural dialogues, took upon themselves the uneasy task of explaining feminism/s to the hostile local public (see Havelková quoted in Hašková 2011a: 147), and, already in the early 1990s, started teaching Gender Studies classes to Czech students. While often feeling (in the words of Šmejkalová) "deep suspicion of our own competence in the field" (1995: 1005), this only propelled them to deepen and expand their interrogation of the field that they found fascinating. They remained engaged, standing ready to parse Gender Studies concepts and interrogate their relevance for the local circumstances, while also seeking to leave their own mark on the field.

Some of the Czech scholars soon started expressing objections to those visiting academics whom they perceived as mining the post-socialist context for novelty material and who treated local scholars as if they were clearly subordinate research assistants, involved only to help gather empirical data, which would then be turned into theories by the presumably more competent Western academics (Šmejkalová 1995: 1001, Šmejkalová 2004: 171, Hašková 2011a: 154). As Šmejkalová has expressed it, "an assumption came into being according to which the 'West' was the producer of 'theory' and the 'East' was supposed to provide the empirical data" (2004: 171). Ann Snitow's 2020 memoir peppered with critical self-reflections leaves no doubt that at least some of the visiting feminists approached the post-socialist location with much critical awareness and self-doubt (2020: 90–95, 112). Yet, Snitow herself notes the overwhelming presence of privileged, mostly American, travelers in Prague in 1991, who exuded over-confidence despite their ignorance of the Czech context. One of the driving forces behind the establishment of the first Czech Gender Studies research teams and centers was likely a desire on the part of local scholars to assert control over the local sources of knowledge, over the ways in which that knowledge would be interpreted and what conclusions and theories would be derived from it. Furthermore, Czech scholars strove to gain control over the ways in which this newly emerging knowledge about women's issues under state socialism and post-socialism would enter into the broader transnational feminist theoretical discourse. Among others, Šmejkalová mounted a critique of the unequal relationship inscribed into much of the post-1989 East-West exchanges, stating, "It is time to start designing a 'room of our own'" (1995: 1001).

Following the events of 1989, the apartment of dissident, sociologist, and organizer Jiřina Šiklová became an unofficial center for meetings and educational activities on feminist topics. Soon, Šiklová's bookshelves were overflowing with feminist books donated from the US, Germany, and Scandinavia. With initial funds from the Network of East-West Women (and later with the long-term financial backing from Frauen-Anstiftung), in 1992, the group around Šiklová registered as a non-profit under the name of the Gender Studies Foundation (soon to be renamed the Gender Studies Center). The Foundation's main objective was to serve as "a curriculum center for developing teaching programs in the field of Gender Studies" (Hašková 2011a: 148). It was under the auspices of this Foundation/Center that the first Gender Studies courses were designed and accepted, "rather grudgingly" (Šmejkalová 2004: 175), by the Faculty of Arts and the School of Social Sciences of Charles University as optional classes for students in the academic year of 1991–1992.

Several lecturers taught these early courses, offered at Charles University as well as Masaryk and Palacký Universities, and the Gender Studies Foundation/Center also sponsored traveling public lectures about feminism for the non-academic public.<sup>10</sup> Šmejkalová (1995), who taught the venue's Gender-Culture-Society course, published a reflection on her experience in the 1995 *Signs* special issue on Postcolonial, Emergent, and Indigenous Feminisms. The essay serves as a valuable historical record. In it, Šmejkalová describes a mix of excitement and anxiety that accompanied teaching this first (in the Czech setting) feminist theory course. The task faced by the instructor was formidable, especially considering the open animosity towards feminism among the Czech general public at the time.<sup>11</sup> Parsing out decades of potentially relevant writings (in English or German) and catching up on the underlying theoretical frameworks new to the local audiences and to the Czech language, the instructor had to make decisions about which texts or concepts might be the most germane for the post-1989 Czech classroom. Presenting open-ended questions, possibly with no right answers, to an audience used to the teacher always having the right answers was also a new experience (Šmejkalová 1995: 1003). The assigned texts were mostly in English, although the students' level of English fluency varied, and the English-Czech dictionaries available at the time were not necessarily adequate for the tasks posed by a feminist theory (or

10 Hana Hašková lists the following scholars as being among the teachers and participants in these early Gender Studies courses: Jiřina Šiklová, Jana Hradílková, Laura Busheikin, Hana Havelková, Jiřina Šmejkalová, Marie Čermáková, Libora Oates-Indruchová, Pavla Frýdlová, Mirek Vodrážka, Pavla Jonssonová, Hana Maříková, Šárka Gjuričová, Eva Hauserová, and Eva Věšínová-Kalivodová (2011a: 149).

11 Rebecca Nash describes the animosity towards feminism on the part of Czech public in the early 1990s as "almost a physical repulsion" (2002: 294). This open hostility is cited also as one of the reasons behind the decision to name the discipline in the Czech context by the more obscure term Gender Studies rather than Feminist or Women's Studies (Šmejkalová 2004: 172, Lenka Václavíková Helšusová quoted in Hašková 2011a: 149).

feminist sociology, for that matter) seminar. One can imagine the excitement and apprehension accompanying the charge of bringing these new ways of thinking and new subjects to the attention of local students.

## **Gender Studies as an Autonomous Field of Study in the Czech Republic: Late 1990s–Present**

Discussing her experience teaching this early Gender Studies course, Šmejkalová also mentions the following issues as causing some confusion: “[N]ot only did I present (at least within the local context) a non-defined discipline, I was also non-defined as a teacher” (1995: 1002). The question of how best to incorporate Gender Studies into the existing Czech academic structure was much debated throughout the 1990s. Clearly, the new methodological and theoretical tools and knowledge needed to be integrated, where possible, into the already existing disciplines and departments. However, how much effort should go into developing separate Gender Studies departments? Would the new field survive long term in academic settings if it did not claim the form of a recognized autonomous department or at least autonomous academic program? The confusion, as articulated by Šmejkalová (1995: 1002) and others, arising from teaching a “non-discipline” as a visiting scholar and within an institution that only “grudgingly” made space for a few elective classes suggests the precarity and long-term untenability of teaching Gender Studies outside the recognized academic structures.

In the following section of our chapter, we first discuss the establishment and the subsequent development (up to the present) of Gender Studies as an autonomous discipline at 1) the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 2) Charles University, and 3) Masaryk University. In the next part of the chapter, we briefly discuss some individual faculty’s efforts to teach gender and sexuality topics outside of Gender Studies programs.

### **I. Gender Studies at the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic**

The first Czech academic institution that officially incorporated Gender Studies was the Czechoslovak (later Czech) Academy of Sciences, specifically its Institute of Sociology. Already in 1990–1991, the sociologist Marie Čermáková, who was a researcher in the Institute of Sociology at the time, assembled the first Czech Gender Studies research team, which became a

forerunner of the Institute's current Gender and Sociology Department (Hašková 2011a: 152).<sup>12</sup> A clarifying note might be warranted here concerning the place of the Academy of Sciences on the map of Czech institutions of higher learning. Historically, Czech academia has followed the continental tradition of a division between the undergraduate-teaching focused universities and the research and doctoral studies focused Academy of Sciences.<sup>13</sup> Today, the division is not as clear-cut as in the past, and Czech university professors are expected to publish research while Academy of Sciences researchers occasionally teach university courses.

Under the leadership of Čermáková,<sup>14</sup> the Gender and Sociology Department at the Academy of Sciences has been instrumental in establishing feminist sociology as a relevant academic subject within the Czech context (Šmejkalová 2004: 176; Hašková 2011a: 151–152). Since 2000, this department has been publishing the peer-reviewed journal *Gender, rovné příležitosti, výzkum* [Gender, equal opportunities, research], renamed *Gender a Výzkum* [Gender and Research] in 2016, which features research by local, as well as international, feminist sociologists written in Czech and English. The journal is an important resource on topics such as transnational feminism, critical studies on masculinities, globalization and gender, transgender issues, as well as teaching gender at the neoliberal university. Especially in the early years, *Gender a Výzkum* served an important role in supporting undergraduate teaching in Gender Studies, and it helped define relevant terminology in the Czech language.

- 12 Another important institution focused on gender research, the NKC (National Contact Center) Women and Science (later renamed to NKC Gender and Science), was founded in 2001. It also has its roots in Čermáková's Gender Studies research team at the Academy of Sciences.
- 13 Jirina Šiklová reminds us that the division between universities as institutions of undergraduate teaching and the Academy of Sciences as a research institution proved useful during the pre-1989 period. Many academics who were found to be politically suspect by the regime could not teach at universities but they were still able to find a job at the Academy (where they would not teach). This was confirmed by Šiklová and discussed in e-mail correspondence between Jusová and Šiklová, on July 29, 2020.
- 14 Marie Čermáková established and served as the head of the department until 2007. Since 2007 the department has been led by Alena Křížková. The NKC is run by Marcela Linková, a scholar well established in the international community who also works in large, EU funded projects.



## **II. Gender Studies at Charles University. From the Faculty of Arts to the Faculty of Humanities. From a Program to a Department to a Program Once Again**

Moving beyond the context of the Academy of Sciences, Czech universities were mostly resistant to making space for the new discipline of Gender Studies. However, the transformations in Czech university curricula mandated by the European Union (EU) prior to the 2004 accession of the Czech Republic into the EU did create new opportunities. The very first Gender Studies program at Charles University (located in the country capital, Prague) was already founded by Šiklová in 1998 with the financial backing of the American Ford Foundation. This program was an outgrowth of the curricular work carried out in the early to mid-1990s under the auspices of the Gender Studies Foundation/Center discussed in the first part of this chapter. This MA program in “Social Work and Gender Studies,” incorporated into the Department of Social Work at the Faculty of Arts, was admitting students between 2000 and 2003. However, in 2003, despite its financial success and popularity with students, university support for the program was withdrawn and the program shut down. The official reason for its discontinuation was that “Gender Studies was not regarded as a field that the Faculty of Arts at Charles University wanted to cultivate as part of its educational agenda” (Hašková 2011a: 150).

When the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University proved more supportive of the new discipline than the university’s Faculty of Arts, several of the Social Work and Gender Studies faculty transferred to the Faculty of Humanities, initiating, in 2005, the first and only Gender Studies Department at a Czech university. Highly successful both in terms of research and in terms of student enrolment, the department’s faculty hailed from a variety of disciplines, including history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, as well as cultural studies, Anglo-American studies, media studies, critical disability studies, and critical race studies. Under the leadership of Věra Sokolová, the department underwent a tumultuous but successful reaccreditation process in 2018. However, as we worked on this chapter, the news reached us that the department had just had its standing and status within the university diminished (in June 2020) and had been transformed into an academic program. The (at this point) program at Charles University offers an MA degree in Gender Studies, and its faculty also teach a number of BA courses.

The above noted change in the structure of the Gender Studies department at Charles University, its dissolution and transformation into an academic program whose faculty will be hosted by other departments, unfolded in the summer of 2020 in the context of a major reform of higher education in the Czech Republic. As part of the reform, the system of departments at Charles University’s Faculty of Humanities was reorganized with the stated goal of

bridging a growing gap between undergraduate and graduate studies. While Gender Studies lost its status as a department in the process, it has maintained its standing as a recognized study program within Charles University's Faculty of Humanities, and the program chair Sokolová has managed to secure physical proximity of the colleagues' offices in their new location.<sup>15</sup>

The assessment of the process and the outcome of this restructuring among the members of the Gender Studies (now) program at Charles University varies. Some faculty interpret the dissolution of the department as a problematic but likely unavoidable result of the broader Faculty of Humanities reform at Charles University. They appreciate that Gender Studies has been preserved as an academic program and its faculty members have been able to maintain their positions. Others, however, are convinced that the loss of department status was a targeted attack on Gender Studies as such. They believe that a more hostile treatment, perhaps even complete closing of Gender Studies, was avoided not due to enthusiasm on the part of the university leadership for the discipline but rather as a result of the recent excellent performance in the accreditation process. Assessing the recent events concerning Gender Studies at Charles University from the outside, it is hard not to view the change in status from department to program as regressive. Departments have a more recognized status than academic programs; they receive more funding and staff support and might be less susceptible to potential future dissolution or discontinuation. Furthermore, faculty members working within departments are able and expected to devote their professional attention to their discipline alone rather than dividing their energies between different disciplines.

### **III. Gender Studies at Masaryk University. From an Independent Program to a Specialization**

While the Gender Studies program at Charles University offers MA-level courses, it does not offer a BA degree in Gender Studies. The first BA-level program in Gender Studies in the Czech Republic was developed in 2004 within the Department of Sociology at the Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University in Brno. This program was initially envisioned by a group of enthusiastic Masaryk University graduate students, several of whom (including the co-author of this chapter, Šmídová, as well as Kateřina Nedbálková, Kateřina Lišková or Lucie Jarkovská) became the program's first lecturers. The Czech German exile sociologist Gerlinda Šmausová,<sup>16</sup> who

15 Information from a Zoom call between Sokolová and Šmídová, September 16, 2020.

16 The works of Gerlinda Šmausová have been collected in an anthology edited by Libora

served as a visiting scholar at Masaryk University throughout the 2000s, played a key role in outlining a formal study program and seeing it through to successful accreditation. Unlike at Charles University, at Masaryk University, Gender Studies were not established as a department but rather as a study program within the Department of Sociology. Gender Studies were designed as part of a double major, which at the time was the dominant form of study at the undergraduate level at the newly established Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University. Students at the Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University commonly studied two academic programs, choosing their major only in the final year via the topic of their BA thesis.

Benefitting from the energy of its young faculty members and from the expertise and experience of professor Šmausová, and supported by the Faculty Dean who was a sociologist himself, by 2004, the BA Gender Studies program at Masaryk University was fully established and running. While the academic staff hoped to also launch an MA program in Gender Studies, its 2011 accreditation attempt was unsuccessful. Despite this setback, the program at Masaryk University flourished as the only bachelor Gender Studies program in the Czech Republic, and by 2017 it had graduated over two hundred students from the Czech Republic as well as nearby Slovakia.

In 2017, however, the undergraduate Gender Studies program at Masaryk University came to its final enrollment year, a result of the same reform of the Czech higher education system that also led to the above-cited loss of department status for Gender Studies at Charles University in 2020. The restructuring has included changes in accreditation process, enabling research universities to apply for an “institutional accreditation.” With institutional accreditation, research universities such as Charles and Masaryk University gained more control over the study programs they offer. At Masaryk University, this new institutional accreditation autonomy has resulted in the shuttering of Gender Studies as a bachelor degree-awarding program. Tellingly, Gender Studies was the only academic program closed down at Masaryk University’s Faculty of Social Studies as part of the reform. The discussions leading to the restructuring took place at the upper levels of Masaryk University leadership and were far from transparent, with various key actors providing different interpretations and reasons for the restructuring. The dominant line of argument followed neo-liberal reasoning and stressed declining student enrollment, presumed unsustainability of the program, and anticipated difficulties in the graduates’ job placements. These arguments were consistent with the general neoliberal tenor of the broader debates about the purpose of higher education at the time (and today), as analyzed by Blanka Nyklová (2017, 2018). While the Faculty Dean struck a protective attitude towards Gender Studies academic staff, recognizing their research

achievements and making an effort to preserve the positions of the core members of the team within the Masaryk University's Department of Sociology, half of the jobs were terminated.

As we write this article, the Faculty of Social Studies at Masaryk University is offering a new Gender Studies specialization within the broader BA study program of sociology. Additionally, there is now a formally accredited Gender Studies specialization in the MA level of study within the Department of Sociology at Masaryk University, which is a welcome new development. In 2018, both the BA and MA specializations were granted accreditation for ten years. At both the BA and MA level, however, these are not independent Gender Studies programs with their own degrees but merely specializations within the discipline of sociology. The students graduate with a BA or MA degree in sociology, not Gender Studies.

These changes in the structure of Gender Studies at Charles and Masaryk Universities have coincided with the upsurge in conservative and populist moods in Czech society (and elsewhere) as well as with polarized debates over the Istanbul convention<sup>17</sup> and the #MeToo movement. Speaking specifically to the situation around the closure of the program at Masaryk (where the co-author of this article, Šmídová, is situated), the loss of the only bachelor Gender Studies program in the Czech Republic has served to encourage arguments in the conservative media about the alleged ideological bias and the presumed uselessness of such studies. At the same time, a high enrollment in the newly launched Introduction to Gender Studies course indicates a growing interest in Gender Studies among students outside the Masaryk Sociology Department who are taking Gender Studies as an optional course. While the total number of Gender Studies program graduates at Masaryk University between 2004 and 2020 was 233, the new Introduction to Gender Studies course has attracted over seventy students in both 2019 and 2020, and some other topical courses have doubled in enrollment in comparison with previous years as well. Besides teaching full classrooms, Masaryk Gender Studies faculty have recently been in high demand as guest lecturers and are now regularly being invited to participate in public discussions on gender-related topics. These invitations sometimes come from unexpected segments of society, including the Catholic University Youth, Scouts or religious schools. Most of the participants of these events are eager to learn more about gender topics and are open to discussion.

Nyklová's 2017 assessment of the post-2000 neoliberal restructuring of Czech academia and of its impact on Gender Studies provides a useful framework for thinking about the events around the discipline of Gender Studies at Masaryk and most recently also Charles University. Nyklová points

17 "Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence against Women and Domestic Violence." As of fall 2020, the Czech Republic has not yet ratified the Convention, although the Czech government did sign it in 2016. There is strong opposition to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the Czech Republic from the Catholic Church.

out that while the internationalization of the post-1989 Czech university system precipitated the (reluctant) acceptance of Gender Studies as an academic field in the Czech context (2017: 159), the same internationalization brought about neoliberal changes as it coincided with the increasing global prominence of the US neoliberal ideology (2017: 155). Bill Readings (1996), Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie (1997), Wendy Brown (2015), and other U.S.-based scholars have studied the impact (starting in the early 1990s) of neoliberalism on the American higher education system and the resultant corporatization of the U.S. university. In the context of the Czech academia, Nyklová has called attention to similar effects of a neoliberal restructuring of the local higher education system post-1989. Faculty across Czech universities have reported being under increasing pressure to publish articles in high impact journals and attract external funding, preferably from abroad, while continuing to fill classrooms. As Nyklová has articulated it: “The driving factor in the policies [at the neoliberal university] is that the quantity of output translates into state budget funding, i.e. the more an institution produces, the more money it obtains” (2017: 159). To some extent, all disciplines share this precarity at the so-called neoliberal university in that their funding depends on their ability to attract sufficient numbers of students, as well as on their performance in applying for research grants. Disciplines like Gender Studies might be disadvantaged in this context in that the positions their graduates tend to secure upon graduation are often in the non-profit and state sectors where salaries are lower than in the for-profit sectors of the economy. In terms of research performance measuring criteria, the across-the-board adoption of measurable outputs criteria stemming from the natural sciences (IMP, citation indexes, patents) by university leadership can be problematic for scholars working in the humanities and social sciences, which do not lend themselves well to these sorts of measuring criteria. Interestingly, most Gender Studies researchers across the Czech academic settings actually do have high performance levels. However, when it comes to making decisions about which disciplines to cut and which to maintain, this is apparently not always part of the picture. The actual measure, it would appear, is not quite honestly disclosed and might have more to do with perceived monetary value of particular research and possibly also with the political value of the kinds of public consciousness that are fostered.

## **Gender and Sexuality Topics in Classes Taught Outside Gender Studies Programs at Czech Universities**

While the focus of this chapter is the establishment of Gender Studies as a field of study, Czech undergraduate students can occasionally gain some exposure to women's and gender studies topics outside Gender Studies programs. Increasing numbers of younger faculty across the Czech Republic are introducing feminist theory as well as gender and sexuality studies topics to students in individual courses they are teaching within various disciplines, including English studies, comparative literature, sociology, TV and film studies, and history. For instance, at Palacký University in Olomouc, the authors of this chapter are familiar with the work of Jana Jedličková in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies at the Faculty of Arts, who integrates questions about gender, sexuality, and ethnicity into the TV studies courses she teaches. Zdeněk Sloboda offers sexuality and Gender Studies courses in the same department. Also at Palacký University, in the Department of Sociology, Andragogy and Cultural Anthropology, Martin Fafejta teaches a popular MA-level Sexuality and Sexual Identity course, as well as a BA-level Gender Studies course open to all Palacký University students.

Beyond research universities, students attending small regional universities (established post-1989) can also find occasional courses that focus on gender and sexuality topics. For instance, at Slezská University, located in the Silesian city of Opava, students are introduced to feminist theory in the Department of English and American Studies. Michaela Weiss teaches the fundamentals of feminist theory in her Literary Criticism and Theory course, and Radek Glabazna incorporates French feminist criticism into his Towards Post-modernity and After course. These examples of courses are far from comprehensive and the list of institutions mentioned here far from exhaustive. The purpose of the discussion here is simply to suggest the extent to which, across Czech universities, gender and sexuality as categories of analysis and feminist theory are not limited to Gender Studies programs.

Whereas, as noted above, research universities like Charles, Palacký and Masaryk University have transferred to the new, institutional accreditation system (where new programs are approved by the respective institution itself), smaller regional universities such as Slezská fall under the slower-moving Central Accreditation Office. Both systems of accreditation pose challenges to the institutionalization of Gender Studies across Czech universities. Teaching individual courses focused on gender-related issues within various (non-Gender Studies) departments and/or programs is one way to bypass the hurdles the accreditation process would likely pose to the establishment of Gender Studies as a program at small universities. There seem to be few structural obstacles standing in the way of individual faculty who wish to incorporate

gender studies topics into their courses, even though at times a colleague or student expresses objections. However, with such courses offered outside the setting of a Gender Studies department or program, whether or not they will continue to be taught and with what methodology, will continue to depend on the interest and expertise of the respective faculty.

## Conclusion

Czech Gender Studies started from largely informal, often improvised and uncertain beginnings in the early 1990s. Taking advantage of the changes in the Czech university curricula in the early 2000s, scholars passionate about feminism and gender studies formalized their work and founded the first Gender Studies programs and departments, utilizing the massification processes affecting Czech higher education at the time. By 2020, feminist sociology has become a well-established academic field in the Czech Republic (cf. Nyklová 2013: 59). Czech feminist historiographers have also made a major mark on the field, especially with publications on the women's movement and gender issues in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Burešová 2001, Jusová 2002, Malečková 2016), under state socialism (Nečasová 2011, Havelková and Oates-Indruchová 2014, Wagnerová 2017), as well as in the context of post-socialism (Kolářová 2014, Jusová and Šiklová 2016). Other fields of research include critical studies on masculinities (Šmídová 1999, 2016), LGBT studies (Sokolová 2005, Sloboda 2015), queer and disability studies (Kolářová 2019), sexuality studies (Dvořáčková 2008, Lišková 2009, 2018), discrimination against Roma women (Sokolová 2004), gender and language (Valdrová 2016), childcare and gender (Hašková and Dudová 2020), gender inequalities in education (Jarkovská 2013, Smetáčková 2016, Fárová 2018), science and gender (Linková and Červinková 2011), feminist art (Pachmanová 2009, Štefková 2016), feminist criminology (Nedbálková 2006), as well as neoliberalism and gender (Nyklová 2017, 2018).

The recent closing of Gender Studies as a program at Masaryk University and the dissolution of the department at Charles University, however, disrupt any simple narrative of progress in terms of both acceptance and mainstreaming of Gender Studies as well as feminism in the Czech Republic. These events demonstrate the continued precarity of the discipline's position within Czech academia. Whether or not these structural changes were directly motivated by the recent populist anti-gender upsurge in Czech society and elsewhere across Europe, they do need to be read in this context. Conservative pundits have certainly used these setbacks to Gender Studies to buttress their anti-feminist and anti-minority rhetoric. This is precisely a political and social context in which flourishing and well-supported Gender Studies programs and

departments are necessary, exposing students systematically to feminist and queer theories and posing a robust challenge to the voices of conservative backlash. The result of the restructuring is a regression in terms of the development of Gender Studies as a recognized and respected academic discipline in the Czech Republic that should give us pause.

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