

Gender, Place & Culture

A Journal of Feminist Geography

ISSN: 0966-369X (Print) 1360-0524 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgpc20>

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To cite this article: Judit Timár (2019): Hungarian feminist geography in a curved space?, *Gender, Place & Culture*, DOI: [10.1080/0966369X.2019.1635998](https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2019.1635998)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2019.1635998>



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Published online: 15 Jul 2019.



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Hungarian feminist geography in a curved space?

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ABSTRACT

The history of feminist geography in Hungary coincides with the 25 year-long history of *Gender, Place and Culture*. Authorities denied the existence of gender inequality in the era of state socialism, which was the primary obstacle to the spread of gender studies. The political changes that had occurred after 1989 had removed most obstacles, but feminist geography emerged with a delay relative to other disciplines. Its first two decades was characterised by struggles and compromises within and against the geographical discipline in order for it to win recognition. The 25 year-long history of feminist studies has, however, been completely broken by legislation proposed by the current government suggesting a ban on masters programs in gender studies. In this article, I trace the situation of feminist geography in Hungary by applying the concept ‘curved space’. This concept adapted from modern physics claims that mass creates a gravitational field, i.e. it bends 4-dimensional ‘spacetime’. My argument is that the situation of feminist geography in Hungary can be interpreted as an embodiment of ‘curved space’. Using this analogy, I argue that the current Hungarian government has amassed such a huge amount of power that has enabled it to curve the space of feminist geographical knowledge production. It has established a quasi-dictatorship that resembles the one that impeded the evolution of gender/feminist geography in the state socialist era. Therefore, only broad-based solidarity can help create opposition to the current government’s attacks against gender studies.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 13 October 2018
Accepted 19 June 2019

KEYWORDS

Curved space; feminist geography; gender studies; Hungary; political power; state socialism

Introduction

In 1993, when the finishing touches were being added to the first issue of *Gender, Place and Culture*, we published a thematic issue entitled ‘Women in Space and Society’ in *Space and Society* (a Hungarian journal) in Hungary

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(Tér és Társadalom 1993). As guest editors, Violetta Zentai, a colleague of mine and I were facing some challenges. Only a few years after the 1989 political changes closing the state socialist era, geography of gender, not to mention feminist geography, had no presence in Hungary (or in the entire post-socialist region for that matter). The spatial turn was yet to influence other disciplines. Therefore, sociologists, ethnographers and economists who had already conducted some gender research were urged to contribute to the ‘Women in Space and Society’ thematic issue. As non-geographers they needed help to rethink their results from space/place perspectives. In addition, the special issue contains translated papers published abroad on the relationship between gender and space. It was no coincidence that Susan Hanson’s (1992) article ‘Geography and feminism: worlds in collision?’ was included in the translated papers. The title of my editorial was: ‘Studying women in geography, or: Are there any grounds for feminist geography in Hungary?’ (Timár 1993).

The past 25 years has proven beyond doubt that there are grounds for feminist geography in Hungary, even if it took a long time to evolve. In addition to the feminist geographical studies published in these years, gender geography was included, though temporarily, in the curriculum of two universities. A chapter in a university textbook was devoted to feminist geography (Timár 1998), and some university lecturers even integrated the topic into their courses. The first PhD thesis incorporating gender into geography was completed in 2010. Involving IGU Commission on Gender and Geography, we organized an international conference at two locations, in Szeged (Hungary) and Timișoara (Romania) in 2009. It was the first time that Hungarian non-geographers had also attended a conference organised by feminist geographers.

Against this background, the news in early August 2018 that the Ministry of Human Capacities and the Ministry of Justice proposed to close gender studies Masters programmes came as a shock. The proposal referred to (multidisciplinary) gender studies courses at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest and the Central European University accredited in Hungary. The government set an entirely unrealistic 24-hour deadline for the two universities to comment on the proposal.

In all likelihood, if I had written an overview of the situation of gender/feminist geography 10–15 years ago I would have relied on the concept of paradox space (Rose 1993). What Bondi (2002) said about the paradoxical space of the editorial process of *Gender, Place and Culture*, and why the position of feminist academics is so often described as contradictory also applies to Hungary, where we are working both ‘within and against’ the discipline. However, in light of the significant changes that have occurred in power relations in Hungary, in order to be able to provide such an overview, one must step outside the academia. In this article, my argument is that the

current situation of feminist geography in Hungary can be understood as an embodiment of ‘curved space’.

Modern physics argues that mass creates a gravitational field. It bends 4-dimensional ‘spacetime’ connecting 3-dimensional space to the dimension of time. Gravity bends the path of the light, or, to put in another way, a massive body/object actually curves the coordinate system itself, thus, a ball that one throws returns to the thrower’s hand at a later time. Using this analogy, I argue that the current Hungarian government re-elected for a third time in succession has amassed such a huge amount of power (‘mass’) that has enabled it to curve the space of feminist geographical knowledge production. As a result, the institutional context of gender geography has changed back to what it was 25 years ago. It is not a direct replica of what it used to be. However, the political environment influencing feminist geography resembles the one in the state socialist era. Using the above theoretical framework, I would like to outline Hungary’s feminist geography genealogy and a few of its characteristics.

Background: gender issues as taboo topics

State socialism created societies where social inequalities – including gender-based inequalities – were declared non-existent. Although its achievements as regards women’s access to education, paid work, and facilities providing child care services were outstanding, they fell short of delivering all the promises made. The lack of democracy made public criticism of the existing regime impossible. There were no feminist activist movements, for example, which may have facilitated the evolution of gender research as it did elsewhere in the world. It was impossible for social scientists to expose inequalities. Publicity of such criticism was also hindered by a general dislike of feminism. As civil society was politically discouraged, public discourses that would have been able to change such negative attitudes could not emerge. The state also applied its cold war policy to sciences. Although détente between the West and the East (and hence a greater transparency) was detectable in the 1980s, restrictions slowed down the ‘infiltration’ of western social theories. Sciences were also adapted to the prevailing status quo through structural transformation. In addition to physical geography, Soviet type economic geography rather than human geography was elevated to an institutional level. Critical social theories in general and the feminist approach, in particular, were missing from geography (Timár and G.Fekete 2010).

The period of emergence: fighting for recognition within geography

The emergence of gender geography in Hungary approximately 25 years ago was clearly belated compared with countries outside the Central and Eastern

European region. The reasons for the delay were presented in an issue of this journal close to a decade ago (Timár and G.Fekete 2010). Now, besides outlining the characteristics of the period that has elapsed since, I focus on the characteristics of a dynamic social space in which gender/feminist geography was set on course through the combined operation of both external and internal forces; it has made progress albeit rather slowly and is still on course.

The postsocialist transition lifted the former political and institutional barriers. The government of the day in the new democracy no longer rejected justification for studying gender relations. This is because, firstly, universities and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences were to be autonomous and have the right of free choice for research. Secondly, because the operation of post-socialism, social and spatial differences and inequalities emerged under market conditions and, hence, gender relations were identified and understood for the formulation of the relevant policies. Women's organizations were established in the new climate. Ultimately, certain barriers outside academia had survived and new ones had emerged, and these were related to anti-feminist attitudes, public parlance and the personal opinions of politicians rather than government policies.

Such surviving barriers also affected disciplines other than geography adopting a feminist approach; nevertheless, gender studies were soon institutionalised within those disciplines. Some social sciences have managed to offer courses, university majors, research centres, regular conferences and, since 2010, even an on-line gender journal in Hungarian (TNTeF). I believe a slower track in geography is due mainly to the patriarchal power relations within Hungarian geography.

The reasons for the belatedness of feminist geography are also likely to include personal positionality/preferences and even a lack of interest. However, many seem to hold an opinion with no scientific substantiation, according to which, gender geography is 'not geography'. A decision-making body of a research fund even committed it to writing that a feminist geographical research proposal at hand should be submitted to the jury panel of another discipline. Such exclusion is common in the history of social sciences. The struggle 'within and against' has left its footprints on the discipline in Hungary even if those concerned did not have a deliberate strategy in this battle and made compromises hoping for affirmative or transformational policies (Frazer 1997). Such footprints are as follows:

- Mapping gender differences in the engagement/position/situation of women and men in different communities and the economy (see in Timár and G.Fekete 2010) and the dominance of empirical research suggest not only an initial lack of theoretical foundations. At the very least it facilitated adjustments to some traditions of social geography;

- There was no need for any further self-justification in order for topics such as unemployment, private businesses, marginalized social groups, household strategies or the geographical ramifications of post-socialism to be accepted as subject-matters of feminist research because the new social order itself provided sufficient evidence for the relevance of those new topics;
- It is only recently that we have undertaken study into issues like body and sexuality that used to be completely incompatible with the traditions of both gender blind and human blind geography, especially before the feed-through of international theoretical discourses on space, scale, representation, etc.;
- Even for those who have tried their hand at studying the relationship between gender and geography, gender research is considered to have been a ‘free time activity’ of a sort in their career. We cannot aspire to be full-time feminist geographers.

The equal opportunities policy of the EU provided some indirect support in the struggle for acceptance because in Hungary applied research facilitating urban and regional development is deep rooted in geography. Gender geography was in demand as these development policies had to be adjusted to the new principles. The fact that even a textbook on equal opportunity in regional policy was published gives some indication of the demand at the time (G.Fekete 2006). The relationships forged with feminist geographers abroad mainly through the IGU Gender and Geography Commission, representatives of gender studies in Hungary and activists of women’s organizations (e.g. Foundation for the Women of Hungary) provided much firmer support. In addition to the jointly visited conferences and joint publications, national and international joint projects have also contributed to the acceptance of gender geography because they were perceived as potential sources of substantial income for the institutions that employed us. They also gave fresh momentum towards the spatial turn in social sciences. As a result, the boundaries of the individual disciplines blurred sufficiently for researchers other than geographers to be able to support feminist geography.

I believe that the most promising step forward was a generational change in the making in geography over the past 5–10 years. Thanks to international networks and grants, the free movement of knowledge and people, the younger generation are seeing the benefits. Bottom-up international professional organizations, the Central European University in Budapest, university halls of residence in Hungary also providing educational and talent management services, interdisciplinary and intergenerational workshops and civil society organizations outside the academia provide an ideal context for knowledge exchange. It is no coincidence that it was a young researcher

working in such a context who was first to include also a gender approach in a textbook on economic geography published in Hungary (Czifrusz 2014). The recent emergence of this generation has given fresh momentum to a critical geography approach and also prompted feminist researchers to use social theories as tools of understanding (e.g. Molnár 2012; Sági 2018). This underpins the reasoning offered by the representatives of feminist geography in their perhaps most important dispute with those of mainstream geography. Feminist geographers who join international discourses and ‘relocate’ them to Hungary help point out that there is no consensus over the issue of whether being scientific should mean being politically neutral.

Back to the present – the chances of feminist geography in the curved space

Returning to the current events: what could possibly happen in a ‘curved space’ to gender/feminist geography that has strengthened as a result of its own fights and compromises in the paradox space?

The current government highlighted two arguments against gender studies (beside some harsher statements made from the spring 2017). According to the first, gender studies is not an ‘economically rational’ course to maintain, ‘it was not created to react to the needs of the labour market, and neither to provide students with knowledge that they can utilize quickly and directly’ (Rétvári 2017, 2). To me, these arguments resemble the state socialist times. Then, the requirement of a science that served the development of the socialist economy and society, the expectation of a ‘useful science’, was exactly the principle that shifted human geography into the direction of economic geography to serve the needs of the planned economy.

As regard the other main argument formulated by the government against gender studies in general and gender studies as an MA major in particular; it requires some retrospection as well. During the state socialist dictatorship the state simply denied the existence of gender inequality, the ban today is justified by the argument that gender studies is not a science (and according to a representative of the government ‘gender’ does not even exist/Csuhaj 2018/). Through this explanation, it has been declared that just like Marxism (the other swearword), gender studies is just an ideology, too. In relation to the recent government plans of the restructuring of the whole Hungarian Academy of Sciences, which have caused fears of a wide spectrum of researchers, similar thought infiltrated into other disciplines as well: ‘science is not allowed to talk politics’. The old reactions were back yet again, for example in the form of self-censorship, maybe not institutionally, but already recognizable. The Deputy Secretary-General, who is responsible for the central program of the Week of Science in the headquarters of the

Academy, has cancelled two lectures, including one discussing gender-based differences, due to their assumed ‘political crosstalk’.

It seems like that the current ruling political elite in Hungary consider all attempts at the betterment or critique of public affairs as the questioning of their legitimacy. However, as we know this from debates of the last decades from all over the world, the science that considers itself neutral also serves some interests: it reinforces the status quo (see e.g. Harvey 1974).

Over the past few months since the completion of the first version of this article, the Hungarian government has taken unmistakable efforts to transform the institutional network and eliminate the autonomy of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, thereby threatening scientific research, in particular, basic research and research in the area of social sciences. The broad-based opposition mounted by Academy personnel in response (<https://adf2019.wordpress.com/english/>) has proven that solidarity is the only viable way of facing the challenge. I believe that, in light of the duress by the government, we must realise that the root causes of the attacks of the corridors of power against gender studies, social sciences, critical thinking and scientific knowledge in general, are the same. None involved in the academic knowledge production presented by the current government can win at the expense of their peers. Only joint production at an international level of spaces of resistance capable of forging alliance between disciplines, movements, teachers and students can counteract the excesses of government, i.e. only such resistance can offer an alternative to the ‘curved space’ presented in this article.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the editors of *Gender, Place and Culture* for the invitation to this special issue, as well as Mirjam Sági, Gábor Velkey and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments during the review stage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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and critical geographies in Hungary. She participated in international research groups studying women's representation in local policy-making and in the labor market, regional differences in women's entrepreneurship and gendered migration processes. She was a co-organizer of the first international conference held in East-Central Europe under the aegis of the Commission on Gender and Geography of the International Geographical Union.

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