

Erzsébet László

Interview with Erzsébet Barát, Organizer of the Annual Conference, Language, Ideology, Media: Gender/Sexuality Relations in Hungary (2011)

Language, Ideology, Media: Gender/Sexuality Relations in Hungary is an annual interdisciplinary conference first launched in September 2005 that has grown into “the only regular research forum for feminist scholarship concerned with Hungarian cultural practices of gender and sexuality” (<http://primus.arts.u-szeged.hu/ieas/gender/index.html>). Since the first contextualizing/grounding event in 2005, whose theme was ‘A nő helye a magyar nyelvhasználatban’ (Woman’s Place in Hungarian Language Use), the conference has touched upon such important issues as stereotypes of “woman” and “femininity” (2006), feminine/masculine identity and experience (2007), the relation of “woman” and body/sensuality (2008), the spaces of sexuality (2009) institutionalizations of gender relations with a specific focus on the intersection of gender and nation(alism) in Hungary (2010). (See the Archive section of the webpage for detailed information.) The theme of the upcoming 2011 conference will concern issues of gender relations and feminism in post-socialist Hungary. To date the conference is the only academic forum in Hungary that provides an opportunity to explore contemporary issues of the relations of Hungarian language and power, cultural representations and ideology, and Hungarian women and feminist thought from an interdisciplinary perspective attracting scholars from Hungarian as well as non-Hungarian universities. Speakers of the conference include well-established feminist scholars with international visibility, such as Louise O. Vasvári (New York University, Stony Brook University), Andrea Virginas, Sapientia, Transylvanian Hungarian University, Cluj, Bolemant Lilla Comenius University, Bratislava, Mária Joó ELTE, Budapest, Judit Friedrich, ELTE Budapest, Nóra Sélley, University of Debrecen, or Erzsébet Barát (University of Szeged, Central European University, Budapest), and Anna Kérchy (University of Szeged). The conference also attracts young Hungarian scholars entering academia, for whom the conference provides an invaluable platform for professional experience and networking.

From the talks presented at the conference three important Hungarian-language volumes have been published to date, *A nő helye a magyar nyelvhasználatban* (Woman’s Place in Hungarian Language) (2007) and *A nő és a női(es)ség sztereotípiái* (Stereotypes of Woman and Femininity) (2009), both of which were edited by the two organizers Erzsébet Barát, Associate Professor and Convener of the Gender Studies MA Program of the University of Szeged and Visiting Associate Professor of Central European University of Budapest, and Klára Sándor, Associate Professor of Linguistics at the Department of Human Informatics and Library Studies of the University of Szeged, and former Member of Parliament. The third volume was published as the first issue of the interdisciplinary, primarily Hungarian-language e-journal, *TNTeF: Társadalmi Nemek Tudománya* (Gender Studies, Interdisciplinary e-Journal), launched in March 2011. Henceforth, the proceedings of the conference will regularly appear in the Spring Issue of this twice yearly e-journal. That is, in total three years worth of conference papers have been published covering primarily literature, discourse analysis, sociology, cultural studies, pedagogy, art criticism and social linguistics, with a wide variety of topics being explored from such grounding articles as Erzsébet Barát’s *Nőközpontúság kontra feminizmus: a “társadalmi nemek” kifejezés tarthatatlanságáról* (Women-Centeredness vs. Feminism: Discussing the Untenability of the Term “társadalmi nemek”) (2007) and Louise O. Vasvári’s *A vágy diskurzusai: A queer és a normative identitások létrehozása* (Discourses of Desire: The Production of Queer and

Normative Identities) (2007), through explorations of stereotypes such as Joó Mária's *Sztereotípiák, bináris oppozíciók, előítéletek – és a Nő* (Stereotypes, Binary Oppositions, Prejudices – and the Woman) (2009) or Schleicher Nóra's "*Nem csak egy kis szőke kislány vagyok!*" – *Társadalmi nem és nyelvhasználat a munkahelyen* ("I'm not just a lovely blonde!" – Gender and Language Use in the Workplace) (2007), to groundbreaking articles such as Attila Ambruzs's *A kritikai férfikutatás külföldön és hiánya itthon* (Critical Masculinity Studies Abroad and their Absence in Hungary) (2009) and Éva Misits' *Aszexualitás diskurzusok a magyar kibertérben* (Discourses of Asexuality in Hungarian Cyberspace) (TNTeF 1. 2011).

In this interview I discuss the context of the launching of the conference, its objectives, and its further possible directions with Professor Erzsébet Barát.

Erzsébet László: The first conference was held in 2005 at Szeged and sought to rethink "our", that is, Hungarian feminist scholars' relationship to the academic traditions we rely on and the implications of their cultural difference. What were the reasons behind this project and why was it started in 2005? Would you please discuss the narrower academic and the wider social contexts that prompted you to organize *Language, Ideology, Media: Gender/Sexuality Relations in Hungary*?

Erzsébet Barát: Before that, I would like to thank you and AHEA for your interest in the conference and giving it further publicity. I hope many scholars of Hungarian origin may develop an interest in keeping an eye on the future *call for papers* and decide to participate on reading this. Now, as for your question about the timing, I am afraid your question is flattering in that it assumes we acted with full awareness. It is never like that, I think. But I do remember two things, clearly. There was a series of informal round table discussions on language and gender research organized by the Hungarian Association of Applied Linguistics, more precisely, by Professor György Szépe, Chair of the Association. I was invited and after my talk he suggested that we should launch at long last a conference in the field and that it should start in Szeged. Klára Sándor, also a linguist, doing sociolinguistics research on the topic was the co-organizer of the round table discussions. She was/is also based in Szeged, so it was an obvious choice to have the first conference in Szeged. However, if you read the first call for papers, you will see that it was conceived as an interdisciplinary event from the very beginning, well beyond linguistics (even in the broadest sense of the term). It is because regarding the division of labor between me and Klári, I am the one who is responsible for the wording of the call for papers, hence for the directions, the approach of the event. Now, since I have always been disappointed with the mainstream approach in gender and language research, namely with the language variation framework for its essentialist approach to gender as a given variable and as corollary to it, for its shocking unfamiliarity with, if not ignorance of, the rich and inspiring theoretical work in feminist scholarship on how to conceptualize the key category of that research, i.e., gender itself, the very first conference was much broader than it was imagined to be back in Budapest. It has always been an interdisciplinary event, open to multiple approaches and, very importantly, to self-reflexivity. In short, it tries to encourage critical reflection on the issues, the difference the disciplinary perception of the issues can make, and the involvement of the researcher in all that, our personal stakes. So you could say, in the broader context we had to have the emergence of the concern best articulated by Deborah Cameron [a feminist linguist with a primary academic interest in the relationship of language to gender and sexuality] to me, who would expose unequivocally the qualitative difference the distinction makes between talking "about" women, or reforming marriage versus the exploration of the values and assumptions associated with what comes to be called 'woman' or 'womanhood', i.e., providing a feminist critique of that institution.

At the same time, it was not only the state of the scholarship inside and outside the country that had to be 'all right' for the kind of conference I would have liked to be identified and to identify with. I had to know that there will be people interested in the event and not just for a single occasion. Somehow to me it was obvious all the way through that, should there be enough participants and interest out there, I would want to carry on. I never thought I would host a single event and that would be it. So as for people's interests, on the one hand, I had to have people working with me on this project. We have had a group of gender studies scholars developing since the early 1990 under the leadership of Dr. Sarolta Marinovich. As a result of that, over the years, we have developed into a formal research group in the Institute of English and American Studies in Szeged. So I was sure I would have my colleagues and friends in the research group to count on. We now call ourselves, self-ironically and with great pride, TNT. It is a cool pun. It is the acronym standing for gender studies in Hungarian (Társadalmi Nemek Tudománya) while it is also a reference to the explosive material. On the other hand, I had to consider if there were enough abstracts sent in for the call. I had been doing feminist research and teaching myself for ten years by then. Over the years I met many interesting Hungarian academics, read their work and thought there should be sufficient response to the call and that all that work should be brought together and make a concentrated presence and visibility that could be dismissed any more as if a single (hence idiosyncratic) individual enterprise. Of course, all this I could not be certain about but it turned out to be a sound judgment - now I can say.

EL: In 2005 the conference called for a reevaluation of Hungarian feminist research, for a rethinking of the directions of Hungarian gender studies through self-reflection on research methods and results in the context of both the East-Central European region and the Euro-American relations of gender studies. From what perspective did the first conference speak and with what aims and objectives? Would you please explain how they have changed over the years?

EB: I think I have partly covered this question when discussing my intention to promote critical feminist research, which is not the same as talking about women, or so-called women issues. However, if you read the abstracts of the six conferences on the website, or the proceedings of the 6th conference in the first issue of the e-journal TNT (<http://primus.arts.u-szeged.hu/ieas/gender/archive/nyim/genderkonf2005.htm>) proudly launched in March 2011, you will see that the approaches are much more diverse. I would not like to reflect on that diversity. I am only noting their variation. I would be personally, happier with more talks and papers willingness to do the critical self-reflection but at the same time I really believe the conference is the space where we come together year after year and are developing such an approach in practice. However, I am happy to share with you my observation that there is no scholarly field lacking such a disposition. Nor is its presence or absence the matter of some 'generational' divide either. It is a matter of lived experiences as far as I dare to generalize. I mean it depends on how far we are willing to take the familiar slogan "The personal is political" to defamiliarize and embrace the productive power of the unknown.

Finally, I cannot really say anything about the conference's position in relation to the Central Eastern Europe context as I do not know for a start if the conference is representative of the feminist scholarship and/or gender studies on Hungarian social and cultural events and institutions.

Now coming back to the "birth" of each call for papers, you need to know that each conference closes with a workshop. We call it a workshop for lack of a better word. What it does is bring us all together at the end of the second day to reflect on the talks and the lively discussions and debates and figure out what should be an interesting theme to pursue further

next year. I take notes and then come up with some key points and then on the basis of that I write up the draft, send it over to Klári for her opinion and off it goes on the mailing list. So, I always do the wording with an eye on the issues, the problematic, while suggesting several possible formulations of the corresponding debates going on in and outside of Hungary. That's how I am trying to secure the interdisciplinary interest and the presence of scholars from the humanities and social sciences. I firmly believe that gender studies sits firmly on that boarder. Yet, the distribution on the average is two thirds of humanities and one third of social sciences. I think it has got to do with the specificity of the local history of the scholarship and its teaching in Hungary and the Central Eastern Europe countries. It entered the scene through humanities / as a result of the English and American philology programs contact with feminist scholars and institutions, beginning in the late 1980s. Sarolta Marinovich and I co-authored a paper on that history. It is entitled "Is There a Space for Teaching Gender Studies in Hungarian Higher Education?" and was published in an important volume by Pető, Andrea *Teaching Gender Studies in Hungary* (Budapest: Ministry of Youth, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity, 2006, 13-21). On reading the contributions, you will also see that Szeged was the first University to integrate not only a gender perspective in the curriculum but to formalize and institutionalize the subject in the form of the specialization certificate. You may find it [the paper and further information on the specialization] uploaded on the website for ease of access (<http://primus.arts.u-szeged.hu/ieas/gender/index.html#hist>). So, we seem to have a history of several „firsts” in academia - to date. Although there is Central European university in Budapest, but it is not a Hungarian Institution. It is chartered in the US, with a multicultural mission. Tellingly, it was not willing to be recognized as a private university before 2004. In 2004 Hungary joined the EU and the formal recognition could mean for CEU entitlement and access to EU research funds. However, some of the conference talks presenting Hungarian research done on events and products outside of Hungary we owe to this Institution. There are PhD students or junior researchers of Hungarian origin who are CEU graduates and would happily come and share their work in the appropriate cultural and linguistic context as well as build networks.

EL: Professor György Szépe, in his introductory speech at the first conference, said that he does not believe that social sciences are objective and neutral. He stated that “we have to know who we are and where our place is. And if we are not allowed to take it [our place] then we have to act!” How do you think that the Hungarian academic and social contexts have changed since 2005? And how has the academic gender community changed during the years? Is “taking our place” still the sole responsibility of female, often feminist, scholars?

EB: I think the fact that we have been coming together for seven years and that in addition to the core group of participants we have always had new faces and voices coming is the strongest evidence for the solid presence of feminist scholarship in Hungary. That shows we have taken the place where we academically feel to belong happily. It also shows that we have been taking responsibility for developing the various academic discourses, the language that can articulate best what is going on. That is the most difficult and time consuming activity: one that can shape only in and through doing/speaking the language that we intend to produce and reproduce. I am not sure about the last question you are asking. But if you mean, whether we have encountered sympathy in this process, then I would say, yes we did. The local media have been willing to come and cover the events, the Faculty does not charge for the conference venue. However, on the relative scale of acceptance, we find ourselves on lower end of that scale. It is more of tolerance than active participation and contribution. Or, if you mean whether there are male participants, well, of course, only some. It is always very

difficult to give up privileges or at least the (myth of) reassurance to know and/or believe that one could resort to it, if need be, don't you think?

EL: The language of the conference and the two volumes and the online journal is Hungarian. Would you please elaborate on the reasons behind this choice? In your opinion what language should "Hungarian Gender Studies" use in Hungarian academia in both its narrowest sense of the language of lectures and seminars, and its broadest sense of publications, conferences, etc?

EB: I have touched upon the relevance of language. It is important to have academic ways of doing/articulating things in addition to the non-academic modes of speaking /speaking about them. It would be a very problematic and exploitative division of labor to have the 'data' of research in Hungarian and the 'theory' abstracted away from this data in another language... It should be a two-way interaction. At the same time language use is a matter of inter-subjective practice: it is to be shaped in the course of actual usage. The conference space can function as a site for such discursal negotiation. It is always fascinating to me to see how our different foreign language background (mostly English and German) can create productive encounters on how to conceptualize a given idea. It is never a matter of finding the "correct" target word: it is always a matter of metaphors resonating with differential patterns of associations and their encounter, the discrepancies and slippages made to emerge and visible because of that encounter are very productive. Now, as for the language of gender studies on relations of gender/sexuality in Hungary, it should not be a decision made out of lack of appropriate discourses available in Hungarian. But I do not think that would be a problem any more. In fact I think the problem is much more that non-Hungarian speakers of gender studies from the English or German speaking part of the world do not speak Hungarian on the same academic level as Hungarian scholars do English. This makes the dialogue very problematic. At CEU, for instance, PhD students are expected to speak the language (sufficiently) in the field, collecting 'data' but are not expected, in fact discouraged to publish in the journal of those very same "regional" cultures and/or languages... As for the language of instruction of a program, ideally it should be conducted and read in the local language as well in the language/s of the field that are the lingua franca of that transnational, global interaction – and, since you have invited me to imagine an ideal situation, one more language that seems to be marginal (yet) – to keep that productive element going.

EL: Having published two volumes and having launched the online journal, covering altogether three years worth of proceedings of the conference, with open-access online journals being the future, are you considering publishing all articles both in Hungarian and in English so that they can gain world-wide access? In the light of the above, considering the ongoing success of the conference, what are your views as to the future direction of the conference, its proceedings and the role of Gender Studies in both Hungary and the Eastern Central European region, during the next decade or so?

EB: At this point we need to be realistic. First of all, that would require money. Please do not forget that all the activities you have just referred we have been doing without any fees, salaries, etc. To go bilingual, as you propose it, would take that. What we are doing now, in the name of this 'global reach', is to provide the abstracts in English. Having said that, remember my ideal world you just probed me about? The question naturalizes the direction of the flow of knowledge. I am not talking about some silly reciprocity of course, nor would I deny the importance of feminist scholarship in the UK, Australia, or in the US and Canada. But I really do not like the ideology informing the question. What is more, a lot of research

just because it is published in English (like our abstracts in the e-journal) does not entail those geopolitical spaces. And the latter point justifies your question, I am fully aware of that. Actually, if I take your question to mean that it invites me to think about our international links, then at this point I would rather say I am more concerned about something else. We need to concentrate our efforts and be much more systematic and strategic in connecting up with scholars doing feminist work on Hungary outside of Hungary. And that research of course does not have to be carried out in Hungarian, nor should it be done in English only, even if gender studies seem to be dominated by English – and then we would make it accessible in Hungarian and bring those scholars together that way. In fact this is why I was more than happy to take the opportunity and give you this interview. I hope to have made the first step in that direction through AHEA. Thank you, again.