

Talking Back to November 1989. Gender Aspects of Memory (Summary)

The book *Ako odvrávat' novembru 1989. Rodové aspekty pamäti* (Talking Back to November 1989. Gender Aspects of Memory) is coming out on the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, also known as the “Gentle Revolution” in Slovak. This momentous event, however, has still not been comprehensively covered in either historiography or memory studies, and the experience of women has been taken into account only partially, mainly in the media or by feminist organizations. This publication seeks to break the silence about women’s roles in the revolution, their rightful place in the collective memory, and about gender as an organizational principle in historical narratives. It is a case study which documents how individual memories of November 1989 overlap with the collective memory and how gender plays its part in both of them. The author draws on the concept of “talking back,” developed by feminist theorist bell hooks and scholars Deborah Cohen and Lessie Jo Frazier, to address the rather simplified stories which present the revolution as a historical event orchestrated by groups of men on the squares of Prague and Bratislava. It is the first Slovak attempt at a feminist interpretation of the events of November 1989.

In the first part, the author introduces the theoretical approaches to researching memory, voice, and silence. By viewing gender as a research category and, at the same time, a constitutive aspect of social relations, she is able to ask how gender can be used as an analytical tool in the understanding of November 1989 memories. The author introduces several concepts of memory which enable her to view it not only as a dy-

dynamic phenomenon rooted in the social and political milieu of its time and power relations but also as a heterogeneous and performative act with the potential to disrupt and endanger the order that be. The author uses memory fields and their distributive criteria to delve deeper into the relations between the individual and the collective memory. Thus, she is able to better understand the possibilities of individual memory formation and formulation. The author also puts great emphasis on the individual's voice as part of agency and memory formation, and she understands silence as a means of communication, a space for agency, and a phenomenon of the social structure.

Such an analysis of the November 1989 events is rooted in feminist historiography. In order to break the silence about the women's involvement in the Velvet Revolution, the author uses the method of oral history. Given the theoretical and ethical pitfalls of this method, she opts for strategic essentialism. Such a position allows her to uncover social and epistemological inequalities and treat the category of "woman" as a dynamic construct determined not only socially but also influenced by the research design that is used. Since the author needed to create a space to collect the experience of women from this period, she first conducted 16 interviews with women from various parts of Slovakia. These were from different age groups (between 17 to 53 in 1989), of different social statuses, and they were active in different social movements at the time (student, civil rights, or ecological activists; company worker, teacher, or Hungarian-minority initiatives, even the punk community). Oral history has enabled the author to enhance our knowledge about how women participated in the revolution, but it has also brought the necessity to compare their personal stories to the dominant narratives about the historical event in question. After the interviews, the author analyzed media narratives and identified the dominant memory fields pertaining to November 1989. Consequently, the book compares two kinds of narratives – the testimonies of women who participated in the events, but whose stories did not become part of the collective memory; and the media narratives which

had the power to shape public discourse. Thus, this historical case helps us unearth the role of gender in the formation of collective memory and also better understand other possible articulations of said memory, those that lie beyond the dominant spaces, activities, and agents. Even though the categories of political acts, revolutionary spaces, and forms of agency have been chosen to better structure the analysis, in reality they overlap.

The material from the media and the interviews points to squares and stages as the dominant and most noticeable images of the revolution. What went on there were the spectacular events that drew the public's attention in November 1989. The media and many interviewees regarded public displays, such as speaking at demonstrations, holding talks with the representatives of the state, and attending TV debates, as "real" revolutionary activities. Since mostly men appeared on stages at demonstrations, they have come to be regarded as the dominant agents. Even in cases when women spoke at the events, they were not regarded as the main figures of the revolution and have not entered the collective memory.

What lay beyond such revolutionary, i.e. public, activities was everyday work without which no spectacular acts would have been possible. Examples include making phone calls all around Slovakia, preparing various materials and food, traveling, repeatedly visiting various offices, administrative work, organizing and dividing up work, supervision, cleaning, doing the dishes, or simply taking care of people who had worked for many days and nights. These were activities which one of the interviewees called "typical female services." However, such activities have not been covered by the media, and even the women interviewed started talking about them only after being directly asked about what they and other women did in November 1989.

This shows that women's acts have been made invisible in two important ways. Firstly, when women did the everyday work needed to build and sustain the movement, they have remained beyond the collective memory, since their activities are not regarded as genuinely revolutionary. Secondly, even when they

were present and to a degree active in the public space, they have not been remembered. This demonstrates that we mostly remember women if they act in accordance with gender stereotypes, i.e. they are wives or helpers. However, such reproductive labor has not been viewed as full-fledged revolutionary or political activity and remains unrepresented in the majority of stories about the revolution.

When discursive spaces of the revolution were being formed, women and several other active participants remained invisible. Media coverage focused mostly on what was going on in Prague and Bratislava, thereby ignoring events in the regions and many participants, including women who edited one of the first post-revolutionary newspaper. The media mostly failed to cover what was going on in numerous work spaces around the country, including schools and factories. Testimonies acquired from the interviews help us fill in such gaps in our knowledge. However, it is clear that these stories cannot be just added to the dominant narrative of the revolution. They demonstrate that it is imperative to reformulate and diversify the story of November 1989 and its language.

The analyzed material suggests that the political potential of the private sphere depended on the agents active within it. The media typically painted the private sphere as secondary to the public, revolutionary space. When it came to revolutionary activities or political responsibilities, families were rarely covered. The material demonstrates that it was not important for men of the revolution to care for their family, since they had to take care of their country. When in rare cases the private lives and families of leading male revolutionaries were mentioned, these were only talked about when speculating what in their background predisposed the men to become leaders.

Quite on the contrary, the testimonies show that women's revolutionary and political activity was conditioned by their family situation and responsibility for their loved ones. Having children and a family with no one else to take care of them influenced the women's possibilities and degree of participation in

the revolution. Thus, the family became an in-between space of political decisions and strategies which women needed to navigate when moving from the private to the public sphere. The oral historical testimonies challenge the understanding of agency as an independent, individual circumstance of independent people. Such an understanding runs against the experience of many people, mainly women, who had to bear in mind their family responsibilities and needed to fulfill them alongside or instead of the revolutionary actions they wanted to pursue.

The fixed ideas of masculinity and femininity have also structured the image of agency in symbolic terms. The analyzed material shows that the male revolutionaries defied hegemonic masculinity with their informal attire, long hair, rejection of institutionalized violence, expressions of emotions, and appeals for mutual love. However, in general these acts did not constitute a rejection of the patriarchal order. The everyday activities of the movement very often reproduced the conventional gender order, as exemplified by the stereotypical work division or the sexualization of women. The depictions of male revolutionaries as having both the characteristics considered dominantly masculine and primarily feminine undermined the ideas of hegemonic masculinity and instead put forward an alternative, rebellious masculinity. This image allowed the male revolutionaries to be dissociated both from the (dirty) politics but also from the public, whom the media often portrayed as a passive feminine mass which had to be led. Historian James Krapfl has argued that the public has not been included in the story of the revolution, and this exclusion can be seen in many theoretical works, the media, and the many interviews conducted. The narrative oftentimes focuses on a small group of leading individuals, and the researched material shows that the public was often construed as a mere onlooker, supporter, or backdrop for the actions of the revolutionaries. Only when looking at political revolutionary events in greater detail do the ordinary people step into the story of November 1989, and it becomes clear how they partook in taking care of the leading figures, the dissemination of information, or material support of

the movement. Even though the revolution was a political process to which millions of people contributed in their own ways, the ordinary acts have been more or less excluded from its story.

At the end the author once again turns to memory fields with the aim of discovering how individual memory traces have been “distributed” across the society. These are the distributive criteria of memory. It can be argued that the dominant narrative about the Velvet Revolution has generated rather restricted memory fields. The most frequently occurring memory field is delimited by two cities (Prague and Bratislava) and acts visible to numerous people, characterized by male agents and an impact on state politics. This memory trace brings with it substantive social and cultural capital, yet it is accessible only to a very narrow group of male individuals. Women, unknown helpers from the revolutionary backstage, the public, or people who for various reasons could not participate in the demonstrations or work at local revolutionary organizations – all these people have been excluded from the dominant memory field. This means that they have had only limited options to form and articulate their memory, think about the social and political implications of what they did, or critically evaluate these events and what came afterwards. Even women who were in leading roles, and have thus tried to address their experience, have been hampered by gender norms and images of femininity inconsistent with leadership positions and political activities. This is why they have struggled to find the right words, they sound unsure, and even apologize for daring to take up active roles in the story. Due to gender expectations, even the stories of the females speaking for themselves sound unfamiliar and unfitting, as if they did not belong to November 1989. A greater differentiation of revolutionary memory fields can help us better understand the complexities of memory, the various ways of articulating experience from the given era, and finally to enhance our understanding of political acts and political subjectivity in the present.

Translated by Igor Tyšš.