forum

Contemporary Women Writers and Intellectuals

Introduction

Negotiating Identities in the Post¹-World(s)

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Everyone knows that there is a place which is not economically or politically indebted to all the vileness and compromise. That is not obliged to reproduce the system. That is writing.

—Hélène Cixous²

[T]he intellectual does not represent a statue/like icon, but an individual vocation, an energy, a stubborn force engaging as a committed and recognizable voice in language and in society with a whole slew of issues, all of them having to do in the end with a combination of enlightenment and emancipation or freedom.

—Edward Said³

The main theme of this volume of *Aspasía* and of its Forum, 'Women Writers and Intellectuals', seems to be at the same time quite traditional and also very timely. It is traditional in the sense that debates over the role of intellectuals have taken place since the early nineteenth century and, in the region that *Aspasía* focusses on, have been of particular importance throughout the twentieth century; it is very timely because these debates continue to take place and be relevant.⁴ This volume of *Aspasía* contributes to this ongoing debate from the perspective of gender.

The relations among the three terms brought together in this theme—women, writers and intellectuals—are far from simple and unproblematic. To begin with, questions arise at the conceptual level: How do we understand the term 'intellectual'? And is every writer or literary critic, by the very nature of his/her vocation, an intellectual? Edward Said, in his Reith Lectures, invoked two of the most famous definitions of an intellectual, which immediately suggest contradictions: that of Antonio Gramsci,

who offered a rather inclusive definition that refers to all those who have some kind of intellectual/social function; and that of Julien Benda, referring to a tiny minority of specially gifted and brave people who stand for eternal standards of truth and justice, even at the risk of being ostracised themselves.⁵

Beginning in the late nineteenth and continuing throughout the twentieth century, the role of intellectuals in the region of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe has been rather specific in comparison to the situation in the so-called Western world, hence the use of the particular term *intelligentsia*.⁶ According to Ivan Szelenyi, the specificity of what he calls Eastern Europe is the existence of this *intelligentsia*, a social group with a particular social status that does not have a counterpart in the Western world.⁷ Szelenyi follows A.W. Gouldner in defining intellectuals as 'those who are bound together by the "culture of critical discourse"'.⁸ Szelenyi claims that the culture of critical discourse had different forms of development. In places where modernisation was linked with market capitalism, the emphasis was on technical aspects of knowledge, whereas in other places, such as Eastern Europe, a teleological dimension of knowledge prevailed. Hence, Szelenyi distinguishes between two types of intellectuals: *professionals*, that is, 'intellectuals under market capitalism in whose knowledge technical know-how dominates the teleological component'; and the *intelligentsia*, that is 'intellectuals who maintain the domination of the teleological component of knowledge above technical know-how, intellectuals in pre- and post-revolutionary Eastern Europe, in societies where modernization does not coincide with the development of civil society and market capitalism'.⁹ Thus the term 'intelligentsia' refers to 'people with not only executive skills but also moral commitment and historical vision'.¹⁰ It also refers to a social group, which Szelenyi even sees as a specific class-in-formation.

The fact that the term 'intelligentsia' is region-specific may raise the question of whether we should not have used it here as well. Szelenyi's perspective offers good arguments for both an affirmative and a negative answer to this question. What speaks for the use of the term *intelligentsia* is what Szelenyi calls the 'teleological component of knowledge', or, if we speak about literature, the 'moral commitment and historical vision'. There is no doubt that some of these dimensions have been strongly present until very recently, and to a certain degree are still preserved in the region of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. This gives literature a very particular role in society, and places specific expectations upon writers.

Interestingly, globalisation and a more elaborated understanding of non-European literatures and cultures have made it clear that this situation is not region-specific, but also present in a number of other cultural contexts. I find it quite telling that Mario Vargas Llosa's account of the situation of writers in contemporary Latin America can be very easily applied to the situation we can still find in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe.¹¹ Debating writers' involvement in politics, Llosa speaks of a strong pressure upon Latin-American writers to be socially committed and to contribute to the solution of the economic, political and cultural problems of their societies.¹² He goes on to explain that such a pressure takes away the liberty from authors to be 'writers only', that is, to put aesthetics before politics.

What Llosa is calling for is actually a *professionalisation* of writers, a situation in which they can be primarily committed to their literature without feeling an obligation

to dedicate their literary and personal abilities to the interests of their nation, which is how he sees the situation of writers in the so-called West. This, again, is not a simple claim, if only because of the serious question concerning whether a writer *can* dissociate him/herself from the immediate social context. Besides, any call for an understanding of literature as a phenomenon autonomous from the social context has also to be considered contextually, that is, the decision to argue for 'pure art' can be as political as the call for its explicit social engagement.¹³

If we follow Selenyi, it is clear that the social transition as it has been experienced since 1989 does not support the existence of intelligentsia in its traditional form. This was one of the reasons why we have decided to stay with the term 'intellectual', believing that it refers in a more proper way to the situation of the authors who contributed to this Forum. In addition, whereas the term 'intelligentsia' implies a certain group identity, we assumed that the term 'intellectual' would leave more space for our contributors to articulate their personal position. The acceptance of a teleological project—seen as characteristic for the intelligentsia, as discussed previously—necessarily places certain restrictions on the way literature is both read and written, foregrounding the social commitment of a literary text over its specific literary qualities, or the 'what' over the 'how', which does not have to be in accordance with writers' own understanding of their work, or with their literary interests.

In fact, the definition of an intellectual as proposed by Richard Posner seems to be closer to the way we have used the term in the Forum: 'the intellectual applies *general* ideas to matters of public concern, working from the top down, *theorizing* about abuses, corruptions, or injustices that he has discovered', adding later that in his view intellectuals are those who either write directly about political or ideological issues, or write literary criticism that is politically or ideologically inflected.¹⁴ Posner uses the expression 'public intellectual', acknowledging a certain redundancy of the term, but at the same time wishing to emphasise that intellectuals always address an audience that is wider than the usual audience of a scholar or professional.¹⁵ In that sense Posner's definition, although not as exclusive as Benda's, is also less broad than Gramsci's,¹⁶ since Posner explicitly claims that 'not all "knowledge workers" are intellectuals'.¹⁷

But whatever our understanding of the term 'intellectual', it should be noted that it has been traditionally associated almost exclusively with men, or rather, with masculinity. Said explains that for Benda intellectuals are men only, but otherwise does not have much to say about gender, being more interested in issues of 'race', state nationalism and exile. However, Said does invoke Virginia Woolf and her classic *A Room of One's Own* to indicate an explanation of the absence of women from the intellectual stage.¹⁸ The call for better education as a prerequisite for women's intellectual involvement in public affairs runs as a constant thread through discussions of the problem. We find it in feminist texts from the early twentieth century, as well as in second-wave feminist interpretations of women's intellectual legacies. Thus, in 1905, the socialist theorist and social reformer Helen Bosanquet called for women's right to attend postgraduate education as a prerequisite for the full development of their intellectual potential.¹⁹ And in 1987, almost a century after Bosanquet, Elisabeth Fox Genovese underlined once again that it was a systemic denial of access to education that prevented women from creating their own intellectual agendas.²⁰

Since the time when Genovese wrote her article a lot has happened in the world of intellectual production. The intellectual participation of women in public life has enormously increased, although women as public intellectuals in Posner's sense of the term are still far from having an equal level of participation and influence as their male colleagues. At one point in his study Posner offers a list of the most prominent intellectuals in American public life from 1995 to 2000, based on Web hits, media mentions and scholarly citations. It is indicative that out of the 607 listed persons, living and dead, only thirteen are women. It is also worth noting that a number of these women are declared feminists—Judith Butler, Andrea Dworkin and Elaine Showalter included—and that by far the most often quoted author in scholarly citations is Michel Foucault, whereas Judith Butler is first among women and twenty-seventh on the list.²¹

Which tentative conclusions can we draw from Posner's list about women's participation in public life—apart from the fact that they are visible to a certain extent? Not many, although we might notice the relatively strong presence of feminist theorists, which can be interpreted as a sign of the scholarly relevance of the feminist project, or of a certain attractiveness of feminist ideas for the media. But in order to interpret this result in a more comprehensive and reliable way, the same basic questions concerning the nature of the media, the functioning of cultural remembrance and the (gendered) principles of the construction of intellectual histories should be raised. In addition, with a necessary level of reserve regarding statistical results such as Posner's list, it would be interesting to see which names would be revealed by similar research in different cultural contexts,²² not only to see who and how many representatives of certain social groups would be there, but also who would be missing, and why.

One more important aspect of Posner's research worth mentioning here is the issue of the market. Posner is primarily interested in the ways the media market creates, promotes and sustains public intellectuals, in particular those who have become professional public intellectuals. In that frame he asks whether the marketplace of ideas can function in the same way as any other market, that is, can it be competitive and ensure that 'in the long run the soundest ideas will prevail'? His answers to these questions are rather reserved, especially because of the lack of controlling mechanisms in the market similar to those that exist for scholarly publications.²³ Still, there are no doubts about the relevance of the market for the formation and presence of contemporary public intellectuals. This also applies to Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, in particular after the social changes in the 1990s: The transition to a capitalist economy has affected the status of literature, which ceased to be a privileged place for both political and intellectual debates, or a protected intellectual activity of particular interest for the state. One of the outcomes of these changes is that writers, like other professionals in the field of culture, have to offer their literary products on a competitive intellectual market. Is this new social situation also gendered in a significant way, and what does the higher exposure of the domain of literature to the market mean for women writers?

For this Forum we have invited a number of women writers and intellectuals with very different personal and professional backgrounds to contribute either with self-chosen texts, or with some more direct answers to questions we sent them about the

specific problems of gender politics and the politics of gender in women's writings in the region. These were our questions:

1. *How do you see the roles of women writers and intellectuals in the present historical and political situation?*
2. *Do you consider these roles of both writers and intellectuals to be interrelated and if so, in which way, or do you believe that literature itself should be regarded separately from the writers' intellectual/political engagement over the most pressing issues of our time?*
3. *To which extent do you consider gender/women's issues important in your own writing and/or intellectual engagement?*
4. *If you believe that women writers have a particular role to perform in today's world, what would that role be?*
5. *What do you think of the concept of l'écriture féminine? Is it useful for a better understanding of your own or, more generally, women's writing? And from the point of view of the intellectual engagement of women writers, can the concept be used to emphasise special forms of women's engagement (e.g. can writing about socially challenging topics such as lesbianism or other forms of female sexuality also be seen as a form of intellectual engagement)? Is the concept of l'écriture féminine important for literatures in Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe?*

The Forum contributions show that gender consciousness is an important aspect of women's critical engagement with social issues in the region of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. But there also seems to be an interesting, and in my view highly relevant, implicit debate here between those participants in the Forum who identify gender as one of the central problems to be addressed in women's writing and those who recognise it as a relevant, but still secondary issue in their literature and/or public claims. This difference is not only generational, but also seems to be very much contextual and individual. Although this makes it difficult to generalise, I will nonetheless try to indicate some significant lines of thinking in order to highlight a few important points.

First, it seems that critical interrogation of the specific position of women in society, and more widely of the complex issues of gender and sexuality, is more important for women writers and intellectuals who continue to live in Central, Eastern and South-eastern Europe than for those who ended up living elsewhere, and who added the experience of being an émigré to the repertoire of their identities. Thus Milena Kirova, Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, Kristin Dimitrova, Mima Simić as well as Karin Karakaşlı speak of the relevance of gender in their writings. Underlining the significance of gender in their texts is not intended to suggest that gender was not also a part of women's writings in previous times, including that of state socialism. But a greater and theoretically grounded interest in gender issues is to a high degree a mark of the times we live in, which in some post-communist countries came with the political changes and the accompanying opening up of the sphere of culture. Still, as both Milena Kirova's and

Andreea Deciu Ritivoi's articles clearly show, to a large degree local conditions influence the ways in which feminist ideas and gender consciousness are articulated and promoted in the local context. Thus, Andreea Deciu speaks of the negative impact that the political climate in Romania has on women who declare their commitment to feminist ideas. Milena Kirova, on the other hand, points to an important interrelation in Bulgaria between feminist theory and the practice of women's writing, with feminist literary critics actively supporting a new production of gender-conscious women's literature. And in the case of Karin Karakaşlı, the specific social transformations that Turkey has been going through in recent decades also contribute to an atmosphere in which gender issues are critically interrogated and feminist ideas spread in the sphere of culture.

Second, the general rise of interest in gender issues in Central, Eastern and South-eastern Europe and the greater presence and influence of feminist ideas in the sphere of culture are not simple processes, nor do they produce simple identifications even among those authors who are inclined to support them. Kristin Dimitrova speaks about the difficult position of women writers in Bulgaria and her own interest in gender issues; at the same time, she considers the concept of *l'écriture féminine* to be too prescriptive and limiting for her to use it. Karin Karakaşlı, on the other hand, approves of the concept, seeing it as a powerful tool for women writers while underlining the complex relations of gender with other social identities. Milena Kirova points to two different patterns that women who associate themselves publicly with feminism tend to follow in public life. On the one hand, there are those who emphasise their relation with feminism, and on the other, those who do not want to be seen as 'feminists' only. What I find important in this distinction is the difficulty that exists in following one fixed course, which Kirova refers to when she speaks of the shifting positions of women writers and critics in regards to these two patterns. These shifting positions are important because the term 'feminism' connotes very different things for different women, and there obviously is a certain stigma that goes with it in a number of regional countries. But what is often lost from sight in these positions are specific traditions of critical thinking that are local and regional, in which emancipatory actions and ideas are not necessarily recognised or named as 'feminist', although they foreground in different ways general interest in women's issues.²⁴

Third, as Andreea Deciu Ritivoi emphasises in her text, social change in post-communism is not free from a number of unexpected biases and problems, especially the fact that gender is used together with political dismissals to keep women intellectuals away from the public scene. Such a use of gender as a derogatory qualification in public life is not a specialty of Romania, but Deciu links it with the important conclusion that '[t]he role of women intellectuals is to confront this tendency and to systematically act against it'.²⁵ This claim, whether more or less explicitly stated, is actually present in all contributions to the Forum, since all authors claim that gender issues—to a higher or lesser degree—prove to be relevant in their thinking and writing.

However, and this is the fourth point, the involvement with gender issues has different forms, and different, often complicated histories. Thus Susan Suleiman gives an account of her compelling intellectual history in which the relevance of gender for her work has changed over time. Although she herself was more involved with feminist theories at an earlier stage in her life, she is now in a position to see how feminist

theory has developed in Hungary, where she was among those who promoted it in the early 1990s. Eva Hoffman explains how in her case issues of gender have been subordinated by a set of other problems, primarily related with her experiences as an émigré. In her case, terms like 'otherness', 'difference' and 'immigration' and intellectual negotiations over the meanings of these terms seem to overwrite 'gender'. By focussing on the painful negotiations among different identities, and on the demanding intellectual task to theorise the very concept of difference itself, Eva Hoffman's essay—together with her added explanation about the meaning of the term 'gender' for her—makes an important contribution to our discussion.

Another important issue that our Forum addresses concerns some authors' complicated relations with feminism—in a different sense than discussed previously. Dubravka Ugrešić is known for her long-lasting engagement with feminist ideas, and her effort to be as critical of feminism as she would be of any other social phenomenon.²⁶ Her essay frames exactly that position: One cannot but be a feminist, or at least gender-conscious to a high degree, and be intellectually engaged against patriarchy; but a recognition of oppressive practices against women does not absolve women themselves from their responsibility for the preservation and perpetuation of patriarchal power-structures as they are. Dubravka Ugrešić thus brings us back to the question of the relations between literature and political engagement. Carmen Firan also addresses this, translating the very act of writing into a political engagement of a kind. In many ways her essay, including the very form in which it has been written, actually evokes the concept of *l'écriture féminine*, echoing in its own way Hélène Cixous's call for women to write, and in this act of writing, to change the situation that the phallocentric order has put them in.²⁷ And for Mima Simić, who grew up in the period of transition and witnessed the Yugoslav wars and the post-war struggles to democratise the region, being a woman and a lesbian means to be political, whereas being a writer also means to be political. For her these identities are inseparable. 'Needless to say, I believe in engagements', she writes, 'with, mothers, fathers, girl-friends, cats, theory, popular culture, art and the police. Even if they are visible and true only just before the moment of utterance'.

Finally, there is another parallel thread running throughout the whole of this Forum: it is the call for respect for *literary* quality as the specific quality that has to be considered when we talk about literature. Thus Karin Karakaşlı speaks of the 'literary' as 'an important criterion'; Andreea Deciu speaks of 'the literary value that gives credibility and force to the social change', whereas Dubravka Ugrešić reverts to 'a third, no-gender, no-ethnic, no-nation, no-race zone' that in her view is a zone of survival of literature. Ugrešić's call for a 'no' zone in that sense sounds almost utopian. It is not a call for dismissal of gender, rather, it subsumes an acknowledgement of differences that are present and debated on different levels. But at the same time, and similar to Hoffman, Ugrešić does not want to be trapped in differences produced at any cost, and does not want the recognition of differences to be the ultimate answer to all the questions that can be asked while reading her literature.

Mima Simić is probably the youngest contributor to the Forum, and she is the one who in many ways sums up the positions of the other authors. This doesn't surprise me, for I know she has read many of them; in a way, she grew up intellectually on their

books, reading them as a student and also by her own choice. Will her position be representative for a 'third wave' of politically engaged feminism in the region of Central and Eastern Europe? Or will she simply be another strong, politically engaged woman intellectual who will manage to leave her mark on the literary and public life of the world she lives in, however it will be called/framed/defined? It remains to be seen, but reading her for sure leaves one with a sense of hope.

◆ About the Author

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◆ Notes

1. Post-communist, post-modernist, post-secular, post-transitional ...
2. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing, Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 72.
3. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, London: Vintage, 1994, 55.
4. For a historical account of the term and some controversial implications of its various uses, see Stephen T. Leonard, 'Introduction: A Genealogy of the Political Intellectual', in *Intellectuals and Public Life: Between Radicalism and Reform*, eds. Leon Fink et al., Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1996, 1–25.
5. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 3–5.
6. For further discussion on the topic, see *The Intelligentsia and the Intellectuals: Theory, Method, and Case Study*, ed. Aleksander Gella, London: Sage, 1977; George Konrád and Ivan Szelenyi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*, trans. Andrew Arato and Richard E. Allen, Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1979. Among the more recent publications, see *Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe*, ed. András Bozóki, Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 1999.
7. Szelenyi refers here to Gella's explicit claim that *intelligentsia* is a unique concept referring to Eastern Europe. Ivan Szelenyi, 'The Intelligentsia in the Class Structure of State-Socialist Societies', *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 88 (1982): 287–326; ref. in the text p. 308.
8. *Ibid.*, 307.
9. *Ibid.*, 307–308.
10. *Ibid.*, 309.
11. It is interesting that a member of the audience at the conference 'The Writer in Politics' where Mario Vargas Llosa was speaking, recognised the similarities between what Llosa was

saying with the situation in communist and post-communist countries. William H. Gass and Lorin Cuoco, eds., *The Writer in Politics*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996, 79.

12. Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Politics and Literature: The Odd Couple', in *The Writer in Politics*, eds. Gass and Cuoco, 61.

13. I have discussed what such a choice meant in the case of the relative freedom of former Yugoslav 'soft socialism' in Jasmina Lukić, 'Poetics, Politics and Gender', in *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Jasmina Lukić, Joanna Regulska and Darja Zaviršek, Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006, 225–244.

14. Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, 19–20.

15. *Ibid.*, 22.

16. 'Today, everyone who works in any field connected either with the production or distribution of knowledge is an intellectual in Gramsci's sense'. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 7.

17. Posner, *Public Intellectuals*, 22.

18. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 6, 25.

19. Bosanquet [née Dendy] Helen (1860–1925), socialist theorist and social reformer. In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/101037208>, accessed on 11 August 2007. Helen Bosanquet, 'The Intellectual Influence of Women', *International Journal of Ethics* vol. 16, no. 1 (1905): 15–24.

20. Elisabeth Fox-Genovese, 'Culture and Consciousness in the Intellectual History of European Women', *Signs* vol. 12, no. 3 (1987): 529–547.

21. Posner, *Public Intellectuals*, 188–207.

22. I think here primarily of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, which is a somewhat different context from a media point of view, as well as from the point of view of local scholarship.

23. Posner, *Public Intellectuals*, 78–79.

24. See also the Forum of *Aspasia* vol. 1 (2007), dedicated to the question: Is 'Communist Feminism' a *Contradictio in Terminis*?

25. One of the best examples is the case of the so-called 'Croatian witches'. Lukić, 'Poetics, Politics and Gender', 229–230.

26. Her novel *Štefica Svek u raljama života* (published in English as 'Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life', in *In the Jaws of Life*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth and Michael Henry Heim, London: Virago, 1992) was published as early as 1981, as a pastiche of romances, with the same intellectual agenda in regard to feminism: promoting its ideas and being at the same time ironic to their simplification.

27. 'It is in writing, from woman and toward woman, and in accepting the challenge of the discourse controlled by the phallus, that woman will affirm woman somewhere other than in silence, the place reserved for her in and through the Symbolic.' Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, 93.