The questions we would like to address directly in this panel are: How has gender/women’s history challenged various narratives and myths about the communist (and procommunist) past? What has been the response from the establishment? What is the relationship between this kind of historical writing and feminist activism in your country? How have historians of women/gender situated themselves vis-à-vis western feminists?

In modern Poland feminism as a social movement was born after the collapse of communism in 1989. The causative factor was a bill of a new, restrictive anti-abortion law against which protested various women’s communities, mainly related with the wide circles of liberal leftist intellectuals. Nowadays we are able to list numerous important organizations and institutions of feminist character that were registered in the early 1990s. The oldest of them are: Women’s Center – Feminist Foundation (Polskie Stowarzyszenie Feministyczne – Centrum Kobiet) established in the 1980s (although formally it was founded as late as in 1989), Foundation National Information Center on Women’s Organizations and Initiatives in Poland – OŚKA (Ośrodek Informacji Środowisk Kobiecych), Center for the Advancement of Women (Foundation) (Fundacja Centrum Promocji Kobiet; established in 1993), Women’s Rights Center Foundation (Centrum Praw Kobiet), Women’s Foundation ‘eFKa’ (Fundacja eFKa), International Forum for Women and Association of Business Women, Federation for Women and Family Planning (Federacja na Rzecz Planowania Rodziny), or La Strada – Foundation Against Trafficking Women.

The above-mentioned organizations have embarked upon the widely understood popularization of feminist ideas, they promote the equality of sexes, prepare and motivate women to conscious participation in professional, social and political life, they offer legal counseling (Women’s Rights Center Foundation), various trainings, conferences, summer camps, and issue diverse publications of feminist character.

In 2001 by the regulation of the Council of Ministers there was established a ministerial office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Gender Equality. The first plenipotentiary was Izabela Jaruga-Nowacka (a member of the leftist Unia Pracy (Labor

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1 The full list of the women’s associations and foundations operating in Poland see in: Directory of Women’s Organizations and Initiatives in Poland, Center for Advancement of Women Foundation, Warsaw 2000, p. 503.
Union), currently acting as deputy prime minister), who in 2004 was replaced by Magdalena Środa, a sociologist, and Warsaw University lecturer.

The most significant periodicals that after 1989 have been promoting feminist ideas are: OŚKA Bulletin (Warsaw), quarterly Zadra (Splinter) published since 1998, and issued in 1993–1997 (5 issues) by the Women’s Foundation ‘eFKa’ in Cracow Pełnym Glosem (In a Full Voice).

A different function performs a weekly ‘Wysokie obcasy’ (High Heels), a color supplement to the Gazeta Wyborcza, which in attractive albeit addressed to the general public form propagates woman’s and feminist perspective on culture in the broad sense of the term: literature, social and economic life and to a lesser degree – politics. The regular columnists of the ‘Wysokie obcasy’ are well-known feminists: Kinga Dunin, a sociologist, novelist and publicist, and Prof. Grażyna Borkowska, a lecturer of the Warsaw University, literary critic and authoress of numerous books and articles on women’s literature.

A bit differently appears academic feminism. The most important institutions are: two-year Post-Graduate Gender Studies. Institute of Applied Social Sciences, Warsaw University, established by Prof. Bożena Choluj, a Germanist and literary critic, and sociologist Małgorzata Fuszara; a circle of female researchers focused around sociologist Prof. Renata Siemińska: Interdisciplinary Research Section on Gender, Institute of Social Studies, Warsaw University; and Prof. Anna Titkow who leads the Women’s Study Center Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of Polish Academy of Sciences, organizing serial lectures and discussions dedicated to women’s position in various aspects of political, social and economic life².

The important communities pursuing research into the women’s/gender history, body history and models of femininity are the circles of female researchers gathered around Prof. Grażyna Borkowska at the Institute for Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences and around Prof. Małgorzata Szpakowska at the Culture Institute of the Warsaw University.

Women’s history research is carried out by the team of Research on Social History of the 19th and 20th Centuries (Institute of History, Warsaw University) under the leadership of Professors Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarc. Since the early 1990s the team has

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conducted systematic research to socio-cultural and political history of women in the 19th and 20th centuries. The fruit of this research is the publication of volumes of collective studies under the editorship of Andrzej Szwarc and Anna Żarnowska in the series entitled “The Woman and…”\(^3\). The area of interest encompasses such questions as: family and household, education in the broad sense of the world, women’s professional activity and labor culture, public and socio-political life, women’s and feminist movements, intellectual and artistic creativity, the everyday culture, leisure culture, models of marriage, sex education and culture of sex life. At the other universities in Łódź, Wrocław, Cracow and Poznań the women’s history is being developed within social history\(^4\). Thus it could be said that the Polish historiography dedicated to the women’s history as regards methodology is much closer to such periodicals as the *Women’s History Review* than *Gender and History*.

As it could be deduced from above, after fourteen years of changes in the political system there are no university departments in Poland specializing in women’s/gender history. The creation of such departments is made more difficult by the educational system, according to which the creation of new studies falls within the authority of the Ministry of National Education, and not universities. The gender issues in scientific research are screened by research into social history or widely understood literary criticism.

Despite the fact that the two mentioned research trends, literary and historical, concern similar issues, they are being developed parallel to each other and only seldom their authors cooperate.

It seems that the main cause of this situation is different methodology of literary and historical research. While the literary criticism refers to the post-modernist philosophy (Lacan, J. Kristeva, J. Butler and others), the historical works concerning women and their questions are nestled within the social history, where in social stratification the gender factor


plays a role similar to social origin, education, age etc. It is characteristic that the theories of M. Faucault which revolutionized western historical research into sexuality, did not introduce similar changes into the scientific paradigms in Poland after 1989. On the one hand the academic history after the collapse of communism became dominated by political history with its disputes over the character of the Polish People’s Republic, transformation of the political system or the first years of the Third Republic etc. On the other hand, however, after the crisis of Marxist ideology, there seems to be a certain state of fatigue with or even aversion to the philosophy offering a new critical view of reality. Women’s or gender history by the members of historical establishment are regarded as a marginal field of historical research.

This is probably the reason for much closer relations of the literary research centers with representatives of social feminism than with historians. In any case, the confines between social feminism and academic feminism (mainly of female literary critics) are frequently blurred. Kinga Dunin, Agnieszka Graff, Kazimiera Szczuka, Bożena Choluj, they all engage themselves in scientific life, and on the other hand participate in wide social debate and coordinate feminist activities.

Women’s/gender history researches have changed or corrected the following fields of historical narrative:

1. The relationship between the republican political tradition of the Noble Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (this specific political form we date from 1454 to 1795, to the loss of statehood by Poland) and emancipation processes of the 19th century. The specific form of political system of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth based on the ancient ideal of direct democracy did not generate the separate spheres between women and men like in the West. In contrast to the absolutist models, the Commonwealth had a large percentage of the male citizens entitled to vote, belonging to the privileged nobility constituting as much as 10 percent of the whole society. Many social, economic and political issues (as for instance taxation, foreign policy etc.) were decided by the nobility on the level of local assemblies (dietines); all decisions of the ruler both in the spheres of internal and foreign policy were dependent on political will of the nobility. This specific form of political system was accompanied by the weakness of towns and townspeople, totally excluded from participation in power structures. Paradoxically, the weakness of towns induced less oppressiveness of women, as for example widows enjoyed great independence in deciding
about own family, they had right to freely dispose and administer of their own properties. It was a model of 'mild patriarchism'. According to the opinion of many researchers, as Anna Titkow or Magdalena Środa, the model of politicalness of the Commonwealth where freedom was understood as the right to share and exercise political power favorably affected the emancipation processes in the 19th century. As said by Nora Koestler, women “by taking advantage of the freedom vested in the nobility and invoking the ideas of equality of Polish woman already before the spread of enlightenment ideas were able to achieve the status that indicated the direction of further evolution in the following century”. Such an opinion was questioned by Sławomira Walczewska, who pointed out that the ideas to include women into political community in the 19th century resulted from the mobilization of the educated part of the Polish society around the question of restoration of the Polish state, while the arising feminist movement was treated by Polish politicians and intellectuals with apprehension or even dislike. It was the time when in the political imagination the icon of heroic Mother-Pole was born, a figure of romantic femininity combining the readiness to make the greatest sacrifices with patient attitude towards any adversities in the name of patriotism. Walczewska wrote that in the Polish culture the most general form of men-women relationship was an ideal of a lady and her knight and the social roles ascribed to them: care and protection, fight and activity for men and loyalty, devotion and martyrdom for women. Maria Janion added that the times of Romanticism established the fixed behavior pattern for women who standing in the background had to bear in silence the burdens of everyday life. It seems, however, that the feminist historiography tends to present the republican tradition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in a somewhat ambiguous way. On the one hand it perceives


\[7\] N. Koestler, “Kobiety polskie między społeczeństwem tradycyjnym a nowoczesnym” (*Polish women between the traditional and modern societies*), in: *Kobieta a edukacja na ziemiach polskich w XIX i XX wieku* (*Woman and Education in the Polish Lands in the 19th and 20th Centuries*), published by the Institute of History of Warsaw University, Warsaw 2002, p. 31.


in it a universal model of citizenship, while on the other it indicates the noble gender contract that preserved the division between male and female roles\(^{11}\).

2. The next field of reinterpretation concerns the women’s movement and feminism of 1890–1939, that in the time of the Polish People’s Republic belonged to the most neglected areas of research. The problem of feminism was in the times of the People’s Republic reduced to the official declarations of equality between men and women in a new political system, just and free from oppression. Marxist historiography emphasized mainly “mass” political movements to which feminism certainly did not belong. Many texts have been written nowadays about the first wave of feminism by the female literary critics: Grażyna Borkowska, Maria Janion, Aneta Górnicka-Boratyńska, who analyze the phenomenon of women’s literary works in the context of emancipation processes, changes in mentality and identity of described characters\(^{12}\). From among the studies *stricte* historical there should be mentioned here a pioneering work by Joanna Dufrat on women’s participation in independence military formations during the First World War, a study by Dobrochna Kalwa about the model of active woman of the interwar period, a book by Natalie Stegman, a German historian connected with the Warsaw circle, on Polish feminism in the 19\(^{th}\) century, and numerous other essays included in the studies edited by A. Żarnowska and A. Szwarc\(^{13}\). It is worth to mention the participation of Polish researchers in preparation of the biographic entries to the “Biographical Dictionary of Women’s Movements and Feminism in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) Centuries” at the invitation of Professors Francisca de Haan (CUE Budapest) and Krassimira Dascalova.


3. The third field of narrative directly relates to the communist period in Poland, namely to the question of woman’s character and role in the democratic opposition in the Polish People’s Republic, especially in “Solidarity”. The first one to tackle this problem was American feminist Shana Penn in her essay “A State Secret” published in 1994 in the *Pelnym Glosem*. She proposed a thesis that in 1981–1988 women organized and lead the underground structures, under male pseudonyms they conducted agitations, published periodicals and – despite it all – there was no place for them in the legal power structures after 1989. In other words, the women engaged in anti-communist conspiracy did not notice gender discrimination in their own communities, because they had no feminist consciousness. After 1989 women, according to the romantic stereotype, effaced themselves and made room for men. This absence of women in the political world was evident already at the very beginning of the transformation of the political system in Poland. In 1989, in the Round Table talks that initiated the changes of the political and economic system in Poland participated only one woman.

The Penn thesis was publicized by Agnieszka Graff in her article in *Gazeta Wyborcza* entitled “Patriarchate after Sexmission” (19–20 June 1999) that provoked a heated discussion of both the supporters and opponents of the Penn thesis. Since that time the democratic opposition in the Polish People’s Republic has been perceived not only as the fight against the oppressive political system; the questions about the gender relationship, distribution of power, gender contract in the circles of democratic opposition have become constant elements of the Polish political commentary journalism\(^{14}\).

The article of Graff brought up the question of relationship between the patriarchal order and communist system in Poland. Her most controversial thesis concerned the alleged abolishment by the communist system of the patriarchal order which was restored by conservative rhetoric and religious symbols of Solidarity. “My thesis could seem to be shocking and blasphemous – wrote Graff – but I think that the liberation movement such as Solidarity in its symbolic meaning is an act of restoration of the patriarchal order which was destroyed by the totalitarian system […]. Regardless of what happened in the real background, Solidarity in its symbolic sphere and in consequence in ‘collective memory’, became a place of the rite of passage for men. The beginning of the history of Solidarity, that is the story of Anna Walentynowicz, was totally superseded

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from the myth of this movement, or – in the best case – it turns up in the form of anecdote in the far background, like an apocrypha. The most important moment of the new history became a male jump of mustached Lech Wałęsa over the shipyard fence to join the striking workers of the Gdańsk Shipyard. The Black Madonna in his lapel, the queen of Poland – that unreal femininity without flesh and blood – gives sacred legitimization of the carried out revolution, her entering the sphere of the sacred. At the same time she was to remind that the real femininity had to stay outside the myth of Solidarity in order to successfully perform the rite.\footnote{Gazeta Wyborcza of 19–20 June, 1999, p. 20.}

Such depiction of the character of anti-communist opposition made by Graff should not be understood as a sign of sympathy for communism. The fact that more than once the authoress referred to her own oppositional political identity allow us to state undoubtedly that she was not rehabilitating the past political system. The presented description of communism, however, as a system neutral for both sexes was based on social observation characteristic only of the 1980s, when both women and men in actual fact were outside the sphere of politics, equally alienated and devoid of any influence on political reality. Nevertheless, Graff expanded this characteristic on the whole over 40-year period of communist system: “Communist system itself was associated with the radical depoliticization of difference […] gender, social or ethnic origin, wealth, age did not transmit into the level of participation in politics […] in times of communism gender was not regarded as political category”. The opinion about the Polish People’s Republic could be reinterpreted in an exactly opposite way than Graff did. The following events and processes: abolition of land ownership as a social strata, disbanding of social and feminist societies at the turn of the 1940s, anti-Jewish campaign from 1968 – are meaningful examples of radical politicization of the differences: ethnic, gender and social origins. Graff also passes over in silence the fact that the women’s representation in the power structures of the Polish People’s Republic was only symbolic.

Bearing in mind these reservations it is worth, however, to reflect upon the question why there was no consciousness of feminism and political subjectivity amongst the women-animators of the opposition in the 1980s? Why these women considered themselves to be only either the “helpers” or “secretaries”, why they did not become the leaders and official heads of the movement? In my opinion, the women’s self-articulation was made difficult by the overall low level of political culture. Even such simple, basic terms as “the Right” or “the
Left” understood here as political identities, had played no role whatsoever till 1989\textsuperscript{16}. Another reason was breaking with feminist tradition in Poland. It is common knowledge that social and scientific societies had been brought under strict control of the authorities and then dissolved at the turn of the 1940s. The same was the fate of all feminist associations. It is worth to notice that when in the first part of the 1990s the first feminist organizations were being established, their organizers did not refer – even symbolically – neither to the Polish feminists nor feminist institutions from the interwar period. Discontinuity of feminist organizations and tradition in Poland was not without impact on women’s consciousness. It was not a matter of chance that one of few women from the Polish opposition who protested against her exclusion from the Round Table talks was Barbara Labuda, with experiences from the French feminist movement of the 1970s.

The history of breaking with feminist tradition in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century proves also that to exist and operate feminism needs an appropriate environment, the guarantee of basic civil liberties, and first and foremost, freedom to associate and grass root social activity. Bożena Choluj noticed that: “the underground was not a school of democracy. […] Women stayed where they were active, at home or in the background, because here they fulfilled themselves in political activity as they did in their households: they coordinated the actions of political subjects like the actions of the members of one great family. For this reason they speak about the past with the language of their feminine socialization: we did it spontaneously, it was quite normal, that we had to, we had no other choice, we had to, but we never wanted to enter into politics […] and for this reason the gender reinterpretation of their actions and staying in the political background after 1989 are alien to them. The first school of democracy for women became the non-governmental organizations that after 1990 sprung up like weeds, and today there are ca. 300 all over Poland. But even here the changes in language and attitudes towards women are made very slowly”\textsuperscript{17}.

The history of institutional feminism of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century in Poland is marked out by two initial dates: the Revolution of 1905 after which the tsarist authorities permitted the founding of societies on the Polish lands under Russian partition, and the collapse of communism in 1989. Paradoxically, Polish women active before the World War I in feminist associations (such as the Union of Equal Rights for Polish Women – Związek Równouprawnienia Kobiet Polskich, 1907–1914, or Polish Women’s Rights Association –

\textsuperscript{17} B. Choluj, \textit{Gender history in Poland}, text in typescript, pp.5
Polskie Stowarzyszenie Równouprawnienia Kobiet, 1907–1914), or social organisations (secret scientific courses or reading rooms for women), cooperating with the international feminist movement entered the period of the independent Polish state in 1918 with much deeper and richer awareness of their own subjectivity than the women after 1989. Suffice it to say that in the electoral campaigns for parliament in 1919 and 1922 the women, as outstanding commentator and publicist Iza Moszczeńska-Rzepecka or Maria Jaworska put up their own feminist electoral lists\(^{18}\). After 1989 due to the lack of organization and international cooperation of feminist character there have been none such actions.

In my opinion it demonstrates that the process of developing the political subjectivity begins at the level of civil society. Undoubtedly, without social feminism, spontaneous activities of women’s organizations and foundations there would be nowadays no such thing as academic feminism.

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