

Remembering Marina Blagojević Hughson



A mural painting of Marina Hughson's image, by TKV

Marina Hughson (former Blagojević) (1958–2020), PhD, was a research professor at the Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research (IKSI) in Belgrade. A sociologist, social demographer, as well as gender scholar and gender expert, Hughson was a professor at the University of Belgrade, as well as a visiting professor in USA, Germany, Hungary, and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Austria. As an expert, Hughson was hired by UNDP, IFAD, USAID, UNIFEM, UNWOMEN and different governments in the region of the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Her publications are available at: <https://independent.academia.edu/MarinaHughson>.

Marina's 2013 self-conducted interview, from which the parts cited herein were taken and translated, was published in the following book: Svenka Savić, Vesna Šijački, Katarina Krajnović (Eds.), *Ten years of yearly awards in the gender equality domain (2003–2013): Life stories of laureates* (Novi Sad: Zavod za ravnopravnost polova i udruženje građana „Ženske studije i istraživanja“ [Novi Sad: the Office for Gender Equality and the Association of Citizens “Women’s Studies and Research”], 2014), pp. 220–232, and was retrieved from the following link: https://www.academia.edu/25339920/Marina_Blogojevic_O_ZNANJU_FEMINIZMU_I_AKTIVIZMU_MOJA_ZIVOTNA_PRICA.

On Knowledge, Feminism, and Activism: My Life Story

You wanted to interview yourself. Why?

There are many reasons. First of all, I am an experienced researcher and I understand well the power of the one who shapes questions and gives an implicit interpretative framework. Second, the envisaged scope for my life story is simply not sufficient, and my life cannot be easily formatted using general questions. I want to tell my life story when, how, and how much I want and how much I believe it to be good and necessary. My life has had a matrix too complex to be reduced or placed into a simple and trivial, most often chronological, course of events. Instead of having someone who does not know me ask me questions that are some kind of general points, I want to talk about myself primarily in order to convey a message. So, this is not about a simple process of reconstructing events and facts, but about my intention to say what I believe to be important and what makes up just one of many “red threads” in my life. The risk of inadequate questions is very big and I keep reassuring myself of this time and again.

As early as the mid-1990s, I decided to speak in public only when I want to convey a message, and not when others think it is ‘convenient’ to fit me into their framework. I have absolutely no desire to become a ‘public person’ by constantly appearing in the media, or by accumulating insignificant functions or positions. I gave up the idea that it makes sense to present ‘one's story’ to a broad circle of listeners because I believe that the circle of those being merely able to understand and follow what I am doing and dealing with is greatly narrowing. The hyperinflation of information and superficial interpretations in the field I deal with essentially

reduces comprehensibility because it suspends depth. And the one and only thing I care about is depth, because I believe that the only way to understand the surface is from depth. And the more I penetrate into depth, owing to my serious and hard work and reflection, the more difficult it becomes for me to communicate and for my listeners to understand what I am saying. Therefore, quite deliberately and with forethought, I altered my strategy. I say only what and how much I want to say, and I am solely engaged in a dialogue with myself because I respect myself as a reflexive and auto-reflexive subject.” This attitude of mine is in contrast to what is happening to me in reality, and that is constant mobbing, denial, malicious interpretation, marginalization, primarily in this small and provincial environment. Nevertheless, what no one can deny me is precisely the right I gave to myself, the right to respect myself as an auto-reflexive subject and to speak exactly from that awakened and self-awakened position.

The hyperproduction of information, media and online contents, as well as different kinds of “studies”, especially in the field I have dealt with ever since the mid-1980s, not only calls into question the quality of what we term “women’s or gender studies” but also creates a general confusion, with the trivialization of serious topics being brought to the level of absurdity. It is precisely because of this that I want to protect myself but also the field that I see as important and “my own”, for I have come to possess it because I “made” it, or in other words, worked hard and continuously on its formation in the course of three decades. I protect myself and that field by saying what I want and what I believe to be necessary at a certain moment. When I make a slip, when I make a mistake by giving an interview to, for example, someone who, as one of many such persons, is writing a PhD thesis on the women’s movement in Serbia, I nearly always come to regret it because I realize that I was fitted into an interpretative framework which is aimed at taking away my legitimacy, denying my “agency”, and interpreting my political stances and my public activity contrary to the truth and contrary to my intentions. We live in a time of great cruelty where the inflation of vanity and plunder creates the prevalent rules of behavior in every field, including the field of support for gender equality. But I do not accept them, never have, so my sole defense remains to be the words I utter or keep to myself, the words I write or keep in my head, the words I publish or do not publish. To me, communicating with the public is a venue of the greatest responsibility imaginable, rather than the affirmation of one’s ego.

So, what is it that you want to talk about right now? What is the message that you want to convey?

I want to tell a brief story of my public activity – just some small segments – and of my philosophy of public activity, because I believe that is important, here and now.

What do you mean by “public activity” and why is precisely this one of the many “red threads” that are woven into your life? And why is that important “here and now”?

The notion of public activity as I use it here stands for the agency which includes support for the common good. So, what I have in mind is not a mere presence in the public, but deliberate agency which is aimed at improving the society. Of course, it can also take place within a profession, and it can also include agency through activism. Public activity is based on the principles of respect for the common good and support for the common good, which also includes such values as equality, justice, freedom, and the like. Public activity means, and I believe in this, that personal, individual interests, if it is necessary, should be subordinated to something that is more important and greater than themselves – and that is the good of the broad community. Why do I believe this is important for my life? Well because, when I look backwards, it becomes crystal clear that what I did was, to the largest extent, precisely governed by the idea of the common good – the idea of how to contribute to something that is greater and more important than me and my own personal interests. Many of my actions can by no means be understood or grasped from the perspective of my individual interest because they look utterly impractical and very harmful to me. But that is precisely because of the fact that I never governed myself by personal interest as narrowly understood, but rather shaped my goals in accordance with what I believed to be necessary from the perspective of the common good. Many a time did I give up “my path”, my interests and talents, to do what I believed to be necessary to the community at a particular moment. I do not think I was the only one, there were many of us, and it is quite certain that all the women present in this book are similar to me in that respect. But I believe that my method, my approach, and my philosophy of public activity were specific, just as the consequences I produced, and this is something that I want to highlight in this conversation. It is very important for me to explain this, because this is the moment of a sui generis collapse of the idea of the common good, the moment of a collapse of the basic principles on which a social community must rest in order to be viewed as a community and as social. The selfish personal interest has become legitimate and it has been

entirely normalized in the public discourse. That is why I decided to speak of my utopianism, my activism, and my political “naivety”, and how I am proud of this. I want to use my own example to explain how I championed the things I championed and what strategies I applied. There were many things that I did precisely “behind the scenes”, thinking strategically about how it would be possible to accelerate progressive social changes. And now, when it is very difficult to evaluate the total result of all those efforts, because the historical moment is rather confusing and because a decades-long regression is culminating in “restauration” and a complete surrender to the negative social trends, I still believe that it is possible to learn at least some lessons and spread them further afield. I am sure that, at the global level, a new wave of activism, civil activism, has commenced, and that it will affect us as well, so that is why I want to talk about my experience. Perhaps someone will find it useful.

You want to talk about your public activity while simultaneously being aware that various efforts towards progressivism have not brought about the desired changes. Is that not, in a way, contradictory? What was the point of those efforts if the result is negative? Would it be any different in the end if you and the likes of you had not done anything? Is it not true that energy was just being wasted to no purpose, given that we have again returned to where we were, being even more ruined as a society and as individuals? If it had not been for that “activism” which failed, perhaps now there would be some hope. How can one, from this point of view, make any sense of what was done, given that positive effects have not been attained and the situation is even worse?

These are the right questions for activism in today’s Serbia. However, these questions are not asked in the circles of activists or among those who championed “democracy”. Why? Well because the cynical ethic of the winner has prevailed, everyone keeps saying that they are the winners, that they have done something good, that they are right. The ones who speak critically in public, like Vesna Pešić, are so few. The feminist circles, just like what is now the ruined women’s movement, are showing neither the desire nor the ability to face their responsibility. The entire field is much too ideologized and left to be overgrown with the rituals of self-glorification, self-congratulation, self-admiration, self-affirmation, and self-mythologization. All that matters is, from time to time, to invent enemies or a female enemy, a female opponent, and then isolate her through gossip and mobbing. That incessant finding of “internal enemies” holds the small number

of female groups together. The feminist circles have intensively worked on their self-isolation, which probably reaches its pinnacle in what is today taught as “gender studies”, with female students who are interested in political agency being told that they are not there to “change the world”. And this is not about a conflict between academicism and activism, but about a conflict between quasi-academicism and quasi-activism. Everything is quasi, because the personal interest has overpowered the support for the common good, gender equality – basically the support for justice. The cynical completion of the circle is the establishment of a few self-proclaimed “leaders” who are writing their versions of feminist history, which is then spun via different networks, MA and PhD theses into the official, that is, dominant version of history. But the real, genuine cynicism is not even in this distortion of history, which perhaps will be corrected with time, but the real cynicism is in the fact that “the democratically oriented”, “the leftists”, “the feminist women” have not created the critical awareness of the role of “imported feminism” (Zillah Eisenstein) in the emergence and implementation of the neoliberal project in the territory of the former Yugoslavia.

Does that mean you are labeling feminism and the feminist women as culprits and national “traitors” in the same manner in which the local critics of feminism have been stigmatizing them for decades now?

Quite the contrary. The basic difference between my attitude and their attitude is in the fact that their criticism of feminism is ideological, leveled mostly from the point of view of Serbian nationalism, whereas what I advocate is the de-ideologization of feminism in terms of both theory and practice.

What does that mean in specific terms?

That means that I believe, in accordance with the attitudes I am putting forward in my numerous scholarly texts, that both knowledge (including “theory”) and activism are contextualized and fitted into a temporal framework. It is necessary to understand from the context, within the context itself, what it is that moves both knowledge and activism forward.

[...]

You chose that more difficult path, the most difficult one, as you say. Were there any periods when that choice seemed wrong to you?

There were many times when I had doubts with regard to my choices. In professional terms, I often wondered whether it would not have been better if I had remained more concentrated on the field of general sociology, instead of going so far towards feminist sociology. All the more so because already at the age of 33 I was elected to the position of associate professor at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, because by that time I had already become the president of the Sociological Society of Serbia, and so on and so forth. I “poured” my high academic status at that time, in the early 1990s, into a series of feminist activist projects, including the foundation of the Women’s Studies Center in 1992/1993. At that point, I was the only person in the Center with a PhD, and a PhD which was practically in the field of feminist sociology (*The Social Position of Professionally Successful Women in Yugoslavia*). At that time, I wanted to use precisely my academic status to defend the Center and the entire field of women’s studies from attacks, and I wanted to give these an academic character, which can be testified to by my various interviews from that period. However, whenever I start to think whether that was a good professional choice, I always end up realizing that my path is specific because I gave absolute priority to my inner development and neglected the climb up the academic ladder. To me, that “intrinsic” career was far more important than the “extrinsic” one, which came spontaneously and as a natural consequence. Feminism gave me an intellectual provocation, as well as ethical engagement, for which I am greatly thankful to it. It came to me at that stage of my development when I had just completed my studies of sociology – in which I had graduated as the best student of my generation – to help me deconstruct androcentric knowledge, which my head was full of at that time. It helped me to “uneducate” myself, that is, to, in a way, demystify knowledge, as well as academe, and to embolden myself to embark on a path of my own. Hence, there are no simple answers to the question if that was a good choice. It was, I repeat, the choice of a more difficult path. But, at the same time, every more difficult path is also a more rewarding one because it includes a greater inner growth. Rather than choosing a well-ordered and relaxed academic career, rather than submitting to the opinion of the majority and receiving the awards that come from that, rather than leading the peaceful life of a complacent professor, I acted in total contrast. There is only one

answer to the question: “Why did I do that?” To save myself from suffocation. To me, at that time, feminism was fresh air. It was a vantage point from which I could see better, farther, deeper. And back then that was enough.

The fact is that I still believe that the feminist approach really has something to offer to the “great” science, that is to say, I believe that “feminist lenses” are necessary for an adequate analysis of the society. Deep down, I believe that feminism (and by this term I am not referring to any specific branch, but I am using this notion in its broadest possible sense as denoting support for gender equality and support for the improvement of women’s status) really makes it possible to see how the micro reproduces the macro and vice versa. It makes me sad when I realize that “the feminist theory” is marginalized in sociology teaching and that gender studies and women’s studies are gettoized; that the, objectively speaking, large contributions of feminist research have been sucked in and made invisible; that the ones who deal with it are marginalized. My decision to professionally choose feminist sociology came at a very high professional price for me, because everything I do turns out to be evaluated outside of the feminist circles as “unimportant” or secondary in comparison with the topics related to nationalism, corruption, the state or the European Union. In my case, there is even a kind of a witty plot – namely, I am given greater credit by the antifeminists than by the local feminist “theoreticians”, who, I guess, believe that “theory” is exclusively produced outside of sociology. But I find it tiresome to keep explaining to those with no education in philosophy, science, and scientific research methodology what the problem is with the feminist “theory” when applied to the Serbian and other semi-peripheral societies.

[...]

An important event for the development of feminism is the organization of the First Post-Communist Feminist Conference in Belgrade, in 1994. How did this come about?

That conference was organized on the basis of my project, and it was financed by the Open Society Foundation. My idea was simple, and it consisted in having the feminists from post-communist countries first sit and talk among themselves in order to see what is actually happening in transition. The idea came about as a result of my firsthand experience of lectures in women’s studies at the Women’s Studies Center and at the faculty. Since I had already been quite familiar

with feminist knowledge, because it was contained in my PhD thesis, I did not have any interest, at that point, in “discovering the feminist theory”, but I was rather interested in the discrepancy between that “theory” and what was the reality of the post-communist world.

[...]

I want to end this interview with a question about hope. What you have described and analyzed does not give many reasons for hope. So, what is your stance on hope?

I have hope and I can see reasons for having it. First of all, at the global level, in spite of all the horrifying, destructive, decades-long neoliberal plundering across the planet, the articulation of resistance and alternatives is becoming ever clearer. That gives hope. At the local level, the level of Serbia, I can see hope in the fact that so many people did not vote in the elections, so that once again it was confirmed that the politicians had underestimated “the people”. At the level of my settlement, Vrdnik, I can see hope in the fact that the flowers and fruit trees are blooming. And at the personal level, what keeps giving me hope time and again is love.

Translated by Goran Petrović