

Different Region, Different Women: Why Feminism Isn't Successful in the Czech Republic¹

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Following the revolution in 1989, borders opened, political and ideological isolation ended, and people in the Czech Republic began to receive head-on and at times all too much the majority of stimuli and ideas which circulate in Western Europe and in America. Except feminism! If some kind of contemporary current of thought raises an a priori aversion, it must be studied and analyzed. While in Western European and American universities, feminism has been transformed into the "differentiated approach to a variable reality from the standpoint of gender" and departments of "women's" or "gender studies" are now an inseparable part of the university curriculum, in the Czech Republic the discipline has grown very slowly. When these topics are treated academically, such work is done on a voluntary basis, or supported financially from abroad.

PATRIARCHY: AN UNFAMILIAR CONCEPT

There are a number of reasons why feminism has not met with success in the Czech Republic. They have their roots in the history of our nation and in specific Czech traditions, and in the recent past of the communist regime. Not even the present period of transition to a market economy is ripe for feminism, and the influence of feminist ideology is causing more harm than good.

The relative absence of tension between men and women in the Czech Republic stems from the fact that for a long period our country had a common enemy, which had the effect of strengthening the cohesion of all who identified themselves as Czech. Women's movements were already vigorously spreading in the Czech lands in the 19th century, with patriotic and democratic roots. Men supported the education of women and their fight for the right to vote, and Czech women were partners with Czech men in opposition to the Habsburg Monarchy. Even following the First World War, when women were

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fighting for civil rights across Europe, it was unnecessary for Czech women to gain their position through confrontation with men. Men understood their cause! The way to equality was laid out for them by a man of great authority, the first President of Czechoslovakia Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, who not only helped women to gain equal rights, but in general placed questions of citizenship, humanity and democracy above questions of nationalism and particularism, *eo ipso*, above feminism.

Even during the Second World War, Czech men and women had a common enemy. Czechs endured the horrors of war, forced labor in a Germany under siege, and concentration camps in equal measure. Men were not called to arms and both sexes were in a similar position: living under the "protectorate" of a higher authority was, in a certain sense, similar to conditions at the end of the last century.

The Communist new regime after 1948 considered class differences more important than the particular interests of women. The emancipation of women was supposed to come into being with the victory of socialism. Feminism was considered by conscientious female members of the Communist Party to be a bourgeois ideology, whose aim was to splinter the unified battle of the working class against class enemies and capitalism. In this context, feminism had become not only ideologically oppressive, but it had lost its economic basis and social foundation: even the smallest work places were nationalized, and the large part of agricultural farms collectivized, such that a man was not able to be the employer of women, not even of his own wife, for more than 40 years. The Communist regime gave priority to and provided more financial support to so-called work for the state. According to official ideology, work in the home, including child-rearing, belonged to the private sphere, which only "retarded" the progress of socialist society.

All of this did not remain without consequences: in the wake of the Second World War, women in Czechoslovakia constituted 22 percent of the work force, and approximately fifteen years later they constituted approximately half of the work force. Czechoslovakia held one little-known world record: 97 percent of all women capable of work were employed. In these conditions, men did not behave towards women as sovereign superiors but rather as colleagues who had to endure the same oppression. The potential emancipation of women in the work sphere was overcome by the numerous different effects of these experiences. Women in this period had not fallen victim to their position in a "patriarchal system," but to "communist power." To this day the majority of Czech and Moravian women are unfamiliar with the contents of the concept of "patriarchy," and if they meet with it in arguments with Western feminists, they consider it to be their (Western) construction.

In the socialist period, at least two generations of women had become convinced of the impossibility of managing the parallel roles and functions of work at home and in the workplace. The massive and compulsory entrance of women into the job market negatively affected their professional expectations, either social or personal: many people were convinced that women were not able to meet the work standards of men. Consequently, the official proclamations about equality between men and women did not raise their consciousness. Women who experienced and survived "existing socialism" thus assume that Western feminism, in its battle for the emancipation of women, places too much value on the demand that women become employees, have the right to their own career, and are economically independent.

In the last two decades of socialism, some women played a distinct, significant role in opposition to the Communist regime, as members of the so-called dissident movement.

Police pressure was so powerful in Czechoslovakia that dissent never reached a period of internal differentiation, as happened with the New Left in the United States in the 1970s from which the last wave of American feminism emerged.

WE SEE IT OTHERWISE

The experiences of women from post-communist countries and women from Western societies are so different that both sides express only surprise at the rigid opinions and thoughts of the other. Thus women from post-communist countries, for example, in no way appreciate the fact that their colleagues from the West are trying to assert their demands in the legal sphere. From their experiences under communism, it follows that legal solutions do not work in practice. Western "Marxist-oriented" feminists are convinced that the oppression of women is integral to contemporary capitalism. According to them, women will be liberated only with the realization of a socialist society. In countries where these same regimes collapsed, similar left wing opinions sound dogmatic and naive, and for this reason these women rule out any interest in feminism.

In popular articles, which are published in greater numbers and have a greater influence on public consciousness than do professional debates, the left-wing position of Western feminists is often mentioned as one that enforces so-called "politically correct thinking." We hear that American feminists demand the rewriting of the Constitution because of the recurrence of the word "man" in place of "person," we hear of the legal treatment of sexual harassment cases (which received the tragicomical Czech translation *sexuálno harašení* [sexual rattling]), but there our knowledge of feminism ends. Far more often we become acquainted with extreme feminism, which in our eyes is something we got rid of a while ago, rather than something which we are actually learning about today.

The image of feminism in Czech society is created in newspaper articles, often written by men who spent a short time at an American university, that exaggerate and ridicule the problems of sexual harassment and ideological feminism. What they fail to mention, however, is that the American university campus is conspicuously distinct from the rest of society, and that in Western Europe, feminists often solve pressing problems common to the whole society: employment and unemployment of women, domestic rape, sexual symbolism in the mass media, or psychological and psychosocial problems (fears women have of receiving positions of authority in the workplace, of earning more money than their husbands, of attaining success, publicity, and so on). In the Czech media, feminism is reduced only to ideology. At a time when any kind of ideological proclamation and political organization leaves a bitter taste in the mouth of Czechs, it is completely impossible for us to fully understand the feminist phenomenon.

THE FLIGHT TO THE FAMILY

Under socialism, the family was a place of considerable private freedom, and it was here that women's and men's "gender identities" were preserved. Because people were unable to realize themselves in the oftentimes absurd work for socialist society, and because participation in the public sphere was impossible, private and intergenerational

family relations played a more significant role than they did in the West. The high number of marriages and divorces among younger people and also of sexual promiscuity are testaments to this. To this day, tolerance towards extra-marital sexual relations, unfaithfulness, abortions, and divorces prevail. Czech women may ask: "Why do Western women so vocally emphasize a woman's right to her own sexual life, to sex before marriage, and so on, when among us it is completely common?" With respect to these opinions, to this day marital unfaithfulness or divorce have not threatened the career of politicians in the Czech Republic, even less so sexual harassment.

Many women reject feminism a priori because it devalues the meanings of home and domesticity, to which they gave their entire lives. Middle-aged and older women are the greatest opponents to feminism, rejecting everything about it. Czech women under socialism experienced every possible social role and today they tell Western feminists that they would like to remain at home and look after their children. Often, however, they are only verbal proclamations. The percentage of employed women in the Czech Republic has not dropped significantly; according to Marie Cermaková from the Sociological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences, women today constitute more than 43.2% of all workers (in 1988 it was 46.1%). Only 13% of Czech women agree with the opinion that in the case of layoffs, women should give their positions to men and the majority of these women had small children at the time they responded. The unemployment rate in the Czech Republic is very low, around 3.2 percent, although among women it is a little higher than among men.

IN THE NAME OF HIGHER INTERESTS

In the Czech Republic, it is understood that freedom does not come from organizations. Women's organizations are unpopular today and the only one which has persisted to this day is the only one that was permitted under state socialism, the Union of Czechoslovak Women (today the Union of Czech Women), which called itself "the extended hand of the Communist Party." It preserved its home, property, and publishing house, and in the meantime has founded an organization for homeless women. This organization, which during the communist period required that women go to patriotic and socialist demonstrations, is teaching embroidery, crochet, and make-up techniques with equal determination today. It buys knitting machines for local organizations with the small amount of money its members take in from the export of winter goods abroad. With it they sponsor activities and maintain a basic membership. Western feminists, of course, don't know this. Otherwise, the Union of Women appears impressive to them, with its own offices, fax machines, money, e-mail, and the finances to prepare conferences, conventions, or rallies.

Western feminists also point out to Czech women that there are no female members in the government, they make up only 15 percent of the representatives in Parliament (before 1996, this figure was even lower, 9.8 percent), and there is only one woman in a leading political party position. Thus, these feminists urge us to push for a quota system. Even here they lack an understanding of how political representation was totally discredited during the past regime, and why women in Czech politics today consequently still behave as an institutionalized minority. Successful women writers, artists, and politicians seek to gain the respect of their colleagues, who are, however, predominantly men

– and since they do not want to be members of an inferior minority, only a small number of Czech writers and artists identify themselves as feminists. But this banal information contradicts the lessons of every social psychology textbook.

During the present transformation of Czech society, women are not yet aware of their particular interests. They will likely be aware of these when the unemployment rate starts growing and they face harsh competition for employment opportunities. Women have not yet realized that the long maternity leave, this "achievement of socialism," may have negatively influenced their professional careers and that their lower retirement age may cause emerging poverty among older women.

Nor are they aware of those interests which belong to society as a whole. And not even our relatively stable economic situation and low degree of unemployment today can spark an interest in feminism. In the uncertain present, as we are again learning how to be citizens and to make decisions about our own affairs, paradise is postponed to the future. Again we consider the present as a transitional stage which we must "somehow survive" because it is the bridge to the future, to the dream of a functioning market economy and democracy. The clashes in the relationships between men and women are also today subordinated to higher aims: the transformation of society. Our way of thinking is once again repeating itself. Again we want to believe that all of our problems, including the relationship between men and women, will be solved with the transformation of the economic foundation of society. Western criticism of capitalism and the market economy urges us to disbelieve the deceits of capitalist society, and at present we don't want to hear it. In ancient Greece, the messenger who brought bad news was executed.