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Muriel Blaive (Ed.)

Marie ČERNÁ

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Women under socialism: what degree of emancipation?

Marie Černá

In this article, I shall attempt to trace the development of the situation of women after the communists took power in 1948. I had intended only to deal with the situation in Czechoslovakia, but the issues raised during the course of this series of papers on societies under communism seemed to me to be more general in nature. I shall therefore also include here examples taken from other ex-communist countries, in particular the GDR, Hungary and Poland.

In my researches, I shall base myself primarily on sociological literature, but I shall also take into account journals dealing with political and legal aspects, or even psychology, in so far as they touch on the issue of gender.¹ It should be noted that the issue of women under socialism has been dealt with almost exclusively by female researchers who are involved more or less closely in the feminist movement, whether in the sense of the social movement or in the academic world.

Communist ideology and the issue of women

The situation of women and their place in society, in other words the issue of women, was one of the principal and recurrent themes of communist ideology. The emancipation of women was closely linked to the emancipation of the workers. Its implementation promised to be a simple matter: it would be enough just to abolish private property (a privilege of men) and to open up to women access to the public sphere by means of their integration into the labour market.

This integration, and this alone, according to this logic, was capable of liberating women from the traditional and family ties that subjected them to men and made them inferior on the social level. Women would thus become independent of men and become their equals in the course of building up a new socialist society.

The practical application of this ideology soon brought with it important changes for women in Czechoslovakia, and in the other socialist countries, too. Up until 1948, the Czechoslovak feminist movement had developed in a similar way to those in other democratic countries and had achieved comparable successes in the area of women's rights. However, the socialist revolution resulted in a certain acceleration but also a somewhat different approach in comparison with the situation that prevailed in the West. The socialist state took over the feminist issue completely and successfully imposed its own definition of women's emancipation, while eliminating the feminist organisations that had remained independent of the communist party.

This naturally had a radical impact on the development of the feminist movement and views on the relationship between the sexes. Under the influence of propaganda and economic necessity, a large number of women entered the world of work, in contrast to women in Western Europe, who at that time experienced for the most part a large-scale return to household responsibilities.

¹ See for example Český svaz žen, *Postavení žen v České republice a demokratizační procesy v ženském hnutí* [The situation of women in the Czech Republic and the process of democratisation in the feminist movement], Prague, JOB Publishing, 1997; M. Čermáková, I. Hradecká, H. Navarová, *K postavení žen v československé společnosti* [On the situation of women in Czechoslovak society], Prague, Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences, 1991; E. Hauserová, *Růže mezi trnami (Ženy v politickém životě)* [Roses among thorns (Women in political life)], *Zpravodaj Zeleného kruhu* (special issue), 1996; H. Havelková (ed.), *Lidská práva, ženy a společnost* [Human rights, women and society], Prague, Evropské středisko UNESCO pro výchovu k lidským právům, 1992.

The new socialist woman was therefore officially seen from the beginning as being active and participating fully in building up socialism, even though the conflict between her professional role and the one that she never at any stage ceased to play in the household soon became evident, as we shall see later. We can genuinely speak here of a historical phenomenon, since it was the entire post-war generation of women that entered the labour market. Many of them also started an apprenticeship or attended secondary schools and universities, where the presence of women, both relative and absolute, grew significantly. The true "boom" in female employment dates from the 1960s, increasing from 60% in 1960 to more than 90% in the 1980s (with some going as far as to speak of 98% of women being economically active).

Communist legislation relating to women's rights

So far as legislation is concerned, the Constitution of 1948 and the Law on the Family of 1950 made women officially the equal of men. The legal institution of head of the family, which had ensured the husband (or the father) a decisive position in the family, was abolished. These changes, which were fairly progressive at the time, were implicitly presented as a victory for the new regime in the official literature of the communist era.² In reality, they had been prepared before 1948 by the Council of Czechoslovak Women, an independent democratic organisation led by Milada Horáková, which was abolished after February 1948 and replaced by an Action Committee under communist auspices.

The widespread integration of women into the world of work was unquestionably the source of major changes and, in a sense, of a genuine emancipation. Education and the public sphere, previously dominated by men, were from now on more open to women; it was now possible for them to attain a social status independently of their husband, making use of their own resources.

It should however be noted that the communist nature of this emancipation – in other words regulation from above, identifying the nature of the problem as being access by women to the labour market and reducing the issue to this aspect alone – acted as a brake on the spontaneous development of a feminist movement and of any public debate on more complex issues surrounding the relations between the sexes.

In addition, it soon became clear that the issue of women's rights could not be reduced to their integration into the labour market: the reconciliation of professional activity with a role in the household, the *worker* versus the *mother*, quickly made its appearance as a problem which started to be the subject of official consideration in the 1960s. The communist idea whereby domestic work – boring and non-productive – would be taken care of by the state enterprise *Liberated household* [Osvobozená domácnost], while children would be brought up in collective crèches, leaving women free to devote themselves to a creative occupation for the good of society, met with only limited success. The capacity of the crèches and nursery schools, together with that of other services, remained for a long time insufficient. The essential domestic tasks, together with the lion's share of care for children, remained the responsibility of the families and of women in particular. Far from being freed from domestic work, economically active women found themselves forced to take on a double burden rather than a single one. And in contrast to economically active women in the past, they no longer had servants and maids of all work to help them with their task.

However, at no time did this situation give rise to a public debate leading to a re-evaluation of the traditional division of roles within the home. The fact is that it was only

² See B. Királyová, L. Holčová, *Pokrokové ženské hnutie na Slovensku 1918-1980* [The progressive feminist movement in Slovakia 1918-1980], Živena, Ústredný výbor Slovenského svazu žien, 1984.

women who were faced with the problem of reconciling a professional activity with their role in the family; men continued to be spared this – which still effectively remains the case today.

An analysis of the social structure carried out in the 1960s passes a critical eye over several aspects of discrimination against women on the labour market, and over the "double burden" laid on them; nevertheless, following the example of the official ideology, the authors of this study warned against any distinctive identity for women and against all "sectarianism".³ In their view, the solution to the problem of women's rights lay not in calling into question the division of roles in the family but in changes affecting society as a whole, notably the creation of better infrastructure and better services. Particular interests, after all, cannot be tolerated in the process of building up socialism.

The objective of the whole complex of social policy measures taken by the socialist state in relation to this issue from the 1960s onwards was to help women to reconcile their dual role,⁴ for example by extending maternity leave; however, this only served to strengthen the notion that the problem was not one of principle, but of an excessive burden.

Thus a certain ambiguity can be noted in the official communist line on women. Without wishing to deny the reality of the communist endeavours aimed at emancipation, it would be too simple to say that they came up against the inertia and ill-will of a society that was still dominated by an instinctive patriarchal reaction. This reaction was present in the official communist position as well. Women were supposed to become the equal of men, to play a comparable role in building up socialism, and to be active in public life, but at the same time it was expected that they continue to submit to stereotypes that allocated certain "exclusively female" tasks to them.

The persistent nature of prejudices

Eva Fodor, a Hungarian sociologist, analyses in her article "*Smiling women and fighting men*" the official documents in which the leading officials of the communist state deal with the issue of women.⁵ These documents cover the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. Eva Fodor is describing Hungary, but comparable elements can be found in a book by Eric Weitz on the official line of the German communists at the time of the Weimar Republic.⁶ I therefore venture to suppose that these elements have a relatively universal character.

Eva Fodor shows that women, as the object of socialist policy, were seen as a homogenous group without distinctive characters or specific features. Due to their particular socio-historical circumstances, they were considered as being behind the times on the political level and more hesitant to adopt the socialist ideals than men were. The fact that they were rooted in the family setting, with its accompanying prejudices linked to "tradition", made

³ See Pavel Machonin (ed.), *Sociální struktura socialistické společnosti* [The social structure of the socialist society], Prague, Svoboda, 1966. This book was one of the contributions to a major sociological research project directed by Pavel Machonin which concentrated on the social structure in socialist Czechoslovakia. It was a complex undertaking and fairly unique for the time and for this type of society, and it is no exaggeration to say that it became a "cult" work for Czech sociology. The work was based on empirical research that was representative of the population. Its objectives were as much political as sociological. The final results, together with some concrete proposals, were presented to the prime minister in 1969. However, as part of the "normalisation" policy of the 1970s, the books and collections connected with this project were blacklisted and the group of researchers was disbanded.

⁴ B. Királyová, L. Holčová, *Pokrokové ženské hnutie na Slovensku 1918-1980* [The progressive feminist movement in Slovakia 1918-1980], op. cit.

⁵ Eva Fodor, "Smiling Women and Fighting Men. The Gender of the Communist Subject in State Socialist Hungary", *Gender & Society*, vol. 16, no. 2, April 2002, pp. 240-263.

⁶ Eric Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990. From Popular Protests to a Socialist State*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1997, pp. 188-232.

them (it was believed) less loyal to the new regime, more religious, and therefore more suspect. They were thought to be more emotional and irrational, quickly becoming enthusiastic about something but lacking in perseverance.

Their faults, it was said, could be corrected, for if women were behind the times, they were also *capable of being re-educated*. It was the task of popular education to educate and instruct them but it was also the duty of specific people: men and husbands. In the documents that Eva Fodor analyses, for example, husbands are encouraged to read to their wives, accompanying this by explanatory comments, while the wives are doing the ironing or darning holes in clothes.

This last example illustrates perfectly the ambiguity of the way in which the communist officials regarded women: they can be re-educated politically if one is patient with them, but ironing and darning will always remain their privileged domain. Here we pass from characteristics that are socially and historically conditioned to those that are said to be *unchanging* and *natural*, in other words immanent and invariable.

Consequently, it is of course women who should look after the household, the children, and other domestic tasks. It is true that they should also take the initiative in the public sphere but it is taken for granted that they will only become involved in specific areas relating to their *nature* – in other words everything connected with family life, children, education, social affairs, etc. As one official summed it up: the place of women is in the services, where they should "smile nicely".

It can therefore be concluded from this analysis of the emancipation of women in communist countries that, if there was supposed to be emancipation of women there, this was only supposed to take place under state control.

Feminism as a social movement

So far as feminism as a social movement, in the broad sense, is concerned, the sociologist Jiřina Šiklová has described its official reception in socialist Czechoslovakia as follows: "Feminism, seen as an ideology that was likely to split the common interest of men and women in eliminating capitalism as a social order, was totally unacceptable."⁷

This way of looking at the matter is hardly surprising if we take into consideration the fact that under "real socialism", a debate on social themes was non-existent, the more so because there was no public sphere allowing free discussion. It does seem to me remarkable, on the other hand, that the issue of women's rights was not dealt with by any of the opposition movements that existed in the different socialist countries.⁸ What is more, this failure to consider the issue was justified by arguments similar to the official ones: we do not want to split the common interests of men and women who are fighting together for freedom.

Shana Penn, an American sociologist, has presented a very detailed study of this phenomenon in a book on the women in *Solidarność*, the underground Polish movement.⁹ The author raises the question, even more astonishing and remarkable in that it had been concealed for a long time behind a practice that seemed to go without saying, of why no one had ever mentioned, and no one ever mentions today, these women in *Solidarność*, who were however

⁷ This quotation is taken from an article in an encyclopaedia on socialism in Czechoslovakia (awaiting publication).

⁸ I shall not go into the question of how this issue was seen by the majority of society. This question is too complex to be dealt with here.

⁹ Shana Penn, *Podziemie kobiet* [The underground struggle of women], Warsaw, Rosner & Wspólnicy, 2003 (English version: *Solidarity's secret: the women who defeated Communism in Poland*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2005.)

very much active and involved. Why is it that the heroes of this movement are all men? Why have the women remained anonymous?

One of the most important underground newspapers, *Tygodnik mazowsze*, a weekly with a circulation of around 60,000 copies (sic), was however prepared by a group of women. If these women had not taken in hand the organisation of many aspects of the struggle, such as the network of contacts, the conspiratorial apartments, the distribution of the newspapers and pamphlets, the collection and distribution of information, and much else besides, the male heroes of Solidarność would have remained isolated and would never have become so famous as they did.

Stereotyped views on the division of roles between the sexes turn out to have played an active role even in opposition circles (and not only in Poland). This division implied that only men should assume a public role, while women should remain in the home. In addition, Polish society remained very much attached to tradition, which meant in practice that nobody would have taken seriously a call to strike or a declaration signed by a woman.

These stereotypes were never called into question. Their acceptance and reproduction appeared to be a functional necessity. Clichés about women being passive and more interested in the family and the private sphere, and thus less capable of becoming involved in politics, sometimes even turned out to be useful. Since women's opposition activity was not subject to so much surveillance, for example, the regime never discovered that it was in fact women who were responsible for the publication of *Tygodnik mazowsze*.

Moreover, the female members of the movement themselves stress that it would have been counter-productive to weaken Solidarność from inside by demands about equality between the sexes. They considered feminism as a luxury of the democratic societies that they were neither able to nor wanted to permit themselves, preferring an opposition that would be capable of struggling with closed ranks against the communist enemy. The injustice practised against women in the opposition was considered as negligible in comparison with the injustice practised by the regime against citizens in general.

Social and professional inequality

In the final part of this article, I shall take up the notion of injustice in order to examine certain institutional or structural aspects of it. Injustice perpetrated against women was a standardised phenomenon, comparable in all the socialist countries and probably present, in varying degrees, in the West as well – it should be noted in passing that if I speak of "inequality" in relation to women, this does not exclude the fact that men may also have been victims of "injustices" arising from this same traditional perception of the division of tasks.

In the East, equality between men and women did not exist even on the formal level, in spite of the declarations by the socialist state. In contrast to the stereotypes that were at work in the everyday relations between the sexes, these facts are concrete and easily measurable. Firstly, the average female wage was only two-thirds of that of men with the same qualifications doing the same work. At no stage did men cease to be considered as the principal support of the family, even when the majority of women had been put to work.

Secondly, the number of sectors in which there was a large female workforce increased above all in the less well-paid professions, while on the contrary, the well-paid sectors such as heavy industry, in particular metallurgy and the mining industry, constituted a labour pool that was typically male. In addition, there was a veritable chasm between women's level of qualification and their career prospects. In the 1980s, 45% of students were women, but the degree to which they were represented in leading positions and public functions remained minimal.

And finally, women always had less free time available than men due to their double work burden. Most women worked full-time, and part-time work remained the exception. What remains remarkable and needs to be stressed, I repeat, is the fact that the opposition movements did not at any time include a reflection on the situation of women in society among the topics they discussed.

Conclusion

In this outline, too brief to be able to cover all the aspects of the emancipation of women under socialism, I have chosen to deal with only certain aspects of this very complex set of issues. Nevertheless, they are revealing.

The issue of women's rights constituted one of the major themes of the socialist revolution, and it accompanied the birth and evolution of this model of society. It cannot be denied that communism took an interest in the situation of women and in their emancipation. However, it in no way allowed any progress in a more general reflection on the relationships between the sexes. The communist vision of emancipation was imposed and drummed in, following the official ideology in giving the impression that the issue of women had been resolved once and for all. The model of the "superwoman", in control of her professional work while at the same time coping with her functions in the family, was imposed during such a long time that it left no room for more general questions concerning the relationship between the sexes. This incidentally is one of the reasons why Czech society, including many women, keeps its distance from feminist movements even today. For most people, feminism still remains and will always remain tinged with extremism.