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The Emancipation of Women: A Concept That Failed

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For some time we have asked ourselves why the words "emancipation of women" have become such objects of derision and irony even among women. As the theoretical basis for the state- and party-directed emancipation of women, these words played a significant role in the building of socialism in Czechoslovakia, influencing women's real position. We offer an analysis of the concept and the basic principles upon which it rests, exploring the positive and negative aspects of its application. We rely also on our personal experiences with "emancipation," its practical deformations and misrepresentations. This article is written with a view to articulating our experiences of the past, a past that affects our position as women and that will affect the process of change in our society today. We are aware that many points of view are possible; for this reason, our reflections should not be taken too generally.

The Czech sociologist I. Možný stated that "there exist side by side in social consciousness two concepts of patriarchy: an articulated familiar one and an unarticulated structural one."¹ Our concern is to articulate structural patriarchy, for which, paradoxically, "emancipation" forms the conceptual basis. Those women who aim to move beyond the framework of the family and obtain self-realization and self-expression in creative activity, which demands time and concentration, experience very strongly the limitations and disadvantages of patriarchy. But the ways in which this structure and the conditions that disadvantage women operate has not been visible, and its principles remain unarticulated.

I.

"Sameness" versus "difference" is one of the central problems of feminist philosophy, and the position one takes on this issue forms the starting point for different theoretical concepts and practices. "Equality" in our country has been interpreted as sameness, requiring formal and substantive conditions to avoid

discrimination against women. "Emancipation" unambiguously meant that women should be self-sufficient and independent and, importantly, equal to men in the sense that they should have the same opportunities for entry into the public sphere. It was argued that there should be no distinction between a "stronger" and "weaker" sex.

In effect, this socialist conception of emancipation was an androgynous one. Furthermore, the paradigm present in the building of socialism, with which women identified, implied that to be equal meant to participate equally with men in socially organized paid labor. It was thus necessary for women to operate under conditions favorable to such participation. It was felt that women ought to (and, in fact, they wished to) fill positions that would have been unusual for their mothers and totally unattainable for their grandmothers. This entry into work took place on a large scale, supported by official ideology and policy, directed from above. As a result, over 90 percent of Czechoslovak women engaged in paid work.

Some women were willing to become equal to men at any price, in order to win social and personal recognition, acceptance, or authority. This meant letting themselves be judged by male standards of rationality, by men who sat on the decision-making commissions. But even so, the occupational structure was and is unequal. Women have similar levels of skills and qualifications as men but are only marginally represented in planning, decision, and leadership positions; in addition, their remuneration is significantly lower than men's. It is not only that the socialist paradigm of equality through paid work was not in practice realized, but that it carried with it the assumption that the admission of female difference meant female inferiority.

The positive consequence of this emancipation was that women gained personal independence and ceased to derive social identity from men. Women had the opportunity for richer social contacts outside of the private sphere, important in a society not so stratified by wealth. A further advantage was that girls and women had a wide range of professional options, job training, and acceptance at secondary-level vocational schools and universities. Girls who chose to attend technical universities were even given preference, through quota systems established by the Ministry of Education. But the whole process unfolded in a social and political atmosphere in which a myth of unity reigned—not a unity of diversity, differences, and heterogeneity, but rather one of homogeneity, of an undifferentiated mass. The society was thereby made easier to control and manipulate through directives, orders, and punishments. The very concept of the emancipation of women reflected these circumstances, in which fear was made part of the mass psychology and people's overriding desire was not to say or do anything too different. Here one can find the roots of the widespread phenomenon of people acting the same, which strongly determined personal relationships.

There were several negative consequences to this androgynous conception of equality, which women became aware of only later and which they have cau-

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tiously expressed in private conversations, but never in movements or in demonstrations. Symbolically expressed, women did not have to fight to gain admittance to the "building"—the factory, school, institute, shop—but were free to enter. When inside, they began to see more clearly how the building was constructed, its plan, and finally who organized life in the building and in which language communication was carried on. In every room they ran into the power of the bureaucratic apparatus, its anonymous and alienating character, which demonstrated its existence by requiring unnecessary activities. It created Mafia-like relationships which made life senselessly complex for everyone and even more difficult for women. Two instances are relevant for our consideration. First, the functionaries, unconcerned with any ideals, were "sexless" because depersonalization came with the job. The consciousness that reigned in general and with regard to one's sexual identity in particular rested on the conviction that these functionaries determined the pace and direction of society. Many women were drawn into such positions within the bureaucracy once they entered the building. They lived a life split between the alienating character of their administrative function and the highly personal individual situation of the private sphere.

Eventually, doubts arose about the content, the conditions, and the forms of women's wage labor. The dissatisfaction was doubly great if the women left the "building" and were also mothers or wives. The two burdens became increasingly difficult to bear with the increasing demands created by hyper-organization and low efficiency, as well as the expectation of additional public and social work and caregiving in the family, for whose well-being women were still responsible. This was exacerbated by the deficiencies in consumer goods and services. A woman confronted a dilemma: either a successful career or a family and children. A successful compromise was more the exception than the rule, and all attempts to reconcile the two realms was accompanied by a desperate sense of a lack of time, constant stress, and haste. This was often expressed laconically in daily conversation as "I just don't have the time."

Women learned that to achieve success in the "building" they had to adapt to various vocational and professional roles. They were not active subjects, but passive carriers of the norms contained in the roles. After living some time in the "building" the women gradually started to realize their dissatisfaction with the gender-undifferentiated nature of work. Sociological research showed that women were more dissatisfied than men in their work, precisely in regard to those aspects that men also value—challenge and diversity, possibilities for realization of one's talents, independence, equal salary, and equal rewards. Men work more often in their chosen occupations, are more able to utilize their qualifications, receive higher salaries for the same work, and achieve faster promotion or advancement than do women.²

Already by the mid-1980s some sociologists were warning about the dissonance between the content and conditions of work for women and their special needs.³ These sociologists demanded a new model of work for women as an important

condition of the humanization of labor. In the opinion of the well-known Czech author E. Kantůrková:

Women here are too emancipated, and the emancipation started with the economic emancipation. Feminism in the sense that women must strive for liberation has been superseded here. The women's question here is not their independence but rather their dignity, because the great emancipation also brought disrespect and degradation with it.⁴

"Emancipation" over the last forty years meant a loss of dignity for women, who were reduced to a cheap source of labor that could be plugged in anywhere without regard to specific capabilities, prerequisites, and ambitions. It meant the loss of women's identity, because women had to adapt themselves to the architecture of the "building" and had no chance to become aware of and determine for themselves what it meant to be a woman and to express it in their lives, their social roles, and their personal expectations. The price to enter the building was too high.

II.

One thus begins to have doubts about the paradigm of catching up and being equal when it has meant adapting to the existing male model. It is only in sociology and women's literature that one begins to find the female contours behind the anonymous, universal work force, a discussion of contemporary women in nontraditional situations, and the necessity of new criteria for assigning value to socially useful work by women.

Several female authors, including V. Hanzová, V. Svenková, E. Farkašová, G. Rothmayerová, L. Hajková, and J. Bodnarová have in short stories, novellas, and poems made the daily struggle against time of their female protagonists the major theme. The lack of time for herself, for the children, for the husband she loves; the lack of deep, quiet, or shared experiences; and the feeling of estrangement are often described as the characteristic themes of our female literature.

Literature written by women has also dealt with the theme of women's identity, contributing to "revealing" that identity and helping thematize the world of women anew. It has been oriented toward private life, toward the emotional sphere, toward the plane of interpersonal relationships in the circle of the family, and has often stayed far away from the "great and heroic themes of the building of socialism." These authors have endeavored to define a social role for women that corresponds to their bio-psychological and sociocultural constitution. They have tried to free themselves from traditional points of view and from masculine aesthetic norms. Instead, they have revealed their own specifically female experience of life. Such literature has often been characterized as "escapist" literature by a literary critical apparatus dominated by men. Yet such authors as M. Halamová, L. Vadkerti-

Gavorníková, M. Haugová, D. Podracká, Z. Szatmaryová, J. Kantorová, and T. Lehenová are searching for a new language for the representation of their specific life experiences.

In the conception of emancipation, the pendulum had swung too far toward "equality," although it is beginning to move now toward the counterpole of difference, individuality, and uniqueness, at least according to sociological studies. The empirical experience came into a conflict with the theoretical principles behind the conception. There has been no language or discourse on this theme. Feminism itself is completely missing in the liberal arts; there is no women's studies or discussion of such issues in books and journals. In the bookstores one finds no books on women, research into women's issues, or feminist philosophy.

Not only ideological and economic factors account for this ignorance of sexual differences, but the conceptual orientation of abstraction from particulars. Tradition posits a humanistic universalism that elevates the universal qualities, rights, and needs of every human being to the greatest importance and posits that a better, more just world and all particular problems will be solved by the resolution of conflict at the universal level. The differences between men and women are regarded as marginal problems. But humanistic universalism veils the important point that the masculine principle is taken as the common human principle. The male value system, male thought patterns, and male ways of action become the patterns for the whole social structure.

The universalization of social roles historically prepared the way for the equality of the sexes, but the latter required a change in traditions and habits that had prescribed distinct gender identities and correspondingly different functions, goals, and positions according to a principle of complementarity. This change required industrial society, with its processes of modernization and its concept of the abstract human being, in which the multidimensionality of the person was reduced to that of labor power. The consequence is a profound devaluation of individuality, uniqueness, and singularity of the personality. This has been harmful to women in two ways.

First, the principle that everyone is interchangeable, the view of a person as *homo economicus*, creates and strengthens the idea that both sexes have the same disposition and capabilities, that they perceive the world in the same way and have the same needs, and that all persons must pursue and realize a common goal that transcends difference.

Second, equality so understood as the absolute opposite of difference, conjoined with a teleological dimension, coexists in our society with the one-sided emphasis on the person as a social being. This is conjoined with the claim that changes in the social conditions and forms of organization will change the person. Methodologically, this has the same basis as behaviorism.

Jointly, this has led to the concept of the sexual universality of many roles originally assigned solely to men or to women, first and foremost in the sphere

of wage labor. It was forgotten that almost all the roles with decision-making power over persons were created by men. In their content and structures one finds that they implicitly contain the norms of masculine interaction, masculine thought, and an orientation toward masculine needs and values. There are only a few professional roles in which a female structure, norms, and patterns of action are entrenched. Women who take on those roles declared universal—sexually neutral—must almost always adapt themselves to the roles. Only by doing so will women become integrated and accepted into the world of their male coworkers. For those courageous women who rejected this forced adaptation and tried to find a role commensurate with their feelings and value systems, one with more moral resonance, the result was often a deep professional and personal isolation. There was an absence of a pluralistic public sphere and instead a unity of social institutions and organizations in which social and leisure-time activities for women were directed by one central women's organization. In a non-pluralist society, the greater the conformity, the fewer the conflicts. But with this conformity went the loss of a female view of the world, of one's own femaleness, of a "female identity." Any such identity was driven back into the private sphere.

The integration of social roles into the concept of emancipation means methodologically the application of a functionalism, because, as I. Možný claims, one's social roles rather than one's individuality were most important for a social system that had overridden essentialism.⁵ The woman became the bearer of many roles in both the public and private spheres. In contrast to men, the spectrum of social roles for women widened considerably. In literary works by some women authors⁶ the "superwoman" appears: the woman who is at once a caring mother, loving wife, exemplary worker and scientist, and enthusiastic functionary. These figures, which served originally as ideals or models, have more recently been represented as parodies. Behind these masks usually stands an exhausted, distracted, inauthentic creature. No miracle of emancipation occurred; the woman was not able to transcend the human limitations of physical and psychic energy or the rigid male structures of jobs.

The technological paradigm of unlimitedness predominates—unlimited manipulation of nature and of persons, radical transformation of social conditions, and inexhaustible possibilities for transforming the self. This unlimitedness, together with seemingly sex-neutral roles, has had far-reaching consequences for women. It has overshadowed their specifically female nature and has led, paradoxically, to the creation of a new inequality.

Možný maintains further that "humanizing of work in our society would result fairly substantially in its feminization." A woman brings a more informal atmosphere to work, more collegial relations, especially given our society's weak performance principle in the absence of a market mechanism. Conversely, the woman brings home nervousness, exhaustion, and turbulence born of the fear and tension over whether she accomplished all that was expected of her. Even if

she sees the source of her discontent in a husband who helps her very little with the household chores, she still blames society primarily for her discontent. The chief conflict for her is "woman versus society," not "woman versus man."⁷

III.

The concept of the emancipation of women in our society was linked not to liberal individualism but to collectivism and patriarchy in the socialist tradition, which explained the subjugation of women in terms of the social system. This is anchored in the philosophical thesis that the nature of the human being is the sum total of its social conditions. The individual is seen as part of the collective; the individual's development depends on the quality of the social conditions, and the final goal is not the individual's development but the advancement of society. The development of the woman is not to be directed primarily toward her personal interests and dimensions; rather, she should contribute to the well-being of the socialist society through her work, her public engagement, and the education of her children. The idea of individual independence is replaced by one of social dependence.

Holism creates the theoretical-methodological background for this principle of collectivism: the whole is greater and dominates the parts. In the social sciences, the concept of the whole lay in the foreground, while its parts were little attended to, assumed to have lesser value. In daily consciousness an atmosphere was created that did not support individualism, although in the last few years it has become clear that we lack outstanding personalities. The woman was doubly "veiled," once as a component of society and again as a female component.

It is in the question of relationships (Woman/Individual to Society) that the concept of emancipation differs most from that of current Western European and American feminism. The following thesis expresses the views against which women reacted in the creation of a woman's philosophy in Western Europe and the United States: If everything goes well in my family, then everything goes well for me personally. The man's philosophy started with the conviction: If I am in order, then it will also go well for my family. According to I. Možný, the basic change which Western feminism wrought was:

- (1) A philosophy that had previously been valid only for men became a legitimate and rational starting point for women;
- (2) the basic frame of reference of women's identity and life-project did not necessarily have to be the family; and
- (3) personal advancement became culturally legitimate for both sexes.

What sort of answers to these three theses could one expect from a representative of the concept of emancipation in our society? One could expect agreement

with the first thesis. The success of the family depends upon the well-being of the man and the woman. The second thesis would be a stronger version: the frame of reference *must* extend beyond the family; the woman must enter into the "building." But with the third thesis there would be absolute dissent. Individualism and individual development is the goal for neither sex, but instead a means for the advancement of the whole. We could formulate the following philosophy behind the concept of emancipation, which would be the same for both sexes: man, wife and family are all right if everything goes well for the whole of society. The thesis may seem too abstract, but it could be documented by the experiences of everyday life. In several spheres the socialist state took on the responsibility for welfare—the establishment and complete financing of day-care centers and kindergartens, of special schools and homes for pensioners and the handicapped, etc. This welfare system especially unburdened women and made possible their higher rate of paid employment, their further education, and their high degree of occupational training.

Collectivism existed not only as a theoretical principle but also as a real form of social organization in which our whole lives played themselves out from childhood to old age. This naturally left behind very specific traces in the individual and in the social consciousness of our people. The idea of historical progress and of an objective historical necessity is deeply embedded in this consciousness. It expressed itself in people's conviction that society was moving toward a better, more perfect and just form. The linear concept of historical progress was evident in daily consciousness. The small, even the gigantic injustices did not break the basic faith that it must someday get better, although one did not know how, when, or where. And anything that was part of that process was itself good.

The concept of the emancipation of women contains all the elements of the idea of historical necessity and historical progress: linearity, evolution, and objective laws of development. In addition, it includes the idea of surpassing oneself through one's children and their children, and the deep conviction that things will go better for each generation. Women are ready to make sacrifices and to renounce their own selves toward this end. Living for the future formed one of the important aspects of identity in our society for both men and women. Women related this to their children; they became the concrete bearers of this good. What was impossible for oneself would be possible for one's children.

On a sociopolitical level, the private sphere provided an asylum from the many senseless aspects of the totalitarian system. In its extreme form, the psychological attitude was that our children have meaning for us even if nothing else here does. Correspondingly, repressive political power was often directed toward the dissenting parents via their children, who served as potential hostages to ensure the obedience and loyalty of the parents. Officials could recommend against the child's admission to specialized training or to the university, and no appeal was possible against such measures.

The holistic approach that gives precedence to the interests and goals of the

whole and that considers individual interests as derivative is easily united with a temporal orientation toward the future. For the older generation the orientation was not to the here-and-now, but toward a future hoped-for experience. After World War II the enthusiasm and strong faith in the creation of a more just society, the sacrifices for a greater ideal, and the belief in the strength of the collective were all deeply built into the system of values. For the young women of that time, who are now grandmothers, the imperative "everything for our children" seemed obvious. Everything for our children so that they could study, learn a trade, have an apartment. But they were nevertheless saved one anxiety—that their children would be unemployed.

Later, another imperative, "everything for our grandchildren," came almost automatically. The figure of the grandmother became symbolic of that generation, a person who personified the orientation toward the future. This is the grandmother who hardly finished raising her own children when she began to help care for her grandchildren; the grandmother who had no time for herself, who became not a world-traveling tourist but a caregiver and teacher. The concern for others, especially for the children, grandchildren, the aged, and the weak, became for her the determining moral value, a value closely connected to the meaning of her life, but seldom articulated. This self sacrifice was not always appreciated by those close to her, but even this was not regarded as a significant negative value for her. The responsibility to show the way dominated, "through others I will find myself." The women-grandmothers perceived more negatively the loneliness and isolation of daily life, the segregation in old age, and the removal into an old-age home. Their participation in the family was not only as a pragmatic, material, and financial aid, but also had a direct personal meaning; the grandmother was not only a guest in the young family but a member of it.

Living for the present is more a preference of women in the younger generation. It entails the direct experience of things of value, the effort to live more for oneself, but also being more utilitarian in regard to consumption. There is less use of the future tense in their language. There is a generational change in values and goals, more directed toward individualism than to collectivism. From an orientation toward the future it moves to an orientation toward the present, from enthusiasm to skepticism, from self-sacrifice to self-advancement.

Self-sacrifice is now frequently regarded negatively, as a loss, a regrettable situation, an inability to do otherwise. The one small exception is self-sacrifice for one's children. Self-sacrifice and self-advancement are interpreted as opposites. Women find themselves in a middle position, and which pole they tend toward depends upon their concrete conditions, their preferences, their age, and their individual ambition. Many hide their self-sacrifice so as not to be pitied or seen as inadequate. The tension between self-sacrifice and self-advancement is reflected in the conflict between the private and public spheres, although the tension exists within each sphere as well. In marriage women find their situation to be increasingly difficult when their partner obstructs their self-advancement

and self-development. The woman often counters with an argument about the "fate" of her mother, aunt, or other woman in the family. The wife demands from her husband not only his noninterference in her self-advancement but also his direct support. Not fulfilling this demand is interpreted by most women as a lack of understanding, as a deficiency on the part of the husband, and it is often given as grounds for divorce.

IV.

It is relevant to distinguish between the formal and the real emancipation when considering the concept of the emancipation of women. Formal equality appeared in the form of the sexual neutrality of many social roles and in the form of universalism. Real equality must start with sexual difference as a given; it should articulate the specific nature of female subjectivity and identity. Formal equality always brings with it the possibility of real disadvantages and discrimination veiled behind data, numbers, charts, and blinding statistics, thereby legitimizing and legalizing purely formal equality. Those who saw through this game of formal emancipation turned all their criticism against the concept of emancipation. Women know the practical results and the positive side, but they also know the other side and the price women paid—a hectic existence, a permanent lack of time, conformity to the existing social structures, failure due to the double burden of wage labor and labor in the home. In this sense, the concept of emancipation has failed, and it is dismissed in daily consciousness.

We have tried to examine this practical area and indicate on what pillars the concept stood. In our opinion, the most important things are: the principle of sameness of the sexes and the reductionism and interchangeability that accompany the principle; the principle of collectivism and the holistic procedure; functionalism in social roles; the principle of historic necessity, and the temporal and future-oriented dimensions of the concept that result from this; and, finally, the principle of formal equality, with the quantitative arguments that accompany it.

From our own experience and from the reported experiences of our female contemporaries we know that the women in our society do not want to give up the positive ends they have attained. They do not want to leave "the building" en masse to return to the private sphere. At the same time they do not wish to be subjected to the limitations and deformations that make up the "false" emancipation. They would like to enter and work and live in the building not as formal equals but as real others. But that will require a revision of the structure and the architecture of the existing building. We hope that with the global changes in our society this can be partially realized.

Notes

1. I. Možný, *Moderní rodina* (Brno: Block, 1990), p. 125.
2. Ibid., p. 113.
3. O. Plavková, "K sociologickej identifikácii životných drah žien v našej spoločnosti" *Sociológia*, no. 4 (1989): 399–409.
4. E. Kantůrková, "Som antifeministka" (I'm Antifeminist), *Literárny týždenník*, March 1, 1991.
5. Možný, p. 115.
6. V. Stýblová, *Zlatá rybka* (Praha: 1988).
7. Možný, p. 122.