

## Emancipation and Ownership

To the discussion on the Lack of Conditions for the Rise of Feminism in Czechoslovakia  
before 1989

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**Abstract:** The paper is concerned with the hitherto neglected aspect of emancipation processes and the specific influence of socialisation processes on the status of women in the former socialist countries. According to the paper, the struggle for economic advancement forms part of the emancipation process, including the women's liberation movement. The radical redistribution of property represented by the nationalisation of private means of production equalised property differences between men and women, thus both reducing the normative character of male acting and behaviour patterns and facilitating the penetration of women into working and employment structures, this in spite of the fact that political structures preserved the marked domination of men and retained their typically male authoritative hierarchies. In this way, the socialist societies preserved the old patriarchal and paternalist type of industrial society and have avoided its further development towards a men's society characterised by the conversion of all relations into commodity relations, typical of present-day post-capitalist society. Of further importance is the differentiation of patriarchal societies from men's societies, a differentiation which has not so far been thematised in feminist discussions. The question is to what extent the capitalist transformation of society will influence the status of women in Czech society.

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### Introduction

Western feminist literature has a tendency to label all male-dominated societies as patriarchal without any further definition of the term. This use of the term is also evident in the definition of patriarchy offered by the Women's Handbook [*Frauenhandlexikon* 1983], in an article by the prominent German feminist Heide Göttner-Abendroth: "Patriarchy is a certain form of hierarchy of the sexes which pervades all areas of social life. In patriarchy, material ownership, social roles and the possibilities for self-determination are systematically divided according to the criterion of the sex to which a person belongs. Members of one sex (the male) are endowed with the right of disposition of the bodies, work and lives of members of the other (female) sex. In this way patriarchy represents latent or manifest repression and violence towards members of the other sex."

Even though there can be no question as to men's superior position over women in all known societies past and present, as the basic criterion for judging a given society this view of patriarchy as the superior ranking and dominance of men in whatever form is too general and all-embracing. Its clearly ideological nature, in the light of which the history of women appears as a calvary of male oppression, diverts attention from the specific concrete forms of this male dominance and particularly from those economic aspects which, as will be shown, strongly influence the position of women in society. The differ-

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ences between the forms of production, the distribution and apportionment of material wealth in preindustrial society and in both capitalist and socialistic forms of industrial society are too great and fundamental to be explained by an operational concept of patriarchy. While such a simplified ideological view may be of use in the political struggle, it is of little value when it comes to the assessment and analysis of concrete societies and specific, often concealed, forms of this oppression. This ideological view and the attempt to impose pre-existing models were among the reasons for Western feminists' failure to evaluate specific forms of female emancipation that had developed in the countries of the former soviet block.

The definition mentioned above holds water neither historically nor etymologically. Derived from the Greek word patriarch, father, or more exactly forefather, patriarchy does not signify the rule of one sex over the other, i.e. of men over women, but the rule of the fathers or heads of families over men and women belonging to the family group. Even if the dominance of fathers developed and spread male dominance to other areas of life, this is not one and the same thing. In patriarchy, sons are as much subject to the will of the father or head of family as are daughters. The greater range for sons' activities and the resulting freedom arose out of the sexual division of labour and certainly contributed to the dominance of men in society. However the father is himself a member of the family group which he rules and his authority outside the family depends on his position within it, not vice versa. Here Western-style capitalist or post-capitalist societies are no more advanced than any other patriarchy, or are so only in the figurative sense. They should rather be described as societies or rule of men, since positions of authority are held by men not in virtue of their position as the father of a family but simply as men who have carried their status and prestige outside the family into the world of work. Whether they are indeed fathers is not fundamental to their position in society, whereas in classic pre-industrial patriarchy, with its strong sense of family, no single or childless man could become head of a family or clan since he lacked the essential qualification: the status of the father. The implications of this difference will be considered later in this article.

### **Emancipation and Ownership**

Although it is frequently overlooked, the struggle of a group seeking emancipation to improve its economic position is an essential component of any emancipation process. Extricating oneself from servitude means ceasing to be "poor", i.e. it means gaining free and equal access to social resources, to the "capital" of that society, whether money, social or cultural (education and contacts). Indeed all discrimination is also associated with sanctions and often with legislative provisions placing hindrances and limitations on the discriminated group's receiving a share of the society's resources. All subjugation aims to confine the subjugated to poverty and insignificance. (Czechs can find proof of this not only in the history of colonialism or of the English repression in Ireland but also in our own experience under the Protectorate.)

The importance of economic aspects and motivations can also be seen in emancipation processes such as the Czech National Revival. Cultural and intellectual activity was closely followed by increased Czech activity in the economic sphere (also encouraged by the increasing industrialisation). The attempts of Czech revivalists and artists to recreate a culturally sovereign nation were accompanied by the attempts of small and later bigger businessmen to develop Czech economic power, including the subsequent

founding of Czech financial institutions. The motivation of these men – of whom A. Zátka from the then German town of České Budějovice was a typical example – was identical: the prosperity of the national cause. National and economic emancipation thus went hand in hand. The building of the Živnobanka on Na příkopě in Prague is as much a sign of the success of this process as is the National Theatre. There is no doubt that the political weight and importance of Czechs within the Austrian-Hungarian empire grew alongside the increasing economic strength of the Czech bourgeoisie. Here too, as in all processes of emancipation, the hitherto privileged German-speaking population of Bohemia did not see this advance of the Czechs as the economic growth it really was, but as *redistribution*, in simple terms, that Czech gains were made at the expense of Germans.

These basic principles which apply to all processes of emancipation are, of course, equally valid to the main concern here, i.e. to the European Women's movement which began to develop in the 1860s. Women were also poor and propertyless, even when they were the wives or daughters of rich men, since none of the wealth belonged to them. A whole series of laws and social norms and customs limited their rights of inheritance, their access to ownership, education and their freedom of movement. (The problem of women's poverty, their material dependence and their emergence from this was an important theme in European literature in the second half of the 19th century, beginning with Jane Austen, moving through the Brontë sisters to Hendrik Ibsen and Thomas Mann; Virginia Woolf's "A Room of my Own" is particularly important in this respect.)

It can be argued that limitations on women had always existed in one way or another, but they became much more widespread with the changing conditions brought by the development of capitalism. In pre-industrial society, when the family was a self-supporting economic unity and its individual members were fully aware of their mutual interdependence, the limitations on women were neither so clear nor so clearly felt. The particular interests of individual members of the society, including those of men, were subordinate to those of the whole and were moreover far from evident. As the process of industrialisation loosened these bonds, the family lost its economic function and labour became the property of the individual which could be sold to provide the needs for existence. With this change the position of women worsened unbearably, in part because once the family had lost its economic role it was no longer able to ensure the livelihood of unmarried daughters and family members who did not work. The full consequences of the process did not become fully obvious for two or three generations. The women's movement was in fact a reaction to this real lack of rights. Although up to the end of the First World War women gradually won access to work, education and business and became legally independent, they far from challenged the position of men in the economic field. They were still poorer than men and have still not been able to emerge from this position of the economically poorer sex today. (The problem of female poverty in the so-called Third World is a separate one.) According to some estimates only 5% of the world's wealth is the hands of women. This economic preeminence of men not only strengthens and reinforces their position in the field of power politics (where women's participation in politics, notwithstanding the differences apparent even within Europe, is still insufficient), but also contributes to the fact that the models of male behaviour and interaction, the so-called "male qualities" such as rationality, purpose-orientation and efficiency have become overwhelming social norms which are now the general and binding criteria in evaluation and judging human behaviour as such. The models of be-

haviour attributed to women (e.g. emotions, irrationality, a holistic outlook) have been pushed into second place.<sup>1</sup> It is men who define and describe the world. Even the poorest and most insignificant man can bask in the glow of male dominance. When the whole of society is dominated by men, it is exceptionally difficult for women to assert other models of behaviour and value standards as equal alternatives within the social structure, which is a condition for success in the process of emancipation. This process is still further complicated in that although the aims of an emancipation movement are formulated in absolute terms, they are, at least in the initial phase, necessarily relative, i.e. in relation to the privileged group whose standard of living they wish to reach and in comparison to which they judge their own position. The starting question of the women's movement was entirely logical: "Why can't I do what men can?" The first model for women seeking emancipation was necessarily men, in the same way that the model for the American blacks was the white man and for Czechs last century it was Germans. They want to be like us, is the reply of the privileged group and this reinforces the latter's dominant social position. It also provides an opportunity to defame the emancipation group as imitative and to accuse it of lacking originality, thus restating the secondary position of its members.

In this close link between ownership and social dominance that I have sought to demonstrate, the question naturally arises of how this superiority is affected by changes in ownership relations. There are many examples from life and literature showing how economic failure, the loss of property and of the associated position in society, can reduce a man's status and so his authority in his family and social circle.

Looking at the results of the post-World-War-Two nationalisation and expropriation in those countries in Europe which became part of the Soviet block, it is clear that this had an important, if unintended and hitherto neglected, "sexist" aspect. Nationalisation not only hit capitalists and small and large landowners as such but also as men, striking at the core of their identity and self-awareness, since in taking away their property it also deprived them of an important attribute of their social dominance. The communist transformation of society also took away the importance of a whole series of occupations (business, commerce, self-employment) which had until then been traditional domains for male self-realisation. This was of course not without influence on the position in society of men as such. It also affected the poor and property-less since they were no longer bathed in the glow from men at the peak of the social hierarchy. Collectivisation not only attacked capitalist power but also fundamentally limited the power of men. Together with its consequences it meant that patterns of male behaviour and interaction lost much of their significance as the binding criteria of human behaviour. In terms of goods relationships, the "price of men" fell. This negative "redistribution", during which men lost but women did not gain, only partly improved the conditions for women to share in society's resources. In any case, the former economic inequality between men and women was levelled out.

Women's property was also nationalised of course, but women's marginal share in the wealth of society meant that this did not represent a fundamental change. While cer-

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<sup>1</sup>) It would perhaps be better to describe the "female ways of behaviour" as an approach to the world not as material and as a source (of power, prestige or satisfaction), as men typically do, but as a social realm in which we exist and in which we must find our place and our role.

tainly unpleasant, loss of property was far less serious for women as it did not touch the heart of their female identity, which was rooted in the immanent inner components of women's existence, in their potential motherhood.

It is paradoxical that the authors and actors of this historical, even if as we now know temporary, "overthrow" of the male sex were in fact men, or rather the institutions and functionaries of the communist party. This party was dominated by men and by extremely strong patriarchal and authoritarian structures and hierarchies and was virtually closed to women throughout the entire communist period. (We can leave aside here the question of whether women in fact wanted to be part of the power structures of the party apparatus and to share in power under these conditions.)

Nationalisation therefore roughly evened out the property distinctions between men and women and so indirectly and unintentionally improved the position of women in society. One major reason for this was that as the economic position of men was weakened so did their dominance in setting norms and patterns of conduct and in the value system founded on the attributes ascribed to men. The position of women and of those without property improved significantly as property lost its importance in determining status. (This did not of course mean that people living under communism did not want to be well-off, but rather that their ideas of well-being were defined differently, being based on the greater possibility of consumption rather than on the possibility of acquiring property.)

These were all unplanned effects of the structural changes in society brought by state socialism.

The achievement of equality between men and women was of course an important element of the political programme of a socialistic rebuilding of society. In Marxist theory, emancipation was originally closely dependent on the liberation of the working class and the liberation of women, but there was already less stress on this emancipation in the ideology of later Stalinism. What became important was the continuing pressure of the labour market dictated by the "liberated" female labour force and the loosening of the traditional bond with the family and the weakening of the function of the family as such, (although the collective rearing of children and the collectivisation of the functions of the individual household as originally conceived had been abandoned). This was "liberation" from above, even if not entirely against the wishes of the liberated, in this case of women. In the lively political atmosphere after the end of the Second World War women expected and demanded improvements in their position in society, as can be seen from many documents pre-dating February 1948. (It was during this period that work began on preparing the new family law giving equal rights to men and women.)

With a certain level of material pressure it was possible to achieve the aims of this rough model of equality which, at least in the early phases, was oriented towards increasing women's share in economic activity. (The majority of men were unable to support a family and so their self-confidence declined, together with their ability and indeed their willingness to support a family and feel responsible for it, as the traditional role of the father demanded.) Alongside that participation in the world of work which made women economically independent of men, there was a rapid and significant rise in women's level of education and qualifications. One sign of all these changes was women's achievement of status independent of their relationship to men (a process which is still incomplete in the West). Despite the physical and psychological pressures which

such communist emancipation imposed, women proved capable of taking advantage of the opportunities which this model offered them. The weakened status of men indirectly strengthened women's position in society. Their position in the family also changed. Economic independence linked with the traditional division of labour, which was basically preserved, concentrated more "executive" power within the family in the hands of women.

The ruling power of the communist state, however, was the matriarchally-patriarchally structured communist party, which with its functionaries functioned as a new form of father. They held virtually all power, but, except for short periods (e.g. 1968), they had no real authority or particular respect in society. The position as a functionary such as the local party secretary did little to strengthen the father's position in the family. This lack permeated the system of hierarchy from top to bottom of society and meant that in a certain sense the society "fell apart" into two organised value systems existing alongside one another. On the one hand, there was the patriarchally-paternalistically organised party apparatus, and, on the other, there was society organised on the basis of immediate family groups as no other form of organisation was available. These women were strongly dominant and had taken over the function formerly allotted to the father, since they now joined their traditional function in the family with a new economic independence. [See Možný 1991] Ordinary party members who were part of both "systems" acted as a link between them. Unlike the "absent father" of Western families, who nonetheless retained his dominance thanks to his role of provider, the father in the socialistic family was not only not absent but indeed more present than before. His function and his role in the family changed. "My mother looked after me and my father played with me" was how one young person described this new situation in the Czech family.

While women were still subject to discrimination in the world of work, this was mostly in terms of pay levels and opportunities for promotion to leading positions, so that the question arises of how the egalitarian communist society really compared with the much more differentiated society in the West. It is clear that there was no reason here for women to feel oppressed by men. The state of society and the form of government aroused a sense of solidarity between them. Men and women had a common oppressor in the party apparatus which limited and regimented their life. Thus the communist societies of the second half of the twentieth century in Europe did not witness the rise of conditions for the emergence of a feminist women's movement since women did not feel any special discrimination and oppression as women but rather as citizens together with their male counterparts. While there were certainly different ways in which this oppression was felt, people remained first and foremost citizens and only secondarily person-man and person-woman. Both the shortcomings of the socialistic model of emancipation and the fall in the prestige of certain professions due to their feminisation (teaching and, to a certain extent, medicine) were the fault of the system rather than of any mechanism common to all industrial societies or of any atavistic prejudices about women.

In its undervaluation of "family work" and the field of reproduction (the reproduction both of the labour force and of the human race) as unproductive compared with "one's own" paid work as productive and value-creating, the original communist model of female emancipation was a typical offspring of the way of thinking of an industrial society fascinated by the possibility of expanding the reproduction of capital with the

concentration of large parts of the labour force in one place and intensive division and mechanisation of its labour. The communist countries also preserved an older form of this society. They did not undergo that further development from a post-patriarchal society to a society of men typical of Western capitalist countries, which can be characterised as a gradual evolution of relations, including (but not exclusively) those in production and the market, into commodity relations. The value of a relation, of things, of human activity was expressed in monetary terms. Money and the effect of money gradually became the only measure of value. The rule of men over women retained the guise given by the dominance of market relations based on rationality, functionality and effectiveness, represented by men, over relations with others based on caring, concern and solidarity, as represented by women, which could only become goods if rejected and destroyed. It is important that the representative of this male dominance in society was no longer the father, as in pre-industrial patriarchy, but had become man, whose family ties were no longer important, who saw his work as purely individual achievement and merit, and for whom the assertion of his abilities at the expense of others was a virtue. His ideal man was no longer the gentleman of the 1930s but a new superman incarnated in American films such as Rambo, a he-man in whom the feminine aspects of his nature, in C.G. Jung's terms,<sup>2</sup> were eliminated.

In the West a new feminist movement grew up at the end of the 1960s in opposition to this male-determined world with its only apparently equal rights between men and women. This movement saw men as guilty not only of oppression of women through devaluing their traditional area of realisation, *de facto* the whole area of reproduction (of labour force and the human race), but also of the whole state of the world as such. It is men who have imposed a view of the world not as creation but as material to be shaped in their own image. The feminist movement is guided by the idea of accepting and asserting a broader scale of values than the narrow pursuit of economic efficiency and profit (and which may be achieved by women taking over a greater share of political power) and has found much in common with the aims of the environmental movement. While in socialistic societies the dividing line was that between the ruling party apparatus and the rest of society, in capitalist societies it is that between the world of men and the world of women.

### Conclusion

The speed with which, since 1989, men have regained the position in business, commerce and self-employment they had lost forty years ago provides a measure of the degree to which they had been humbled under communism. While men immediately became visible in society, women have been somewhat marginalised. There are also latent anti-female sentiments which cannot be ignored and which may indicate that men place some of the blame for their former humiliation on women. The advantages which the communist model of emancipation brought for women have in some way compromised them. The still very low level of unemployment means that it is not possible to predict what

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<sup>2</sup>) In his theory of the anima, C. G. Jung started out from the idea of the dual basis of man and woman. Each sex has elements of the other, men a female part and women a male part. (Each gender also produces the hormones of the other.) It is these aspects held in common with the other sex which make it possible for men and women to understand each other. Virginia Woolf also expressed this androgyny in a similar way.

would happen to the female labour force if this level should rise and whether the government would seek to resolve the problem at the expense of women. Such a solution would certainly be convenient but it is less certain that it would be either feasible or acceptable to society. Women's employment is still economically important, even after 1989. The sharp fall in the birth rate in the last two years is also proof of the increasingly severe conflict between women's function in the family and their employment. Here, too, women have been able to adapt quickly to the new conditions. Czech women act as if they really do have equal rights in society and a status that is far from the bottom of society. (The role of wife has gained new status with the emergence of a new economic and political elite and it is by no means certain that this will not come to compete with that of an independent earner.) Most Czech women are totally uninterested in emancipation, the women's movement or even feminism. This may be a source of strength but also leaves them unprepared. Unlike their counterparts in the west, Czech women have not had to fight for their rights and were emancipated from above. Will they be able to fight for their place in society if necessary? Will it in fact be necessary? Czech women still do not realise how quickly women may lose their rights.

If a strong feminist movement develops in the Czech Lands over the next few years, it will be due to the failure of Czech men who have turned away from the tradition of those like Náprstek and Masaryk who saw society's development as dependent on the equal collaboration of men and women in all areas of public, political and cultural life.

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