

## Democratization and the Feminist Movement in Slovenia

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. EVA D. BAHOVEC

The changes that swept former communist Eastern Europe radically altered the lives of its people. In Slovenia the democratization process was not as sweeping as in the neighboring countries. Dr. Eva D. Bahovec of the Center of Women's Studies recalls the developments in her country and how these affected the future of feminist groups in Slovenia.

MIRIAM CORONEL FERRER (MCF): What are the major features of the transition – or what you may call democratization process in Slovenia?

DR. EVA D. BAHOVEC: Slovenia is one of the smallest Eastern European countries, with two million inhabitants who live between two worlds: the Alpine region, with its Middle-European tradition, and the Mediterranean. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Slovenia became an independent state in 1991, bordering on Croatia, Hungary, Austria and Italy. Neither its political structure nor its intellectual background could be said to be typical Eastern European democracies.

As for the political life, the democratization process has started long before the actual fall of socialism. Actually, the Yugoslav version of socialism has departed quite soon from the Soviet-type communism; as early as in 1948 the Yugoslav communist party has split with the Soviet one and from that time on obtained its autonomy. It was never a member of the Eastern Bloc "behind the iron curtain" countries – neither in politics nor in its military organization i.e. the Warsaw Pact.

Under the great pressure of public opinion and the civil-society groups and organizations, the Communist Party had to introduce a lot of necessary changes. Gradually the Slovene Communist Party (which was on the whole much more liberal than those of other Yugoslav republics, i.e. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia) was forced to commit itself to significant democratic changes. This is true specially for the second part of the 1980s which was actually (after its previous ups and downs) the most liberal era of the communist regime.

The public opinion itself, backed by the intellectuals, had a great impact on the political life as a whole, however, one party political system was not threatened only by the public polemics in the newspapers etc., but also by other political organizations, such as the Youth Organization and partly the Syndicates, which later, after the introduction of the multi-party political system and the first free elections, transformed into autonomous political parties.

Also, a rather important role was played by the so-called "alternative culture": the "Student Radio," the journal *Mladina*, some punk groups (Laibach, Neue Slowenische Kunst etc.), as well as some established cultural institutions, like the Slovene Writers Association and the journal *Nova revija*.

MCF: How has the process affected or transformed the nature and conduct of the feminist groups in your country?

BAHOVEC: Like the general political developments, the organization of feminist groups was closely related to the changes in the 1980s when the various feminist groups have been founded, starting with the Women's section of the Slovene Sociological Society in 1984, and a year later, with the first autonomous group Lilith, which organized discussions on female sexuality, violence against women, female identity, etc. In 1987 the first lesbian journal called *Pandora* appeared; it was actually the first in Eastern Europe. Opening the space for homosexual groups was very important for the democratization of the whole society, since the whole range of Eastern European states were rather homophobic – in legislation as well as in everyday life.

Later, other groups were formed which focused predominantly on the problem of women in politics, including the influential Women for Politics; at the beginning of the 1990s the group played an important role defending constitutional abortion rights against conservative political circles. Other groups which are predominant in the present day were focused on the problems of violence against women (we have several SOS telephones), groups for help in case of sexual abuse, eating disorders, women's counseling group, etc. Apart from the feminist groups, organized in the capital of Slovenia, in Ljubljana, regional groups were formed. The most active one was probably the one in the southern coastal region.

Two years ago, as the result of all these movements, the Bureau for Women's Politics was established as the first governmental body of its kind in our country and I think the first in Eastern Europe.

MCF: Tell us how you got started on the journal project.

BAHOVEC: Over the last decade women's studies and feminist theory in Slovenia gained increasing importance. At first the field of women's studies was mainly related to sociology and the empirical social sciences. However, it soon became – like the mainstream of our intellectual life – inspired by philosophy and the humanities, with particular emphasis placed on structuralism and psychoanalysis. This was actually the field which has, as early as the late 1970s, replaced the previously prevailing Frankfurt school debates, closely related to criticism of Stalinism and of what Herbert Marcuse has called "Soviet Marxism."

In this context of general theoretical developments, the first feminist theoretical journal, *Delta*, finally appeared in early 1995. The idea of founding a new journal, specializing in women's studies and feminist theory did not, of course, emerge overnight. In some feminist groups and among the female intellectuals, the idea has been around for several years. The immediate stimulus to go ahead with it came from both "activists" and "theorists" from a civil-society feminist group at the Ljubljana "Center for Metelkova," and from a group of women editors who had previously been engaged in editing books, collection of essays or special issues concerning women's studies. The journal also tried to bridge the gap between our intellectual production in this field and that of some Western countries where feminism has a long pedigree. It was also a response to a growing interest in the topic by the readers.

MCF: What difficulties do you face in pursuing your goals? What strategies do you use in the light of your circumstances, and what limitations and possibilities do you face?

BAHOVEC: Our plans with the journal are, as befits the freshness and enthusiasm of a new beginning, quite ambitious. Although we know we will have to become more realistic, we have decided to carry on with the whole project. This would become, perhaps, our version of "intellectual activism" – beyond the traditional feminist theory/activism divide. For the present, the main difficulty with the journal seems to be the one of



funding which is still, after more than two years of our endeavors, not settled. In a country of two million people, the publication of such a journal is virtually impossible without some subsidies. The state subsidies have been turned down last year by an (exclusively male) expert group, but the prospects this year seem to be better.

But our optimism is growing: every week we get more and more subscriptions for the journal. Two double issues have found a very positive critical response in the newspapers and journals, and some of the published papers have already turned into a general reference.

So the "optimism of the will," as Gramsci might have put it, seems to have the power to outweigh the "pessimism of the intellect." The same goes, I think, for most of our active feminist groups – despite the fact that they (we) are not likely to become part of the establishment. Our newly installed Bureau for Women's Politics, in which great hopes were vested as to what it might bring into our political and everyday life, has brought some disappointment. It is still in search of the general concept of work and riddled by too many "early feminism" – type of "mistakes." However, it might in the first place be a problem of a new beginning – so, let us hope for the best!

In general I could say that our main strategy is still personal engagement: in struggles for opening up the whole society, in feminist groups, in helping women with their specific problems and needs. At the same time, we have to keep in mind that the intellectual work itself, together with the constant effort to somehow separate the close relationship between knowledge and power, can also have an enormous political impact. The pluralization of the intellectual space, although it is not a guarantee in itself, has a very practical and immediate meaning.

And since we live in a time of big changes, which is a time of new possibilities, one of the most important limitations is the constant race against time. To give you an insight into the specific situation in an Eastern European, ex-socialist country, I will also mention one specific, new "limitation" for our country: the constant pressure of the Christian Democrats to bring women back to the family, and away from political and public life, to imprison them into the sphere of the private, of nurturing their children, and cooking for their husbands. An official proposal was made, for example, for a three-year maternity leave, which

would make women virtually unemployable. You can imagine the consequences of such a change in position of women in our society. Who would want to employ somebody who is likely to be absent from work for years? (It already happens that younger women, in order to get a job, have to sign a statement confirming that they are not going to have any children in the near future...It is illegal, of course, but it is very difficult to be traced since women are afraid to lose their jobs, and they are more likely to lose them as their male colleagues.)

MCF: On a more personal note, what led you to pursue women's studies?

BAHOVEC: I have to admit that the first impulse was the theoretical one. Like most of my generation I have started with what Perry Anderson has called the "Western Marxism." This has helped us a lot in our confrontations with the Stalinist discourse and power structures. It is actually the Frankfurt school tradition, the reading of Marx with Freud, which has, at a certain turn of our theoretical developments, brought us close to the so called French structuralism, and through that to the Lacanian "return to Freud." However, the more I have read Freud through Lacan, the more I was aware of a certain conceptual embarrassment related to the very definition of the sexual difference. And I think that it is possible to deal with this predicament precisely through feminism – not any feminism, of course, neither the first-wave nor the contemporary "politically correct" feminism...

On a more activist level, the engagement in the struggles for democracy and tolerance from the old socialist era have to be pursued now in the new context, while remaining surprisingly the same in many respects. Today the sexual difference seems to be the one that overdetermines (in Althusserian sense) such endeavors. It is a privileged difference which somehow binds all others into a structure, it organizes them, makes them understandable.

It is rather paradoxical that women were on the whole much better off in our country than in many others during the socialist era; for decades women's rights were most thoroughly put on the agenda. We had abortion rights (and access), good state-provided kindergartens, comparatively good working conditions, access to political life etc. Now, our West European and American colleagues would say: but this was only "state feminism," prescribed from above. My answer would be, regardless

of the description or classification, regardless of its inclusion into a totalitarian regime (which is yet to be analyzed – it is not so simple as it seems to be at first sight, and it is not so similar in all Eastern European countries), it had very powerful real effects, it affected our everyday lives very much. What we have gained should not be lost. In a word, women's studies enable me to engage in both, theory and practical action, and to relate them into a whole without presupposing any direct, one-to-one relation. ♦