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Between Hope and Hopelessness : Women in the GDR after the "Turning Point"

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Democracy and Civil Society in Eastern Europe

Selected Papers from the Fourth World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies, Harrogate, 1990

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7 Between Hope and Helplessness: Women in the GDR after the 'Turning-point'

Irene Dölling

In October and November 1989, women in the GDR optimistically entered the public sphere with demands of their own. The active engagement of large numbers of women in grass-roots democratic initiatives, self-help, consciousness-raising and discussion groups was evident. At the beginning of December, the hope that women would henceforth become so vast a force that they could no longer be overlooked was strengthened when over a thousand women from throughout the GDR met in a large Berlin theatre and voted to found an Independent Women's Union. A few days later, representatives of the Independent Women's Union took their places as members of the Central Round Table. The Independent Women's Organisation participated in a joint election campaign with the Green Party and received 2.7 per cent of the vote. On the other hand, over 46 per cent of all registered women voters chose the 'Alliance for Germany'. These results were both disappointing and sobering. This voting behaviour, however, provides us with unexpectedly clear evidence for a number of conclusions regarding the situation of women in what is now the former GDR after the 'turning-point'.

First of all, it makes it distinctly clear that the vast majority of women in the GDR do not associate themselves with emancipatory or feminist ideas and practices and, in fact, reject them. The needs and behavioural structures of most women are obviously not what the Independent Women thought. The threat of unemployment, the unclear status of legal and property rights, vacillation on the question of a currency union and its already visible effects (high prices for foodstuffs, inflation) and so on have led to a deep insecurity on the part of almost all GDR citizens. Although women are affected specifically as women – for example, at this moment feminised job categories are especially threatened (women now make up more than 50 per cent of

the unemployed and less than 25 per cent of those rehired) – they have offered hardly any resistance. Helpless outrage at what is happening to them and their families, or resigned acceptance of the brutal forms of discrimination and exclusion with which primarily men are now beginning to practice competition – these are 'normal' responses.

My thesis is as follows: under state socialism women developed subjective structures which provide fertile soil for 'conservative' solutions to the conflicts arising in the process of radical change on the path to a 'different modernism' (Ulrich Beck). The social 'achievements' of socialism must be examined critically from this perspective in order to understand the situation in which women of the GDR find themselves today.

Unfortunately there is no place in this chapter for discussing the question as to how really emancipatory or 'woman-friendly' were the conditions and social supports created for women under state socialism. Here can only be stated the following: formal legal equality, state measures and supports to allow women to combine career and motherhood, state programmes to raise women's level of education and qualifications to those of men, et cetera, were – until now – internationally recognised advantages and 'achievements' of socialism in the GDR. On the other hand we know very well that these conditions and social policy measures were not necessarily 'woman-friendly' or emancipatory, because women were regarded primarily functionally – as workers or as mothers – in these measures and not as subjects with a claim to self-determination and responsibility for their own lives. Nevertheless the mere statement of these facts and the contradictory effects of the social policy measures affecting working women with children is not sufficient to explain women's current wavering between hope and helplessness: their lack of power to resist the social cut-backs now beginning, on the one hand and the attractiveness of such traditional values as family, the roles of mother and housewife and so on to a not insignificant number of women, on the other.

To approach a clearer understanding of the underlying causes, it is in my opinion necessary to examine first, the general role of patriarchy in state socialism and its influence on women's behavioural structures. I propose to do this in a series of theses.

1. State socialism is a form of modern society characterised by the dominance of political policy over all other systemic structures. That is, the political system provides the representation of all other systems. Like the *pater familias* within the pre-bourgeois family-centred

production system, 'the Party', with its centralist–hierarchical structure led by its General Secretary as the 'Father of the Nation', takes over the function of speaking in the interest of the whole, of knowing what is good for everyone, as well as taking upon itself the responsibility for the welfare of all.

This patriarchal–paternalist principle merges with the political idea of a society of social equality and justice in the sense that the 'fatherly' Party, or State, assures justice and equality. This principle finds its expression, extension and stabilisation in the practical and symbolic gender order, which orders the daily life of the individual. This means that patriarchal structures can **never** become the object of critical reflection or practical change: under these conditions, criticism of patriarchal gender relations is direct criticism of the political system. Applied locally, individual efforts to depart from traditional gender roles and stereotypes becomes at best a 'purely personal', 'private' matter which cannot take on the quality of a public, institutionalised confrontation with patriarchal structures.

2. Representation means the disqualification of those who are represented, and the repression of forms of a public political discourse and a 'civil society' in which independent, differentiated interests of those represented could be presented, articulated and developed. The lack of a women's movement in the GDR (and in all of the socialist countries) is thus in no way accidental. If women in the modern period have been at a general disadvantage because, since the nineteenth century, the constitution of a public political sphere has been a process primarily 'of a man's affair among men',[1] a reinforcement of this trend can be established within state socialism. This can be seen as a significant cause of the fact, that since October 1989, relatively few women have participated in the process of constructing a public political sphere in the GDR, and those few have been rapidly marginalised or have themselves withdrawn in resignation. Many of the women who became active in grass-roots organisations or in the old or new parties were forced to recognise that, after an 'open', 'euphoric' phase in the autumn of 1989, women's emancipatory claims did not carry very much weight in the developing struggle for the consolidation of political power. The distribution of positions is primarily a matter for men. The issue of gender quotas has not been mentioned in Parliament since the March 1990 election.

3. Representation, however, also means relieving the individual of responsibility. The patriarchal–paternalistic principle generalises a cultural pattern taken from daily life: the father or man takes responsibility for the children or wife – which also gives him the right and

power to make decisions concerning them. Women in the GDR were until now integrated into full-time paid labour as well as having the responsibility for children and housework. This double and triple burden hardly left them room to escape the snares of a tutelary ideology, which was delivered to them free of charge – along with social welfare measures to increase the compatibility of work and motherhood. The grateful acceptance of dependency is 'inscribed into' this ideology. It may be that women in the GDR have, to a certain degree, overcome their dependence on their husbands through their paid labour, but they are caught at the same time in a dependency upon 'Father State', of which they are in most cases just as unaware as they are of their dependency on a husband – and to which they even consent.

I therefore suspect that behind the demands of many so-called 'normal', that is non-feminist women, for the guarantee of social policy 'achievements', there also lies a massive fear of the loss of a social welfare network which took care of them and their children or families, according to a traditional cultural pattern. This is also a massive emotional fear of a situation in which individual lack of responsibility will no longer be rewarded, but more responsibility for oneself will be demanded. In the current context of radical change, this behaviour pattern, created and spread by a patriarchal state socialism, makes women susceptible to parties which are ready to relieve them of their responsibility once again.

4. The lack of goods and services, as well as the previous absence of a competitive 'elbow society' led to the striking stability of traditional living groups under state socialism. The family (in the broadest sense), circles of friends and acquaintances, group solidarity and so on have acted in a form and with bonding power which, in West Germany for example, had begun to disappear in the 1950s.

One consequence of this is the conservation of traditional structures, especially gender roles and stereotypes. Despite their employment, most women have experienced their traditional role within the family as something they did not want to lose and have regarded it as their sphere of influence, not least because their paid work was frequently unskilled, monotonous, poorly paid and socially not as highly regarded as male work. This was also further reinforced by a 'Father State policy' which manifested itself in direct improvements in the quality of life as well as egalitarian social guarantees which an individual could definitely experience and evaluate positively.

All of this led to the fact that the majority of women in the GDR did not question their customary role in the family and regarded their

employment primarily as a 'double burden' and not as a precondition for emancipation.

5. The subordination of the individual to a general concept has a further patriarchal dimension: certain aspects of common human interests are excluded *ex post facto*; 'human' interests, when looked at more closely, reveal themselves to be male. The 'builders of socialism' are of course male; women may take part in the process of socialist construction by 'working like a man'. Provided with an honorarium as a mother (preferably of three children), women play no role in public or publicised consciousness as the ones who perform by far the greatest part of unpaid household labour. As housewives they do not exist within the general concept of 'the socialist individual'.

Over several generations, women in the GDR have lived with and within a contradiction which demands of them all of the behaviours and qualities internal to the traditional women's role while at the same time either ignoring significant aspects of the skills and abilities which belong to this role or disqualifying them as socially unimportant. Women were supposed to behave in a traditionally 'female' manner while neither 'femininity' in the customary sense, nor the insistence on gender difference was recognised or honoured – women were supposed to work, think and develop their abilities 'like men'. This multiple devaluation may have nourished among many women the furtive wish to live out these discriminated dimensions of 'contextual female existence'. Now these longings can be openly articulated, and at the moment they conjoin with an emotional rejection of everything that was 'socialism'. The sudden attractiveness to many women of 'femininity' and 'motherliness' or even the vision of an existence without paid work, which has also manifested itself in women's acceptance of 'Miss' contests, sexist portrayals of women and so forth, must, in my opinion, be seen in relationship to the above-named symptomatic and affective methods of patriarchal state socialism.

Although I have been able to illustrate this problem only in a very shortened form, I hope that I have succeeded in establishing the beginnings of an explanation for the fact that the majority of women in the GDR, despite so many favourable conditions, have emancipatory demands – previously repressed – which can now burst forth.

The question of how the long-term effects of a 'heritage' of 40 years of state socialism and patriarchal–paternalistic policies will express themselves remains open. We will have to wait to see how former GDR

citizens use their newly-gained freedoms within a bourgeois democracy, as well as what role their previous experience and former rights – for example, to economic security – will play. For now it is certainly realistic to assume that the specific manifestation of patriarchy within state socialism enouraged and stabilised, in the majority of individuals, behaviour and value structures which now provide a favourable basis for the transition to a modern society of the bourgeois–capitalist type. This transition is characterised by 'conservative' omens: for the above-named reasons, traditional projections of 'femininity' and the women's role exert an attraction for women; male dominance, never questioned within state socialism, provides men with a good launching-pad into the achievement-oriented 'elbow society' and for a first robust and unself-conscious application of their superior power to women. The majority of men and women want to achieve the West German standard of living as quickly as possible and are therefore deaf to references to limitations or delays along this path, required in the interests of equality of the sexes, a healthy environment or people in the 'third world'.

It is not at all out of the question that these 'conservative' preconditions may, in fact, be favourable to a rapid transition to a different modern society and to the mitigation of the social conflicts arising from it. The price, however, is high: much of what has been accomplished in the past decades in the interest of dismantling patriarchal gender relations and promoting the emancipation of women, laborious and inadequate as it has been, is now endangered *in the East and the West.* Achievements, already practically in hand, will probably be partially or totally lost; the Utopia of an equality within differences between the sexes will survive only in a small minority of cases; and it will be primarily women who pay the price. To be sure, improvements in the situation of women will in future be less a 'gift from above' than the result of women's own demands and struggles. Thus women will place a higher value on the fruits of their own efforts than on gifts, which generate dependency and for which gratitude is expected.

Note

1. Karin Hausen, 'Thoughts on the gender-specific structural change of the public sphere', lecture at the congress 'Human rights have no/a gender', Frankfurt/Main 1989 (publication forthcoming).