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QUO VADIS, MARIE?

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1. **Feminismus devadesatých let videno českými očima (Feminism of ninetieth years by Czech Eyes)**

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Feminism is, in my opinion, a philosophical trend which has transformed itself, and is still doing so, into a worldwide social movement. It highlights feminine values, giving them social priority. These feminine values are the gift of life, intuition, caring for others, cooperation, interpersonal relations, compassion, love of nature, flowers and animals, beauty and harmony. It is put on the agenda at five minutes to twelve - at the end of the millennium, the history of which bears the mark of the philosophy of patriarchy, when conquering forces, egoism, rationalism, lust for power and wealth have brought humanity to the edge of global environmental crisis.

Feminism is not represented by any one thinker alone. Women generally do not market their egos as separate from others, rather than being hammered in, the feminist ideas seep in. Feminism traverses in waves the whole history of humanity. Sometimes it was represented by women, whom the Middle Ages burned as witches, at other times by small personal rebellions which did not enter the history books, for these were written by male chroniclers. The manifestations of suffragettes to obtain the right to vote and to be elected, to be able to study and have access to the same professions as men and to receive fair wages bear witness to the lack of sincerity and justice of the rulers of the world, of the great philosophies and theories of love. It is the paradox of human evolution that, at the end of the twentieth century, at the peak of scientific-technological revolution, when science prides itself on having succeeded in splitting the world in molecules and atoms, it becomes patent that it lacks the fundamental and essential definition of who is a man and who is a woman, what is the difference between us and what links us together.

The relations and conflicts within families are projected to the society as a whole, and a disorderly society, distorting human relation, indicates how far the civilized world still is from conceiving the universe as a harmonious whole, where everything is linked with everything else, where every consequence has its cause.

My feminism is about the fact that a woman that is not completely finished off as a result of a constant need to adapt and disassemble, can give the world a great deal of positive

impulses, provided that her voice is listened to. Of course, if the feminine values are going to be put on the agenda, it is necessary to see woman – their bearer – as a subject. As a self-sufficient individual being, not just as an object of desire and pleasure. Do you know that joke that she is not human, merely a woman? Her value consists in her salability for consumption, priced and valued by men as goods in a shop, her attractiveness enhanced by youth, physical beauty and freshness. Woman is esteemed in the role of the biblical seductress Eva, young and beautiful, older women can serve as practical Marthas, taking care of the housework quietly, patiently and unrewarded. Mystical Marias meditate in cloisters, but wise Sophias, who in themselves unify all the feminine roles, strengthened by the experience of giving life, these are never mentioned by the "developed civilization".

The five "p's" are expected from the Czech woman. Are these qualities ever considered otherwise than as qualities of servants? I believe the position on women in the Czech Lands is best expressed in the guessing game: "If two women and a man meet, who will drive?" and "If two men and a woman meet, who will take down the minutes and make coffee?". Unfortunately, women in our country often like to behave as stakhanovites who can take care of everything, do not allow anybody into the kitchen, do not involve the family in the housework. Then they are overworked, exhausted and fed up; instead of a smile, love and tranquility their lot is tiredness, irritation and nervousness.

I was lucky to meet personally the anthropologist Helena Norberg-Hodge, who won fame with her book *Ancient futures* (published in Czech as *Dávné budoucnosti* by Hnutí DUHA, Brno 1996) in which she describes the destruction, within the scope of a single human life, of the original culture of the Ladak population. We spoke about causes and consequences of the environmental crisis and about the crisis of modern humanity. Our debate could not leave out some thoughts about the position of women and how society esteems – or rather has no regard for – women's roles and women's work.

Helena brought up an interesting observation, based on her lifelong experience with different civilizations and nations. According to her, the position of the woman in a society can be inferred from the size and location of the kitchen in architectural design. Food and its preparation is the most important and fundamental element of life. In cultures where women and their work is respected, the kitchen is the largest and most important place. The kitchen is important not only from the simple aspect of filling stomachs, but also from a social point of view. It is a space in which the whole family gathers around a common table, integrating a social group. And today's psychologists know that, when a married couple ceases to eat together, they stop sleeping together and the marriage falls apart. In our society, the seriousness of the approach to women's work and the wages corresponding to it may easily be ascertained by looking at the apartments in housing estate buildings, where the architects who designed them reduced the kitchen to such dimensions that often no table can fit in and all the work has to be done standing up by the kitchen range.

At present housework is degraded and woman's role as keeper of the hearth does not pay. Women feel frustrated, when they have to remain for longer periods of time at home with the children, explaining this phenomenon as an outbreak of workaholic hysteria, which has seized Czech society and the fact that housework is somewhere on the edge of society, far back behind work in banks and "important" commercial societies. Work at home is excluded from the economic categories, as if it did not exist, although Czech women have spent - and still are spending - the major part of their lives cooking, shopping, washing, ironing, supervising children's homework, curing their illnesses and taking care of the upkeep of the house. A negative role is also played by the cult of overfilled stomachs, this god of developed consumerist society at the end of the twentieth century, when most of human energy concentrates on material things and money. People do not know how to communicate, they are not taught to develop social skills, friendship and love. They work to buy a car, they drive the car to go to work. As under an evil spell, a labyrinth of senseless hurry and flight from oneself.

I feel I am a feminist. For some time, I have been studying philosophy and did not find any which would give me a satisfactory and complete theoretical answer to the problems of the world. Feminism has no exact borders, at least I know none. It is an open movement, open to women as well as to men. Maybe it is finally about liberty, equality and brotherhood, as a result, it should lead to a social consensus, instead of the victory or defeat of one over another. It is one of the questions, answers, possibilities and ways. We live in this world, both women and men, and it depends on us how we will work it out among ourselves. Our common world will be as we make it to be. Do we pine for a tough, hierarchic and competitive struggle or for a world of partnership and cooperation, where there is room for everybody?

Personally, I believe that feminism has already penetrated so much our the society that world peace efforts, the growth of NGOs, teamwork, sociological investigations interested in people's opinions – all of these benefit it. The thought, the word, and the action go hand in hand and are difficult to distinguish. It is not in the character of women to be possessive about things, thoughts or actions, on the contrary, sharing is a trait of their nature, so that ideas and creativity are handed out freely without much preoccupation about patents, ownership or fees. Ideologies that were meant to transform the world and human behavior were generally promoted by men. They fostered the feeling that they were the ones that would bring a better world with more justice and less poverty and violence. Instead, thousands of victims fell in sacrifice, wars were fought to spread them and their "fathers" indulged in the cult of personality. Women never adopted any "perfect ideology", yet they were the ones who, through their conduct, contributed to make the world more caring and just.

I can interpret the question on the state of feminism in our country on two levels – general and personal. As to the general level, everybody knows the answer by glancing at the Czech government, Parliament, Senate and Czech companies' managements. The

proportion of women in strategic posts corresponds to the level of Czech women's self-esteem and the conduct of Czech men, who have been raised by them. So that responsibility for the situation is shared, and that is why I cannot give a unambiguous answer. Czech women by their industriousness and service provide men with room for their self-realization, and so, the situation is as it is. When in the evening, I go for a walk around the housing estate, the youth loafing next to gambling machines are practically all boys: no wonder that ninety percent of crimes are committed by men. By chance, is not it out of boredom, while at home there always would be something to do?

Two years ago, I organized in several Czech schools the program *Democracy in practice* which consisted in having children to write down their values and priorities for my election platform as candidate to the Senate for the district of Domažlice. It was interesting to watch the reaction of girls and boys. The boys reacted immediately and without hesitation, were original and direct in their ideas, while the girls were slower, willing to read the Constitution, able to quote and present other people's thoughts articulately. How does the Czech educational system work with these differences, when kindergarten and primary schools are in the hands of women, while the male staff can be found sporadically in the secondary schools, more frequently on the university level and exclusively on ministerial posts?

During my MBA studies, where the majority of lecturers were English, I experienced directly how agreeable and humane it was to feel encouraged by psychologically knowledgeable teachers while they held back the aggressive and dominant individuals. I remember the time I arrived late at school, precisely when sociological methods were being discussed. Three affirmations were presented, from which we were supposed to choose which method to use in order to prove that dental paste X is better than dental paste Y, that shoes of the brand B are better than brand A shoes or that women are genetically on a higher level than men. As I was entering the classroom, my colleagues started to scream at me: "Look, you feminist, what kind of a nonsense is this, that women are genetically on a higher level than men?" Although they could play around with dental paste or shoes, this sentence had upset them to the extent they were absolutely unable to think about the method we had been asked to determine. One of the colleagues tried to calm the passions by saying: "Gentlemen, let's be fair, we really are important only for a second during our lives", but that did not help. The team to which I then belonged did not learn much about sociological proofs, but the English professor's provocative statement constituted a successful educational effort. He was familiar with the Czech environment and knew how to have a stab at a hornets' nest.

On a personal level, I have been through contradictory experiences, so that I can present no unambiguous opinion. I am the mother of two adolescent sons and married to a Czech husband. My mother left her husband in 1955, when I was four years old and when the Family Law which stopped sanctioning that, in case of family conflict, the husband always had the last word, had hardly been heard of in our remote West-Bohemia hamlet.

Unanimously condemned by the whole hamlet, she left her husband and, with a four-year-old child and a pair of empty hands, she went to live as a tenant at her sister's house and, in order to earn her independence, to work at a three-shift job as crane operator in the Škoda Plzeň factory. She met a man who became the father of my sister and later perished tragically; today, she lives with her companion of many years. She always danced around these men to the tune of the theory that love enters through the stomach and kept stuffing them into monstrous hundred-kilos shapes. She looks at me with reproach in her eyes, because I do not cook according to the traditional Czech pork-dumplings-cabbage model and her worried queries: "Where have you been roaming again, who took care of them meanwhile?" show me where lies the hitch of Czech women's emancipation. Today's society, however, is so busy, that hardly anybody has time to devote to the so-called kitchen rituals. Is it therefore necessary for a woman to spend her time in the kitchen doing something which nobody can appreciate and, moreover, having hardly anything in common with the principles of healthy eating?

My mother-in-law was a typical mother who knew nothing else but hard work and caring for her four children and husband. She devoted all her energy to the children, her life itself had no meaning except in relation to them. Even when they grew up, she was always at their disposition. She went to visit them bringing little gifts, always ready to help and serve. Her children did not respect her, they considered her attentions as normal, and when in old age she ended in a psychiatric ward, I was the one who got her out and returned her back to life. For me, she became an example of how one must be prudent even when dealing out love and care. It is not without interest to add that she divorced her husband when her oldest child, my husband, was eighteen.

I can thank for my approach to life to the fact that I spent my childhood in the country among farm animals and in contact with the native soil; my direct and simple view of the world is derived mainly from the experience of having to work and being on my own since seventeen. All theoretical education, whether economics, music, philosophy or management, served me only as a complement to the practical life which I had to lead since my early youth. My relation to men is marked by the experience of a ten-year-old child groped at by the step-father and the confession to paternity I heard at fifteen from a man, who had consoled my mother in her dreary marriage. A few companions of my mother, curious specimens of Czech men and fathers, passed me by during my childhood. I was aware of my femininity in the traditional sense. As a young and unattached secretary, I disliked the offers of bosses and older men and the role of a wife, spending her life as a slave to her husband, children and work, did not appeal to me.

When my sons were born, I spent ten years with them at home, with one year interval to complete the company apartment requirement. sincerely, I remember my motherhood as the most beautiful time of my life, though I have the darkest memories of giving birth. I still feel the joy and pride which flooded me at the first steps, words and successes of my little boys. I am writing 'my', for my husband had read somewhere in Hemingway that small

children are not worth the attention of the lord of creation, who only deigns to become aware of them when they grow into Homo Sapiens, so something which happens in many Czech families happened to us too. The father had no time to spend with a small child, the son grew and now he has no time for his father nor interest to waste on him. In addition to my own children, I took care of the child of a physician, who did not want to lose her job. I am sociable and without any problems I found friends with whom I shared whatever I had to share and from whom I learned what they did better than I. In my free moments, I made a herbarium, I knitted, sewed, made macramés, played musical instruments, sang and played with the children. It was the most beautiful time of my life. My experience of motherhood has given me the certainty and faith that women who have known the feeling of giving life, and more, who love life, with all its fevers and childhood illnesses, are wiser, because they have come to know the essence of life. They have enjoyed living through time, something that is difficult to experience in one's own life, but can be better experienced through their children and probably even better through their grandchildren. Men can share this experience with them, if they do not let their laziness and comfort get in the way of enjoying life with children.

Later at my work as director I behaved in such a way that all came to me with all problems of any kind – starting with the lack of toilet paper to decisions on a strategic level. With circles under the eyes, I had to take care of everything, and prop up everything. I danced around my personnel just like Czech mothers dance around their children, even grown up, like hens around their chicken.

At the business school for managers I have mentioned, we were once given a psychological test on management styles. There were four model behavior styles: Zeus, Apollo, Athena and Dionysos. Zeus ruled over the club where everything spinned and concentrated around him. Apollo distributed tasks and controlled and directed them, Athena motivated people to solve problems and work in teams, while Dionysos danced around his subordinates, caring and worrying about them. I landed naturally with Dionysos, while the majority of my masculine colleagues turned out to win Zeus. Eventually, I reached the conclusion that it is a case of reciprocity and a phenomenon of communicating vessels. Tough, arrogant and egotistic natures need for their realization people that are easily manipulated, meek, dependent and loyal. It is not, however, only one party's game and fault, individuals fearful of independence search for a strong hand in which to lay their responsibility for their own life. Manipulation and these, often unconscious, interpersonal games have accompanied humanity since time immemorial. The relations between men and women occupy the first place, with the addition of emotional dependency, sexual games and responsibility for the home and the education of children.

Since the Dionysos test, I have made some progress. On one hand, I have read a few books and on the other, I have met different people. Gradually it dawned on me that, if I play professionally the role of director, then at home I cannot operate as a maid. I was

greatly helped by watching my male fellow-students and their situation at home. They had a privileged position at home, their wife and children tiptoed around their important dad studying at a prestigious school, while I could only study after having brought in the shopping, cooked the meals and cleaned...

I will mention a meeting that changed my life. It was meeting a well known and respected American scientist, who from the very first moment treated me with such respect and seriousness that I felt like a queen. For me, it was such a new, surprising, different and heady feeling, in contrast with the only feeling I had known up to then as daughter, mother, wife, subordinate, boss - forever subject to criticism, so that I sometimes felt like a victim among vampires, stalking me to see when and how to get hold of me and gain, if nothing more, at least some pleasure from spoiling my good humor. Now, in a matter of days, or maybe hours, I bloomed, I was overflowing with wit and ideas like a seed which lay dormant among the weeds and suddenly was watered and given space and light. I began to reappraise my life and my reappraisal did not proceed without family conflicts, thanks to which I now have a study – a room all for myself – in our council house flat. I had the wall between the kitchen and the adjoining room torn down, joining the two rooms and opening a space instinctively, without being at the time aware of the sociological interpretation of the relation between the dimensions of the kitchen and its significance for family life. The kitchen fixtures stand in an open space and men, who have not been taught kitchen work, know where to find the bread, serve themselves and cooperate in running the house. Until my reappraisal, my sons had their room, my husband had his room and the bedroom, the living room and the kitchen were common, so I used to commute from one room to another, forever ceding the space to somebody else and creating him conditions for his realization. I would like to know how many Czech women have at home some space just for themselves, with at least a minimum of privacy?

Let us come back to the introduction, where I write about feminism as philosophical orientation, which is special in the sense that there is no single author, whose books, on the bookcase shelves, would take up a meter in length and whom we would quote with religious fervor. Feminism is a search and a solution. It is a commitment to bring change, step by step. Women are for the most part practical and cannot be satisfied by a theory the practical results of which manifest themselves some hundred years later. If I did not want to be a feminist, it would be because I believe that feminism should not be a social horror and rage. The arguments should be considered from an objective point of view and should bring a positive improvement. Even if I admit that the change will be painful mainly for individuals characterized by stiffness in their thinking who are fossilized devotees of some "traditional values".

I will give an example from my own family, where merely the words "feminism" and "women" stir up emotions. I remember the municipal elections, when my husband was going to the election board and, before he left, we exchanged a few words on the topic of women in politics and public life in general. After a while, the bell rang and there was my

husband standing at the door. I asked him whether he had forgotten his keys, but he rushed to the shoe-chest. Because he had gone out wearing a black suit, white shirt and a tie, I thought he had no doubt put on brown shoes. No, he had put a different shoe on each foot and noticed it only in the election room. I really had a good laugh, all this dignity and would-be respectability, represented by the black suit - and the comical side of the whole voting procedure, expressed by a different shoe on each foot! He was only upset by our debate on women in politics. Soon after, there was a television discussion on witches. My husband started jumping up, and could not stay till the end, it really was too much for him. The climax came the next evening, when there was a program on beatnik culture and in it, there were women poets. One of them recited in an emotional voice on rising up from men's oppression. The men in my family sat motionless bewitched by the passionate utterance and truth of the speech.

I like enormously the observations of the German psychiatrist Ernest Borneman, who, in his *Encyclopedia of Sexuality*, writes the following: "Any sexuological work that is up to a certain standard constitutes an attack on the patriarchal society, because it pays the same attention to both sexes and therefor undermines the patriarchal tenet on the primogeniture and natural dominance of men. Every sexuological work is, however, also a critique of a social order that needs some discipline like sexuology."

In 1996 I received a USAID grant and went for four weeks to the USA to study the management of non-governmental organizations in the field. At the airport in Washington, I was picked up by a brisk looking, fortyish man who shook hands with me, greeted me and led me to the car. He helped me with the suitcase only when he saw that otherwise we could not leave the parking lot, for I was unable to lift it into the car boot. Once we arrived to the training place at Miami Beach, I asked my instructor, Lori, how did the American feminism work in reality. An she said: " We got so far that, when I meet a man whom I like, he will ask me first of all what my salary is and whether I would be able to support him." Lori was divorced and lived alone. A beautiful and capable woman, but evidently this hypercapability and workaholism, which act like a drug, are repellent in the case of both sexes. They are detrimental to a feeling of togetherness and shared pleasure and joy which may be indulged in through sexual differences. They take up time, the enjoyment of which depends on the quality of the relations, these being primarily relations between men and women. This is given by nature and cannot be argued away. I understand the escape into the world of work as an escape from unsatisfactory relations within a couple.

In the Danish town of Aarhus, I saw how a mix of social roles of men and women can have a positive impact on society. Healthy men in their best years worked in cloak-rooms, women managed trolleys at the airport. Men laughed relaxingly, they did not make fun of anybody, the dominant statue on the square represented the struggle between paganism and Christianity, the pagan was a man with a fish-tail, lying at the feet of the woman who represented Christianity, looking at her. In this town, there was plenty of room everywhere

for pedestrians and cyclists, bands of greenery and lawns with water gave children a chance to play anywhere and at any time. The whole ambience was so soft, cozy and welcoming, like a home – feminine element -- transplanted into the outer world.

Life in our country still seems to me rough and ordinary. The loudness of drivers, violence on television and lack of consideration indicates that the masculine principle is still sovereign here. I will give a personal example: we were getting ready to celebrate Earth Day 98 in our Lublaòská street in Vinohrady by taking care of the trees, we hoed and sowed grass around their trunks, and took part in a happening. Three weeks earlier, children had gone around asking the owners of the cars parked in that street to park their cars elsewhere on 22 April and free the street for our use. Although our campaign was intensive – folders behind windshield wipers, in mail boxes, personal visits – altogether only three cars left the street.

Our times are difficult for men and women both. To me, change means life, so I love change. However, many people feel threatened by change and are frightened, for change opens the door to the new and the unknown. Fear of feminism is fear of the unknown, for no one knows exactly, what to imagine under this term. What do men and women at the millennium's end, made dumb through television, stupid films and advertisement, know about themselves?

I am generally seen as related to that trend called ecofeminism which draws attention to the link between the lot that befalls women and the fate of the Earth. Virgin land and virgin woman, conquering land and conquering a woman... When in my lectures I speak about the consequences of the dominance of masculine values and reach the issues of alcoholism, drug addiction, property, money and violence that derives from these, ruthless automobilism and workaholism, I am usually listened to with understanding.

Indeed, my chats are attended by young people and women of all generations. The reaction of older men would be interesting, to say the least; religious individuals of all age categories, who have their eternal and unchangeable dogmas, react offended and with susceptibility.

I usually comment that, for two thousand years, mankind has been adoring masculine gods, two hundred years ago it began to worship reason and science and lately it has been venerating the mammon of consumerism, while the work of human hands is underrated, sex hidden in the darkness of the bedrooms or vulgarized on the pages of pornographic magazines, the earth is plundered... The schizophrenia of an era, which I propose to cure with the help of harmony and balancing the work of hand, brain, relationship with nature, sexuality, consumption... I offer the way out through social interdependence, which is the knowledge and understanding of all the connections between all the phenomena on Earth, on which an educated and sensitive person moves with empathy for the needs of the fellow-men and all other creatures as well. Let us not

thank and pray to the heavens above, but also bow down towards the earth we tread with our feet and that sustains us.

As a practical example, I can offer my own life. In 1995, with a group of friends, we founded a Women's Club. We organized for ourselves a few seminars on various topics: Cinderella after the Wedding, Presentation and Communication, Leadership Supportive Training. We held an international conference on the theme of women in politics, which resulted in the brochure *A Rose among Thorns*, and on the 20th century consumerist society, which came out as *Your Money or your Life*. We founded the civic association Agentura GAIA, which seeks new forms of interpersonal communication in the area of environmental protection, schooling and education. Three main programs are Green is Life, the aim of which is to put trees back into the grey streets of our towns and municipalities, Women and the Environment, which emphasizes the feminine approach to life and its understanding, and Your Money or Your Life – a search for solving the world-wide environmental crisis. A tree with a woman's face is our logo.

After forty years of totalitarianism, which, like all dictatorships, was the rule of men, we will still have to spend some time trying to get rid of post-totalitarian consequences constituted by behavioral stereotypes and manipulative ways of treating one another. We have a good historical precedent, for the women's movement during our First Republic, between the World Wars, was very strong and some of the greatest men in our history, T.G.Masaryk and V. Náprstek, were great supporters of womanhood.

In the social sphere, women one day will stop behaving like Christmas fish, silently accepting their fate, which men, traditions, history had imposed and they, of their own accord, had burdened themselves with. Womanhood will come forth from its shell and bring to the light of day its positive qualities – affection, real human relationships, contact with nature and life, motherhood, music, dance, poetry, literature, coziness of the home, embellished by art and enlivened by flowers, animals and children, the irrational, the unconscious, instincts and intuitions.