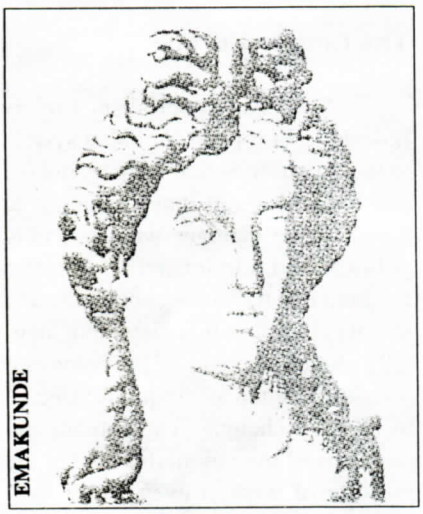
The Politics of Language: "Feminism" in Eastern Europe

by Lisa Mulholland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In Eastern Europe, "feminism" is a dirty word. The same holds true for other words like "emancipation," "equal rights for women," and "women's liberation." Under communist regimes of the past, "emancipation" was imposed on women and given as the reason for requiring women to leave their homes to become part of the labor force.

As a result, the newly democratic nations like Czechoslovakia and Hungary are experiencing a backlash against feminist ideas.

The analogy of a pendulum used for other political and social trends in the region also works with this issue. In the past 50 years, the pendulum was held artificially to the left. Pictured as happy workers, contented to leave children with equally happy grandmothers or in provided childcare, women were visible in unrepresentative but recognizable numbers in the political and public social arena and the charters of most governments provided equality under the law.

The result was not so rosy. Not treated as social equals, women carried the double burden of outside job and household maintenance. They often mistrusted state provided childcare and resented demands on their time for mandatory attendance at party meetings and holiday celebrations.

Given present opportunities, the pendulum has swung far to the right. Private enterprise, imported goods on store shelves, and tourism are on the rise, as are skinheads, racism, and threats to legal abortion. Women are expressing hopes to return to roles labelled "traditional," caring for the home, and their families.

When asked about their dreams for their daughters, many of the 110 Czech women questioned in a recent survey responded that they are looking forward to sons-in-law with well-paying jobs or other circumstances that will allow their daughters to stay at home more than they were able to do. One architectural engineer named Lenka had this to say, "The girls should [put aside] their emancipation, which they have learned in socialism. They should learn the woman's role in the family, which was suppressed by socialism."

Although a number of women hold beliefs which are encompassed in the spectrum of feminist thought--equal access to education, freedom to choose a career, abortion on demand, etc., even many of these women would not claim to be "feminists."

Klara Sankova, a representative to the Czech and Slovak Federal Assembly, is one example. Elected on a platform of rights for minorities, she refuses the title of feminist, saying, "I am for all minorities in our democracy, not just one."

Alena Kratka, a young, highly educated English teacher in Prague explains her distaste for the term. "I don't like the word 'feminism' myself. It reminds me of the Czechoslovak Union of Women. It was a really formal group. The women in this horrible institution were gung-ho communists who were supposed to represent the working women of Czechoslovakia. They had funny congresses and funny meetings to solve pseudo problems, it was all in theory. They just talked about it. The institution was purely women and showed that women had the right to talk about problems in public, but it was very superficial, no depth. In the past, equality was not that a woman could become a head of a school, but that she could drive a tractor or operate a crane."

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